

The Pilgrim

By Dean J Lee

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Written by Dean J. Lee

(and edited by Robert Paddle)

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"The forest burned, and with it something inside me."
- Jon Crosby, VAST

PART I: OF SHADOW AND HOPE

Prologue: The Turning

Between the pale greenery on the surface of the earth and the bitter evening sky that could scarcely illuminate it, a creature came from the north: a jet black raven, soaring southward. Though the bird could travel at astonishing speed, its flight was disrupted by the powerful gusts of tailwind that stalked it from the tainted land whence it had come. From its right ankle, a short strip of parchment fluttered violently in the wind. In the considerable distance its piercing eyes finally came across its destination. At the very heart of the Forest of Pán`gaia – that never ending ocean of trees that almost completely covered the landmass of the same name – there stood Treecastle, the throne of the Guardian.

Within this majestic and organic dwelling the demigod waited, not in fear but dread; the anticipation of the hatred that he could already feel tearing its way like a talon through the earth's flesh. Yet, he awaited confirmation as he sat in his chair gazing out the hollow window on the opposite side of the cylindrical wall. Not smiling, the Guardian rose to his feet. Not a second later, the raven came fluttering through the opening. Though it appeared completely unharmed, its

feathers had been ruffled by the flight, made all the more turbulent by the nasty gale that seemed to accompany the present threat. It flew before its master, and then hovered right in front of him with its talons reaching out. Curled up around the right talon was a strip of parchment. The Guardian reached out with his right hand, pinched the loose parchment between thumb and forefinger, and pulled out towards himself. By the time he stopped pulling, it was no longer a parchment strip in his grasp, but another hand in a shaking gesture. And it was no longer a raven standing before him, but the figure of a human female. The Guardian let go of her hand, and nodded towards her.

“It is coming from the Northern Plains” she said, “it is exactly as you imagine.”

The Guardian looked away, “Thankyou” he said.

He then proceeded to descend the stairs before him. The woman followed alongside.

“Could you tell me again why you have not resorted to this measure before?” she asked.

“Even when divided,” said the Guardian with a tone of anxiety his companion clearly lacked, “there is not a nightmare in this world that could shape up to the Trinity. You remember the Beast Wars vividly don’t you? Well, trust me, they were nothing.”

“But they still could have ended much more swiftly.”

“Well don’t worry, you are about to witness the alternative you always wanted. And believe me you’ll never want it again, if you survive.”

The woman noted a hint of annoyance in the Guardian’s words. He continued.

“Besides, even if *you* wanted it, no human ever would.”

“You think even as sworn defenders they could wound humanity?”

“*They* wouldn’t,” said the Guardian, “but their memory would. Please understand Gâbríel, they were made to strike terror into the hearts of all who would threaten the Forest. People can never be made to see them as trustworthy allies.”

By now, the two had left the stairs, and were heading toward the entrance, or their exit.

“People fear people without heart, or identity,” said Gâbríel.

“Or free will for that matter, yes.”

They were now emerging from Treecastle, into the open. It was the evening and the sky was slowly growing dark. But what was especially creepy was that the vicious wind that had taunted the raven seemed to have no presence on the ground.

“If I unleashed the Trinity upon the struggles of the earth, I would never be forgiven. Under their shadow people would never be at ease, and so they could never be used to keep the peace. When this is over you will understand.”

The Guardian looked at Gâbríel.

“Do you enjoy the daylight?”

The sadness in his question once again set him apart from the woman.

“Yes, I think I do.”

He gazed upward.

“Do you enjoy this?”

“Not as much as you do.”

“Well, try Gâbríel, because it may be the last we ever get to see.”

“Of course,” said Gâbríel, “otherwise we wouldn’t be talking about this.”

“You said it,” concluded the Guardian with a nervous smile. The time had come to perform a ritual he had always dreaded, something that only the most utterly foolish could ever want to provoke. The Guardian raised his hands toward the grey sky and moved them apart. In apparent response to this gesture, the clouds above parted and gave way to a sky beyond the sky, where far greater clouds could be seen far deeper into the heavens. The Guardian’s hands now began to dance, and these greater clouds shifted and reshaped obeying his every gesture.

This was at Treecastle, the home of the Guardian. Thousands of miles to the north, these celestial clouds could be seen at the northern border of the Forest of Pán`gaia. The land beyond the woods was dry like a desert, and very flat. From here, the woods themselves stretched beyond sight in either direction. Not far from this wall of trees another great wall appeared. This wall, however, was not of normal matter, but rather of a disturbance in the air, manifesting itself in an array of rapid lightening-like flashes. From this field materialised several ranks of dark humanoid figures. Their faces were almost human but without expression. They were somewhat muscular and lacked any hair or genitalia. Their skin was very tanned in colour. Their eyes were black. Though the ranks of these creatures – the Flesh Cutters – were relatively few, the length of each was immeasurable, stretching out beyond normal human sight, in either direction as did the woods. These ranks were facing northward, the crusty ground seemingly melted and reformed beneath their feet.

Not far behind the Flesh Cutters, a similar but different wall of disturbance came into being. This was a wall of rips and tears in space, revealing small shreds of what would

appear to be another world. What emerged from this display were much like the Flesh Cutters in appearance but thinner, lighter in colour and slightly taller. These were the Soul Destroyers, and they too stood in but a few endless ranks, with their backs to the Forest. Each one pulled out of nowhere a pair of long, slim, and slightly curved swords. In a similar fashion the Flesh Cutters each drew out with the right hand several small airborne creatures, which then began orbiting asymmetrically about their masters' bodies. These were about the size of a rat but cone shaped with inward pointing claws at the front narrowing down to stinger like tails at the back, their shell-like hide the colour of a dead man's limb. From the back of the left hand of each of the Flesh Cutters a pair of coarsely serrated blades thrust out with a clang. The sound rung from the endless rows of these soldiers like a cold chorus, muffled only by the sickening shrieks of the Flesh Cutters' right hand weapons.

Beyond the sight of these two legions there was yet a third, watching over the battlefield from somewhere the cold grey sky. Closer to the Flesh Cutters in appearance but less human, their forearms were surrounded by a swirling purple mist. They were the Steel Cleavers. Together, these three macabre arrays were but one: the Trinity of Legions were now ready to fulfil the Guardian's wishes.

In silence they waited. They had only been present for minutes by the time they all began to feel the sordid tremor of the ascending force. Outwardly this did not affect them, but it filled them with a dark lust. Up in the sky, storm clouds were gathering, concealing from sight the much higher ones that had beacons to the legions. These storm clouds were also the Guardian's doing; a final preparation. Then, the silence was broken. The minions could hear the rumble as well as they could feel it. What they did not notice was that behind them all the trees within several hundred

yards began to decay. Whether on hills, among water, or anywhere else, trees of all types were falling indiscriminately to some invisible wave of infection that left them weak and tattered. All that concerned the legions was the tremor, which grew louder... and louder... until it finally ceased altogether.

Hundreds of yards north of the vanguard the ground began to shatter and sink into the earth, leaving a large black pit the size of a large crater. Following the briefest of silence, the pit welled up with wicked, inhuman shrieks blending together into a ghastly cacophony, which quickly became deafening as the entities reached the surface. Suddenly, thousands upon thousands of black humanoid creatures began pouring out of the deathly pit, all running toward the forest and screaming like banshees. The Flesh Cutters charged, and in an instant the gap was shut. The vanguard of the fiends met a messy end at the right hands of the Flesh Cutters, which sent their fearsome familiars exploding messily into their torsos, ripping some of them in half. The few survivors of this wave of slaughter lived only to fall to the wrist-mounted blades of the left hands of their terrifying foes. All that perished disintegrated no later than it hit the ground.

But the fiends were far from defenceless. Each one was armed with a mace, which struck with a brilliant display of burning red sparks, hindering but never slaying the Flesh Cutters. The two forces were about the same height, but the enemy's hide was as charcoal and their faces like wooden masks. And when they fell, it took little time for the terrible souls of these beings to manifest themselves and slip easily through the ranks, again toward the Forest, terrible black shrouds with sickly hands wielding torches in place of their former maces. The torches burned furiously but could not light up whatever lurked within the garments' twisted

entanglements. These emerged behind the Flesh Cutters, only to be literally cut to ribbons by the Soul Destroyers, with effortless grace, moving their blades like butterfly wings. No incorporeal being in weapon's reach could evade the incredible swordplay.

The legions fought ruthlessly and without hesitation, but deep in the distance the creatures continued pouring out of the great pit in overwhelming numbers persisting with the same dreadful shrieks, with the foremost getting ever closer to the woods. They kept pushing through the Flesh Cutters' ranks until the two forces became interspersed in a colossal sea of violence and death. And for every corpse that hit the ground its spirit arose, faster and more terrifying than before, impervious to the wrath of the Flesh Cutters. These spirits became likewise mixed with the Soul Destroyers. Without warning one of the screaming horrors suddenly burst and shattered in a brilliant white blast. In the blink of an eye many more met the same fate. Beautiful green sparks of light were falling from the colourless sky like burning rain, delivering death to the unsheltered creatures below. The Steel Cleavers had entered the battle. Upon landing each one created with both hands a dark purple ball of energy and charged it up, enhancing its size and brilliance, and then threw it at the nearest foe. The missiles struck them like lightning and disintegrated them. Noting the enemy's frailness the Steel Cleavers proceeded firing less powerful blasts, just enough to kill, and not discriminating between body and ghost.

The boundaries of this battle could not be seen. Literally millions of soldiers stretched beyond sight, hundreds still falling from the sky and tens of thousands still crawling out of the great black pit like ants. Eventually many of the intact bodies of the enemy made it past the Flesh Cutters only to confront the Soul Destroyers. The blades went unobstructed

through their torsos, but met their real target. But somehow the bereft bodies managed to push on, although slower than before, straight through the ghostly soldiers toward the forest. This forced the Flesh Cutters and the Steel Cleavers to move back, mixing them with the Soul Destroyers. At about this time, with a deafening clash of thunder, lightning struck, deliberately smiting one of the shrieking creatures. The storm had begun, for the Guardian knew that the scourge was now inevitable. The enemies were getting closer to the border of the forest, and their force was driving the defenders back. The very numbers that limited the Trinity of Legions did not seem to apply to the soldiers of black and flame as they poured endlessly from the hole in the earth, ever pushing the colossal melee closer to the northern border, and closer, until finally the horrors reached the forest edge. The Guardian shut his eyes.

A fiend struck a tree with its mace and the point of impact burst into flames, which then licked up and scorched the branches. At that point in time several hundred other trees at the border, already tattered by the mysterious decay they had suffered, were also burning. The great scourge had begun. Promptly came the heavy rain whose petty contribution could do little to quell the fire and ease the destruction. Occasionally a bolt of lightning would strike one of the screaming creatures outside the border, briefly illuminating the farthest reaches of the great melee in a white flash, as by this time it had become dark with but a trace of daylight left. The last of the Steel Cleavers descended, obliterating the targets below. Still, the black soldiers continued to scorch the trees with their infernal weapons. The fiends' souls did the same; only they were faster and needed only to lick the wood with the flames of their torches, seemingly unaffected by the angry rain. The scourge went deeper into the woods as the defenders fought them in the midst of the great storm. Beyond the enflamed northern border the black pit still

continued to erupt, spewing forth the soldiers of black and flame. The Trinity of Legions, though ferocious, immortal, and untiring, were becoming increasingly out-numbered.

Many hours into the night the scourge found its way into a village. The people woke to the horrible shrieking of the attackers. The creatures, vicious as they were, had no interest in the town's inhabitants, although anyone unlucky enough to get in their way went up in flames. Even those who had the stomach to bear the sight of the living entities whimpered in terror at the dreadful spirits that swept across the field torching every trace of living wood. The event passed and the people were relieved; but they were in more danger than they realised. Many other villages had the same experience. After many days there was no battle; it was a rampage. The Trinity of Legions was out numbered one thousand to one. The storm was well exhausted and almost all of Pán`gaia was on fire. Billions of heartless mercenaries plagued the continent and the woods continued to perish, until one evening.

The Guardian was standing outside Treecastle, alone and in silence. Almost all of the Forest was gone, and soon the earth and everything on it would die. In one desperate last move, he gathered all of his strength, and drew from the remaining woods a strange green mist, emerging from every last tree and gathering into the Guardian's hands. And with a broken heart he threw it away with such force that it took through the sky like a star.

The army of black and cinder then melted away. The Trinity of Legions disappeared. Now many villages which once stood in the thick of forest found themselves embedded in fields of black stumps. Throughout these villages, men, women and children looked at each other with a trace of confusion in their eyes. Within the minute, a raven flew through a window into Treecastle, and landed at the top of the staircase inside. Right before it, the unmistakable figure

of the Guardian lay motionless on the floor facing the ceiling. His arms and legs were disoriented. Gâbríel knew he was not dead.

Chapter 1: The Prisoner

There were several who noticed the man lodging with a small family in Creeks Village, a few of whom were able to recognise him. He was not a subject of great interest; no talk had been heard of him in the village pub since his arrival. Nor was he ever encountered in person with as little as a greeting. In fact, he drew extraordinarily little attention to himself for an armed hunter who had, over an extensive period of time, visited a very large proportion of the village's houses, and even done a great deal of handiwork for them. Now, he had just added one more to his list. He was never seen elsewhere, perhaps because he suspected, without ego, that his own presence was probably the most interesting thing going on.

The man, Thäràc, was sitting at a wooden table among three other people: a young boy and his parents. They were having dinner. It was a fairly simple meal of rice and fish cooked with nuts. The room was fairly spacious. The dinner table was in the middle and the kitchen was at the end of the room opposite the window. The kitchen was composed mainly of wooden cupboards, a fireplace and a basin of water. The walls were made of stones cemented together. Outside the window the stars could be seen above a dark

forest. No one spoke. The table had remained silent throughout the meal and all but Thäràc were focused mainly on their food. Thäràc's sight was fixed on his hosts. The child playing with his food was the only thing that stuck out. He then discovered a good excuse to break the silence.

"Did you find out what the problem was with that lantern?" he asked the woman.

"No, not yet," she replied.

"Would you like me to look at it?" Thäràc had a very good idea what would follow.

"No, don't trouble yourself."

True to the trend, that was the end of the conversation. More silence. That lantern was working, but was highly dysfunctional, and Thäràc suspected it might be dangerous, but could not be sure. Eventually, this mother of one had something to say.

"Do you still wish to stay another night like you said earlier?" she asked, "it won't be a problem for us."

"No, I think I'll be off," said Thäràc.

The words stopped there. Thäràc finished his meal and then stood up. He thanked his hosts for their hospitality, said goodbye and parted. Walking out the front door he did not look back. He had had enough. He had been lodging with those people for the past two nights. It was not for shelter or for food – Thäràc was a veteran hunter and hiker and could live off the land with sufficient ease and comfort for his living standard – rather, the major reason was that he was in it for the mere presence of human beings. He had been living on his own for a very, very long time, but ever present was the need for company which kept him returning to the villages of Me`ridía time and time again, despite the fact that, without exception, every visit ended in a hasty escape. The irony was that the instinct that attracted Thäràc to the company of

others seemed to be the very same thing that invariably drove him away. In the beginning he had never visited the same house twice, for none ever left a good impression. But his memory was hardly enough to keep track of every place been, and there were only so many places around *to be*. By now there was scarcely a block in Me`ridía where he had not been a guest once or more. Still, he tried to vary his visits as much as he could; sometimes indulging in a fanciful notion that his luck might change, sometimes not. Almost all of the time, however, he remained in the wild.

Thäràc was born and raised in a small village in the southernmost part of the continent. His father was one of the Vîje`lîz, the military of the dêvas – that division of the human race to which all of the societies of Pán`gaia but a fragmented few belonged – established after the Second Great War to ensure that the forthcoming era of expected piece would not weaken Pán`gaia's defence against subsequent threat. Thäràc was trained by his father as an archer and swordsman, with the intention that he would be inaugurated into the brethren. He had fond memories of his childhood. Beside his own close nit family, and beside his two most special companions, Cära and the sage-like Tôbit, he had many friends among the good-willed and enjoyable people that made up most of his community, each of whom had many friends of their own. To the best of Thäràc's memory, nobody was ever alone. As an adolescent his childish fun gave way to passion, as his immediate potential to be a great fighter in the unlikely event of a struggle became apparent. Indeed, he took great pride in his hobby. At the age of 19 he joined the Vîje`lîz, and continued to train with them vigorously for the next twelve years. This training was itself considered a very precious contribution to society, so he, like the other Vîje`lîz in training, was never pressured to supplement with a second line of work. It was a curious and unusual fact that during this time he was never married.

Nor did he ever leave home, although even then there were some signs of his survival abilities. On the whole, his own life was enviably prosperous, until one dreadful night shortly after his 27th birthday.

It was in the evening, just as Thäràc and his parents were sitting down to dinner, when through the window they noticed their neighbours being drawn outside and staring up at the sky. With great apprehension the family stepped out and joined them. What they saw was certainly enough to raise the confusion and bewilderment of all of those not inaugurated into the Vîje`lîz, such as Thäràc's mother. To those who were, it was a warning, passed down from generation to generation among the order. It was a sign that something terrible was happening, that events were entirely out of their hands, and that for their own sake they must not interfere. And so all they did was wait. For many days there was an uneasy air about the village. Though the children did not seem that bothered, the adults had become scared. Then one morning, when Thäràc happened to be outside, the attention of those in the open was drawn to what looked like a great star shooting towards the south, shining a brilliant green. Suddenly, Thäràc shrieked in agony as he held his hand over his left eye. It brought him to tears and the tears seemed to make the pain worse. He fell to the ground whimpering.

Later that day, the pain having passed, he stood up. The sky seemed to be back to normal. He went home to his parents. It took little time indeed for Thäràc to notice the change in behaviour that had come over them. Conversation weakened dramatically, smiles faded, faces went blank. For Thäràc, this was frightening; his discovery when he visited his friends and neighbours, horrifying. They were the same. No longer did human language serve recreation; no longer did the children play; and no longer did even the earth itself

seem to gleam out to all those interested, which now meant only Thäràc. Not the land. Not the sky. Suddenly the world was asleep, and so Thäràc was alone.

It was about a week before Thäràc dared to venture out and observe the outside world. All he found was more of the same thing. By this time, he had become a superb archer and swordsman, which suddenly meant everything, because every other part of his life had been destroyed. So he took up what seemed to be the only worthwhile pastime that was possible: he became a hunter. Thäràc learned how to travel far and wide and to live off the land. He hunted and slew the beasts of the daytime, and the creatures of the night. It was in the early years of this occupation that he made the first of two disconcerting discoveries. One day, while travelling as usual the forest came to an end and he found himself facing open land where open land had never been. Having scaled the border of the woods for miles it then became clear that some sizable portion of the Forest of Pán`gaia had been destroyed, and none but his imagination could suggest how much. Inexperienced with the open wilderness he decided to remain either within or close to the woods. The second revelation came many years later while gazing at his reflection in the still water of a quiet pool. It was then that he realised that he did not look a year older than he had on his 27th birthday. His hopeful doubts receded with each passing year, while he remained unsure as to whether or not this had happened to anybody else. He decided against looking for the answer to that question.

A decade on from the disaster, Thäràc had begun to wonder what it was that set his own life apart from the half-lives of every compatriot to cross his path. He seemed to have nothing, until that life-changing day that he encountered by chance one of the legendary White Beasts of Me`ridía. With nothing to lose he fought the great reptile.

Then, at the conclusion of a massive struggle, Thäràc killed it. Though it left him limping for days, this spectacular achievement became the turning point of his long, isolated life in the woods. All of a sudden he had a purpose; a goal; something to strive for. If he could slay the White Beasts and claim the great bounty laid upon them by none other than Gerra, the creature from the stars, then he would have made a legendary accomplishment; even if there would not be a person on earth that would care. The bounty was Gerra's very own soul, declared shortly after his body had been torn apart by those very creatures, who then proceeded to terrorize the people of Pán`gaia, all way back in the Ancient Days. It was the bounty which had them hunted down and thus driven away from civilization. Thäràc could not afford to overlook the possibility that the Spirit of Gerra might bring him some happiness. Nevertheless, even without it, hunting down the White Beasts or getting killed in the process were both better options than carrying on as he was.

And so he began hunting the White Beasts of Me`ridía. Over the decades his skills in sword and bow became sharpened to deadly perfection. It took years at a time to come across one of the White Beasts, and usually they got away. Nonetheless it was a worthy aspiration for one with the essence of a great warrior; a genuine challenge with a marvellous prize. After about a century had passed Thäràc had slain a total of five.

However, there was more to Thäràc's own half-life than glorified game hunting. By this time, he had long since become acutely conscious of how deeply society had been affected by its strange metamorphosis. The most frightening thing was what seemed like an absence of motivation. Society had slowed down to a crawl, wherein routine was more important, and change more disruptive than ever. Interestingly enough, there seemed to be a certain threshold

where the boredom was enough to spark some limited boost in creativity. This led to a bizarre cycle where a typical town was slightly but repeatedly refurnished, before gradually deteriorating into junk. Magic also helped, but on the whole the standard of living was ever so slowly getting worse and worse. It was known (who knows how) that some villages had packed up entirely and regressed to a nomadic lifestyle, though perhaps this was but a more extreme example of the cycle of retarded change and adaptation that the human seemed bound to by a thread. But the truth was that at least some communities had perished, and Thäràc found it amazing they had survived for so long.

That was the other major thing that kept Thäràc going back to the villages. He recognised himself as a valuable source of vigour and renewal, and dedicated a good deal of his time to re-oiling the cogs of society and the economy. Most of it was plain handiwork, seeking out the weak links where things had to be done but people were reluctant to lift a finger, from fixing lanterns to replacing cattle. As frustrated as he often got with with astonishing laziness, it did allow him to relate to people in a particularly meaningful, ultimately preserving his sanity far better than dining and lodging, not to mention his hobby as a bounty-hunter. But no matter what he did he could not rid himself of an endless longing for love and companionship. Though the master of the forest, he remained its prisoner.

Chapter 2: An Unlikely Message

It was late in the afternoon. The winter sun lay hidden behind the clouds. Deep in the woods the trees were quite tall and relatively thin. A strange light mist surrounded them, up to about the height of a man's waist. There was very little colour, even in the leaves. It was quiet. The only sound that could be heard was the footsteps of a man treading gently on the dirt floor. In Thäràc's left hand he held a bow. In his right hand an arrow. He was of average height with light skin and short brown hair. He wore grey pants, a thick woollen grey jumper and boots. His attention was focused on his surroundings. He watched for movement and listened for footsteps. It took extraordinary patience to hunt like this knowing that the chances of encountering one of the six remaining White Beasts were so slim.

Finally, he spotted something. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed a small black spot moving towards him through the woods. He settled the arrow in his bow and watched. Quickly enough he identified it as a raven. Although it was flying straight in his direction Thäràc withdrew his weapon. As it got closer it flew down to his level. Though he did not think it necessary to harm the creature he was prepared to change his mind if it turned out hostile. About a yard before

him the bird stopped in midair, and did something very strange. For a moment it hovered in the one spot, flapping its wings as though trying to shake something off its back. That was when Thäràc noticed what looked like a message strip wrapped around its ankle. A message for Thäràc? He thought it would probably not do to ask it, until the bird itself reached down with its own beak and clasped onto the loose end of the strip. Then it pulled.

The result was something that Thäràc could never in his life describe verbally. What ended up being rolled out was not a piece of parchment, but something rapidly changing shape, together with the bird, as it emerged. Before Thäràc could begin to speculate he found himself standing face-to-face before a woman. She was reasonably attractive and appeared to be quite young. She was slightly taller than he. She had brown eyes and her skin was a fair bit whiter than his. It would take some time before Thäràc recognised the absurdity in the fact that from the moment of her appearance the woman was fully dressed. She wore black pants, black boots, and a black top with no outer garments. Her dark hair was tied back in a long ponytail that Thäràc could not yet see. Again, this would later cause him confusion. She stood before him very straight with her hands behind her back. Promptly, she spoke.

“Hello Thäràc,” she said welcomingly. Her voice was solid and her speech very firm.

“Who are you and how did you know my name?” asked Thäràc.

“My name is Gâbríel,” she replied, “and I know a lot more than that.”

Thäràc was already becoming aware that he was engaging in a conversation unlike any that had blessed him for a very long time, and found it curiously exhilarating.

“Well then, what can I do for you?”

“What you can do for me is not so important to your current concerns as is what *I* can do for *you*.”

Thäràc smiled. She was eloquent too.

“Ok then, what can you do for me?” asked Thäràc.

“I can offer you understanding,” said Gâbríel.

“Of what?”

“You know very well what. You remember that night don’t you? The strange clouds in the sky? The sudden change among your neighbours?”

Thäràc was halted in words.

“Go on.”

“I can tell you what happened on that night; how it changed everything and why things are the way they are.”

“What would it matter?” said Thäràc, reacting rebelliously to the irony of Gâbríel's painfully late coming.

“Because I can tell you how you can make it end.”

“Ah, So that’s what I can do for you!”

Gâbríel did not seem amused. Perhaps next time. But now Thäràc was starting to take things a little seriously. There was silence. They both stood very still in the mist surrounded by the thin tall trees. Not knowing how else to respond, Thäràc said, “Tell me. I want to know everything.”

And so Gâbríel began.

“What do you know about the Forest of Pán`gaia?”

Thäràc thought way back to discussions with his dear old childhood teacher Tôbit. The continent of Pán`gaia encompassed a rich, if very short history succeeded by

thousands of relatively incident free years before his lifetime. But of the Forest itself...

“Nothing I suppose.”

“Few people do. Its secret has been well kept in our age.”

“What secret?”

“The Pa`räjí.”

Thäràc had never heard the word in his life. If anything, those strange dancing clouds that preceded the event in question was the only possibly relevant knowledge he had. Gâbríel figured as much.

“The Pa`räjí,” she began, “is the heart of the earth. It is connected to the life force of every living creature, and of the earth itself. I trust that you’re already beginning to understand?”

“I think so.”

Though the sort of terminology Gâbríel was using came as both a complete surprise and as an utterly foreign mystical mumbo jumbo, he understood in the sense that it obviously related to the present state of the world. Nevertheless, as Gâbríel continued her cosmological seminar, Thäràc found himself in completely new territory.

“It is said that in time immemorial the Pa`räjí existed in some other, more primitive form, but the Guardian, out of necessity, hid it into a forest, namely, the Forest of Pán`gaia.”

“Why a forest?” asked Thäràc.

“Because such is the only hiding place where the triad structure of the Pa`räjí, the earth and its living inhabitants could function.”

“Sorry, I don't follow.”

Gâbríel patiently explained.

From the beginning of time the existence of every living creature has depended on the planet on which they sit. Yet at the same time, the planet has always been dependent on its creatures. Thus the earth and its children are mutually and inseparably bound, and it is through the trees, those living entities, yet with their roots in the soil, that the Pa`räjı can connect them. The Guardian chose Pán`gaia, and thus sealed its sanctity over all other lands.

After hearing all of this, Thäràc was wincing. He realised just then that he had in fact heard this sort of language before. It sounded much like the sort of supernatural beliefs that came from those people who had coexisted with the dêvas for as long as history could attest. He had been warned never to underestimate the potential wisdom of the gâjın, as misguided as they are, even in their notorious doctrines. Irrespective of this, Thäràc considered himself a simple person, and resented having to digest the inner reality of life and existence before getting to the more practical issue of his. Yet, Gâbrıel seemed sympathetic to this.

“It is not important that you understand the Pa`räjı,” she went on, “just know this: the Heart of the world and all things was coveted. In the age before ages, there were great wars between the Guardian and those who sort to take the Pa`räjı for themselves. It was from these wars that the Trinity of Legions emerged.”

By this point in the conversation, Thäràc had come to notice something slightly drab in the way the woman spoke. She was elegant, sure, but also rather boring. This might have been a breakthrough in his social life, but it was turning out to be a disappointing one at that. He tried to keep his mind on the subject at hand.

“The Trinity of Legions?” said Thäràc, “why three?”

“Not every potential enemy is made of flesh and blood as you should know. The wars were complex Thäràc. It did not just involve ordinary beings, but spirits also, alongside great constructs which weapons such as yours could not stand to. The Guardian's soldiers were specialised accordingly: the Flesh Cutters, the Soul Destroyers and the Steel Cleavers.”

Thäràc thought back to those clouds.

“That was not the last time they would fight,” he figured.

“No,” said Gâbríel, “what you saw that night was the beacon, sent up to call the Trinity of Legions to their posts.”

Suddenly, Thäràc stumbled in his train of thought. There was something eerie about the way the woman kept reading him. She continued.

“After the wars the Guardian lived on in the hope that no one would ever successfully conjure up a force great enough to overcome the Trinity of Legions, but someone did. One day the Guardian felt it, and that was when he sent out the beacon. It could be seen everywhere, even from the Spiritual Plane where the Soul Destroyers dwell. They and the Flesh Cutters teleported to the Northern Plains just beyond the border of the forest. That was where the threat was coming from. The Steel Cleavers also went there but they held their position in the sky because their descent upon the enemy embodies their greatest power.”

“Can I ask you something?” asked Thäràc.

“Sure.”

“Do you always talk like a story book?”

“Is that a serious question?”

“Yes, it really is.”

“Well, yes I do. Finished?”

“Sorry, you were talking about the Trinity of Legions,” said Thäràc, “How many were there?”

“Well since you’re interested, the Flesh Cutters and the Soul Destroyers number in the millions. The Steel Cleavers however, only come to about ten thousand.”

Thäràc smiled again. She did possess *some* subtlety. She continued.

“Given the fact that they are immortal, untiring and exceedingly powerful, the only way through the Legions is with unimaginable numbers. That is exactly what they got.”

“Who exactly were the attackers?”

“I do not know where they came from. Never have I seen an abyss worthy of their dwelling. But know this, the Army of Black and Flame did not share their predecessors desire to take the Pa`rājí for themselves, their purpose was to destroy it.”

At this point Thäràc was still a little confused at the details of the battle. If the defence was divided into fighters of flesh and soul, then did that mean that the invaders were fought in two completely different ways? Some assailed normally and others on a spiritual level? Once again, Gâbríel seemed disconcertingly aware of his confusion.

“When the bodies of these beings were shattered their souls arose, even more fiendish than before, and continued their work. But the really remarkable thing was that when their souls were rent apart first their *bodies* also kept moving. It seemed that the very force that animated their spirits was able to transfer itself to their empty bodies. Essentially, each one had to be killed twice, except when faced with the Steel Cleavers, who do not distinguish between body and soul.”

“Right, and they specialise in the heavily armoured yes?” said Thäràc, “was there any?”

“No actually. It was all surprisingly lightly armoured infantry. The Steel Cleavers were far from redundant, but their particular purpose was not fulfilled; only a fraction of their potential power was unleashed. Due to limited numbers, their contribution was relatively small.”

“Sounds like they were a waste of space.”

“The Trinity defended the forest for as long as they possibly could, but the enemy broke through.”

“With what?” asked Thäràc.

“Fire of course, and no ordinary fire. It only took one lick of the flame to set a tree alight. The Guardian stirred up a great storm in an attempt to fight the fire but it was of little use. They were actually quite frail creatures, but their numbers saw no end. The Forest of Pán`gaia was almost completely destroyed.”

“And this is all that is left?” asked Thäràc, taking some time to look around. As he stared into the roof of leaves and branches that partly blocked out the cloudy sky Gâbríel continued.

“We are standing in what is now known as the Forest of Me`ridía, the largest remaining forest in the world. There are many others, but none of them even come close in size.”

Me`ridía was the name given to the southernmost part of the continent, the land of which the forest of Me`ridía was only a part. Thäràc’s hometown was in the central southern part of this piece of woods.

“I’m surprised they didn’t finish the job.”

“With reason”, said Gâbríel, “because the Guardian knew that the total destruction of the Pa`räjí, and so all the earth and life, was inevitable. In his desperation he resorted to the unthinkable. He ripped the diminished remains of the

Pa`räjí out of the remaining woods. It was he who brought this half-death upon the whole world.”

A sudden shock came over Thäràc.

“But why?!”

“Because if he had not done so then the Pa`räjí would have been destroyed completely, and you and I would not be here. Instead, the binding of life has merely been severed. The Pa`räjí is still out there, and until it is returned to where it is meant to be, there can be no life but that which has them walk and speak and think. People will never be alive enough to enjoy, alive enough to love, or even alive enough to age.”

“So no one else has aged either?” Thäràc paused for a moment. If he had remained unaffected by the catastrophe then why was he also unable to grow old? Gâbríel, once again, sensed his confusion.

“I do not know why you were not affected,” she said, “And I suppose the effect on ageing was more universal. Or perhaps whatever kept you alive did the same thing coincidentally.”

By this time, Thäràc’s focus had finally shifted completely to the matter at hand. There would be plenty of time for light chat.

“How do you know all this?” he asked.

“I was a servant of the Guardian. I was created to serve him as his eyes and ears. I was the one who confirmed the coming onslaught. I was there when he sent out his beacon. And I was there when he killed the earth. I saw when his grief, so overwhelming, thrust him out of consciousness. I did not know then if the Guardian had a future; nor if there even *was* a future, but as long as the Guardian was alive I was bound to his wishes. I had to assume that he had hurled the Pa`räjí away for a reason: so that someday, somehow, it might be retrieved. I had to assume that there was hope for

the world, so I went looking for it. For many decades I searched, and I found you.”

“Ok, let’s summarise. So the Guardian snatched out the earth's soul because that was the only way that he could save it from total annihilation, and that is why life sucks? I can accept that, but what would you have me do?”

“What else?” said Gâbríel, “find it. The Pa`räjí still rests in a safe place. It awaits its return to where it should never have left. Once it has, the harmony of life will be restored, and everything will be made right.”

Thäràc had mixed feelings about what was being asked of him. On the one hand, he had been presented with an answer to his incessant depression; at the least, perhaps a far better pastime, yet at the most, the resurrection of the entire world. That, on the other hand, was quite a responsibility for a mere hunter, even one of the Vîje`liz. Furthermore, he had no idea of what he was in for. This was his predominant thought in giving his answer.

“I'm not making any promises,” he said, “but I will try. But where on earth is this Pa`räjí that you have sought for so long its saviour?”

Gâbríel's answer was blunt.

“In the sea.”

Chapter 3: They Come at Night

It was late in the evening. Thäràc and Gâbríel were travelling southeast from the place where they had first met, and their surrounding environment was notably different. The forest had changed gradually and continuously from one place to another, and as such the trees around them were now shorter and notably fatter than at their starting point. They were also a little bit further apart. The two had already been travelling for miles and it was getting dark. The mellow redness of the sunset that could be seen through the forest roof had passed, and the distant scenery was gradually fading into darkness.

Thäràc and Gâbríel had not spoken much. Little sooner had Thäràc learnt the very basic whereabouts of what he was to seek then did Gâbríel begin – with quite a jolt – their long trek southeastward. When he asked where they going, her only answer was 'to find you a better weapon'. On occasion he would repeat the question only to get the same reply. She was keeping him in the dark as to where they were going and to what lay ahead, and he found that (as he always had) incredibly frustrating. It marked a further peculiarity of Thäràc's mind that it had taken this long for him to think of

another, far more obvious question. A question which might better lead him to the answers he wanted.

“How exactly am I supposed to find the Pa`räjí if it is in the sea?”

Though Gâbríel kept walking, one hand characteristically holding the other behind her back as she went, she eventually yielded to his question.

“It is not just *in* the sea,” she said, “but right at the bottom. It is about the only safe place there is.”

“And how am I supposed to get there? Become a fish?”

“Not exactly. There is only one creature in recorded history who was even said to have reached such depths. Do you know of whom I speak?”

Thäràc needed not think it over for long.

“Gerra,” he answered.

“Yes. Impressive work by the way; I never thought I would see another bounty hunter, let alone one who seems to have knocked out about half of the White Beasts of Me`ridía.”

“Five,” said Thäràc.

“Impressive, as I said. Kill the remaining six, and you could be infused with the spirit of the greatest warrior who ever lived. And with such power you will be able to bring the world back to life.”

“So what you’re saying is...”

“Once you have the prize, your life will be restored.”

“Which is another way of saying...”

“Your life will no longer suck,”

“Thankyou. Now it’s getting better already.”

“I didn’t come here to entertain you Thäràc, I came here to help you acquire the power to solve your problem for good.”

This power that Gâbríel spoke of was the very bounty that he had been seeking since forever. Indeed, it was during his continuing search for the White Beasts that she interrupted him in the first place. Only now the bounty presented a real purpose; Gâbríel was right, and nothing could have been in his better interest than paying close attention to her. Gâbríel continued.

“I first found you years ago. I decided to wait until I knew you well enough, until I was sure. It took you over a century to get halfway towards your goal. With my help your task can be finished in weeks. Claiming your prize, of course, is another matter.”

“I’m listening. How can you help me?”

“Because I know where they dwell. You may have even been there already and failed to find them. I am going to lead you right into their homeland. The advantage, of course, is that it will not take another century; the disadvantage is that it is exceptionally dangerous. I need not tell you about the White Beasts. As a rule you have only ever encountered one at a given time, for otherwise you would not be here. But I believe that you are ready save for just one thing: you need a better weapon, and that is where we are now headed.”

Finally Thäràc was satisfied, at least with the knowledge. Gâbríel's point had been well made, and for a further couple of minutes, he could think over his situation a little more clearly. It was shortly afterward that she disrupted his thoughts completely.

“There is something down there.”

She was pointing toward the east. Thäràc did not stop; rather he slowed down cautiously and became increasingly more watchful. As he continued on he began to hear things; strange sounds difficult to make out, though he had a very good idea of what it was. Throughout his travels Thäràc

always held his bow and an arrow ready, and on alert he would promptly place his arrow in position. Now was no exception. Ready to draw back and fire at anything that moved he pushed on, Gâbríel following right behind him. Suddenly, he heard a snarl. It came from his left. This was quickly followed by rapid footfalls. About a second later it came into view. It was a wretched black cat-like creature, smaller than a wolf, but larger than a fox. It was running towards him. Before it could come close Thäràc let off an arrow. It struck the creature straight through the shoulder. With a sickly choking sound the animal fell flat and did not move again. Thäràc quickly went over to retrieve the arrow, paying close attention to his surroundings. No sooner did he pluck it out than he heard another such creature quickly approaching behind him. Without thinking he spun around, prepared another shot and fired. The arrow went into its skull. It shrieked in agony, a very disturbing high-pitched sound.

As he retrieved his arrow from the twitching body Gâbríel joined him, not showing the slightest trace of fear. Before she could comment Thäràc turned back in the direction that they were originally facing, once again readying the same arrow. Out of the darkness came two more of the same creatures. The instant he saw them he fired, hitting the one on the right. As it dropped to the ground moaning horribly he saw a third trailing behind. Without hesitation he dropped his bow and pulled out his sword from the sheath on his back as the creature leapt up at him. Effortlessly he struck it down, dumping the corpse on the ground. As he did so it let off a short squealing noise. The one behind it met a similar end. Thäràc had not the time to watch the tattered corpse hit the ground before he spun around and slashed through the jaw and neck of the animal that had come up behind him, in a single, messy blow. This one did not make a sound; the silence had returned. It was then that Gâbríel, with another

mid-air pull of that mysterious message strip, transformed before Thäràc into human form a second time.

“Does it hurt when you do that?” asked Thäràc.

“No,” Gâbríel replied.

Neither spoke further. Having watched and listened for further danger they pushed on, leaving behind them the last fenrî that Thäràc had slain; laying on the ground; a pool of blood still gushing out from its sliced throat. In the faint light of the late evening the most distinguishable feature was the very white (though blood stained), long teeth that stuck out of its shattered lower jaw.

The fèn`rîra usually hunted in packs of five or six. They were the hunters of the night, the most common of predators and some of the most dangerous. They were remotely like panthers in appearance but with no hair or fur, longer teeth, much larger jaws and very flat heads. To add to that they had no tails and their lower hind legs stuck out much further back than those of any normal cat or dog. They were looked upon by most as hideous creatures.

For an animal once believed extinct, the fèn`rîra were doing remarkably well nowadays. Back when there was a Forest of Pán`gaia, that forest provided the creatures with one vast habitat. Yet, for some reason, their numbers had become very thin. Although the total population was considerable, they were spread out so thinly that, contained within in the endless mass of trees, almost entirely uninhabited by humans, a fenrî was understandably an extremely rare sight. So rare were they, that most people came to believe they had ceased to be. Then came the Great Scourge from the north. Being particularly astute creatures, the fèn`rîra, perhaps on account of some incredible sixth sense, performed an astonishing feat of migration away from the fire that swept over the land from top to bottom, straight

into the south, and ultimately into what became the Forest of Me`ridía. One of the most human inhabited spots in the once infinite woods, the people of Me`ridía then rapidly discovered, for better and worse, that these legendary animals were very much alive, and in greater, more dangerous numbers than anyone imagined. Upsetting the entire ecosystem of the greatest surviving forest, the once mourned animals became instantly and permanently established as a common pest. Among his more general services to his lethargic neighbours, Thäràc had taken particular pains to keep the fenrï threat to an absolute minimum.

By the time it had progressed well into the night, Thäràc and Gâbrïel had not been bothered a second time. Nor had they spoken. Thäràc was still in deep thought and it took more than fèn`rïra to put him off track. He travelled as usual holding his bow, and the same arrow with which he had taken down three of his six opponents. The trees here were about the same width as those prior, but notably taller; the branches started at about 10 yards high. Also the branches were not quite as thick, and little shreds of moonlight were allowed to pour through. Thäràc could see into the distance reasonably well, but it seemed that Gâbrïel was always able to see further.

“I saw something move up ahead,” she said, “Looks about your height.”

As before, Thäràc kept moving but at a slower pace, his bow and arrow ready. Soon enough he spotted what he had come to know of as a bonrï. It was a bit like a bear; especially in the manner in which it walked on all fours, though occasionally standing up on its hind legs. Again it was black with no fur. In fact it had a few features in common with the fenrï, suggesting that the two had a common ancestry, and its looks attracted no less disfavour among people. The bonrï

was one good example of an animal whose near dominance in the food chain had been stolen by the fenrï.

Thäràc pulled out a second arrow and placed it evenly alongside the first before quietly approaching the creature. Once he had a clear shot, he pulled back his arrows, waited for the right moment, and fired. The animal howled; a very loud, monstrous sound. Before the arrows had even hit, Thäràc turned and ran in the opposite direction, preparing another arrow as he did so. Then he turned and fired again. The bonrï was after him, and it was quickly gaining on him. Repeating the process of running and firing Thäràc was able to hit it two more times. Then he dropped his bow and drew his sword. On its hind legs the animal was about his height. Clenching his teeth he slashed it from its left shoulder to its right hip. Again the creature howled, its massive gaping jaw displaying a fierce set of long, sharp, white teeth. The creature kept moving forward. Likewise, Thäràc kept moving backwards as he struck it again, and again. After the fourth blow it finally halted. Carefully, Thäràc positioned himself, and with one swift swing he cut off its head. As the heavy bleeding body collapsed to the ground, he turned, and found himself facing Gâbrïel, who up until that moment had been nowhere to be seen.

About 40 minutes later Thäràc was sitting by a fire roasting and eating his dinner. Gâbrïel stood a few yards away keeping an eye out for predators. She did not eat. In fact, it seemed that she did not even need food or rest. She just stood there scanning the darkness. It was true that fire attracted creatures such as the fenrï, but Thäràc took the risk. The meat of the bonrï was about as tasty as the creature was attractive, though when cooked it was at least bearable. He was a master at starting fires, and this one took little effort. He still had not spoken much to Gâbrïel. He had spent the whole evening contemplating what now lay on his

shoulders, and by now he was sufficiently disillusioned with his guide's conversational value that there was little to tempt him away from his thoughts. At least he had come up with a question, although he decided that it could wait for tomorrow. That way, he thought, he could avoid the risk of losing sleep. When he was done eating, Thäràc stood up, stamped out the fire, and he and Gâbríel kept moving.

A few hours later it was about midnight. Thäràc and Gâbríel had come to a place where the trees were about the width of three men. They were also very short, so much so that some of the branches even touched the ground. Their particular lack of density allowed the moon to shine brightly through the leaves. Thäràc decided that it was a good time and place to get some sleep. He found a convenient cradle like structure in one of the trees about four feet up off the ground. He climbed up and made himself comfortable, which was relatively easy for one accustomed to sleeping in trees. The threat of predators at night was often constant, and as such it was good practice to go to sleep late. Although it was in the later half of winter Thäràc did not need blankets. Over a hundred years of living in the wild had trained his mind and body to sleep soundly in the cold. All that he needed was his thick woollen jumper and he never got sick. Gâbríel approached him.

"I will wake you if anything comes close," she said.

"Yes," said Thäràc, "Otherwise wake me in about six hours. Goodnight."

With that, he positioned himself, and then performed a ritual which he had been practicing every night since he left home. He reached into a well concealed pocket at the chest of his jumper and pulled out a fine necklace. At that part of the necklace which would rest on Thäràc's upper chest had he not had such an aversion to wearing jewelry, was an interesting symbol: a hook. Its wider significance was

overshadowed by what it meant to him. For a moment he just held it in his hand and shut his eyes, before slipping it back into its resting place, and falling swiftly into a deep, undisturbed sleep. This trinket was the only thing that remained of the world that had fallen to pieces before his eyes. It had been given to him by one of his very best friends, an old man named Tôbit.

Chapter 4: The Myth of the Lion Man

In the living room of a small, simple house at the heart of a village not far from the southernmost border of the Forest of Pán`gaia, a teenage boy sat at a table. On that table before him was a cup of tea. To his left, staring out the window into an afternoon tainted by only the slightest of showers, was a man; getting on in his years and a little overweight, but otherwise in good health. The child began to speak.

“Uh...”

The old man half turned, half spun around to face him.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” he said in a burly, yet curiously mellow voice, “what was your question again?”

“Who came first, the dêvas or the gîajìn?”

“Oh, that one.”

The man sat himself down, opposite the boy, and before his own cup of tea.

“Well...” he said while adjusting himself. Then he looked him humorously in the eyes and said “we don’t know.”

He smiled.

“We both like to think we are the first and foremost, as our stories show. The reality is that both of us have been around for as long as history can testify. What I can tell you is that the ways in which the two bring about civilisation are completely different.”

“I have been told that the two started off the same way.”

“Very true. We call it the nomadic period; moving from place to place, living off the land. Then – at least for some – came the seminomadic period, wherein people began to occasionally settle in huts. This is all very simplistic mind you. It is not until the development of agriculture that we can really start to see some differences between 'us' and 'them'.”

“Like?”

“Well, the main difference is the way in which we managed labour. As you know Thäràc, the beginnings of agriculture go very much (though not entirely) hand in hand with the move to sedentary living. When people learnt how to build more permanent houses, what often followed was an interest in luxury. Hence, besides food and house building, people learnt how to make tables, chairs and other items of material benefit. We dêvas always divided the basic labours so that no one was ever overworked, and then we would use what time and energy we had left in order to produce other, more novel things such as furniture, and occasionally art. This was where the gîajìn had their own way of doing things.”

He finished the sentence with a rather cute wink followed by a chuckle. Then he continued.

“But, to the point, it is an interesting fact that both sides date the other’s creation to this period; where the differences most clearly emerge. You do know them, don’t you?”

Young Thäràc shrugged. Tôbit rolled his eyes and grinned.

“Well then, which one would you like to hear first?”

Thàràc thought it over for a moment.

“I think I will start with ours.”

Tôbit sighed; he did not seem surprised.

“Very well. It is interesting I must say. Well, this story, again like its counterpart dates back to...”

As he went on, he got up and approached his rather large book shelf.

“...a period shortly after the beginning of conflict between the two races.”

Still speaking, he searched briefly for his book, found it, and returned to his seat.

“Actually... sorry. This one seems to have come later, probably after the gîajìn were all but exterminated on this continent.” Thàràc glanced over at the title of the small book.

The Myth of the Lion Man

“Ready?” asked Tôbit with a quick glance at his beloved pupil. Not bothering to wait for a belated response, he lowered his eyes to the page and started reading.

In an age when the chaos thrived but its source was forgotten, there lived a mage named Lôcí. He was wild and eccentric, and many thought mad. The people were somewhat suspicious and distrustful of him, and the mages even more so. He was known for his toying with nature, and had created many unnatural things, some of which had to be destroyed. One day it was discovered that he was at work on his most ambitious project ever. The people were worried, and the mages in particular sought to investigate. By the time they discovered Lôcí’s ambition it was too late,

and the truth was even more disturbing than almost anyone had imagined. Lôcí had transformed a pack of lions into human beings. The mages were so horrified that they planned extermination. But Lôcí would not let that happen; he believed that the Lion People were perfect, and could do no harm. He believed that his creation was identical to that of the Transcendence; but it was not. Before too long, the legacy of the Lion People's animal origins became increasingly apparent.

The first great flaw to be noticed lay in their reproductive drive. Rather than the mellow nature of human love, their drives were excessive, and out of control. Blind to this, Lôcí made the tragic mistake of bestowing the Lion People with romantic feelings, like humans. But such was not compatible with their nature, and so the act of love became as poison to them, the ultimate creative force, but a new means to wound and destroy each other. Couples fell apart, often in acts of disloyalty; many children were born into unstable families; some even lost their parents, and were left homeless. The Lion People spread like mice and saw no reason to stop, and so they rapidly expanded their territories. Good land was coveted, and the Lion People were often willing to fight for it. Aggression, the fact for which lions were best known, had remained unchanged.

The greater tragedy, however, was Lôcí's attempt, and failure, to reproduce human reasoning. People had been endowed with the capacity to understand their world, and to use reason to decide on their actions, so that people would live happy lives. All that Lôcí had done was to enhance the minds of his Animal subjects, creating a cruel mockery of understanding. The constraints of unblessed brains made them simplistic, and insensitive to detail; blind to reality, blind to reason, and primed for illusion and fantasy. Without reason and understanding, ideas and

beliefs took all forms, and divided the Lion People into cultures, religions, and philosophies. Aside from its inherent inadequacy, this reasoning often also revealed itself to be little more than a medium for the instincts that drove animal behaviour: aggression, hierarchy, and selfishness. The consequence was cruelty and apathy.

“Then it goes into all the history of relations between the two races etc.” said Tôbit, before snapping the book shut.

“Scathing isn't it?”

Chapter 5: The Sword of Cain

Early in the afternoon, Thäràc and Gâbríel were walking among thin tightly spaced trees; part of an ever-changing forest. Already they had seen a wide variety of trees and plants of every shape and size, something they were both well used to. They had taken off promptly after breakfast, and having slept on the rather serious matter before him, Thäràc was feeling more open again to the pursuit of conversation. Although Gâbríel was hardly the most exciting person to ever grace his company, she was still a person, if not necessarily a real human being, and Thäràc had long despaired that such (potentially) engaging companions no longer existed. Gâbríel, for her part, could see very clearly that from the moment they met, Thäràc had been trying to make precisely such use of her. She found it very annoying, but she did see the utility in putting in some effort. And so it was that throughout the morning they had spoken of whatever simple things they could, but otherwise still kept silent. Now he saw fit to ask of Gâbríel that one crucial question which, up until this time, he had been delaying.

“You mentioned yesterday that *someone* had conjured the Army of Black and Flame. Do you have any idea who it was?”

In her response, Gâbríel seemed strangely hesitant.

“Yes,” she said, “I believe I do.”

Again she was silent. Never fond of half answered questions, Thäràc was feeling a little impatient.

“Well, who was it?”

“You have heard of him,” said Gâbríel, “he once brought about the worst scourge then known to memory, yet he was also responsible for the greater horrors of what came next. The cause behind the destruction of Pán`gaia, and the world with it, is Effa.”

Thäràc was a little surprised.

“Effa? Wasn’t that guy destroyed?”

“Only his body,” said Gâbríel, “his spirit slipped away, never to be seen by human eyes again. I pursued it, but not with much success. It was only rarely that I could ever catch a glimpse of him. And with every sighting he was more twisted and less human than before, not only in appearance, but in the depths of his heart.”

At that moment, Thäràc had a sudden flash. That last sentence had conjured up in his head numerous accounts of a legendary being. A messenger who could see straight into the heart of every living creature on the face of the earth; one who was known for exactly the lack of what anybody really knew; one who led a double existence as both a person and an animal.

“You are the Sô`fía!”

“That is right,” said Gâbríel, “I told you, I was the Guardian's eyes and ears. I was also his mouth; his messenger, his diplomat, but most importantly, his spy.”

Thäràc should have known when he first met her, even more so when she first mentioned that she was the Guardian's servant. In fact, most of what Gâbríel had just

said was said the day before. He had completely forgotten all about the legends of the entity with whom he was now acquainted personally. It took that fleeting mention of 'looking into Effa's heart' for everything to come back. This was why she was so sharp in sensing Thäràc's emotions. Gâbríel was created with precisely that power, so that she could see lies, woes, weaknesses, and motives. She was *the* servant of the Guardian, and now she was Thäràc's guide. It also explained his other observation, that by default she was about as much fun to talk to as a frog.

"So do you mind telling me what exactly is written on that message strip around... bird-you's leg?"

"Yes, I am."

"Now I'm sure that makes sense to you, but to me..."

"What you see before you right now is the magical fruition of the words engraved on the parchment by the Guardian himself."

"Wasn't he a clever author," said Thäràc, "I never read that the great Sô`fía was meant to be nothing but, no offence, a glorified messenger bird."

"No offence to be taken," said Gâbríel, "and yes, that is what I am. I am my words, and my words are the message, which naturally changes."

"So when your target wanted to see what was in stall for him, he need only unroll the strip and there you were!"

"That is correct."

"And if I am not mistaken," sounding really clever, "after the Guardian collapsed you had to learn how to do it yourself?"

"Yes."

"I bet it took a lot of practice?"

“Yes it did.”

Thäràc just looked at her.

“It drove me nuts.”

“(I’m sure that wasn’t hard). Now, you were telling me about Effa.”

“I was under the Guardian’s instructions to keep track of him,” she continued, “but Effa was evasive. In time it became almost impossible to find him, but the orders were never dropped. It was forever my duty to maintain some knowledge of his whereabouts and activities. Yet, my efforts were in vain. There was nothing I could see of him save one thing: over the centuries he had grown stronger than before.”

“So he simply *grew* powerful enough to create an army that could overcome the Trinity of Legions?” asked Thäràc.

“I don’t think so. I have suspicions as to what gave him that power, but it is too soon to be troubling you with such things.”

“But what was his purpose?” asked Thäràc, “just to annihilate everything? Out of sheer malice?”

“Effa is angry Thäràc; angry, vindictive and furiously hateful of all he sees. He is not interested in grief or suffering. He simply wants to destroy everything that we are and everything that we are ever going to be. And that’s all there is to it.”

Much to Gâbríel’s relief, this got Thäràc rather quiet. She did not have to be the Sôfía to see why. Effa was remembered in history as the personification of nightmares. That he still existed and had ambitions was more than a touch unsettling. Thäràc remained silent for the rest of the afternoon, and Gâbríel kept to a characteristic policy of no questions, no need to talk at all.

They kept moving towards the southeast, Gâbríel leading the way. As always the size and type of trees around them changed continuously. They stopped to rest whenever and for how ever long they needed to; or rather Thäràc needed to. Gâbríel saw to it that every once in a while they would come to a pool or a creek where Thäràc could drink. Nor did he ever go hungry. He never had to travel far to find some berries or roots in the wild, and the woods were inhabited by dears and other herbivores. When night came, so did the fèn`rira, neither terribly dangerous to Thäràc nor terribly tasty. His night was spent sleeping beside a particularly large tree from midnight to about the sixth hour. That morning, following a rich and satisfying breakfast of berries and nuts, he and Gâbríel headed off once again.

They kept moving until finally, late that afternoon, the woods gave way to a more open space. Over their heads the branches from the tall trees continued to shelter much of the area. Before them the ground tilted down into a cemetery. They stepped down onto a sort of terrace, with tombstones neatly aligned in rows and columns. The tombstones were impressively well preserved. They were also very simple. Beyond this terrace lay a complex network of different levels and sections, connected by stone hewn stairs, corridors and arches; divided by walls, chasms and height. The contents of the different sections varied from tightly packed sets of graves to virtually empty areas with single, specialised stone structures.

“Welcome to the Cemetery of Gèth`semaní,” said Gâbríel as they stepped through the first section.

“These are gîajìn tombstones, most of them are local, but very very old. You can tell by their basic design that these were marginal figures, probably merchants and some distinguished farmers. However, in this place you will find the resting places of some of the most well remembered

people from every age and every part of the world, dêvas and gâjìn. Yet, alongside these lie other, very privileged neighbours, some whose names I guarantee you will never find elsewhere. There is so much to know about this place that some have dedicated their lives to studying it. It is also sacred; a place of pilgrimage, particularly to the gâjìn.”

As she spoke, the two were passing through a twisting pathway between an elaborate graveyard on one side, and an array of stone huts and various structures on the other. The path then dipped into a virtual pit, surrounded on all sides by higher ground. Then Gâbríel stopped. Before her, lay what looked like a small stone slab encrusted into the wall of earth like a door. For a moment she just stood there, staring at it. Then she spoke.

“I have not been to this place for a long time, but when I last did there was a passage here.”

About forty minutes later, the two were strolling casually through the ancient cemetery looking for anything that could give them even the slightest lead. After discovering the mysterious sabotage of their passage, Gâbríel had taken several minutes to gather her thoughts. Her final answer was to search the area at least until she could decide on the next move. And so, over the next half hour their time was spent exploring the deceptively vast ruins that presented them with a survey not only of some of the farthest reaches of the world, but also of the depths of history. The place where they were supposed to have entered the blocked entrance was a memorial dedicated to the Beast Wars, the 'greater horrors' mentioned by Gâbríel, for which Effa was ultimately responsible. Thousands of years ago the continent had been richly inhabited not only by gâjìn, but also by all manner of animals of marvelous size and power. By the end of what became known as 'The Second War' of Pán`gaia, both

populations were almost completely wiped out. Not long after, the Great Beasts of Old fell, one by one, to extinction. It was often said that only the White Beasts of Me`ridía remained, alongside the most feared creature in the world. This memorial was but one of the many special places in the sacred graveyards, but it was the centre of pilgrimage.

Thäràc and Gàbríel now stood near the top of a hill, completely bare except for the grass and the graves of a few overseas kings. It was barely a backward glance toward the tombstone encrusted woods from whence they had come that drew Thäràc's attention away from where they were headed.

“Did you see that?” he said.

“No. What is it?”

“I saw movement behind us.”

Thäràc turned and followed his sighting. He returned to the various graves among the open woods. Looking about, there was nothing there he had not already seen (some four times now). Once he looked more broadly however, he soon spotted a creature of some sort hovering about the tombstones in the distance. Hastily, but with caution, he approached. He had reached an impressively short distance before the creature – which looked like a very strange sort of bug – moved on. Yet, it did not seem to be frightened of him. In fact, it seemed to take very little interest in him at all. Even when Gàbríel suddenly emerged from behind a large boulder further ahead, right next to the creature, it appeared indifferent. Thäràc decided to follow it, reuniting him with Gàbríel.

“What is that?”

“That is an úmahai,” she said, speaking as they pursued it, “an exceptionally rare creature. If you look closely enough its head is very horse-like in appearance. It is actually almost identical to its obvious cousin, what we call a seahorse. The

difference is that while the sea horse is waterborne, the úmahai has wings like a fly.”

“Is it afraid of us?”

“Not at all. They can be a little timid, yes, but this one is not.”

This curious animal led its followers more than half-way around the cemetery. They had only passed a few sections before it started to rain lightly. By the time the creature finally halted, the rain was considerable. Before the three curious onlookers was an isolated pillar-like tombstone beyond just a few uneven ascending steps in tree sheltered space. As Thäràc read the partially obscured inscription, Gâbríel, with some incredible sense of Thäràc's progress, spoke aloud the missing words whenever he got to them.

Hĩ lîz Thäràc dh [Great. A revolutionary from the time before] dh Bíst Wóz.

Thäràc realised right then that he was standing once again in the 'Second War' memorial.

Az hí stud [before the] ódíens at dh sacrificshal rît ov [roses of that year, he] niú hiz final fât uud cãm from uidhìn.

“And a fact known by very few,” said Gâbríel, “the knife used to assassinate him three weeks later was incidentally the very same knife used by the temple priest at that ceremony in the 'cutting of the cloth.'”

Though Thäràc knew little of his namesake, he did know him as the celebrated inauguration of the rebellion which

exploded into the bloodiest war in recorded history. The úmahai was hovering about before the inscription, Thäràc just stood there for a moment gazing at it. This was the first time he had taken a closer look at the creature. Its small head was very horse-like indeed, though with a very thin pointy snout; its whole body looked somewhat shell-like; its torso was quite straight and stretched from its head to its tail, which was tightly curled back behind it in a spiral much like the pattern of a snail shell; its wings were invisible as they worked hard to keep it in the air; the whole thing was about the size of Thäràc's hand. Thäràc turned his attention back toward the inscription, wondering to what extent he could imagine it leading him towards their goal. It took some time for him to notice movement in the corner of his eye. He dropped his gaze. The úmahai was now hovering at the ground. Beneath it, about one foot away from the tombstone, was an exposed piece of what appeared to be a stone surface covered with earth and leaves. On the small remaining bit of uncovered surface Thäràc could just discern a hewn pattern. It looked like roses. At first he did not think much of it. Then the words of the inscription seemed to whisper into his ear: 'As he stood before the audience at the sacrificial rite of roses of that year.'

Thäràc dropped down to his hands and knees, and took a moment to clear away the dirt and leaf covering. Beneath him was a flat stone surface, hewn in a pattern of densely packed roses. He looked briefly up at Gâbríel, who stood motionless behind him, hands behind her back. Then he turned his attention back to the rock, and continued clearing away the matter until he could clearly make out all four edges of a square; some two and a half feet in diameter. He started exploring the surface. He noticed that there was a straight split which ran right down the middle, parallel with the surface of the tombstone. Then the whisper returned: 'he knew his final fate would come from within.' Thäràc

unsheathed his sword. Then he positioned himself, held his sword high facing downwards, and thrust it into the slit. With pressure he drove it down deeper, until only half of the sword remained in view. Then, with one leg on either side of the stone surface, he pulled his sword towards him. Slowly but surely the two stones gave way, revealing a gap. It took effort, and before Thäràc could shift them to a satisfactory distance apart, his sword snapped. As he heard the pointy end clang to the ground below, he felt just a little upset, as this sword had lasted ever since he received it at his inauguration into the Vije`liz. But even as he groaned over his carelessness, he remained focused. He lowered the blade until once again it was half way through, and maximised the gap. Then he lay the broken weapon down beside him. There was now enough room for his fingers, so he curled them around the end of one of the slabs and pulled. It was surprisingly light, and lifted quite easily off the ground, revealing a hole. He removed the other slab, and gazed down into utter blackness.

It occurred to him pretty quickly that light might be an issue. He was ready to go off in search of a light source when the úmahai approached the hole, and slowly began to descend. Thäràc and Gâbríel watched as the creature lowered itself into the pit. It was half obscured by darkness when it began to make a very strange sound, a sort of low pitched hiss. The sound quickly became more intense before suddenly breaking into what sounded almost like halfway between a choke and a cough. About one second later the úmahai instantaneously lit up into a beacon-like light. It was curiously bright, enough at least to make every corner visible. Thäràc turned to Gâbríel and smiled.

“I think I will call him Firefly.”

Beyond the opening was a flat surface beyond a five foot drop. Without waiting long, Thäràc climbed in. Gâbríel

followed. Before them was a dangerously steep set of stairs. With Firefly slowly and steadily floating down before them, they proceeded down. When they got to the bottom, they found themselves standing before a long corridor that stretched completely into darkness, some five or so yards away. The passageway was about a foot taller than Thäràc and three times his width. The walls were made of large stone bricks. The floor comprised smooth stone and the ceiling was just natural rock. Thäràc and Gâbríel moved quickly through the corridor, their light source likewise keeping pace ahead of them. It was a long passageway, but a simple one, with only a few sharp turns but otherwise straight. Eventually they reached what seemed like a dead end. Thäràc approached the wall blocking their way, and placed the palm of his hand on it. It felt a little strange. He pushed harder, until finally it moved. He kept pushing until the wall swung open as though it were on hinges. They stepped out into a similar but wider corridor. One end vanished into darkness while the other opened up into a chamber. Upon entering it lit up very well in Firefly's light.

"Welcome to the Tomb of Cain," said Gâbríel, "the great hero of the Beast Wars."

The chamber was about twice Thäràc's height, same in width and about three times his height in length. Directly ahead was a corridor, identical to the one from which they had just emerged. To its left was a corpse lying on its stomach. The walls, ceiling and floor had the same basic architecture as in the previous corridor. Gâbríel looked about cautiously.

"That body has been here for as long as I can remember," she said, "why it keeps so well I cannot say. But I must warn you Thäràc, nothing has ever been taken from this cemetery before."

“So we came here to rob it?” asked Thäràc, clutching the hilt of his broken sword nervously.

“We must. Do not forget, Thäràc, that the future depends on you. Should you fall to the White Beasts of Me`ridía then I don’t think there will be a second opportunity to make things right again. You must take what you can.”

“Like this guy?” said Thäràc, gesturing toward the corpse, “perhaps he had a similar idea.”

Thäràc understood Gâbríel’s reasoning but he did not want to. Even the dêvas were not immune to the superstitious dread of grave robbing. But he had to be practical. The world was now his responsibility and he had to take great care with every decision he made. Boldly, he proceeded forward, with Gâbríel right behind him. The corridor ahead was very short; about two yards long. With Firefly at the lead as usual, they passed through and emerged in another chamber. It was about the same length as the previous one, but significantly wider. Furthermore, while the last room was as bland as the passage via which they had entered, this place was richly carved and decorated with fine stone masonry. In the centre of the room lay a stone sarcophagus; its ends lengthwise with the corridor. On the lid of the sarcophagus was hewn the image of a man. His hands lay on his chest, and in those hands he held a Sword. The sheath lay beside the altar on the right. Thäràc braced himself, approached the sarcophagus, and with a bit of effort he wrenched the sword free. It was a beautiful weapon, about the same size as his own, reaching from his waist to about the tip of his head. As he held it before him, experiencing its weight and feel, Gâbríel spoke.

“This sword was forged with Setharòn; the celestial flame. Any weapon so forged bears great power and ferocity against evil. Yet, this sword has borne the great fire itself. Cain was the second person in history to be given the Setharòn, and he

wielded it through this sword. With such a weapon he played a large part in the defeat of King Mammon, tyrant of the Beast Wars. After the war the Setharòn was taken back, but the bearing of the flame seemed to have had a permanent effect on the sword. It was even stronger than before. After Cain's death the weapon was no longer needed, so they placed it in this tomb with his body, which of course lies in this sarcophagus. With this sword your chances of success will be doubled.”

Thäràc did not speak. Rather, he just smiled. He liked his new weapon, and no longer did he have any conscientious concerns about grave robbing. He bent over and picked up the sheath. Carefully he put the sword in. Then he took off his old sheath, returned to it the broken sword he still held, and lay them against the far right corner of the room. He fixed his new sheath into position and stood in the corner. And then, after standing still for a moment, he slid out the sword in the blink of an eye and swung it around manically, sending the dim light into turmoil as Firefly darted about startled. After dancing across to the other side of the room Thäràc stopped. Once again he sheathed his sword and walked back toward Gâbríel. Stepping ahead of her he said, “let's go.”

Leaving Thäràc's old sword and sheath behind they stepped back into the previous chamber and proceeded towards the corridor. But just as Thäràc was in the opening he suddenly heard a strange gurgling sound coming from behind him. He turned around. It was coming from the corpse. It was twitching. The noise and the twitching continued uninterrupted for about two more seconds, until suddenly it began to lift up off the ground. Slowly it rose, tilting upward until it was almost upright; its back towards Thäràc. Its feet were well off the ground. By then the gurgling sound had been replaced by a horrid, inhuman

screeching noise that filled the room. Then it started shaking violently, and before Thäràc could find the presence of mind to draw his sword, the corpse shot across the room, at about the speed of a tossed rock, straight into him; winding him. Instantaneously its arms and legs were wrapped tightly around him. Even in his panic Thäràc still received a further shock when he realised that he was staring straight into the back of its head. Likewise it was the back of its torso that was pressing hard against his chest as the limbs embraced him behind itself in a torturous looking position.

He stumbled back, almost falling over into the corridor, but as soon as he entered the corridor the body seemed to nudge him back into the main chamber. He struggled to force it off of himself but could not. He could take his sword out but he did not like the idea of being so directly exposed to its blood. Not knowing what else to do he turned right and ran into the wall. He felt its grip loosen very briefly. And so he did it again, this time trying to wrench its arms off of him. He was still winded, but he could still smell the overwhelming stench of death. The third time he rammed it into the wall he almost broke free of its arms. The fourth time he succeeded. He managed to push himself behind its arms and then he let go. The arms became tightly wrapped around its own back. Then he had to deal with the legs. Again he ran into the wall. This time it only took two tries for him to break free. He tossed the corpse to the ground, and without delay he drew his sword. For a moment he watched the body twitch and squirm on the floor and having no better idea he gestured for Gâbríel to enter the corridor and then did so himself. He was not quite sure how to disable something that was already dead, and he did not think much of trial and error. So he moved through the corridor as fast as his winded condition would let him; occasionally glancing back to make sure he was not being followed; backtracking through the side passage from whence they came. Once

again, Firefly took the lead, lighting the way as they went. When they reached the outside, Thäràc reset the two stone slabs as quickly as he could, and then he stopped to get his breath back, while Firefly hovered before him with an apparent curiosity.

Chapter 6: Before the Turning: the Ancient Days

It is said that from the beginning of time, humanity was like a child. In the beginning people were peaceful. They lived in simplicity, and they hardly knew the sight of human blood. Though they were not beyond the tyranny of anger, desire and fear, their world was governed by reason and compassion. This was the way of things before one horrible day, when a man named Effa became the dividing line between the age of good and the reality of evil. Little would be remembered of the things which so enraged him that he drew the first blood ever known to be spilt by a dêva, the blood of his own father and brother. This lit a flame that would never burn out. His anger became uncontrollable, and that anger turned to hate. Leaving his mother to grieve he ran away into the night. In time he took another life; and another. Each killing made him angrier, and the anger made him kill. Effa became the very death which stalked the people of Pán`gaia. He scaled the land teaching people the meaning of pain and the colour of blood, until finally came the time that he found a common cause with the mindless and brutal among the gâajîn. This was the beginning of the plague which

forever darkened the eyes of human kind: the Army of Blood. Never before had the people of the world seen such horror as the chaos which Effa and the Army of Blood spread across the land of Pán`gaia. The innocence of humanity was gone forever.

In the ancient years there was a constellation of a great animal called Gerra. And one day, at a time when no one was safe from Effa's horrible scourge, the people looked up into the sky and beheld as the stars of the constellation came together and became one. And as a great fireball it fell to the earth, and from the flames of its collision came Gerra. This winged creature from the heavens had power beyond anything that the people had ever seen, and Effa and his dominions became scared. Gerra brought about order and saved the people from annihilation. He brought with him 'Setharòn', the celestial flame, and entrusted it to the Cuôlva, the spirits of the earth.

Effa hated him and wanted him dead, so one day he visited a well-known mage of the gîajìn whose name was Mammon. They made a deal. If Mammon could have Gerra destroyed, then Effa would make him king. So Effa gave him half of his army and made him sovereign over a large portion of land in the South, which became known as Lecríá. Seeing no reason to break his promise, Mammon took twelve of his men, cursed them, and sent them after Gerra.

Gerra's wish was to protect the human race for as long as he could. He decided that it was time to obliterate Effa's legion once and for all, but he needed the people to help. So he taught them how to fight and waged what would be known to history as the First War. The war was won. The people smashed the Army of Blood while Gerra hunted Effa down, and killed him. This was to be his final achievement. On the eve of the war's end Mammon's predators found him in a valley and assailed him. They severed his wings and

weakened him and in return he slaughtered them. But the fight was not over. The valley was occupied by a flock of reptiles, and before Gerra could lower his blood stained hand, the souls of the men violently tore out of their bodies and raced into the flock. This turned them from relatively peaceful animals into vicious killers. They turned on Gerra and tore him to shreds. Such was the fulfilment of Mammon's curse.

After the war, the possessed reptiles proceeded to terrorise the community. Gerra, too new to the reality of ghost-hood, was too weak and could not fight, so instead he made a bounty of himself. In those days, many reptiles possessed feathers, including Gerra's killers, and so, with the help of a mage, he had them plucked bare to mark them apart from the rest. Then he passed the word that whoever caught and killed them all would be infused with Gerra's spirit as a reward. Hunters from all over the world came to claim the prize, until one of them was destroyed and the others grew fearful. And so they ran away into the forest in the region of Me`ridia and never returned; and thus, became known as the White Beasts of Me`ridia, for their loss of feathers had a curious paling effect. Satisfied that his work was done, Gerra returned to the heavens and rested.

While the First War was over, the rule of King Mammon continued. From the beginning his subjects resented the inhumanity of his policies, but in time his tyranny became legendary. As his cruelty grew, tensions began to emerge throughout society, until the people revolted. This was the beginning of the great war of the people against the King: the Second War. The first battle made it clear to Mammon that his forces were too weak. He had a plan. With the help of his magic (and that of other mages) Mammon captured and tamed some of the great beasts that inhabited the earth at that time. Using these beasts he was victorious in the second

battle. The resistance, with their own mages, took to the same strategy, and found living war machines of their own. Thus began the Beast Wars, the most traumatic struggle of all living memory.

Yet, the Beast Wars were only the backdrop for a more far reaching tragedy, for it was then that the gîajîn discovered the true separateness between themselves and their eternal brothers the dêvas. Their response was rejection, and Mammon used the Schism to unite many of the gîajîn to his cause. The Beasts Wars were no longer about freedom against tyranny, they were the struggle between the dêvas and the gîajîn, whose ambition was to assert supremacy over their brothers, and ultimately to destroy them. For over a decade both sides continued to scale the land collecting resources with which to tear each other to pieces. As the numbers became exhausted, it was the gîajîn whose war machine was finally depleted, and in their final weakness, they lost the war and were left almost completely wiped out, as were the multitude of greater animals which once filled the earth. For the dêvas however, it was the end of a nightmare, and the beginning of the slow restoration of the old way of the world. Despite his crimes, Mammon was not denied the right to live a normal life among the ever forgiving dêvas, but he chose to live in exile, and was never seen again.

This marked the end of ancient history. From then on the dêvas lived in harmony with their diminished gîajîn brothers. Yet, the legacy of the Second War remained, and the world was forever a changed place. It was agreed that the dêvas must never become complacent in peacetime. And so they preserved their training; passed it on to their children; and instigated an organization of fighters dedicated to maintaining a strong defence in a world of peace and prosperity. They were the Vîje`lîz.

Chapter 7: A Dreaded History

Thäràc was awakened by the sound of Gâbríel's voice. It was early in the morning. He had spent the night up in a tree, in a fairly secure spot. He opened his eyes and found Gâbríel's familiar face looming over him, urging him to wake up. She must have been standing on a branch a few feet below his level. By the time he lifted his head she was gone. He looked to the ground just in time to see a raven swoop down, flutter its wings whilst pulling something from its right leg with its beak, and transform into what looked like a human; something about her that he had almost forgotten about. Not too distracted by this he began to sit up, and it was then that he noticed something strange on his chest. It was Firefly, who was curled up like a cat sleeping on him. As he got onto his feet, the creature practically fell off, but promptly started its wings and hovered to the ground.

Firefly had followed Thäràc and Gâbríel all the way from the cemetery, and seemed to have developed a liking to Thäràc. It seemed pretty clear that it was there to stay. Standing carefully on the branch Thäràc looked up at the few things which remained in this tree in this part of winter. He reached up with two hands, and plucked down a pair of large, round, dark red fruits. Though he knew not their name

– having had so few to ask even over a whole century – they had been a blessing since he first discovered them early on in his nomadic life. They were very rare, but possessed a sweetness which no exorcism of the Pa`räjı could take away. Aside from one looking a little eaten by wildlife, they were in great condition. Without thinking much of it he bent down to face Gâbrıel, and tossed his breakfast down to her. She stood there motionless as they hit the ground. A little surprised and disappointed, Thäràc climbed down from the tree. Once he got down to the ground, he collected the bruised fruits, and offered one to Gâbrıel, who did not seem to have the slightest interest in it. Instead she just debriefed him as the three headed off once again.

“Where we are heading is a cluster of long abandoned villages,” she said. “Each of the White Beasts has its home in one of those villages. Our first stop from here is Beddingville, the nearest village; some ten miles from the Cemetery. We only have a little under two miles to go.”

Thäràc was somewhat curious about this place called Beddingville, but decided – against his nature – that it was probably best just to wait and see. But that was not to keep him quiet. He was not nearly as interested in his destination as he was in his enigmatic guide, whose often strange behaviour seemed so paradoxical to her sheer wisdom. For the remainder of the journey, he spent their time probing her for everything she could reveal about herself. It was not nearly as difficult as he had imagined. As shy as he was about it, Gâbrıel had almost no reluctance to shake away some of his mystery.

The very first thing that Thäràc had to understand about the Sô`fıa, so she said, was that she was not human in any way. She was created by the Guardian during the First War, thus she was thousands of years old. Though she was a bound servant of the Guardian himself, she was in those days

an agent rather of Gerra. Her main purpose in that struggle was as a diplomat and a spokesperson. This was the purpose of her human guise; the spectre of a young woman. Thäràc had wondered fruitlessly how an ordinary looking bird could become a human being *with* clothes and a pre-tied ponytail. The answer, as he now understood it, was that they were no more real than her pretty, but firm face. The real question however – which had boggled many for as long as the title of Sô`fia was known – was: why a woman? For the majority of her subjects were gîajìn; and the gîajìn were patriarchal. One would think that had she been made male, such people would have taken her more seriously. Yet, for reasons of his own, the Guardian chose otherwise, and it seemed somehow to have worked.

This initial role as a diplomat and particularly as a spokesperson served to explain the fact that she was built on the principle of a messenger bird. Thäràc tried to imagine Effa's representative retrieving a message from the Guardian from the birds foot in the normal manner. It was almost as though she had evolved from a fixed message to a dynamic one capable of rewriting itself and changing its target at will, manifest magically as a person, complete with five senses and a voice. This seemed to lead onto her later function.

At the time of the Beast Wars and forever after, her main purpose was to spy. Without her, the Guardian could know practically nothing about the world he had sworn to protect. In the subsequent history of Pán`gaia next to nothing is known of her activities. It was no secret to Thäràc however that in the foreign places where gîajìn still ruled, she was feared. Though she would not reveal anything of her missions, Thäràc could understand why some would cower. When he was confronted with the predators of the night, and later assaulted by the corpse at Gèth`semaní, Gâbríel had been completely out of the picture. Why? Was it because she

was fragile? Or perhaps she was not. Perhaps there was more to Gâbríel than what she could see, like what she could *do*. But whatever her capacities, Gâbríel's was a presence the likes of which Thäràc had never felt, and he saw himself as more privileged than potentially threatened.

As the three travelled, the forest around them continued to change. The trees grew taller and straighter than ever before. They were stretching up to about 15 times Thäràc's height when finally he and his companions came to an opening in the woods.

"We are here," said Gâbríel, "or here we are, if you prefer that."

From the first moment he set eyes upon Beddingville Thäràc could see where it got its name. The entire village, or vast mass of ruins as it were, rested upon a stone foundation which lay about 5 feet above the ground, and the edge ran pretty much parallel with the forest wall from which they had emerged. To their right, roughly 20 yards along the wall of the foundation, was a stone staircase leading up to the ruins. At the top of the stairs was a stone arch. This was the doorway into a small stone structure that appeared to be nothing more than an elaborate gateway. Beyond this he could see stone brick houses, worn away to varying degrees. With Firefly hovering at the lead Thäràc and Gâbríel made their way to the stairs. When they got there, Gâbríel stepped ahead and went straight up. There were only eight steps. When she was at the top, Thäràc started up. About halfway he paused. He looked around, acknowledging his surroundings. Not far behind him the edge of the woods loomed high above. There was very little sound. For about half a minute he stared down the area between the edge of the foundation and the forest wall. In the distance both curved around in the direction of the ruins. He continued up the stairs and when he reached the top Gâbríel was gone.

As he emerged from the crumbling gateway he found himself gazing into the stone ruins of an ancient village. Left, right and ahead were houses of various shapes and degrees of wholeness. Some appeared to still be standing strong, at least from his angle. Most of them were clearly eaten away. Some were reduced to nothing but two crumbling walls. Before too long he saw a raven approaching him. In the same manner as when they first met the bird stopped in midair, bit onto the curled up message strip, and shape-changed into the human form Thäràc knew best.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“A fixer-upper, but I like it.” replied Thäràc.

“Good, because we may be here for some time; I don’t know quite how long it will take for our host to show up. Right now the creature is nowhere to be seen. We have little to do but wait.”

“Wait I can certainly do. In the mean time, what can you tell me about this place?”

“Incidentally, Beddingville was the first permanent settlement to be built in this area. Look at the architecture; pretty impressive for a dêva town isn’t it? Such sturdy stone structures as we see here must have taken hard work to build. As you know dêvas rarely go to such lengths to show off their skills, indeed usually they opt for bare necessity. But these people did so much more. They decided that they would make something great.”

“Well, *I’m* impressed!” said Thäràc.

“Also very interesting is the location. First of all, this part of the forest is peppered with open spots, minimising the number of trees that had to be cut down. It was much easier for most sedentary people to live outside the great forest. Second, the proximity of this place to its neighbours is typical of the pattern of town building unique to the dêvas.

These villages are clustered up because arriving settlers were generally welcomed and even appreciated as neighbours provided they kept from intruding. Thus, each new settlement was deliberately established a couple of miles away from an existing community. Such a distance was close enough for the people in separate villages to visit each other if they wished, and far enough to have their own space. And so it goes with many dêva communities. This establishment is the first of four lined up in a very neat row. On either side of this string of ruins are another five empty villages; three on the west side, and two on the east. Of course, all subsequent settlers were mightily impressed by this one, and no doubt were highly influenced. None of the other settlements were as glamorous as where we stand, but they were well above average, even though they were not as keen on doing the work. In fact, the inhabitants of this town were even happy to help them.”

By this point in the discussion they had begun strolling around. Thäràc was anxious to see more of this wonder. He was especially fascinated when he saw what appeared to be a former garden built onto the stone ground. It was a very thick angular horseshoe shape and a modest size, about four yards across. Attached to one end of the horseshoe shape was a piece of stone wall; presumably the back end of the house. Thäràc pictured a young girl stepping outside through a doorway, pulling out a pumpkin, and walking back inside. Gâbríel noticed a sadness wash over him. She knew what he was about to ask.

“What happened to them?”

“Three and a half thousand years ago when Gerra set the great bounty his true intention was not to have the White Beasts destroyed, but simply to have them chased away. As it turned out it was probably better to keep them alive. Anyway, his plan worked, or at least it drove them away from

the bulk of civilisation. Like I said, the Forest of Pán`gaia was mostly uninhabited. It was the tragic and unforeseen consequence of Gerra's actions that they would find these towns. They fell in love. They decided that this would be their home. One fateful night they slaughtered everybody, one village at a time. They would move into a village, kill everyone; many of them in their sleep, and move onto the next. There was no resistance. None of them were fighters or great hunters, and no one was able to leave one place to alert another. It was total, absolute massacre.”

As Gâbríel spoke, Thäràc's sight was fixed on a stone statue that lay on the ground. It was of a woman. She had long hair and was smiling subtly; and she was holding a baby. The statue was heavily weathered; her right leg and various other bits were detached. The child was shambled. Her still smiling face was surprisingly well preserved, except that a large portion of the forehead including the left eye was missing, and the tip of the nose was chipped off.

“Were there any survivors?” he asked.

“Amazingly one single boy actually managed to escape. I found him, and was able to give him some comfort. I led him to a safe place where he could stay. On the way I advised him not to tell anybody of the whereabouts of the White Beasts. It was better kept a secret, and I knew he would keep his word.”

“Because it was better to keep them alive,” Thäràc remembered, “why? To keep the pestilence down?”

“Something like that. It turned out that Mammon's curse went further than was first believed. When the first of the White Beasts was killed all those centuries ago its spirit moved on to another creature; the one whose name is rarely spoken but with the greatest of fear.”

“Ithamä?” said Thäràc, “that thing was a White Beast?”

“Yes,” said Gâbríel, “it would have been better if the previous host remained alive to meet its fate at your hands instead. In the ancient years the earth was inhabited by beasts far greater than those that roam the world today; creatures such as the bird-like reptiles, twelve of which took the souls of Mammon’s assassins. If they were still here they would be no match for their possessed ancestors. But you could imagine the consequences if the cursed ghosts transmigrated into beings ten times greater. But as it happens, the great beasts of old perished to the Second War. Now Ithamä and the White Beasts are the fiercest animals left in the material world, at least on land, and their death will make the world safer. Of course that is not the real reason we are hunting them.”

The conversation stopped there. Gâbríel took off, leaving Thäràc to explore the ruins. For the next few days he spent most of his time strolling about the ancient village with only Firefly for company. His stay was actually quite a happy one. He loved this place, and felt as though he could spend forever quietly pacing among the deteriorated buildings in tranquillity. It was wonderful except for when it rained; then he would sit against a high wall, the only shelter he could find. When he got hungry he would venture into the forest to find food, meat or otherwise. When thirsty he would resort to one of several basins which collected the rain and slowly released it in such a way as to keep themselves clean. Gâbríel spent her time in the air above, continuously circling the village to keep an eye out for any visitors. It was in the evening after the third night that the visitor, or rather the owner, arrived.

Fragments of the red setting sun could be seen through the woods. The sky was filled with grey clouds suggesting rain. Thäràc was sitting on a large rock playing with Firefly when Gâbríel returned.

“It is here,” she said. Thäràc did not say a word. He drew out his sword, and proceeded to follow Gâbríel as she led the way to his target. The path they took was such that Thäràc did not see his enemy until it was only about ten yards away; to his right when he emerged from behind a solitary broken wall. It was a familiar sight: taller than a man, its two legs incredibly powerful. Its arms in contrast were puny and weak. Its head was fierce, and its teeth extremely sharp. Its tough reptilian hide was pale white. It was facing the other way. Thäràc kept moving away from the wall from which he had emerged. Then he stopped. Between him and his opponent was a wide arena like space surrounded by broken down pieces of stone wall, some still standing as high as three feet, others reduced to rubble. The path from him to the beast was clear.

He quickly moved forward, this time taking no care to silence his footfalls. The White Beast turned around to face its threat. Like some birds, the creature had a slight overlap of vision between its sideward facing eyes, allowing it a narrow field of binocular vision aligned with its nose. Without delay it began to charge. Thäràc ran further into the arena, stopped, prepared himself, and when it came close he jumped out of the way to the right, and as he did so he slashed his opponent, striking it below the neck. The creature moaned in pain; a frightful noise. It turned towards Thäràc and darted back just in time to avoid his second attack. For a moment the two just stood there in the middle of the arena, keeping constant eye contact. Thäràc took a swing at its head, which darted back swiftly. He moved forward, compelling it to step back, toward a short wall. As he advanced Thäràc took two more swings forcing his enemy further into the barrier. Before he could swing a third time, the creature threw its left talon forward. Without thinking, Thäràc swung his sword through the talon, chopping it off. Screaming, it managed to hop away from him. Before he

began to approach it, the creature limped towards him. It had fallen into a rage and become careless. Thäràc sidestepped away from the wall and when it was in range he swung diagonally at its pale head. It dodged swiftly. Stepping back he swung again from left to right. It ducked its head, and before he could swing again the raptor took a snap at him. Thäràc ducked, swung his left leg around to the right, spun around clockwise, turned and slashed the creature right between its open jaws. Its upper jaw and most of its head came clean off, leaving nothing but a lower jaw attached to an otherwise headless body. Thäràc took a few steps back and watched the animal stumble around hopelessly, blood spurting from its neck. After a moment, the White Beast collapsed to the ground. It squirmed around a bit and then stopped. Thäràc watched the pool of blood accumulate and smiled. This was his sixth victory over such an animal, and he knew that if the ghosts of the town's former inhabitants were there they would probably have approved.

Chapter 8: The Fox

Once the White Beast had been dealt with, Thäràc and Gâbríel made their way to the nearest village to the west; a place called Newground, with Firefly once again at the fore. On the way, Thäràc managed to incorporate a meal. Gâbríel advised him not to eat of his adversary's meat; something he never intended to do anyway. A fenrï did just fine. The pathway from one town to the next was all through forest. On the way, it started to rain lightly. By the time they had emerged from the tall trees surrounding the village the sun had gone down and it was getting dark. It was still raining. Unlike Beddingville, of course, this village was not built on a stone foundation, but it was composed mainly of the same sort of weathered down stone houses. But this place had some other distinctive features.

Thäràc and Gâbríel began to explore the ruins. This time the ground was covered in grass, and was fairly uneven. Before Gâbríel took to scan the area they saw a creature emerge from behind a wall about eight yards away. It was a Fenrï. Within seconds it spotted them. Thäràc already had his bow ready. The animal started towards him, and he was about to fire, when all of a sudden a large white reptile appeared and caught the Fenrï in its jaws. Thäràc darted

behind a wall to his left and listened to the horrible squealing of the doomed creature. Then it was silent. He peaked around the corner (the wall was connected to another) just in time to see the reptile drop its bleeding kill onto the ground. The White Beast opened its mouth wide and hissed proudly. Thäràc remembered this one. Many decades earlier, he had encountered a particularly vain creature with a knack for showing off its gaping jaws, not to mention its ultra-sharp teeth and its mighty vocal capacity. It seemed to possess a great deal of pride. Or maybe the pride possessed *it*. Thäràc had since speculated an idea of how he could use this to his advantage. Though the White Beasts of Me`ridía seemed to possess the intelligence of their gâajìn spirits, this one might just be arrogant enough for his idea to work. He decided that it was worth a shot.

He came out from behind the wall, revealing himself. The creature spotted him, started running towards him and, sure enough, opened up its mouth wide and let off a fierce hiss which had Firefly dart back for yards behind his protector. Thäràc did not waste a second. He cocked back his arrow and fired it straight into the creature's mouth. The arrow struck a bit to the left just above the throat. The animal shrieked. In a flash he pulled out another two arrows and readied them, quickly advanced towards the creature as it jolted its white head up skyward in pain, and taking advantage of this he aimed carefully and fired. Both arrows went straight into its neck. It shrieked again, only this time the sound was much weaker. Thäràc dropped his bow and drew his sword, and hastily approached the animal arriving at its left. Before it could retaliate he chopped its head off, splintering one of his arrows as he did so. He took a few steps back and watched it stumble about hopelessly, blood spurting from its neck. Once again his opponent plummeted to the ground still moving, and then it was still. This time the blood slowly began to flow through the grass like a creek as it got washed into the rain.

When Thäràc turned around he was facing Gâbríel, who had kept to her usual knack of staying out of things. She spoke.

“Well done. But we cannot leave yet.”

“Why not?” asked Thäràc.

“Because that was not the White Beast that usually inhabits this village. It was just a visitor.”

“Wonderful,” said Thäràc with a hint of sarcasm.

“Yes it is, in fact,” said Gâbríel, “we have been quite fortunate. This saves us time.”

As they stood there talking in the rain Gâbríel kept her eye out for any approaching predators, reptilian or otherwise. Suddenly, Thäràc gave a surprised look to Gâbríel.

“How on earth can you tell them apart like that?”

“Simple. Their bodies may all look the same, but not their spirits.”

“You mean you can actually *see* their souls?”

“That’s right,” said Gâbríel, “and I have been watching these ones for a very long time.”

“For how long exactly?”

“Ever since I started searching for you. I decided that I should keep an eye on them because if any went missing then that would mean that they were being hunted, and whoever was doing so might be promising. It was not until about seven years ago that they began to disappear. Until then I had spent much of my time scaling the whole world searching for someone like you. Somehow I always managed to miss you.”

“Seven years ago?! But I started killing them long before that!”

“Yes, you did” said Gâbríel, “I discovered that when I first saw you. It seems I was tricked.”

“How?” asked Thäràc.

“It must have been an illusion, and an inconceivably powerful one since it could fool me.”

She paused for a moment.

“I am going to start watching for company. You do whatever you wish, as before.”

With that, she turned away from him. Then she squatted slightly, before leaping straight off her feet into the air, straight into a backward somersault. As this happened, her body seemed to roll up into itself, the reverse of what happened whenever she changed the other way, until nothing was left of it but a strip of parchment wrapped around a raven’s right leg. Then the bird flew away, leaving Thäràc to kill some time.

Thäràc did not find these ruins as appealing as the stone grounded construct of Beddingville, although the lush grass seemed to illuminate the half-shattered buildings, making Newground far more beautiful. These buildings however, seemed to be in considerably better shape. Some of them still had all four outer walls still standing, and some of these walls were almost whole. It was fun to explore the interior. There was one structure that Thäràc found particularly captivating. Right in the centre of the village was a pavilion comprising a rather plain rectangular stone foundation, about 5 by 20 yards, and a stone ceiling. All four sides of the slab sloped up at a 45 degree angle, about 1 yard off the ground. The rest was perfectly flat. In the middle of each sloping side was a set of stairs. Circling the flat surface was a series of aligned pillars, together holding up the stone roof. The fact that all of this was intact astounded Thäràc, and he figured that it must have been preserved by magic. Thus, it

must have been important, although at the time its actual purpose eluded him.

Gâbríel would later explain to him that it was the centre of the culture of the original settlers. Though the dêvas were characteristically outgoing and perfectly social people, they were also in a sense, reserved. This was ever a difficult thing to explain, but most clearly illustrated by a feature that set the people of Newground apart from any other dêva society: they liked to dance. It was said in the time of their living that the 'dancers' as they were called, chose this place for none other reason than its suitability as a dancing ground! Hence the name 'Newground'. Looking at the rugged landscape, Thäràc found that difficult to imagine. While it was fair to question the validity of the claim, the name probably would have had a lot of meaning to the settlers; seeing it as their new dancing ground despite its suitability, or its more practical value. It was probably because of the uneven landscape that they decided to built an outdoor ballroom. There was no doubt that such was the purpose of the grand pavilion, and while Thäràc no more understood the joys of dancing than the next dêva, he could not help but admire the enthusiasm behind this marvellous piece of architecture. Pity it was he could never be able to see it in use.

Whatever time Thäràc did not spend at the pavilion, he spent pacing about as before, venturing into the forest for each meal and heading down to a nearby waterhole for water. After five days he started getting restless, and began climbing the various walls and other objects like a child as his main way of passing time. He wondered if one day children *could* come and play here. Maybe one day, when their little hearts are lit back to life, when this part of the forest is inhabited once more, this place could become a playground. From this point on Thäràc began dreaming as

he waited. His stay was uneventful, at least until the 8th night.

That night, Thäràc was sleeping inside a single room structure. All the walls were intact, and he was positioned by the wall to the right of the doorway (i.e. the right of the doorway from inside the structure.) There was little moonlight. Firefly was out near the edge of the ruins, foraging. Not too far away from Thäràc's resting spot was another creature in the darkness. It was carefully sniffing about as though on a scent, but appeared to be gradually making its way toward the place where Thäràc lay. The creature was a fox; a normal fox except that its eyes were glowing a deep, menacing red. As it neared the building its pace quickened, until soon enough it found its way inside.

It found Thäràc sleeping on his side with his back to the wall. It hopped onto his leg and climbed straight up his body sniffing furiously. Its glowing red eyes actually illuminated Thäràc's body wherever it looked. Behind it, on the other side of the room, a raven landed on the ground without a sound. Just as silently, a human figure arose from it, rising slowly to her feet. Unknown to the fox, Gâbríel approached it from behind as it kept sniffing at Thäràc's neck. For some reason he remained sound asleep. When she was close enough she started to reach over to grab it, but when her hand got as close as about a foot and a half from the animal she received a massive shock that hurled her violently back across the room and hard into the wall. As she hit the ground the fox turned its head and looked directly her, with a pair of red, spark eyes to which all but a few would shudder. Then it turned its attention back to Thäràc, who had started moving. It was sniffing at his face. It occurred to Gâbríel that the creature was doing something, and that it had to finish before it could leave. With a loud voice she said, "Wake up!" Thäràc was resistant.

“Wake up now!” she said again.

The fox continued sniffing all over Thäràc's face. His eyes slowly opened.

“Grab that creature; don’t let it get away!”

These were the first words he heard, and he still did not quite understand.

“Grab it now!”

Finally, Thäràc fully woke up and realised what was happening. At that very same moment the fox turned around and ran off of him. He tried to grab it, just in time to see it run out the doorway. Gâbríel knew it was too late.

“Never mind,” she said solemnly, “Go back to sleep, I will explain everything in the morning.”

She sounded as though she expected him to wipe the episode straight from his mind and get back to sleep on the spot. She also spoke before Thäràc could even ask ‘what’s going on?’ But curiously, he had no difficulty remaining quiet, and nodding off just as Gâbríel took to the air to continue her watching for further intruders.

Thäràc awoke the next day, once again to the sound of Gâbríel's voice. She was standing over him.

“Good morning,” she said.

Thäràc opened his eyes instantly. In about a second he got up. For some reason he was very anxious to get outside. Without delay he stepped out the doorway and gazed around at the early morning ruins. Nothing had changed. Gâbríel approached and stood before him, hands behind her back as always.

“What was that all about?” asked Thäràc.

“I cannot say for certain but I think you are in grave danger,” said Gâbríel.

“Why? What was that thing? It looked like a fox.”

“It was Mammon,” said Gâbríel.

“Mammon?” said Thäràc, surprised, “King Mammon was in my sleeping quarters?!”

“I am afraid so,” said Gâbríel, “and so should you be. Last night he paid you a visit. He seemed to have you under some kind of spell. It took you an unusually long time to wake up, and when you did it was too late.”

“What could he possibly want with me? What was he doing?”

“I don’t know,” said Gâbríel with an uncharacteristic tone of concern in her voice, “It cannot have been good. I could not see his intentions but he was very serious about whatever he was up to. I tried to grab him but he had some sort of... shield. When I got too close I was resisted with a force that would have sent you to the moon. In fact, that was what seemed to wake you up. I usually do not take such risks but last night I knew I had to.”

“Because?” asked Thäràc.

“Because of what I *did* see; something I could not explain. I saw in him a loyalty I now dread. For some reason, after so many centuries, millennia no less, he is still a servant of Effa. What is more, Effa knows of the bounty and would not wish for his archenemy Gerra to return; not in any form. He does not have the knowledge that I do, but he would suspect our ambition. In fact, that is probably what Mammon was doing here in the first place, keeping an eye on the White Beasts of Me`ridía. Now, I dare say, he will be on his way to bring the news to Effa. And when he does, Effa will take pains to ensure that we do not succeed.”

“He will be on our trail?” said Thäràc, quickly becoming nervous.

“Yes,” said Gâbríel, “And if he finds you there is no conceivable way that you will survive.”

Upon hearing this, an acute fear washed over Thäràc, as though he were threatened with death for the first time in his life. Gâbríel continued.

“Whatever Mammon was doing last night, it probably has something to do with how Effa will be able to track you down. Perhaps he placed some sort of beacon on you, I don’t know. We must hurry Thäràc. As soon as the White Beasts of Me`ridía are dead we must make our way to the Palace of Gerra as quickly as possible. Effa is terrified of Gerra and will dare not come near once the spirit of the great warrior is in your blood. And even if he does, that spirit will protect you.”

“How much time do you think we have?” asked Thäràc.

“Again I am not sure. For the last few centuries that I tracked Effa, his dwelling place was in the far northeast. He is an immensely powerful creature and could probably move pretty fast if he wanted to, and he *will* want to. As for Mammon, whether or not he can run any faster than an ordinary fox I don’t know. We cannot take any chances.”

Gâbríel paused for a moment.

“There is one other thing I learnt last night. When Mammon looked me in the eye I saw a sort of pride, the type one has when he confronts the oblivious victim of his ingenious trickery. I caught a glimpse of what he had done. It was he who tricked me into thinking that the White Beasts of Me`ridía were still alive. He was even cleverer than I thought. Even when you killed the first five of the eleven White Beasts their spirits still returned to their usual homes. But Mammon found those spirits, his former soldiers, and shrouded each one in the illusion of its former body,

knowing that I would not be fooled by the mere illusion itself. I had suspected that some immensely powerful mage had created illusions of both the bodies and the souls of the animals, but as it turns out it was just genius. The animals I saw were fake. But the souls within them were real. That presents us with another problem. When the entities I saw began to disappear they must have either left, or the illusions wore off. Ghosts tend to be invisible. I can only see a spirit when I have a visual cue to pinpoint its exact position. Without such a cue I do not know where or how to look. I have been able to watch Effa because when Gerra tore off his face he made sure that the spirit could not pass by unseen. But whether or not the souls of the first five of the eleven White Beasts still lurk among these ruins I cannot say. You need not worry about the last two you killed, for they have not been given nearly enough time to completely adapt to their spiritual form. But the others would have grown very dangerous by now. Furthermore, they would be more than keen to take revenge on the man who deprived them of such rare and wonderful vessels. If you encounter one the odds will be against you. I am sure you are aware that your current weapons would be useless.”

By this point, Thäràc was feeling very uneasy. That cursed fox turned out to be the worst of news. His mission was much more dangerous than he had realised. The worst thing was that now he had to rely a lot more on luck. He had to count on the remaining four White Beasts showing up as soon as he needed them to. He had to count on not coming face-to-face with vindictive ghosts. Most dishearteningly, he had to count on the assumption that he had enough time in the first place, even if these conditions are met. Gâbríel had nothing more to say. The sudden urgency of the situation gave her all the more reason to get to work keeping an eye out for their awaited guest.

Three days later, on the day after the 11th night, their guest arrived. It was early in the afternoon, and the sun was shining. Thäràc had just eaten lunch, but was hardly filled, precisely because he took special care to keep himself ready for an encounter at any time. He was sitting on the low reaching remains of a wall when Gâbríel came. She gave him a nod.

Thäràc drew his sword, and at the same time Gâbríel assumed her raven form and led him through a carefully planned path that allowed him to remain hidden. When he eventually caught up with her she returned to human form and gestured around the right side of the wall behind her. Thäràc approached the wall, and when he peeked past it he saw the reptile about eight yards away. A further five yards behind it was Thäràc's favourite spot: the pavilion. Thäràc did not hesitate. He emerged from behind the wall, revealing himself to his enemy. When the reptile saw him it hissed. He stepped towards it. The creature did not move; Thäràc did not stop. As he came close the creature began stepping back. He became very worried. Last time this happened his target ran away. He carefully continued, trying to look nervous so as not to intimidate it, resisting his utter temptation to introduce himself with an emphatic 'lets dance!'

His feigned reluctance worked. The creature paused briefly, and giving no warning it leapt into the air straight towards him. Thäràc dodged to the left, swiping it in the torso with his sword. He spun around. His enemy did not show much pain. Now he stood between it and the pavilion, right before the steps. For a moment the two stood still in unbroken eye contact. Then the creature advanced, its head thrust forward. Thäràc took a vertical swing at it. The animal darted its head to its right, taking a deep cut along the side of its lower neck. Thäràc began stepping back, towards the steps. Despite the seriousness of its injury the reptile still did

not react. It came forward. He took another swing, this time sideways. The creature ducked, now dodging it completely. They both kept moving until Thäràc was on the first step. Hastily he started climbing up backwards. The White Beast followed him, so he repeatedly swung his sword on the way up. With his attention divided by the steps his swordplay was average, and the animal dodged every swing. Just as he reached the top, the White Beast leapt up from the bottom of the stairs straight into him. He spun clockwise to the right, just in time to feel a sharp blow on his left side just below the ribs. He had no time to look. Again he found himself standing eye to eye before his opponent.

They now stood on flat ground, and were surrounded by pillars. No longer did the sun shine on them. Thäràc stepped forward and without waiting he took a vertical swing. This time it took a step back, and managed to dodge his swing completely. Before he could make another move the creature spun around and struck his hands with its tail, knocking the sword out of his grasp. It hit the ground about six feet away to his right. In a panic he immediately started running for it. But before he could get further than two steps the jaws of the reptile came down on his left shoulder. He shouted in pain as the creature jerked him back. Thinking quickly he reached back behind him with his right arm and pulled out an arrow, swung his arm around to his left and thrust the arrow into the creature as hard as he could. The arrow snapped under the pressure. No sooner did the animal let go than it screamed in pain. Thäràc ran straight for his sword. He reached it. When he turned around he saw that the peace of arrow was stuck right in the animal's left eye. After it was done stamping about the White Beast turned its attention to Thäràc and charged. When it was almost within reach Thäràc swung his sword sideways to the right. This was a trick. With incredible swiftness he stepped aside to the left, and with a mighty swing he cut its legs clean off. The creature plunged

onto the floor, wailing as blood spurted out from its stumps. Thäràc watched as it continued to squirm around on the stone ground and as the puddle of blood slowly spread out. Gradually its movements slowed down and its wailing quietened. Then it stopped. Not for the first time he turned around and found that Gâbríel was standing behind him.

“Are you all right?” she asked. She was looking at the side of his torso. Thäràc looked and saw that the 'blow' he had felt was in fact a gaping wound right below his ribs.

“Yeah, never better!” he said, though in fairly good spirits, “could be worse.”

“Much worse. In fact, you are very lucky,” said Gâbríel, “It is very difficult to be wounded by the talon of a White Beast and live.”

Chapter 9: The Nomads of Apathy

The geographic alignment of the nine former villages in the area was remarkably symmetrical. They ran in three fairly straight lines from north to south: four in the middle, three to the west, and two to the east. The place called Redberry was in the middle row, two villages south of Beddingville, which was the northern-most of the nine ruins. Thus, the trek from Newground, which lay on the west side, was about half as eastbound as it was southbound. The town itself was, in the past as now, the most plantation-consumed of all the villages. The name, Redberry, was inspired by the rich blood red grapes forever draped over every building. Unfortunately for Thäràc, they were not in season. But that was the least of his problems. Redberry was also the most dangerous of places which Thäràc had yet been, for it was the only village that served as home to not one but two of the White Beasts of Me`ridía. Gâbríel did not have to make it clear that Thäràc did not want to encounter both of them at once.

It also happened that Thäràc was in a considerable amount of pain; not only from the gaping wound on his left side below his ribs but also and especially from the massive bite mark on his left shoulder. The closer they got to the

village the shorter (and somewhat denser) the trees became, such that the woods from which they emerged into the area of Redberry were little more than a story high, and rather twisted. The first thing Thäràc noticed about this place was the vines wrapped over every stone surface; grape-free, but still decorative. The second thing that stood out was the structures, ranging far beyond mere houses and other mundane things like pavilions. Things as obscure as twisting staircases going nowhere and three story high walls. All were painted with a beautiful greyish-green texture by the grapevines, giving the place an ethereal quality, more like the dwelling place of a gâjìn god than of humans. It was a wonder that only two of the White Beasts had picked the spot.

Without saying a word, Gâbríel flew ahead and began scanning the ruins, leaving Thäràc and Firefly to begin their own exploring. Thäràc in particular was looking forward to it enough that he found it rather frustrating when he was so soon interrupted by Gâbríel's ominous return.

“We have company,” she said.

Thäràc reached behind himself and placed his hand on the hilt of his sword.

“Not that sort of company.”

She led him to the heart of the ruins. They came to an area partly enclosed by a thick semi circular wall reaching various heights from about one and a half to three storeys, with a space of about 25 yards between each end. It was, of course, completely covered in vines. Thäràc could not work out the purpose of this structure, deciding that it must have been an unfinished project, or a shattered one leaving no immediate evidence of its former construct. In the centre of the area directly between what would have been the two ends of a complete semicircle following from the curve of the wall was

a well-preserved arched bridge about four yards across, crossing over a large mostly dry basin, which must have been a pond of some sort. Scattered about within the enclosure was a group of about two dozen people. They were dressed much like he was, and most of the men carried weapons. By the centre of the wall Thäràc could see a deposit of rolled up blankets. Between these and the bridge was a large fireplace surrounded by a circle of stones, probably serving as seats. As he approached the people they gathered towards him curiously.

“What exactly are you people doing here?!”

“Just settling in for a time,” said one person, “what's your name?”

“My name is Thäràc. How long have you been here for?”

“We arrived here two days ago,” said another, “it is the best place we have ever seen.”

“Are you nomads?” asked Thäràc.

“Yes,” said a woman, “Are you?”

“As a matter of fact yes,” he replied, “and I am here now to announce that you have picked a very bad spot. You must not stay here, your lives are in great danger.”

“What sort of danger?” asked a man.

“You have entered into the territory of two monstrous animals, and if you are still here when they get back you will be torn to shreds.”

“Then what are you doing here?” asked a young girl.

“I am here to kill them,” said Thäràc, “They are two of several monsters I have been hunting for a very long time, and have slain all but three.”

“You are after the bounty,” said one slightly peculiar man.

“That's right,” Thäràc replied, “well, goodbye!”

No one moved, at least that Thäràc could see.

“I’m not joking. You must leave now... well?”

The people just looked at each other. One of them answered.

“We would rather stay.”

“And die?” exclaimed Thäràc, “Go! Now!”

He was starting to get upset. He wanted them to live; only, not to live as they did now, but to live as they would when his work was finished. The people just looked at each other again. Thäràc suddenly began shouting.

“Don't you people care for your lives?!”

They said nothing. A tear trickled down Thäràc's cheek. For the first time he felt the hand of Gâbríel on his shoulder.

“Stop trying Thäràc. The drive for survival is part of the human spirit. That spirit is weak, and so is the drive. These people have no real attachment to their lives and so care little for their own safety. So stop trying. If all goes well they should not be harmed. They will probably stay here at the centre of the ruins. I will do everything in my power to see to their safety.”

“Well since you put it that way...[he turned to face the group] how on earth do you people maintain this lifestyle?!”

“Thäràc,” said Gâbríel.

“Your survival seems impossible!”

“Thäràc!!” Gâbríel shouted, quite unexpectedly.

“We had a healer,” said the first man who had spoken.

Gâbríel paused and turned to face the man. She seemed to be stunned, “what?”

Thäràc was surprised too. He only meant his question rhetorically.

“A healer,” the man repeated, “he healed our wounds, kept us alive and healthy.”

Thäràc looked at Gâbrîel. Her return glance said no answer. He turned back to the group.

“But he is no longer with you?”

“He left us recently,” said the woman.

“Well then, now you really are in trouble unless you take my advice.”

Still no answer. Thäràc gave up and walked away.

About an hour and a half later Thäràc was sitting in the area enclosed by the semi circular wall, among the nomads. He did not speak much, which seemed to suit them just fine. He just sat there looking at them. His only observation was a certain fondness they seemed to possess for this divine playground; a love that both he and the two hideous landlords could relate to.

One of them, however, stood out from the others. It was the man who had mentioned the bounty. He was much like Thäràc in appearance. He wore the same basic sort of clothes, a thick woollen jumper and dark brown pants, and he had brown hair a bit longer than Thäràc's. To add to that he was about the same height and had the same light skin colour. There was actually little variation from this appearance among these men. Indeed, there was very little difference between the men and women. The women's hair was only about twice the length of the men's. What was interesting about this individual was his mannerism. While the others just sat or stood there looking mostly at the ground, this person spent most of his time staring into space. He was standing. Thäràc watched with curiosity as the man turned his head almost in his direction. His eyes did not appear to be focused on anything in particular. Then he slowly turned his head back, and tilted it up a little. Then he

appeared to be gazing around at the sky not far above the horizon. He seemed to be breathing through his mouth. Thäràc approached the man and stood before him. It took him a moment to notice Thäràc, or at least to pay any attention to him. His gaze went from the sky to the ground about five yards behind Thäràc to his right, and then managed to climb up Thäràc's body to his face.

“What is your name?” asked Thäràc.

“Snapdrágon,” the man replied. When he answered he was still not looking quite at Thäràc's eyes, but just off.

“Thäràc isn't it?”

“Yes, that's right.”

“I am sorry you could not convince them,” said Snapdrágon, “preferably I would go, but the others choose not to and I will not leave them. I may not look like much but I am the best hunter here.”

Thäràc was surprised. Snapdrágon exhibited a great deal more conversation than any of the others. Perhaps it was due simply to this peculiarity. It was clear that the man had something wrong with him, but whatever it was it made him better company than the rest. Of course, Thäràc could tell that the conversation was not going to last much longer.

“So you only have three to go?” said Snapdrágon. For the first time he was looking Thäràc straight in the eyes.

“You have already killed eight?” his eyes wandered off again, “it didn't affect you, did it?”

At first, Thäràc wondered what the man meant. Then he was suddenly startled when he realised what Snapdrágon was referring to. This was the first time he had ever heard another person speak of that which had affected everybody else; Gâbríel not being a person after all. Whatever his story,

Snapdrágon had nothing more to say, and Thäràc decided to let him be.

Despite the new found company, Thäràc spent most of his time pacing about the ruins as usual. He loved this place, and swore to return to it one day. During this time, however, he rarely ate alone. He saw meal times as a good occasion to get together. Besides, now he was not the only hunter there, and although he usually did a lot of the hunting for them, other times he did not have to hunt at all. He also spent his nights with them. It was during this time that Thäràc got to learn the nomads' story. They had not always been nomads. On the day the world went to sleep, they were part of a normal village community. But the great change took its toll. As elsewhere, tradesmen began to lose their motivation, hesitated to improvise and solve problems, and things often failed to get done. When routines broke, many people broke with them, and the economy eventually collapsed, forcing the more adaptable survivors into a radically different way of life, apparently due largely to the help of this alleged 'healer', whose name had never been revealed. Anyway, these people kept Thäràc some extra company during his stay, which lasted until the third night.

The people were circled around a large fire close to the centre of the great wall and seated on pieces of stone. It was dark and they had just eaten. Thäràc was seated next to Snapdrágon, who in turn sat beside a pregnant woman named Cí. Cí was eight months pregnant, and had been ever since the Turning, the day the earth died, over a century ago. The child was not dead, it had just stopped growing. And so it appeared that the entire motion of human life, growing as well as ageing, was frozen in time. The old stayed old, the young stayed young, the children remained children and the infants remained infants, born or not. The very strange thing was that this phenomenon seemed to be absent throughout

the rest of the animal kingdom. After all, the other animals must have been reproducing otherwise they would have been wiped out almost immediately. It was clear that something about humans stood them apart, something of their construct and their connection with the earth. This would make more than enough sense to the dêvas, and even more to the gîajìn, but reason itself could hardly explain it. Whatever the cause, humans and animals were affected in vastly different ways. Snapdrágon had been her sworn and loyal protector since they abandoned sedentary life, and rightly so, being supposedly the best hunter and fighter they had.

Part of the custom was sitting next to her at mealtime. Cí was not actually sitting but lying on her back, closer to the fire than Thäràc or Snapdrágon. Hovering over her bear stomach with some strange sort of attraction was Firefly, who in turn caught the attention of Snapdrágon. After a moment he got off his seat, approached the woman and kneeled before her. Thäràc watched with curiosity as he leant over her, causing Firefly to dart back. He placed his left-hand on her stomach and moved it around as though he were looking for something. His head was tilted sideways, yet it appeared to be facing straight ahead. Then he accompanied his left hand with his right, and felt around with both hands. Then he slowly bent over and placed the right side of his head – but not his ear – onto her, between his hands. Thäràc could see that his eyes were shut, and again he was breathing through his mouth. Cí did not seem to be taking much notice. Snapdrágon then dropped his hands down to the ground and slid his head around a few inches, as though drawing a line. Then slowly he opened his eyes, and lifted his head up. He stood back up and returned to his seat. Then he turned his head, almost facing Thäràc and said, “I cannot feel it but I know it is there.”

Before Thäràc could try and imagine an appropriate response to that, Snapdrágon said something else.

“I think I have seen you before.”

“Really?”

“You once mended my neighbour’s fishing net.”

Thäràc thought back for a moment.

“That’s right, I did,” he said, “did it work well for him?”

“Yes, he was very pleased.”

There it was. The most human exchange of words he had engaged in since forever. How ironic it was that the session had to be interrupted at just that moment. Gâbríel returned to Thäràc in her usual fashion. The people had already seen her transmute before and did not seem to be the slightest bit impressed. She looked serious.

“It’s coming!” she said, “From that direction, it must have seen the smoke.”

She was pointing in the direction to the left of the great wall. Thäràc drew his sword, and just as he turned to the nomads for an almost certainly futile attempt at instruction, Gâbríel, in a loud voice, commanded:

“Everybody go to the wall, single file, and stick to it!”

They complied. Thäràc, while shaking off his sense of surprise, stood between the fire and the bridge, and waited. He reasoned that the best place to fight was both near the fire, so he could see clearly, and away from the others. In not half a minute a White Beast emerged from the darkness beyond the wall. It moved towards Thäràc until it got past the wall and was able to spot the others. Its gaze went from them to him. Quickly it made its decision. It went for Thäràc. When it was in reach he took a vertical swing. The creature dodged. Then it advanced. Before Thäràc could swing his

sword again, he suddenly heard Gâbríel's voice louder than ever before.

“Behind you!!”

Thäràc briefly turned his head and to his horror he found that another White Beast had emerged from the opposite side of the wall behind him. He quickly moved backwards so as not to be surrounded from both sides, and then he turned to his left as he moved. The newcomer was quickly advancing and in an instant, he found himself facing both of them. They both advanced, avoiding his attempts to strike. They rotated clockwise around him compelling him to turn further to his left, until he was standing on the end of the bridge. They kept moving, pushing him further onto the bridge. It was not until one of them suddenly hopped off and ran to the other side that he realised what they were doing, and what a terrible mistake he had made. Before he knew it he was standing in the middle of the bridge directly between them. He had fallen straight into their trap. The bridge was about three feet wide, and was completely plain with no sides or barriers. He was under the impression that hopping off would be tactically suicidal. What was more, he was not sure if the bridge could handle the weight. He did not have any time to work everything out logically. They both attacked, and Thäràc fought them. He swung his sword about like crazy, sometimes spinning it in a full circle to avoid being assailed from either side. At the same time he dodged every talon and every bite. Luckily for him their strange pale bodies were easy to see in the firelight. Thäràc fought in such a frenzy that the nomads marvelled. It was amazing that he could avoid being struck for this long.

Yet, it was not long at all. It was no longer than the time it took for someone to cautiously approach the reptile on the right side, the side where Thäràc had been driven onto the bridge. Thäràc realised immediately that the attention of the

creature was suddenly divided between himself and another swordsman. It was Snapdrágon. Now, both that reptile and Thäràc were surrounded from either side. As Thäràc fought the two creatures one of them was struggling between him and his new ally. It was in the midst of this melee that Snapdrágon managed to chop off his opponent's tail. This gave them an advantage. In that instant the other one made the mistake of thrusting its talon forward while Thäràc was facing it. Thäràc cut off its whole foot. This made it easier to focus on the other. Finally, in one critical moment, Snapdrágon was able to maintain its attention for long enough that when it turned Thäràc effortlessly chopped off its head. As it stumbled off the bridge and collapsed below Snapdrágon raced around to the other side before the other could think to run away. Surrounded from both sides and with only one foot the creature did not have much going for it. It fought relentlessly, with no illusion of being on the offensive, until finally it felt almost everything between its head and shoulders violently severed. Thäràc stood back and watched in astonishment as the blood simultaneously sprayed and dripped from the widely gaping wound. Snapdrágon did not stand back, but merely flicked the blood off his sword. It did not take long for the creature to collapse, its barely attached head hanging off the side of the bridge. Thäràc gazed with wonder at the killer, as the rapidly dripping blood of his enemy trickled down into the middle of the basin and mixed into the shallow, dark pool accumulating from its companion.

Chapter 10: Snapdrágon

Very early the next morning the nomads left Redberry. On Gâbríel's advice they headed southeast right after breakfast. Thäràc decided to accompany them for the first few miles. Gâbríel was not keen on this idea as it was considerably disadvantageous to move away from the most probable location of the last of the White Beasts, but Thäràc would not have it any other way. Soon after they departed the trees rapidly became very short. It was a cloudy day and very cold. Thäràc and Gâbríel were travelling near the back of the group, where they believed the White Beast more likely to show up if it did at all. There was something that Thäràc had been meaning to ask Gâbríel but had not really had the chance while she had spent her time circling Redberry on watch for intruders. Now was his chance.

“See that man over there?” he said, pointing at Snapdrágon.

“Yes,” said Gâbríel.

“What do you see?”

“Hard to say. He is... difficult to read. Every dêva and gâjìn is a puzzle enough, but this man completely evades me.”

“Which is he?”

“I don’t know. Even that is unclear. We could assume he is a dêva like the others, but bare in mind he is not their kin. I can only tell you one thing: he is not well.”

“I have noticed. But in what way exactly?” asked Thäràc.

“He is possessed by a sickness, that of a scarred mind, or a broken soul. Whatever it is, and I do not know if I could decipher it, the man is ill.”

“Well thanks for clearing that up. Any idea where it came from?”

“That I can figure out least of all. Whatever happened to him, it damaged him in such a way that he will probably never recover. Also, I think it had something to do with the Turning.”

“Somehow I think it would take a lot more than the Turning to do that,” said Thäràc.

“I agree. It was probably many things. Whatever his story is, the Turning did something to him that I have never seen before, and I think it is permanent. The Pa`räjí will be his saviour like everybody else, but in his case the damage is done.”

As she spoke they both watched Snapdrágon walking along before them. He walked more or less like the others, but every now and again he would gaze about as though he were lost. The others just moved on.

By the early afternoon they were about three miles from the nearest village. The trees here were a lot larger than before but still almost as short. The sky remained cloudy. At this point Thäràc, under some pressure from Gâbríel, announced to the nomads that he would be heading back. He had just turned around when Snapdrágon approached him.

“So you are going back to find the last?” he said, looking at Thäràc's left shoulder.

“Yes, that’s right,” replied Thäràc.

“If it’s all the same, I would like to come with you.”

“Don't your people need you?” said Thäràc.

“They need me to help you save them. I want to help you save me.”

Thäràc was not sure. He turned to Gâbríel.

“I was actually hoping you would ask that,” she said to Snapdrágon, “Your assistance is valuable.”

“Thank you,” he replied, “I will tell the others.”

Once Snapdrágon had announced his departure to his people he left with his new hosts.

Despite the fact that Gâbríel was the one who knew where they were going, it was Snapdrágon who was well in front, leaving the other two to talk amongst themselves. Even Firefly was happy to lag behind him, though still ahead of the others. Gâbríel found this rather amusing. Every once in a while she had to set their headman back in the right direction. They were headed toward Serpent's Maw, the southernmost village of the western string. As Thäràc watched the strange man before him Gâbríel explained.

“He holds a greater importance to us than you might believe,” she said, “he presents us with a second hope.”

“Him?” said Thäràc, “how?”

“He has spilt the blood of a White Beast,” said Gâbríel, “therefore, he is a candidate for the great bounty. When Gerra judges the slayer, the slayer's heart and contribution are considered. He will reject the slayer only if he sees that there is another who is more worthy of his prize.”

This got Thäràc thinking.

“But why can’t he just give it to me? What’s stoping him from fixing this problem now, rather than arbitrarily reserving it despite my cause like some gâajìn god?”

“He would if he had any knowledge of our affairs,” replied Gâbríel, “But the inhabitants of the heavens know nothing of the state of the world. They cannot see it. As far as Gerra is concerned everything is just as he left it. The death of the White Beasts is the only way we can reach him. Other ways do exist but they are beyond our grasp. Once his palace is reached by a slayer, Gerra will be summoned to a place where he can see the history of the White Beasts and their bounty hunters. Should Effa find you and tear you asunder then Gerra will recognise Snapdrágon as the one remaining candidate.”

“Because Effa knows nothing of Snapdrágon,” said Thäràc, otherwise trying to ignore that last remark.

“Exactly. If you perish I will pass the burden on to him. However I sincerely hope it does not come to that. Though he is capable, the world is much better off in your hands.”

This gave Thäràc that extra bit of comfort. Though his own life was still in horrible danger, his cause was now more secure, in theory. He observed his new companion. If Snapdrágon could hear them speak, he showed no sign. He paused in his tracks. He looked around, rolling his head in a strange, yet utterly characteristic sedated manner. He seemed to be using his head more than his eyes to scan the woods, though he tended to look up without tilting his head. His eyes were usually off centre. He also had this occasional habit of breathing through his mouth, particularly when apparently paying attention. At times he came off more like a confused child than a warrior. Watching him, Thäràc began to wonder what it was like being this man. Exactly what lay behind the eyes of a broken mind? How different must the world have appeared? Was he truly worthy of pity? At that

time, Thäràc felt he could believe only that Snapdrágon must perceive the world quite differently to him. Whether or not this perception was lesser or greater than his own was impossible to say.

It was not too late in the afternoon when, in the midst of a fairly straightforward journey, and at a point where the place known as Serpent's Maw was probably only minutes away, Firefly, closely followed by Snapdrágon, took to a rapid detour. Thäràc, not entirely surprised at this, followed along. This took them over an obscuring hill. Following about a minutes walk, the party arrived at a very well hidden monument. Lodged in the ground, ingrained to some extent in the forestry was the skeleton of what looked like a giant snake. It must have been some twenty yards long, at least at ground level. At one end, partially buried, was the head, a gaping jaw about one and half times the height of a man. Few of its teeth remained, but those that did certainly left an impression. Beyond the skull lay a tunnel of ribcage, the floor of which sunk with the ceiling, forming a passage stretching beyond the length of the exposed (above ground) remains, about the height of the skull, and a little wider. It was very straight, but eventually bent into a further corridor which Thäràc had no interest in exploring. Thäràc had never met such a thing, but it took no stretch of the imagination to now see where 'Serpent's Maw', which lay only minutes away, got its name. Firefly, of course, did not hesitate to shoot into the tunnel, returning seconds after disappearing beyond the bend. Snapdrágon merely circled the structure, inspecting it from every angle. Thäràc just stood directly in front, confronting the awesome display of aggression so well preserved in the otherwise innocent woods. Gâbríel came to his side.

“One of our great war machines,” she said, “the subterranean was a weapon Mammon never had. This creature played a decisive role in our victory. I was personally involved in its harnessing.”

Before Thäràc could endeavour to learn more he saw that Snapdrágon was leaving. He seemed to be following something; not an action out of character. Thäràc dashed up and walked beside him, leaving about two yards in between so as not to make them unnecessarily easy targets. This seemed to confuse Firefly, who behaved as though trying to find a notch in stone wall. Gâbríel came to Thäràc's right, opposite Snapdrágon. They travelled like this for a couple of minutes, prompted by a notion that Snapdrágon's was an intuition worth listening to. The ruins of the village called Serpent's Maw were just beginning to come into view when Snapdrágon stopped in his tracks. For a moment he just stood there like a statue with a vacant look on his face, listening to the air. Then his head dropped slightly, and he gazed at the ground a few yards before him. Then he looked up, and spoke.

“It's here.”

Thäràc and Gâbríel looked ahead. The area was hardly dense with trees. Had they not been so distracted by their companion's strange behaviour the warning would have put them both on full alert. It was just as Thäràc turned back to face Snapdrágon, that the man spun around faster than life and swung his sword widely. This was such a surprise to Thäràc that he raised his own sword in defence. Yet, at the same time, he heard a familiar shriek coming from his left. He looked, and saw a large reptile stumbling about in confusion and pain. Snapdrágon had struck its eyes, now streaming with blood. Thäràc stepped back on reflex. Snapdrágon did not. The creature continued to stumble about helplessly, and its enemies were ready to move in for

the kill. Then, all of a sudden, it hurled its head up in the air and screamed in agony, and at the same time a ring of misty white light appeared on the ground around it and began to ascend, illuminating the widely spaced surrounding trees. Thäràc and Snapdrágon stepped back cautiously. When the ring reached the level of its head it began descending again while another came from the ground. The creature, its head still in the air, began shaking. After a third ring of light appeared, the others started accelerating as they moved up and down around the beast. Soon they got so fast that they resembled a round wall, and the creature was completely hidden, though its screams could still be heard. Then the wall expanded to about twice its original size. Gradually the wall faded away, revealing a much larger, and more grotesque creature than before. Its size had doubled, its tail now had spikes protruding from it, and its more shapely head now had six eyes instead of two.

While Gâbriel disappeared immediately, Thäràc advanced, while Snapdrágon, dodging trees, ran around, circling the creature clockwise. Before he could get too close the creature spun in his direction. Thäràc jumped back just in time to see the spiked tail swoop past before him. Snapdrágon had to jump out of the way too. It came full circle, advanced toward Thäràc and spun for a second swing. Again he jumped back, but this time as soon as he did so he ran in and took a swing at the creature's head. It darted back, missing the blade. Suddenly it started moaning horribly. It spun around, and that was when Thäràc saw that Snapdrágon had cut off the spiky tip of its tail. It was in great pain, and now it was angry. It went at Snapdrágon with its left talon, about the size of a club. He managed to fend it off with his sword. Not seeing the wisdom in staying there right between its two opponents the monster sidestepped away, knocking its tail stump painfully into a tree, trying to circle Thäràc to his left. Snapdrágon ran up and joined his ally to face it together.

It stepped back, drawing them both forward. Thäràc took a vertical swing at its head. It dodged, getting nipped beside the neck. In retaliation it lunged its head at him, forcing him to jump back to escape its long sharp teeth. As it did this Snapdrágon took the opportunity and went for its neck, instead slashing its jaw as it pulled its head back. Again it thrust its head at its assailant with jaws open (though now badly cut). Snapdrágon darted back. For a moment they all stood there on the ready. The White Beast started stepping back. Then, without warning it lunged its right talon at Thäràc. Almost reflexively he swung his sword straight through its foot, cutting half of it clean off. It screeched, and before it could react, Thäràc stepped right in and thrust his sword straight up through its head from between its hind teeth to between its middle pair of eyes. He tried to remove it and found that it was stuck. Thinking quickly, he used it as a handle to push the creature back and tilted it sideways in an attempt to force the beast to collapse onto its side. This did not work as planned. Instead, the creature came at him with its remaining talon, compelling him to let go of the sword and jump back to save his torso. The beast instantly started stepping back despite being in a fit of agony. Then something happened that Thäràc would never have predicted: it bolted. In a split-second decision he pursued, having to run through the woods incredibly fast to keep up. In his frenzy he could not have noticed Gâbríel, who was yelling at him to take Snapdrágon's sword. This never crossed his mind in the first few seconds of pursuit, and when it did there was no time. Nor did it ever occur to Snapdrágon; (nor would he have wanted it to).

As Thäràc pursued the creature he could see the giant skeleton rapidly coming into view. Soon, it was clear that they were headed in that exact direction. Then they were there. Was the beast intending to dash into the tunnel of bones? Yes. It went straight in, with Thäràc right at its tail.

As he watched his target approach the underground bend he began feeling a little concerned, with no idea what lay beyond, nor any sign that Firefly was around to light his way. The creature turned the corner, and at the same time managed somehow to let out a sort of call. When Thäràc turned the same bend a second later, he found himself confronted with a strange sight. A few yards beyond the monster was what looked like a flat dead-end made of smooth rock, only it was rising into the ceiling, revealing a further passage. The White Beast ducked its head past the remaining 'wall' and kept running. The tunnel was now completely subterranean. Somehow, despite the lack of any apparent light source, the tunnel was well illuminated. Thäràc briefly lost sight of his opponent when the tunnel took a sharp turn to the right. Soon it curved back to the left revealing a reverse 's' shape. The whole time he could feel that they were gradually descending. Following the 's' bend was a chamber with three paths leading from it. The reptile went left. Thäràc continued to chase it through curves and bends before reaching a second chamber, again with three paths protruding from it except that this time the one in the middle was blocked by what looked like a large door made entirely of steel. This was the path his enemy took. The creature made another call, and once again the door rose, and once again it was sufficiently slow to compel the animal to duck. Thäràc was still on its tail.

Once he had passed through the open door it slammed shut behind him, and he found himself continuing his chase through something very different: a large glass tube. Having visited on different terms he would have stopped and taken great interest in the mine like space outside the glass but now he had no time. At the end of the tube some ten yards away was another steel door. After following the enemy through it he found himself in a long rectangular chamber made not of steel, but some other sort of metal. It was about

a dozen yards across and twice that in length. Again, in less demanding times he would have noticed that the light in this somewhat eerie place was coming from visible sources: strange black metallic objects that shone like stars and created a sort of graded lighting along the room. At the end was a ramp leading to a platform about Thäràc's height. He chased the beast up this and through yet another steel door at the platform's rear. By this stage he was becoming exhausted but he pushed on. Following the door was a second metal room. This one was somewhat smaller and bent hard left. At the other end was a door. On the other side the chase continued through a long tube curving sharply downward and steadily to the right. It was about two and a half yards across and made of metal, but what really stood out about it were the white lights that rotated in alternating directions around it. The creature several yards before him was now a black silhouette illuminated every few steps by thin streams of white. Near the end of the round tunnel, an apparent dead end came into view. Seeing that the time of confrontation had come, Thäràc drew an arrow from his quiver; the only weapon he had. The dead end was another tube; this time a vertical one, and a bit wider. About a second after the giant reptile had reached it, the ground began to rise, revealing itself as a thin platform made primarily of a hard looking stone, and about three yards across.

Just as the White Beast spun around to face him, Thäràc leapt onto the rising platform. As soon as he did so he was almost knocked over by the creature's swinging stumped tail. At this opportunity he climbed up its back and stuck his arrow straight into its hind right eye. The animal shrieked in pain and slammed its back into the glass wall of the tube, trying to crush him, successfully to a degree. Then it went to do it again, only this time he moved out of way. Before it could shake him off, he stuck another eye. Shrieking again, it rose rapidly on its hind legs, finally managing to shake

Thäràc off before he could retrieve the arrow. He landed painfully on his knees, facing his foe. In this instant he was able to note, ever briefly, the fact that outside the glass various structures as alien as the rest could be seen steadily falling as he and his companion ascended. The Beast turned and came at him with its single talon just as he stood up. He ducked, and then screamed in pain as it dug into the back of his left shoulder. In all of his agony, however, he knew this was actually an advantage because the great beast could not bite, as its jaw was still practically wired shut by the sword it had stolen from Thäràc, still fixed through its head.

Knowing that he must disregard pain, he reached for the hilt of his sword with both arms, and twisted it as hard as he could. The sound that then came from its hardly open mouth was both deafening and horrid. All of a sudden it started jerking its head like crazy, testing Thäràc's hold on the sword. Then, without any sort of warning, the raptor smashed its head through the glass, cutting Thäràc's wrist because he did not let go of the sword. It just so happened that the place its head had rammed through was just inches beneath the metal floor where the platform was apparently about to stop. The floor was about four feet thick, and as the platform was still ascending rather quickly, the beast's head was promptly forced down, shattering the glass, until it reached the ground. Its head was then caught between the platform and the underside of the floor. Thäràc was absolutely astounded at the strength of the creature's skull. The inches of glass left below the floor had snapped off under the pressure, and the platform was completely jammed. This was the time to take his sword back.

He dropped down and, grasping it with both hands, he put his feet on its jaw and neck and pulled with full force. The animal let out a depressing high pitched groan as Thäràc pulled with all his might with its neck as the pressure point.

It only took a few seconds for it to finally give way. On retrieving his sword, the raptor's groan became a squeal. Thäràc was now just as motivated by pity as he was by his mission to end its wretched life. Without wasting a second he got up and raised his sword ready to decapitate it when suddenly the platform gave way and started falling beneath his feet. His enemy was no longer with him. Somehow it had managed to get itself stuck where it was beneath the metal floor above. Thäràc was more concerned about the fact that he was now falling on a construct which seemed to be broken. But after a few seconds it slowed down as if it had some sort of mechanism to counter the fall. Eventually it stopped. Many yards above he could see the White Beast still struggling in agony. This continued for about fifteen seconds before it broke away and fell straight down towards him. He watched it and readied himself with stark terror until it hit the platform and shattered it.

All of a sudden they were falling together down a black pit, along with several pieces of hard stone. Before it even occurred to Thäràc that his enemy still had any spirit left it grabbed his torso in its severely weakened jaws. He screamed and reflexively thrust his sword wherever he could reach: somewhere in its back. Then it let go, and Thäràc swung at it vigorously as it tried to tear at him with its talon. This went on until his sword went clean through its throat. Then, without thinking, he made his way to face the nearest side of the glass cylinder, held his sword in an overhead position, and then with all his might and a grasp of iron, he smashed the sword straight through the glass and ripped through it as though it were a curtain. Although he was now being showered with shattered glass, he could see the possibly dead creature begin to fall away from him, along with the rocks. One of them bounced off the back of his neck, which really would have hurt if there was any time for pain. He shut his eyes tight. The sound of his sword ripping

through the glass was deafening, and he was already bleeding badly from the accumulating cuts on his hands. But he felt himself slowing down. At this point he could only hope that the bottom of the pit was not close enough to kill him, or far enough to leave him hanging when he stopped. Before he could decide which he would prefer the glass came to an end, and he free-fell about five yards before crashing to the ground feet first and collapsing unconscious on to the hard ground, though with his head and shoulder luckily cushioned by the still-warm flesh of a dead reptile.

Chapter 11: Gâbríel's Promise

Thäràc's eyes opened slowly. In the time it took for him to adjust his sight he was not quite sure where he should expect to find himself. He was also unsure if he had survived the fall. The first thing he did notice was the hideous stench of the very recent corpse of a giant reptile. Then he moved his legs. They were exceptionally sore. His whole body in fact was aching very badly. Nor was it in the most comfortable position. His head was cushioned against what felt like a corpse; obviously the source of the smell. His back was not as well supported. Scattered over the ground where he lay were variously sized pieces of rock and glass. His ears were still ringing badly from the shattering of the glass. Despite the attractiveness of not moving he decided that the sooner he got out of that position the better.

With a bit of effort (and lots of pain) he rose to his knees. His eyes had still not adjusted. He had realised by this point that he probably was not dead, and as far as he could tell he was in precisely the environment he should expect after what had just happened. He was accompanied by a huge dead reptile (which of course was a bloody mess), in a pile of shattered stone and glass. His hands

were stinging like hell, and as his vision continued to clear he could see that they were covered in blood and pieces of glass. One thing was new however: Gâbrîel was with him. She stood not far from him in her typical manner. They were in a more or less square room of metal with a ramp leading to a steel door on one side. Directly above him was an endless shaft. The room was lit by several strange pointy metal things stuck to the walls and ceiling. It was an eerie white, and although it did not appear to be very bright, everything around him was well illuminated. Seeing that he had collected himself, Gâbrîel spoke.

“You look like you have had a hard time,” she said sounding to him as though she were many yards away, “for that matter, so does he.”

Thäràc looked at his opponent. It was not a pretty sight. The face was a total mess, with a broken arrow still stuck in one of its six bloodied eyes. Various parts of the rest of it were either badly cut or missing. And the smell was truly terrible.

“You could not imagine,” he replied.

“Correction, I could not *have* imagined.”

“You were there?”

“Yes. I followed you closely when you started the chase. I do not blame you for not noticing a black bird spiralling above you in that shaft. Nor was I the only one.”

“What?” he replied, just before noticing another presence he had actually felt before Gâbrîel's. It had been irritating his right shoulder since he first came to, but the sensation was hardly distinguishable among the many other things presently upsetting his skin. It was Firefly, who seemed to be feeding on an open wound. He gently buzzed it off. The creature must have been the one lighting

his way in the seemingly light-less tunnels through which he had run.

“I am the closest thing you have met to an immortal Thäràc, and I never imagined that I would ever see such a fierce fighter. Mind you, you were not alone.”

“Huh?”

“Your sword; it is absolutely impossible for any ordinary weapon to do that. The Sword of Cain cut through several stories of hard glass as though it were skin.”

Thäràc was paying less attention to her than to his surroundings.

“You are probably wondering where we are,” said Gâbríel, “to tell you the truth, so am I. I know nothing of this place. I have no idea what it is for or who made it; how it was made or even when. You have unwittingly stumbled upon one of the world’s many secrets. But I have explored it. It is safe, and yes there is a way out.”

“How long was I out?”

“About a day.”

She could see from Thäràc’s face alone that other things also needed to be answered for.

“As for your enemy’s sudden transformation, again I cannot say. That being said, it really reminded me of Mammon’s sorcery. He might have had something to do with it. What interests me, though, is the fact that the creature knew about this place.”

There was not really much more to say. After the fight, Gâbríel had left Thäràc with Firefly and returned to check on Snapdrágon. She led him to a place not too far away and instructed him to stay put. Then she returned to Thäràc and waited for him to wake up. Now it was time for them to move.

With much discomfort, Thäràc climbed to his feet. He could stand well enough, but with great irritation. He picked up his sword and checked his person more thoroughly. Amazingly, his bow was okay but his quiver was cracked; though not useless. He had to pick pieces of glass out of his hand. He also had a surprisingly mild pain in his right shoulder, which reminded him of the talon that had dug into it, and Thäràc wondered how he was bearing so well. Perhaps it had something to do with Firefly's premature carrion feeding. Having checked everything, it was time to move. He and Gâbríel went up the ramp leading up to the steel door where Firefly eagerly awaited. As they approached the door it opened, which seemed to be normal in this place. They stepped through. On the other side was another large room, some fifteen or so yards across and completely square as far as Thäràc could tell. On each side there were doors. In the centre was a square area with a pillar at each corner. It was about five yards across. The ceiling was not high above them, only about two feet from Thäràc's head. Above the square in the middle was a hole in the ceiling; also a square. Thäràc realised with disdain that the surface within had the same apparent function as the one that had shattered beneath him over what is normally considered a fall to certain death. Sure enough, it was part of his set route.

They boarded. After a few seconds, thin walls of a strange glass-like white light appeared between the pillars, forming an enclosure. Then they ascended. They passed by four floors much the same as the first. Eventually they stopped at the top. This room was the same shape and size as the others had been, but without the pillars. On each side were doors in seemingly random places. They took the one almost directly in front of them. The room behind it was larger, and the ground was one story below. They were standing on a catwalk; a path of steel grating that went

both across the room and along the sides in certain places. They took the straight path to the other side of the room that then ran along the wall to their right. At its end was a door. They went through this and then through a small long chamber consisting of two large metal cylinders with a narrow path in between. Finally, they emerged through the door on the other side of this claustrophobic chamber into an unimaginably large one.

It was like the inside of a giant egg shell in shape. The single enclosing wall was jet black, and looked as though it was miles long. It was illuminated by strange blue lights that were scattered over it. Thäràc and Gâbríel were standing on a rectangular balcony of metal grating. It extended about four yards before them and was twice as wide. Beyond this was what looked like yet another shifting platform, again much like the one that now lay in pieces at the bottom of a shaft. They stepped aboard. As usual there was a slight delay before it began to hover towards the other end of the great chamber. Below them the bottom seemed just as distant as the top and sides, which seemed like over a mile across. At a certain point the platform seemed to be accelerating, though he could not tell how fast they were going. Nor for some reason did he have any idea of how long it took him to reach the other side. When they got there, they found not a balcony, but rather a tunnel not much wider than the platform. A minute passed before the transport slowed right down yards before a steel barrier. As they approached the barrier it opened slowly by splitting in half and opening like a double door. The way beyond this was much the same; another couple of minutes through the tunnel and then another strange chamber, where, finally, the platform terminated.

While the last one was miles in length, this one was some sixty yards across, and while the previous chamber

was shaped like an egg lying on its side, this one was like a half flattened orange. The wall seemed to be made of the same material as the last place, though now it was close enough that they could see it was not a smooth surface, but appeared to be made of many-sided tiles. It was also very reflective. It was not lit by the same blue lights as before, but eerie and familiar white ones. When Thäràc and Gâbríel stepped off the lift it began its journey back through the tunnel and the gate of steel. This place was clearly intended as an exit, not an entrance. Opposite in the chamber to the now departing ride was another one, below a shaft disconcertingly similar to the first one, except that it was of earth rather than glass. One improvement! They crossed the room and boarded.

Seconds later they began to ascend. Again, Thäràc could not quite place how fast they were going once it had reached full speed, but it was pretty fast. In about half a minute's time, he, Gâbríel and Firefly arrived at the top and were greeted by a wide open area enclosed within the forest, and saturated by a refreshingly clear sunny morning. It was more or less circular, covered in grass and was peppered with trees, some standing alone and some in small clusters. They came in different shapes and sizes. There were no huge trees; indeed, the shape varied more than the size. Some of the treetops were flat and very wide, shaped much like clouds. Others were cone shaped. It was quite a vast piece of land. The three were situated not far from edge. Way over at the opposite side furthest from them the trees looked very small.

For whatever reason, Thäràc had some curious expectation that this would be the end of the road. His goal for the last several minutes had been simply to escape from that bizarre place, and now that he had he was looking forward to some good rest. But Gâbríel never stopped

walking, and it was only now as he followed her that he began thinking about what comes after the annihilation of the White Beasts. As best he could tell, the answer to that was the trek to Gerra's Palace. It came as something of a shock to him, then, when it occurred to him that the trek had begun. They seemed to be heading toward the northwest. They were almost into the woods when Thäràc asked the question that Gâbríel had been waiting to hear.

“Where are we going now?”

“First, before any further decision, we need to leave. If Effa is near at hand, this may be the first place he will look.”

Despite the feverish effect of hearing this, Thäràc was somewhat relieved. So the trip had not begun? Were they heading to a place of refuge to discuss the next move? These were Thäràc's expectations as they tread the woods for an increasingly painful half-hour. His sores seemed now to be just beginning to show their severity. Another expectation was that he would be reunited with Snapdrágon, of whom Gâbríel made no mention. The moment of truth came when Gâbríel came to an abrupt halt. She turned to face him.

“Stay here and do not leave this spot.”

“What?”

“I need you to remain here. I will not be long.”

“Where are you going?”

“There is something I need to see to. I will *not* be gone long.”

Thäràc was just opening his mouth to speak further when Gâbríel turned back in the direction they had been heading. Then, with a very sudden change of demeanour, she sprung into the air, and in a somersault her image

shattered like an abruptly disturbed pool into that of a raven, and then she ascended to a height well above the trees. As she ascended she could see Thäràc diminish into the distance. Then she turned and headed west. As she flew she watched the endless sea of trees speed by beneath her. If only Thäràc could see what she could. To his eyes the trees showed only the subtlest signs of depravity. But Gâbríel could see so much more. Her eyes penetrated the paralysed wood straight into the emptiness that lay within. She could see the emptiness as though it were a shadow, trapped within every leaf and twig. Yet, at the same time that shadow encompassed them. Through the trees she could see the earth itself. Below her was most plainly visible the layer of dirt and soil that stretched over the land as a skin. Ahead of her she could see the shapes of hills, mountains and valleys. She flew over thin streams and little lakes. She flew over the many open spots of land that peppered the forest. Yet, in all these things she also saw an emptiness. This emptiness, however, was not absolute. The very spirit of the hills, rivers and valleys, the spirit of all she saw was still there. But it was so weak that it may as well have been nothing. In the years before the Turning, before an extent of time which meant nothing to Gâbríel, she had flown over the same place more times than one. In those days the spirit of every different shape of land was so beautiful that she could hardly look away. But, much as the colour faded from the eyes of every man, woman and child, that spirit wasted away. And the emptiness that lay in its place was so oppressive on the heart that even the raven felt its sting. The earth was to the forest as a plane that darkens as the sun goes down. She could also see the animals. Though their behaviour was virtually unaffected the spirits within were of little more essence than that of the earth. Gâbríel knew that such a dark halo was not evil, but the ever natural seeker that finds its dwelling at the

waning of light, as the feeders of carrion, which find their sustenance in the passing of life, not with malice, but with a form of love that no bearer of human feelings could ever understand. But this was a carrion that was never meant to be. After several miles of forest had passed beneath her she came to a village and started searching. It was a matter of extraordinary luck and good fortune that she found what she was looking for.

Thäràc had not been waiting for long, but it was long enough to start having thoughts about Gâbríel being the second person to come seeking him, only to find that there was not much left of him to make any use of. He was relieved to find that her trip had not been long when she materialised before him.

“Come with me,” she said.

“Where to now?”

She did not answer. She just began stepping in the same direction that they had gone before. Thäràc followed. The two remained silent for about four miles. Firefly, after some initial ambivalence, had decided reluctantly that its most appropriate place was now behind Gâbríel and not far in front of Thäràc, a bizarre change in mentality. Snapdrágon's whereabouts were unknown. Thäràc had been succumbing gradually to a sense of dread, closely tied to his now intense physical discomfort. It was time for another question.

“It is not going to be a pleasant trip is it?”

Gâbríel remained silent.

“How far away is Gerra's palace?”

Still silent.

“Gabriel?!”

She stopped.

“How far is it?”

“About a thousand miles.”

She did not look back, but kept moving in her characteristic stride; her hands behind her back. Though Thäràc was now profoundly upset, he kept moving, and decided to keep the rest of his questions to himself. Another few hours passed before nightfall, and Thäràc was not in the mood to lose unnecessary sleep. The next morning he felt better, but was still in a state of gloom. He skipped breakfast, and continued to follow Gâbríel until, in the afternoon, they arrived at a village. This surprised Thäràc, although he was expecting practically anything. It came as a further surprise when Gâbríel took off once again, this time without a word. When she came back within a minute, she gestured for him to follow.

The town was not much different to those which he had visited over the course of the century. Standard stonework houses; partial co-existence with the woods; dêvas of the southern type; few sudden movements. The path was depressingly old and worn, and fairly straight. With only few bends it led them to what seemed to be the heart of the town. Through this place ran a small creek, and within this creek was a large round basin of water about two yards across. It collected water from upstream and deposited water downstream. About three yards up the creek and then five yards to the right was a tree, and under this tree holding a pail, was a woman. She looked about Thäràc's age, but a little shorter. Her dark hair went down to her shoulders, and she was dressed much the same way as was he. Thäràc found her beautiful, though it took him some time to realise who she was.

“Cära!” he gasped, “You knew about her?”

“Of course I did.” said Gâbrîel, “Why wouldn't I? Her image is engraved in you, like a poem.”

“How did you know she was here?”

“I have known since before I met you. Ever since I did, I have been meaning to show you one day.”

It appeared that she was there to collect water, but for the time being she just stood there. Such behaviour was so typical, but watching it in this person was a bit much for Thäràc. Gâbrîel continued.

“You were both children when you met. She was about a year older than you. You fell in love with her, and she loved you in return. For a time you lived a dream; with no complications, but innocence; for a short time.”

As Gâbrîel spoke, Thäràc's gaze remained fixed on the girl. What he saw was only a shadow of what Gâbrîel was describing.

“Then she left. For reasons never revealed, her parents decided to move away. Then you never saw her again. But your grief was short lived. Soon you forgot about her, and your life went on. So did hers.”

“Why did you bring me here?”

“You are weakening,” said Gâbrîel, “I could see it from the moment you recovered from the final fight. It was then that I decided to show you. Of course, I had to fly ahead and check that she was still here.”

She paused for a moment, then her tone mellowed.

“I know this hurts,” she said, “but she does not have to remain like this. You can bring her back to life, along with everybody else. And what is more, she has *not* forgotten you.”

Thäràc turned to Gâbrîel.

“What are you saying?” he asked with a broken voice.

“I know that her feelings for you have not left her, and like yourself she has remained alone. Thäràc, I can never give you the utmost of certainty, but if you have never doubted anything I have said then do not doubt this: the day her heart beats once more it can become yours.”

When Thäràc turned his attention back to Cära she was walking away with the pail. As he watched her disappear into the village he realised that the vision which now consumed him was the first prospect of a personal future he had seen for over a hundred years. The future of the world had begun the day he first met Gâbríel. But his own future was beginning here and now. And as the former had set his true responsibility, it was the latter which somehow gave him the means. It was *this* future which gave him strength. The underlying fear that had hampered his every step since the fight in the shaft had somehow been shuffled off leaving only the fear of that which could destroy *his* future: Effa. What had once been merely his potential destruction was now a truly personal enemy, and Thäràc no longer had any reservations about taking pains, agonies against meeting that threat. Gâbríel smiled. She, of course, could see that her stunt had worked. She understood better than he did how the last of the White Beasts had traumatised him, and had seen the willpower of the mightiest suffer into collapse. This was one of the peculiar fragilities of the dêvas.

As some of the people about the village witnessed the beginning of a great journey toward the border of the forest and beyond, they could only treat with mild curiosity the sight of an armed man, perhaps a hunter, chasing after a black bird, an account that Cära would later hear with disinterest.

Chapter 12: Smoke

Snapdrágon had never been very good at keeping track of time. The period from the time Gâbríel left him in that interesting part of the woods to the time he made the decision to leave could have been anything between one and a half to three weeks. During that time he had been living off the land as he always had. He had spent most of his days dwelling by the wall of forest that surrounded an open field of grassland and trees, and most of his nights in the strange underground chamber beneath it. Gâbríel had left him about a mile away from this spot and instructed him to wait at least five days before going there; Snapdrágon waited two. He was strictly ordered, however, to wait in that general area until Gâbríel returned. Now he was about 25 miles east and slightly south of the area. Early one morning, after a short, tasteless breakfast, he had headed off without too much haste, and then trekked steadily through the woods for four days straight. The bush that now surrounded him was relatively short; about two to three times his height. It was early afternoon, and the sunlight was streaming down quite nicely on and through the unusually long and extensive branches that decorated his path.

In a manner hardly atypical of him, Snapdrágon paused. He was not distracted by his surroundings; rather he had a certain sense of disturbance. He spun around, and stared down the trail he had left behind. Nothing but tree branches and rays of sunlight. Half satisfied that all was clear he had just begun to turn back around when he was suddenly greeted by a curious, somewhat high-pitched voice.

“Hello!”

Snapdrágon practically jumped and spun back in the direction he had been walking. He was looking at an apparently very young girl; about 14 years old. She was upside-down, hanging by a branch above him. When he looked up he saw that she was hanging not by her legs but by a pair of sickles clasped tightly in her hands and hooked onto the branch. She had black hair – not too long – and a rather funny-looking cute face. Her clothes were greenish brown and somewhat tattered.

“You look like you are going somewhere,” the girl said enthusiastically. Snapdrágon stepped back not knowing what to expect. In one motion the strange girl hopped down from the tree branch and landed on her feet. Walking towards Snapdrágon holding a sharp looking sickle in each hand she suddenly became very imposing. As if reading this she stopped and just stood there, still holding the sickles, with her arms now crossed.

“Can you not speak?” she said, “well that is a shame; you look so interesting. Or am I wrong? Well, are you going to say something or not?”

“Who are you?” asked Snapdrágon. In response to that the girl let out a spontaneous and slightly demented laugh.

“Please, straight to the point so soon? Oh, I suppose I must introduce myself. Very well then; my name is Smoke. And you are?”

Snapdrágon was dumbfounded. For over a century few of his acquaintances have ever uttered more than two sentences in a row, let alone five. The girl, Smoke, seemed not only happy but hyperactive.

“And you are?” she repeated, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. Snapdrágon was always a very cautious person, and for him the question ‘what does this lunatic want?’ was more a product of instinct than anything else. Smoke seemed to be getting impatient.

“And you are?!!” she practically shrieked, knocking him out of limbo.

“Snapdrágon,” he finally replied. The girl’s frustration vanished immediately.

“Well then,” she replied, “where are you off to?”

This actually got him thinking. No one had asked him that question for a very long time, and he never really asked himself. Once again, his thoughts were interrupted.

“You don’t know do you?” said Smoke, tilting her head and smiling innocently, “Well, not to worry, I know where *I’m* going. Want to come with me?”

Snapdrágon was not really fussed.

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Oh, I’m going to a special place” she said, “I think you will like it. Come with me.”

She certainly liked to get straight to the point. More importantly the shift of words from ‘Want to come with me?’ to ‘come with me’ made all the difference to Snapdrágon; almost automatically he complied.

“Right! This way,” she squeaked, and then started skipping off. Snapdrágon just watched with amazement as she disappeared from view. Moments later he had just started off in the same direction he was originally going

when suddenly Smoke swung down from the trees right in front of him, again landing on her feet. For a moment she just looked at him with absolutely no expression on her face. Then she raised her right hand (still holding the sickle) and knocked him twice on the head with the flat of the blade, her face still blank. Then she started skipping off again this time at walking pace. Snapdrágon finally decided to follow. He had forgotten all about Gâbríel's instructions.

Chapter 13: The Thousand Mile Run

Ever since Thäràc had emerged from the forest and began journeying through the open plains his progress had remained more or less the same. While he was unable to maintain the initial exertion with which he had sped through the woods, nor was he any longer hampered by them. Thus, his journey through the plains was no slower or faster than in the woods. The plains were indeed alien to him. Food was a lot more scarce, and whatever animals he did find were radically different to those in the forest. Thankfully water was just as accessible. Of course, the world beyond Me`ridía was not just plains. Thäràc had travelled through a wide variety of landscapes. He had passed through hills, valleys, mountains and forests. He had seen lakes, rivers and creeks. It was all quite beautiful, but throughout his travels he had been in a state of constant exhaustion. There were times when his wounds forced him to a halt, and his attempted sprints often punished him. In time he found that a paced jog worked well, but much of the time called for a mere hasty walk. It had been about the most painful experience of his life. The whole time he had an intense envy towards Gâbríel who just flew along with him as he jogged, and stepped along when he walked without showing the slightest sign of

discomfort. But if it were any consolation, it did seem that few others indeed could have pushed themselves so far, especially given his injured physical and mental state and relative lack of food and sleep. It had been two weeks, and he had travelled over 700 miles. By this point, however, he was so worn down that he felt he was close to death.

It was about that time that Thäràc and Gâbríel came upon a river, which flowed north-east. Not a day later, they experienced yet another stroke of luck. It was in the middle of the afternoon when, deep into the distance, Gâbríel could see a figure down river. Leaving Thäràc behind she went to investigate, then she returned.

“There is a lady upstream. She is heading in the same direction as we are, and she has agreed to give you a ride.”

Thäràc had never felt more relieved. It took some time for him to reach the boat. When he did he was confronted with a fairly old looking woman with long grey hair. The boat in which she sat was very simple and plain, but it seemed sturdy. Firefly shot straight over the water and hovered over the boat right before the woman’s face as though it were asking her a question. The woman returned the stare, but otherwise did not respond. She just turned to Thäràc, said hello, and then invited him and Gâbríel into the boat, and from then on she remained silent. When she started rowing again her guests could see that she still possessed considerable strength. Though she never mentioned what she was doing out there in the wilderness, Gâbríel suspected that she was emigrating. In recent years, in a town not too far from the beginning of the river, there had been a shortage in available work, sending an exodus of the more industrious townspeople down stream looking for something to do with their hands. To Gâbríel, the woman's strength indicated one not ready for retirement, which at her age, was impressive, even for a dêva. To Thäràc, her strength served only to

remind him of his own present weakness, just in time for him to collapse.

It was a pity he could not stay awake to appreciate his surroundings as they drifted downstream. The river was rather wide, and at times it was difficult to make out the sides while drifting down the centre. Beyond them, on either side, great mountains loomed in the distance. The taller ones were snow-capped. The land between them and the river was grass covered, with a few trees scattered here and there. The old woman seemed to be well seasoned at spear fishing, so they did not go without food, uncooked though it was. When came evening the woman grew tired, and so Thäràc was woken up so that he could continue rowing while she slept. It was the first time since his quest had begun, and indeed since well before that, that Thäràc had taken some good time to appreciate the night sky. It was not yet black, but just dark enough for the stars to be seen. It was then that the world before him vanished to the most intense and vivid of Memories, however distant it had long been.

Under such an evening sky, on an arena-like plateau, looming at great height over the extreme mountainous landscape far below, eleven-year-old Thäràc was stepping rapidly back and forth, wielding in his right hand a short, wooden sword. His amateur footwork was accompanied by an occasional wild swing that sometimes sent the imitation weapon yards from his clumsy reach. After one such accident, he decided to leave it be, and rest. He turned southward to face the sea. Deep in the distance, what looked like a volcano protruded from the water, a mountain that had always captivated the child. Having fanaticized briefly of flying over to explore, he turned around to face northward. Some hundred yards in the distance was another plateau, only higher, and much wider, at the top of the tallest

mountain. This was the base of a section of the village. It was sufficiently high that only a few of the dozen houses atop could be seen as the sky grew ever darker. When Thäràc looked in that direction, he saw that the lights of the closest house were now glowing through the windows. His father had told him that when those lights were lit, it was time to come inside. Not one to push his boundaries, Thäràc went to collect his toy, and hopped down the wooden steps that began the trail which winded about the various summits.

These summits were dotted with houses and inhabited by extraordinarily thin, twisted trees that often grew straight out of the mountains rocky walls, sometimes even upside-down. Beyond the steps, Thäràc's path dipped a little further, before wrapping around the mountain to his right. Once he was almost halfway around, Tôbit's house could be seen. It was embedded in yet another mountain, looking out upon a handful of houses on the plain beyond the conclusion of the narrow trail on which Thäràc was stepping. Beyond this plain, and a fair climb, was the higher plain, on which stood the place where Thäràc was meant to be. As he emerged onto the lower plain, he had no second thoughts about moving straight on home. He was halfway toward the steep slope to his left when he heard a not too distant voice coming from his right.

“Thäràc!” she called in a relatively high pitched tone. Thäràc turned. A girl about his age was running his way. Thäràc went up to greet her.

“Come quick!”

“What? What is it?”

By the time he finished that sentence, the girl was running back to the arch-like hole in the rock whence she had come.

“Cara!” he called out with an express annoyance, and followed after. Always the athlete, he caught up pretty fast,

and chased her through the arch and down a path twisted around Thäràc's home summit for about sixty yards. Near the bottom it got very steep, and the two slowed down; not too much, but with the typical caution of children. Thankfully, neither of them hurt themselves. At the bottom, was a wide and uneven ground that formed the foundation of a massive niche in the mountain. Besides the usual twisting trees, the area proudly possessed a large pond, and inhabiting the pond was a flock of ducks. Cära raced to the bench before the pond, quickly slowing down as the birds paced away from her. She sat down, retrieved the gourd from behind the bench, and hand-gestured for Thäràc to come and sit, which he was in the process of doing anyway. As he sat down and laid his wooden sword onto the seat, Cära started taking bread pieces from the gourd and tossing them toward the ducks. It took a while for them to come. As she waited Cära was looking carefully at the flock. Then at one point she put her finger out and said "there!"

"What?"

"um.. never mind."

About a minute later, the ducks finally came. As they got close, Cära became increasingly diligent. Then suddenly...

"That one."

Thäràc followed her finger, but his face remained blank. There was still light enough to see, but not with great acuity.

"Well, can't you see it?"

"What am I looking for?"

"Argh!" she grunted impatiently, "see that one there?"

If it was the one that Cära was tossing all of her bread to, he saw it. When they came out of the water, Cära lost track of her favourite among the cluster. It was when they came close enough to be hand fed that she could definitively identify it.

“Look at its back.”

Thäràc gazed down at the isolated black mark on an otherwise green surface.

“A tree?”

“No stupid, a hook.”

He gazed closer as the creature gobbled bread pieces from Cära's hand. She was right.”

“Oh yes!”

“It looks like the very same hook you see on some of those gîajîns' doors.”

Thäràc was not wholly impressed at the resemblance himself, but could see some similarities. The hook which Cära referred to was the symbol of one of the major religions, followed by the very small gîajîn minority with which the dêvas happily shared the mountain. Though not troublesome, they mostly kept to themselves. And while religion was an essentially gîajîn phenomenon, dêva conversions were known. However, it was not often spoken of before the children, for there was, quite justifiably, a degree of suspicion.

“Don't the others get any?” asked Thäràc.

“I like this one.”

“That does not mean it has to hog all the food.”

When Thäràc realised just then how dark it had become, he knew better than to sit around. His father was not a stern man, but he knew how to offer incentive. When he stood up, Cära completely forgot about the ducks. She got up herself, and went with him back up the path whence they came. When they reached the top, she gave him a big hug, and without a word she hurried off home, not far from Tôbit's house. Thäràc then made his way up the hill to the higher plain. When he reached his house, he stepped nervously

through the door, and proceeded to the living room to greet his parents.

“Little late,” said the father, a thin, but solid looking man pushing forty.

“Yes. I’m very sorry.”

“No problem,” he said, finishing off his food, “your dinner, not mine.”

Thäràc's meal was still there, but without a trace of steam. His father looked up at him and smiled humorously.

“Where is your sword?”

As these memories went through Thäràc's head, he found himself suffering from the most intense episode of nostalgia that he could even remember. Yet, as depressing as it was, it seemed to strengthen him, because he knew that if he were to succeed in his quest, then, as Gâbríel promised, the bitter reality he suffered would disappear, and the true joy would once again be united with the present. Tôbit had once told him that the experience of love, as all other treasures of life, is like a river. Though it seems the same, it never stops changing. If one tries to fight the waters, one may drown. When the times we cherish slip out of fingers, trying to save them merely distorts the present; the flow. Thäràc's entire world had disappeared a long time ago, and he knew well that he may never see Tôbit and his father again. Nor would he ever again meet the same Cära, but only a distorted reflection that would one day greet him with a kiss. This was his future, and it was this that occupied his waking thoughts as he and his host continued to take turns rowing and sleeping.

It was more Gâbríel, who typically had little to think about, who gave full attention to the fact that the surrounding landscape was changing dramatically. The

mountains grew much higher, and at the same time the altitude of the ice caps dropped. Then the mountains disappeared completely. By day four it had become very cold, and the green beyond the river's edge had gradually turned to white. By that time the mountains had returned, but they were short and almost completely covered in snow. It was on the evening of the fifth day when they finally took to shore. Gâbrîel had insisted that Thäràc proceed on foot as soon as he was ready. And now he was. They had travelled well over 100 miles and were less than 200 miles from the palace. Besides, the river at this point was just starting to bend away from their destination. Once Gâbrîel and Thäràc had got off the boat they said farewell to the old lady and then took off.

Thäràc was able to travel much faster now than by the time he had boarded the boat, but now he was freezing. The air stung, and there was nothing beneath his feet but snow. The redness of the sunset along with the sun was deadened by a strange veil of pale white mist. The mountains were like shadows. As he went on the river quickly disappeared behind him; and ahead, he soon discovered, was a blizzard. As he pushed forward the mountains became fainter, the horizon became whiter, and the air became colder. Gâbrîel told him that this climate would pass him by soon enough, but the escalating torment of the winter plains quickly brought him down. Determined to leave this place as quickly as he could, he ran furiously. Gâbrîel shouted at him to slow down, but he did not. The sharp sting of the weather in his eyes kept them shut; although the storm was so thick that this really made little difference. He ran for about half an hour. The only thing that stopped him was the solid object that caught his foot and sent him stumbling face first into the snow. He did not get up.

Chapter 14: Faces

The woods had become thick; not so much the trees themselves but rather the branches. It was fairly early in the morning. Snapdrágon watched as Smoke, who hitherto had been a rather jolly sort of character, hacked through the vegetation as though it were on the offensive. This curious agitation manifested itself in a loud, childish squeak with every second or third branch she cut. Many would have been at least a little amused at the sight; Snapdrágon was not. They had covered roughly 30 or so miles, but even Smoke's frantic pace could not bring Snapdrágon up to speed, and the trip, typically, had taken a few days.

"I can see it!" Smoke suddenly shrieked. She had already been popping through the tree tops and telling him that *It* was getting closer and closer. Now she had seen it from the ground. She kept cutting, only this time instead of squeaking angrily she was singing some strange song. Snapdrágon was paying no attention to her, but soon he could see the yard high mound preceded by a shallow pit roughly three yards across. In the deep end, slightly to the right, was the entrance to a tunnel. When they reached it Smoke rejoiced.

“We are here!” she said excitedly, and with that she ran straight into the tunnel. A few seconds later she emerged again.

“We need light! I always forget that part. Snappy, make me a torch... I mean, *us* a torch.”

Snapdrágon really had nothing better to do so he complied. Good branches were abundant, so he had no trouble putting the torch together. Starting the fire was more difficult. Once it was ready however, he and Smoke entered the tunnel.

“So what is this place?” asked Snapdrágon, staring through the tip of the flame.

“You will see,” said Smoke. She paced about a yard ahead of him and took great pleasure in directing him at every intersection; usually with a particularly odd gesture involving both her sickles. He knew nothing of his surroundings; all he knew was that they were gradually ascending; and they seemed to be making a general directional turn to the right. Eventually, they finally saw natural light. When they emerged from the tunnel they found themselves at a great height above the ground and looking over the woods. Right before them was a firm looking rope bridge. On the other side of the bridge was the rim of a volcano-like mountain, very wide with incredibly steep slopes. It appeared to be hollow. The shadows of clouds drifting over the mountain’s side between rays from the morning sun were a marvellous sight. The view in general was magnificent.

“Shall we?” asked Smoke, then she skipped straight across the bridge, leaving Snapdrágon to follow casually behind. When he reached the rim he was greeted with yet another amazing sight. Before him lay a huge bowl of creeks, ponds, small hills, rich grassland, old stone huts

and, most significantly, trees. The trees were of greatly varying size and shape. Many were average in size while others were massive; reaching up to one fifth of the crater's depth. While many were solitary, others were intricately woven together to form complex structures. It was a world within a world. Snapdrágon was also greeted, of course, with another knock on the head with Smoke's sickle.

"Come on Snappy!" she said while hopping down the narrow ledges. Snapdrágon looked back behind him. He could see now that the mountain from which he and Smoke had emerged was far taller than he had imagined. It towered at least twice over the apparent volcano on which they now stood. Not waiting around for another wake-up call from Smoke he began climbing down the terraced slope to the bottom behind her. The slope was peppered with stone stairs; some of them still standing, most of them ruined. Some of the jumps they had to make were great; and while Snapdrágon held in good faith that Smoke knew what she was doing, he did think he had a pretty good question.

"How do we get out?" he asked. Her response was interspersed with numerous blows to his head.

"WHAT –bang, bang- IS –bang- THE MATTER WITH YOU? –bang, bang, bang,- How do you think we get out? The drain of course!"

"The drain?" he spluttered, no longer able to think.

"Yes! What do you think happens when it rains silly? Does the whole thing just flood and kill everybody? No, the water goes down the drain. And when we are done here, so will we. Now let's get going."

And so, they gradually made their way to the bottom. As Snapdrágon stepped out into the area he was suddenly consumed by a strange sensation that he could not quite

place. It seemed perceptual. What is more it became slightly more intense with each step.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” said Smoke. She started running around frantically while Snapdrágon, paying no attention to her, continued to explore. In his vision, each object in sight had a certain aura over it. And the more he walked around the stronger each aura became. One in particular stood out from the rest. It was a mass of trees. Many of them grew out of the ground sideways; but they all came together, twisted around each other, and appeared to form a large temple-like structure. The branches were all clustered together so as to have the appearance of a single, large treetop. Snapdrágon approached it. As he drew near the strange sensation intensified. There were many spaces between the trunks through which he could enter. Even those spaces had auras! As he naturally entered through the strongest one he began to get a strange feeling that his path was not his own, but rather some unknown set route that his steps somehow could not resist. Inside the Tree Temple there was surprisingly little to see except for one thing. In the centre of the chamber was an ancient looking stump. It was taller than he was but only just. At the level of his eyes was hewn a strange inscription composed of symbols he had never seen to his memory. Hammered into the stump just inches below were two spikes; and resting on those spikes was a lyre. The aura on the lyre was so intense that Snapdrágon was afraid to touch it. Hesitantly, he lifted it off of its mount and held it in position.

“Play something!” an irritating voice exclaimed from behind him, making him jump on the spot, “Can you play?” she asked eagerly. Nothing happened for a moment.

“You can’t then? That is a pity. Maybe I can teach you, I know a little...” Smoke was interrupted by a soft, dreamy melody. It sounded like it was being played by a master.

The strings were being plucked in full dynamic range and in a steady soothing rhythm. Smoke suddenly smiled wickedly.

“Well, you are not too bad are you? Play me more.”

Snapdrágon was not listening. Nor did he stop.

At about that time Thäràc lay half buried in the snow. His eyes opened weakly. Reality started to reform around him. He was near frozen, and was amazed that he was not sick. It took no time at all to realise that he had not woken up on his own. Through the blizzard (which had diminished somewhat overnight,) he could faintly hear music coming from somewhere. It sounded like a harp; and it was beautiful. He could make this judgement despite the fact that he could hardly make it out. Slowly and very painfully he struggled up to his feet. After judging where the melody seemed to be coming from he followed it. As he drew near, the blizzard faded as if by magic, and things started coming into view. First he saw various stone figures; ruins not different from those of Beddingville or Newground. Then as the storm continued to lift, he discovered that these ruins were far greater. Deep in the distance he could just make out the silhouette of a truly grand building, many stories high; and with a two storied structure built around it. The music was getting louder. Then, sitting on a broken statue he could see a human figure playing a lyre. As he approached him the blizzard disappeared completely; exposing the city in its full glory. The man did not react to him or even seem to notice him.

Then something strange happened. After about a minute, the music coming from the man ceased, and a similar but different theme instantly started coming from somewhere else. The man before Thäràc was finished, and

in a moment he began to fade. This did not seem out of the ordinary for Thäràc. The music led him into a short, slightly spiralling corridor from which he emerged to find himself in the corner of a small courtyard. On the side left of the opposite corner he saw a second story stone balcony; still intact, resting on three large pillars each about twice his height. Sitting cross-legged on the balcony was, in appearance, a middle aged woman plucking at a lyre.

Snapdrágon had drifted away from the Tree Temple. His path still seemed predetermined, and he felt like a horse being led to water. He was now playing a different song. It was not as dreamy, rather more ceremonial, and his playing seemed to be as directed as his steps. He was walking down a path that lay between a line of stone dwellings and an open field that stretched all the way to the tallest tree in this hidden world. He was not far from the edge of the bowl, which rose sharply upward. As he went he subtly transposed to a different key.

The new source of the music was leading Thäràc through a labyrinth of ruined buildings, archways, statues and various other forms of stonework. The snow beneath his feet was still there, but he could no longer feel it. This time the song had not changed, but the key was one semitone higher, which had a dramatic effect. The music was luring him simply with its beauty. Finally, he was led to a wide open area. Close to the centre was another man sitting cross-legged on a boulder that reached just a few feet in height. Thäràc had gotten about halfway towards him when he suddenly recognised who it was.

“Snapdrágon!” he gasped. Even so, Snapdrágon never looked up. He just sat there and played with the same

vacant stare that most readily identified him. Then Thäràc saw another lyrist. This one was sitting up in a tree looking down. His music was very soft, and was accompanying Snapdrágon's melody. To Thäràc's continuing surprise, several other musicians appeared, both men and women. Some had lyres and similar instruments while others had flutes, ocarinas and panpipes. Together they played in harmony, scattered around on a blanket of snow. One of the figures, he noticed, was not playing; nor even had an instrument. It was a very young girl with white hair that was almost invisible against the pale background. She looked about nine or ten; and while the others (including Snapdrágon) paid no attention to him, the girl was looking straight at him. She started towards him. He felt nervous. As she drew near, he was able to make out the prettiest face that he could remember: pale blue eyes and red cheeks. Not once did she break eye contact. She stopped right before him, and then embraced him. She was quite small so her head only reached his lower chest. She looked up at him. Then she gave him the slightest smile. It was a curious fact that while this spectre was able to touch him in the same way as a living human being, he could not feel it.

Snapdrágon, still plucking away, could tell that his path was nearly complete. It was measure of his completely introverted nature that he did not recognise his final destination until it was very close. When he did see it, he was consumed with a feeling of dread. What lay before him was a tree. It was of average size and shape and actually looked very comfortable. But the tree completely lacked an aura. It stood out in context like a black spot. Feeling increasingly ill, Snapdrágon approached it. He stopped playing his lyre so he could sit himself down with his back

to the tree. He made himself comfortable and began playing a completely different tune.

The sudden cease in the music was shortly followed by the initiation of a less appealing composition. It was not dark, but it was not dreamy or love-like either. It was comparatively rather bland. Also it was solo; only Snapdrágon was playing. The others just stood or sat where they were for a moment before they all began to look in a particular direction; away from the area. Everyone was looking except for Snapdrágon, who just kept playing, and the child, who never gazed away from Thäràc, and was still smiling subtly. Thäràc looked too. Several yards away to his left a burly human figure faded into existence. At least nine feet tall, he was wearing some sort of robe made from animal hide. His face was large, even for his height, and it was twisted in grief.

Snapdrágon's eyes started to water. As he leant against the tree playing the lyre he was gradually being consumed with grief. First it touched him, and then it penetrated him; pulling him down and down. The sensation was like sinking in quicksand. In a short time tears were pouring down both cheeks, though his face was otherwise unchanged.

The sizeable human figure in the slight distance from Thäràc put his large hands together. Then he slowly drew them apart. Between his hands was a spark; a pale, but glowing spark of green light. As the distance widened the spark grew. Suddenly, Thäràc could feel something happening right before him. He looked just in time to see thin streams of the same pale green light being drawn from

the bodies of all the people he saw, ending with the girl. The streams quickly travelled straight into the spot between the giant's hands, which was now of considerable size. Then, Thäràc noticed two things. Firstly, Snapdrágon had stopped playing, yet the music could still be heard; and it was getting more depressing. Secondly, while the smile on the child's face had not gone away, tears were now trickling down her cheeks. Still, her gaze never left his eyes. It was almost as though she was asking for help. He was becoming very upset, but nothing prepared him for what he saw next. The man to his left engulfed the moon-like sphere between his hands. He closed his eyes for a moment, and then opened them. Thäràc grew more and more anxious. Then, in a display of great energy and might, the man, with one great over-arm swing, hurled the light away.

"NO!!" Thäràc screamed as the light became like a shooting star. Then he looked back at the people. Many of them dropped their instruments, and all of them collapsed. The man on the tree fell violently to the ground, landing on his lyre and breaking it. Snapdrágon rolled off the boulder and fell flat on his face. When Thäràc finally built up the courage to look down at the girl he was struck with horror as he saw that the tears had become blood. Most disturbingly of all she was still smiling. Then she fell. She fell straight through his body and hit the ground behind him. By this point, of course, Thäràc was in tears himself. In fact, he was barely able to stand. He collapsed onto the snow, right next to the fading spectre of the child's body and completely broke down. He would have stayed that way for a while if it were not for the sudden darkness that caught his attention.

The light had vanished almost completely. Shortly after, it returned. He looked up and saw the sun circle over him.

Then it got dark again. The accelerated day/night cycle continued until the sun rose for the fourth time. When it did, it slowed down to a halt at about midday. Thäràc waited to see what would happen next. Then, in the corner of his eye, he noticed movement. He looked over and saw Snapdrágon squirming in the snow. With considerable effort Snapdrágon slowly forced himself up; onto his arms and legs, onto his knees, and finally onto his feet. He stumbled forward, and then began stepping clumsily around, looking for something. It appeared that there was nothing there for him, so he started walking away with his back to Thäràc. He then started fading. At the same time the blizzard gradually returned, and through Snapdrágon's disappearing image Thäràc could see Gâbríel walking towards him. Before the image disappeared Gâbríel stepped straight through it. He then noticed Firefly buzzing about between them. Once again, Thäràc was back in reality.

“What you just saw was an illustration,” said Gâbríel, “I don’t think I need to explain what it was revealing.”

“You saw it too?” asked Thäràc, confused.

“Not directly,” said Gâbríel, “but your heart is like a mirror. Through it I could see what you saw.”

“What is this place?”

“This was once a great city, as I am sure you can tell. It was the greatest in fact; built by Gerra himself. It was a gift to the Music Makers.”

She paused, probably anticipating a question. Thäràc asked nothing, so she continued.

“There was once a very unique tribe of people. They were known for two things: their fragility, and their love and talent for music. And so they were called the Music Makers. Early in their history they divided into two groups.

One remained here, and the other chose a different home. They moved into the deep south; into what is now the Forest of Me`ridía. They found a home in a dead volcano.”

It was not until this time that Thäràc realised that the music was still playing. It was just far more difficult to hear in the blizzard. He did not know if Gâbríel sensed it, either directly or through him, but it did not seem to matter. So he did not bother mentioning it.

“What happened to them?”

“You know very well what happened to them,” replied Gâbríel sternly, “but you still want to hear it from me, very well. What you saw in the Guardian's hands was the Pa`räjí, torn away from the remains of Pán`gaia, and therefore, from every living creature, in order to save them from total annihilation. But the Music Makers were so fragile that they did not survive at all. The only one that did survive, as we have discovered, was Snapdrágon. We know now what he is and where he came from.”

“So Snapdrágon travelled all the way to the forest from this city?”

“No. Interestingly, the style of music you heard was actually that of the southern tribe. None of the people you saw ever would have lived here. It is the connection between the peoples that explains what you saw.”

Beneath a wide hanging tree trunk in a small jungle of twisted trees reaching very high, but so thick that a man could not stand up, a pack of six fèn`rira slept. One of them began to awaken. The creature stumbled up lazily, shook its head, and stretched, arching its back. Then it began to nuzzle the others. It received varying responses from each. One of them snapped at its inconsiderate comrade. Soon many of them started to get up. After each

individual had got on its feet it chose a particular direction and then went to check it out. This common behaviour allowed the fenri to choose more efficiently the best starting point for a pack hunt. Then, one of them let out a very strange snarling-yelping sound. This got the remainder out of bed. One by one they all came to see what the winner had found. Many yards away, leaning on a tree was a human. It was holding some meaningless object in its hands, and it did not seem to be very aroused. Thick saliva started oozing from their jaws.

It was only now that Thäràc could bring his mind back to his present situation. He had collapsed in the snow the night before, and he must have been impossible to wake up. Otherwise Gâbríel would have done so. She also must have been unable to reach him during the vision. He did figure out one thing. The reason she had not pushed him forward again as soon as he came to was that she knew very well that sometimes he needed answers before he could move on. She was not only his guide, but also his counsellor. She did everything she had to in order to keep him on task. Thäràc decided it was time that he took the initiative.

“We should keep going,” he said. He would have started moving right away, but he had no idea which direction he was facing. In response to his suggestion Gâbríel pointed the way. And so he started running, making his way through the maze of walls and pillars. As he ran he could still faintly hear the music, which had become slower and duller. He did not get very far before instinctively freezing in his track to a far more threatening sound. As he stood frozen on the spot he listened with great fear to the loud, heavy breathing of a colossal animal. It was coming from his left side. Unable to prepare himself, he slowly turned

his head. Lying flat alongside a massive, though broken wall that ran more or less in Thäràc's direction was a monster. Its back reached about nine feet above the ground that lay beneath its flat stomach. Its long neck was twisted to its left and consequently its head was resting almost sideways in Thäràc's view; with its chin flat against the ground. It appeared to be asleep. The head alone was almost his height; at least up to his chest. This height consisted primarily of a large bulge above its snake-like mouth, with huge sideways orientated nostrils about halfway up. The rear end of the head was shorter. Its reptilian eye was in a strange spot; about half way up the head and behind the mouth. Its left wing was spread out over the area with the tip leaning against the opposite wall about a dozen yards across. Thäràc's blood ran cold. All the stories he had heard as a child came back to him. He knew exactly who it was. He was standing before Ithamä, the most feared creature on earth. His spirit once numbered among the White Beasts of Me`ridía, and he was the first to be slain. Thäràc knew better than to hang around. Slowly, he started making his way across to the nearest out-of-sight place. Gâbríel was there, watching him.

Snapdrágon's playing had become duller, drearier and softer. The tears had dried on his face, and he had become more absent than even he had been before. He was not, however, oblivious to the creatures that emerged before him. A fenrï stepped out from a cluster of trees in the distance. For a moment it just stood there with its mouth open. Then others started to appear. With no further hesitation, they advanced. Snapdrágon just watched them. His reaction would have been no different if they were rabbits. The one that led the charge was a few yards ahead of the rest. As Snapdrágon sat there playing the lyre the

animals quickly closed in on him. The foremost was about four yards away when Smoke suddenly fell from above holding both of her sickles high above her head, and then landed before it, slashing straight through the creature with both blades. The animal did not make a sound.

At that exact moment, as Thäràc was making his way cautiously away from Ithamä's line of sight, the monster suddenly awakened in a spontaneous fit of agony that sent it springing to its feet in an instant, bellowing a terrifying reptilian howl that totally humbled even the most fearsome creatures. Thäràc turned white. He was too scared to even think to draw his sword. That was probably for the best. After a few more cries of pain and frustration the creature stamped about aimlessly, not seeming to be paying any attention to the terrified man standing not ten yards away. Thäràc could feel every step without any effort. Before he could act on his intention to run like crazy Ithamä began flapping its enormous wings, lifting it promptly off the ground, and took off. Thäràc watched as the creature disappeared into the blizzard. Behind him, Gâbrîel approached, not the slightest bit agitated. Thäràc turned to face her. They exchanged glances for a moment. Then, once again, Thäràc took off. Gâbrîel followed.

The remaining five fèn`rîra all focused their attention on Smoke. This was a common fenrî tactic; one foe at a time. It worked to her advantage. Before they could completely circle her, two of them impatiently lunged at her. Both were virtually ripped in two. The other three were clever enough to realise that they might fare better if they all attacked in one instant. This was actually one of their most unique and amazing abilities. They positioned themselves so that they were each of equal distance from

her, about five yards away; one in front, and one on each side. They waited for a moment, until the one in front began to advance. The others immediately followed cue. As they closed in they synchronised themselves so that they would take her down in one lethal coup. Then, at two yards distance, they all pounced. Without giving the slightest warning, Smoke spun around so quickly that even Snapdrágon was taken aback, with both of her sickles extending far out creating a blur of blades, and in one instant the three animals leapt straight into death. The scene ended with four fiendish black things bleeding on the ground, and Smoke standing proudly over them. She turned around and faced Snapdrágon, who by this point had actually stopped playing the lyre. She walked up to him, bent over before him, put on a cute face and said, “I know that next time you are not going to just sit there entertaining yourself while I do all the work. Are you?”

It was late in the afternoon after six more days of travel when at last the palace of Gerra came into view. When Thäràc and Gâbríel came close enough to get a good look they found that the entrance was directly facing south. It was a grand building. The bottom section was about 80 yards across and at least two storeys high. The ascending sections of the palace were 60, 40 and 20 yards across, giving it a terraced pyramid shape. The building was amazingly well preserved, though still more worn down than the pavilion of Newground. Thäràc did not have any time to observe the building in more detail. He ran straight up to the open rectangular entrance and went straight through. Gâbríel waited outside. Once Thäràc was in the building he kept running until he came to the centre. For a moment he dreaded the possibility that nothing would happen, that somehow he might have missed one of the

White Beasts. That fear was not justified. As he stood in the centre of the great hall it began to light up. Rapidly it became brighter and brighter. It became bright enough to force a person's eyes shut, but somehow Thäràc did not even blink. Finally, it got so bright that everything disappeared and all he could see was white.

At about that time, Firefly arrived in the empty temple, having fallen behind Thäràc in his haste. The creature was certain that he had entered the building, and now spun randomly in confusion, looking for the man who had to be in there somewhere.

Chapter 15: The Chamber

When the shroud of white light finally lifted, Thäràc found himself standing in a black void. Curiously, his hunger and exhaustion were gone. Beneath his feet there was no visible ground, all he could see was blackness. That was except for one figure. Directly before him, what appeared to be about 15 yards away was a large throne. On that throne sat a creature. He appeared to be about seven or eight foot tall. He had a head much like that of a lion, and the rest of his body was large and definitely more beast than man. His hands were humanlike, but twice as large and with great claws at the ends of his fingers. His feet were more like those of an eagle, with three great front talons and one back talon on each foot. The creature spoke.

“Hello Thäràc,” in a kingly sort of voice, “I know why you are here.”

“Are you Gerra?”

“Yes, I am”

“What is this place?”

“This is a chamber located within the lower reaches of the Ethereal Plane. It was preserved for visitors such as yourself,

and I was summoned here when you set foot in my palace. How did you like my palace by the way?"

"It was wonderful," said Thäràc, "Who built it?"

"I did."

"What for?"

"My home, of course!"

"So what happens now?"

"Strange choice of words. Well, the first thing that must 'happen' is that you understand. What you are looking at is a spirit. What do you know about spirits?"

"Not much."

"Well the gift you are about to receive is not to be taken lightly. Little breaks the boundaries of nature more than spiritual infusion, and I cannot hand myself over to someone with no understanding of what the spirit is. So you must pay extra careful attention. Can you do that?"

"Yes."

"Some of what I tell you, you may already know, intuitively or otherwise. Some of what you think you know may be wrong. The first thing you must realise is that the world you come from is not the only world."

"How many are there?"

"Technically there are four. The world you know is the Material Plane. It is the world of life and indeed the place where life begins. It is the most perilous of worlds, but its wholeness is unparalleled, and its sanctity boundless. Its fruits, however, are temporary. When a person dies, his or her spirit feels out of place and develops a sense of homelessness. This motivates the spirit to leave, and when it does, he or she is led to the Spiritual Plane. Not all of them choose to go. All but the most disciplined of people suffer

attachment to the material world. Some souls, usually the ones the gîajìn call evil, are so attached that on passing they cannot let go, choosing instead to linger on with little direction. Very rarely a soul may return from the Spiritual Plane. They can also possess new bodies, always the bodies of animals though. It is almost impossible for a human spirit to enter the body of a living man or woman. The fundamental thing that you and everyone ought to know about the Spiritual Plane is that it is *not* a higher plane. It sits neither above nor below your world but parallel with it.”

“I don’t understand,” said Thäràc.

“That’s Ok. The Spiritual Plane is actually a sort of shadow; a distorted reflection. It would sound strange indeed to say that the earth has a soul, but that is probably the best way of putting it. Every form of life in the Spiritual Plane stems from the passing of a living creature on earth, including people. Likewise, it seems that the plane itself developed as a by-product of the chaotic formation of the earth. That is not to say that the Spiritual Plane is a *physical* entity; no physical object of any sort can be taken into it. It is made up of a material of its own. The two planes are not that different in nature. Once a soul has entered the Spiritual Plane he or she can usually remain undisturbed, for it is a peaceful, welcoming place, but it is not without its dangers. When the soul is ready he or she will reach a third world, the Ethereal Plane. That is where we are now. It is the ultimate goal of every spirit. In this place there is neither pain nor death, but absolute peace and beauty. With the exception of this chamber, no spirit has ever returned from this place. Through my promised bounty I will be the first, and almost certainly the last”

Thäràc took some time to take everything in.

“You said that there was no death here,” said Thäràc, “what exactly did you mean by that?”

“The spirit is not immortal. It can be destroyed just like the body, and once it is it is gone forever. It is the only true death. Every soul that has not ascended is vulnerable. Ascension is not easy to achieve, and for some it will take thousands and thousands of years. It stems from the accumulation of knowledge, wisdom and spiritual growth. Indeed the cardinal criterion is the absolute abolition of evil.”

“And the fourth plane?”

“The fourth plane is different from the other three in that it is completely and utterly uninhabited. It is the Plane of Power, the reservoir of all the power in the cosmos. Mages channel into it whenever they perform magic, and sometimes items are deposited and preserved there. There is little more to it than that.”

“Is it possible for a person to walk upon the Plane of Power?”

“No. A spirit cannot enter the plane under any circumstances. In that sense it is the opposite to the Spiritual Plane. That is not really important for us. What you must understand is the spirit itself, including the technical facts.”

“Technical?”

“The mechanics of the soul, pretty much all of which stem logically from one simple principle.”

“Which is?”

“That the spirit cannot handle or impede a physical object in any way. For example, a ghost cannot pick up a sword, unless somehow that sword has a spiritual component. If a ghost ever touches you let alone harms you in any way it is touching your soul not your body. For this reason ghosts are exceptionally dangerous entities. If you are slain in battle or killed by wild beasts, only your body is destroyed and your soul moves on. If however you die at the hands of a ghost or

demon then your soul itself is destroyed, and cannot be resurrected.”

The thought made Thäràc shudder. He had been unaware of the true consequences should he have been too slow and should Effa have found him. That his very soul would have been torn to pieces made him ever more grateful that he had made it. It was during this certain uneasiness that Thäràc came upon a question.

“If a spirit cannot interact with material then how does it walk the earth?”

“Now that is a good question. Firstly, realise that spirits, like material things, cannot bypass one another. In a dense crowd of souls, for example, one *would* find it difficult to move. Secondly, remember that the earth has a spirit of its own. Therefore, it is a ground to the dead as it is to the living. What is more, this spirit runs like a current through any solid object that rests on the earth, such as a wall or a bridge, for such objects are themselves ‘empty’ of spirit. But this current, naturally, cannot run through the living. A solitary soul, then, cannot pass through a wall any more than a body can. But throw a rock at one and it will hit nothing but air. The same goes for your sword, for the weapon is isolated from the current, and again does not interact with a soul. The only way to fight a ghost or demon is to use a spiritual weapon, or to grapple it with your bare hands. Of course it would be your spirit, not your hand, that touches it, and unless your opponent is particularly weak you will not have a very good chance. Once a spirit is freed from its vessel it becomes stronger and much more capable on its own. And one last thing to remember is that whenever two people interact physically it is always their bodies that are touching, never their spirits.”

“What about the Pa`räjí?” asked Thäràc.

Gerra paused briefly before answering.

“The Pa`räjí is the connection between the earth and all life. When that connection was broken, it sucked the strength out of the entire spiritual domain in both worlds. The effect reached even the cosmic depths of this world. How this happened is beyond even my understanding. But it has shown us for all time the true extent of the earth’s power, and the complete mystery of its nature. I understand that the Pa`räjí now rests on the ocean floor, and with my power you can reach it. Any other questions?”

“No,” said Thäràc, “I am ready.”

“Whenever you enter the water you will be able to breathe, and you will be able to swim faster than you have ever swam before. From now on your hunger will be slower to wear you down, and you will be able push yourself harder with little rest. Finally, I thank you for ridding the world of the White Beasts, and I hope you enjoy your reward. Your next destination is the sea. To the east of my palace is a river. Follow this, and it will terminate at a lake. Hidden within this lake is a passage that will lead you directly to the open water. Gâbríel should know the way. As long as you travel by water your journey will be swift. Now, your mission begins.”

These were the last of Gerra’s words. He stood up from his throne. Slowly he walked towards Thäràc. When he got about half way he suddenly exploded into what looked like a mass of stars. These stars were so bright that both he and the chair turned white. Yet once again they did not overwhelm him, and the blackness that surrounded him was still pure. Then they came up and began circling around him. They spun faster and faster as they started to close in on him. Finally, they collided into him. Instantly Thäràc felt a massive amount of energy surge through his body. At the same time the blackness around him gradually turned white. Eventually the energy surge intensified to the point that every muscle in

his body tensed up and he could not move. By the time he could see nothing but bright white light he was suffering an intense burning sensation and had begun screaming. Then suddenly, all in one instant, the pain stopped, the surge of energy ceased, the light was gone and he was standing back inside the palace. His hunger and exhaustion had returned, but were now insignificant. He felt stronger than he had ever felt before. Without wasting a second he ran outside the palace to meet Gâbríel who was standing just outside with Firefly.

“Well done,” she said.

“Thank you,” said Thäràc, “I can’t believe I actually...”

Before he could finish that sentence he was interrupted by a sudden bone-chilling scream that filled the air and echoed all around. It was not a scream of pain, but of the greatest rage. Nor was it human, but cold and bloodthirsty. Thäràc's face turned white in sheer horror. Gâbríel just gazed around looking for the source. It was difficult to tell when the scream stopped, because it was obscured by its own echoes. Then there was silence. After choking on this for a moment, Thäràc turned to Gâbríel.

“Was that...”

“Effa? Yes,” said Gâbríel, “he must not have been too far away.”

Chapter 16: To Dance into the Dark

Ever since Snapdrágon and Smoke had escaped from the great crater, through the passage built to drain the rainwater that would otherwise threaten all its inhabitants, they had been heading northwards. Days had passed, and now it was late in the afternoon. Smoke, as usual, seemed to find everything quite fun. Snapdrágon had never felt stranger. By the time he had stopped playing the lyre his entire life seemed to have disappeared before his eyes, though his memory seemed the same. His existence now lay in limbo, waiting for the conclusion to the episode which began when this strange girl came and swept him away. By now it was clear that she had more to show him. She had led him into utterly unknown territory, and he had a feeling that only she could lead him back out. He had no choice, then, but to follow his mysterious guide, and to do as she commanded, as she skipped along through the darkening woods.

“There it is!” she said suddenly.

Snapdrágon, peering deep into the distance, could make out some sort of stone work, something he was very used to seeing in this forest. As they came near, however, familiarity began to strike as Snapdrágon identified what could only be

understood as the outlines of tombstones. There was no clear line between the woods and the southern border of Gèth`semaní, a place where he and his nomad friends had once stayed in relative security.

By the time they had entered the cemetery, the sun was long gone, although the sky was still bright enough to make out the inscriptions on the tombstones. Although Snapdrágon recognized nothing, Smoke seemed very interested in some of the names. At one point she stopped in her trail to introduce her companion to an apparently unknown historical figure.

“When Gerra took to do away with his killers (that is, the ones we know as the White Beasts), he had a mark laid on them: the removal of their feathers. He could not do it himself (because he was DEAD), so he enlisted the help of a mage. Here before you lies the person who saw it done.”

Snapdrágon peered down at the grave; a very plain slab lacking even a date, just the name: ‘Spîalbig’. As he was gazing, he could hear his strange host continue down the path, which at that time was actually enough to capture his attention and incite him to follow her. Through the ever changing complex of graves; away from the open and the sight of sky; back into the forest. Smoke never looked back, even though such was good practice when traveling with Snapdrágon. She simply skipped ahead, leading him down a path that continued from the cemetery into the woods. These woods were dark, and the ground was rugged, so that he hardly noticed when he left the dirty stone pathway, which bent around to his right. Very soon, however, the tombstones at the end of the gradually descending path came into view. As Snapdrágon drew closer he realized that the stones were more like pillars; the height of humans; with no apparent burial spot; and arranged in a circle with a gap straight ahead through which Smoke skipped like a child entering a

playground. Warily, Snapdrágon followed, until he and Smoke were standing in a circle of upright stone slabs, about three yards in diameter.

Smoke was standing right in the centre. Snapdrágon watched nervously as he waited for Smoke's will to materialize. Gazing around, it seemed as though they were in a pit, for nothing could be seen in any direction but an upward slope. The slabs themselves were lacking inscription. The ground was as bare as the pathway. The trees had lost most of their color, and there was not enough daylight left to stream through the high branches. Smoke was standing unusually still with her back to Snapdrágon, standing right behind her. Then she spoke. Although Snapdrágon could hear her clearly, he could not understand. The words sounded like no tongue he had ever heard. It sounded about as long as a normal sentence, and then silence.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then Snapdrágon noticed a change in his peripheral vision. He turned to his right, and before him was what had to be a ghost. It was a woman. Her figure was vague yet distinct. Though some age was showing, her hair was of a rich blonde. She wore what looked like a ceremonial garb. Though it was Smoke who seemed acquainted with the woman, her gaze was fixed on Snapdrágon, who merely stood there staring back. Smoke turned to face the same way. Then, without warning, Snapdrágon felt what must have been Smoke's right hand gently but firmly grasp the back of his head. Before he could react, he saw her left hand come up to his face until he could see nothing. At the same time, he heard a much darker tone in Smoke's girlish voice as she whispered menacingly into his left ear with a slight cooing intonation.

"Time to close your eyes!"

That very moment, he felt his environment change. The feeling was inexplicable. Everything felt different, yet he

could not tell how. And now he was moving. Smoke was guiding his steps down what seemed like a straight path, one which should have been hampered by the ghostly woman, not to mention the stone pillar right behind her. For Snapdrágon, the covering of his eyes seemed only symbolic of how he had felt since he and Smoke left the crater; hardly any more strange or frightening. When they reached the end of whatever unknown path they were treading, Smoke released his sight.

The two were in a tunnel. They were facing one wall, about a room's length away, while the other stood right behind them, exactly where they seemed to have emerged. The tunnel was lit by wall mounted torches, and seemed to be carved out of a mountain. The ground was running with water, broken only by the many bulges that stuck out as though they were meant as stepping stones. The stream was running from right to left, down a fairly steep but steady slope. The walls and ceiling were infested with weed-like plantation, which hung down in places to the level of the water.

"Shall we?" said Smoke as she began skipping from bare rock to bare rock to the right. Snapdrágon followed, his slow pace drawing Smoke's reluctantly to an ordinary stepping pattern. The path before him rose like a hill, and was twisting around to the left. As they slowly spiraled upward, Snapdrágon detected movement. Smoke did not seem bothered. A snarl was heard, shortly before two wolves appeared from behind the bend. They went first to Smoke, found nothing of interest, and then confronted Snapdrágon, who was following closely behind. They took no further action, but merely followed them upstream. Only a single instance of clear vocal aggression took place, followed by the smirking tone of Smoke's voice:

"Good doggies."

Soon enough, amid the occasional grunts (which were followed from time to time by a high pitched giggle), the sound of falling water gradually came to their attention. By this time the passage was almost flat, but fluctuating swiftly from left to right. It was also narrower, reaching only five feet across. Smoke stopped, leaving her three companions in anticipation.

“I can hear it!”

After that the journey was free of incident. Though the wolves continued to stalk them, they caused no trouble, for their numbers were insufficient. Snapdrágon, thinking back to the fèn`rira at the crater, was not hugely concerned about them. In time, they came to a fork in the tunnel. It was not a division of their path, but rather an over looming ledge leading into a separate trail from which the water emerged and came down in a gushing waterfall. Smoke did not slow down. She kept moving straight up to the water and stepped through it as though it were nothing. Snapdrágon was having trouble with the rocks. They were too slippery to climb over quickly, and the wolves were making it harder. He was just about ready to try and force himself through when a small hand emerged abruptly from the curtain of water, grabbed his wrist, and yanked him through. He found himself on the other side with Smoke glaring down at him, this young girl who had just shown an astonishing amount of strength, for few men could have drawn him so forcefully. She said nothing, but rather turned and continued down the now dry tunnel.

Now she was picking up pace. Snapdrágon glanced over his shoulder, the wolves remained behind. This trail was a lot straighter than the last, and brighter. Indeed, while the torches were no longer present, it seemed as though the passage ahead was being illuminated by what could only be daylight. But only moments ago, back at the cemetery, it was

dark. Snapdrágon found this very strange. They proceeded with increased haste through the tunnel. Soon enough, the path began to rise considerably. It was the steepest turf yet, compelling Snapdrágon to embrace a climbing mentality, as he pushed his way towards being able to see further than a few feet before him. It was immediately beyond this that the two emerged into the open, in what appeared to be a semi-enclosed area. And it was clearly daytime.

Several yards from where they emerged was a sudden drop-off; the area was erratically uneven, and Smoke and Snapdrágon found themselves virtually climbing over a hill to get to the edge. The area itself was adorned with several of what looked like totem poles. Beyond the edge they could see a sort of canyon far below. Directly ahead some distance away was the opposite wall of the canyon. It appeared that the ground on which they stood was about halfway up. Having seen all this, Snapdrágon turned and looked back. Above and beyond the tunnel whence they had come the boundaries of rock stretched right back, as though the open area had been eaten out of the rock. Snapdrágon's gaze continued up till he could see the ceiling well over a hundred yards over their heads. It was then that he jumped in momentary panic when finally he noticed the gaping set of serpentine jaws, many yards above, almost directly over his head. The snake appeared to be made of brass. The jaws were pointing downward as though ready to lunge down at Snapdrágon and Smoke. The fangs were finely molded and appeared very sharp. At his angle, Snapdrágon could see little more.

The eagle perched on the other side of canyon, however, could see everything. The snake's head, although many times greater in size than the peculiar fellow and his young friend below, was just the tip of a colossal building. Its body was coiled around the bottom half, which became vaster as one

looked higher. On this bottom half alone, many tiny balconies and windows could be seen as though it were a city. Beyond this lower half, the remainder of the building was deeply embedded into the overlying rock, but with most of that side visible. With less windows and balconies, this half had more the appearance of a temple. Beyond all of this sat the late afternoon sun, shining over a vast landscape not easily recognizable as the Forest of Me`ridía.

Chapter 17: A Wonder of the Isles

The sun had just risen for the fourth time since Thäràc's departure from the Palace of Gerra, and he could feel he was now very close to the southern shores of Pán`gaia. Not once had he bothered to surface to check his surroundings. From the moment he entered the water he had forgotten all about the need for air, although he was, in fact, breathing, albeit through a completely different bodily system as instinctive and natural as his own. Thäràc had never been much of a swimmer, but there were several other things about the last few days that went explicitly against his entire history of swimming experience. For one thing, he felt not the slightest of cold. In fact, body temperature did not seem to matter any more. That was another thing; his body was not even there. It was Gerra's body that propelled him at a speed massively exceeding his own. However, this creature was not quite how he remembered the kingly figure he had just been introduced to. He had the same basic shape, true, but he was a lot darker than before. His eyes were glowing a bright orange, and his arms, wings and legs were surrounded by strange ribbon like tentacles that shifted and flickered about like a flame. They were transparent. Mostly it was the wings that

did the swimming, though it was clear that the tentacles played a role of their own. The other major difference was that he could see perfectly clearly as far as the opacity of the water allowed.

Thäràc did not have his weapons. He had left them behind with Gâbríel, along with Firefly. For a creature so strikingly similar to the sea horse, Firefly had absolutely no willingness to submerge, and they honestly were not sure what would become of the familiar. Gâbríel was to take off toward the south; whether flying overhead with his weapons in her powerful talons, or carrying them on foot he did not know. Perhaps she found it easy enough to take Firefly with her. Gâbríel was to wait for Thäràc at the southernmost shore of the continent, at a particular spot, of course, with which Thäràc was familiar. She had warned him that the ocean was a perilous place, with creatures far greater than those on land, and left him with the sole piece of information that would lead him to the Pa`räjí: “follow the light and you will find the life.”

Eventually, the time came when in the relatively short visible distance he could see an abrupt end to his river journey, in the form of a waterfall. For a brief, stupid moment, he figured it proper to simply let himself be taken down with the water. Then, natural sense struck and he came to a halt, impressively considering his speed. He surfaced. His human head looked around and could see flat land, and so he went back down and then shot up out of the water, landing in a somersault on the grass. He stood up. He stepped over to the edge and gazed down. The waterfall was only about two stories high, but with a distinguished mass of rocks at the bottom.

Before him lay a wide lake. It was immediately obvious that the water level was below normal, for all around the perimeter was a rocky wall reaching about the height of

where he stood. Sizable spots of bare ground could be seen. Of course, Thäràc knew that somewhere there had to be a draining spot to prevent the lake from filling. Not far from the centre of the lake, again at his level, was a wooden pier standing high over water on thick stumps. It did not run straight, but meandered its way to about the nearest shore, suggesting that the builders had taken advantage of a high rising ridge under the water. This was not the only man made object in sight. Behind Thäràc, and surrounding much of the north-western side of the lake, was a village, much of it built very near the shore. It was there, towards the north, that Thäràc could see a safe entry point into the water. Thinking nothing of bypassing the village and its inhabitants, he made his way around, stepped into the water, and searched around the lake for the alleged exit. It was indeed well hidden, beyond what looked like a dead-end ditch, but was actually a narrow passage disguised by consistent texture on the rocks.

There was no point where the lake clearly ended and the tunnel began, but soon enough he found himself (or Gerra's-self as it were) gliding through a remarkably straight tunnel, with only a few bends, and no intersections. The one thing he did notice was that he travelled not only southward, but down as well. He could well feel the pressure as the trail descended, but it seemed to have no effect. It took seemingly no time before he reached the vastness of the open sea.

At the entry point, Thäràc could see nothing but blue. He travelled out further, discovering in the process that Gerra also had a sixth sense for direction. Gâbríel had suggested in some forgotten context that the Pa`răjí was probably was not too far from Pán`gaia, and he knew from his own bitter experience that it was to be found in the south. But she had given far more important advice: 'follow the light and you

will find the life.’ After giving that some thought, he decided that the best thing to do would be to wait until nightfall before making a move. And so he did. As the hours passed his vision seemed to be playing tricks on him. He began ‘seeing’ what he thought was a sign of light in both directions. But when evening came, it became clear that the colour of the water had changed. No longer did it appear purely blue, but toward the east, Thäràc – perhaps at the benefit of Gerra’s sight – could see the most subtle transition from blue to green. However, he was still not certain. Hours continued to pass, until finally, when the colour of the sea faded to black, the faint but persisting green glow coming from the east became manifest. And so, that was the direction he went. That entire night he spent swimming without rest, stopping only to feed on the fish and occasionally other forms of wildlife. Sometimes the threat of a shark or worse would prompt him to take off again quickly. This was life in the sea, and that night offered little more to mention.

Then came daylight, and with it went away the glow, leaving him once again in infinite blue. The day was uneventful until the afternoon. In the distance ahead of him, Thäràc began to detect movement. As he tried to make out what it was, he found himself distracted by more activity, this time coming from below. When he gazed downward, he witnessed a marvel. Below in the deep blue he could just make out what appeared to be a school of creatures. They were ascending. As they came closer Thäràc decided to move out of the way, as they were directly beneath him. Then he watched as they passed his altitude. The creatures were a wondrous sight. Their torsos were shaped like those of deer, were rather plain and were curved backwards. They had no limbs attached except for pairs of winglike fins, which were attached to their backs about two thirds of the way up their torsos, and were about the same length. They were much like

dragon wings in appearance. Their heads were very small, but with very long pointy beaks. Finally, they had very long thin tails; about two to three times their body length. The school of the creatures was vast. To Thäràc's left and to his right, above and below they could be seen slowly rising toward the surface way up above. None of them seemed to take any notice of him. He had no idea what they were, what they were doing or how they lived, but the sight of them slowly ascending one above the other as far as his eyes could see was beautiful.

It was so beautiful, in fact, that Thäràc was almost caught off guard, for he turned around just in time to see a colossal figure fast approaching. It was like a whale, only much larger, and had long fins all over its surface. Then, the whale resemblance disappeared completely when its mouth opened, revealing a set of jaws like the opening of cave, and teeth that looked like they could pierce the wall. It happened to be about level with Thäràc, and was closing in fast. He dove as fast as he could, just barely missing the great slaughter of the creatures in the vicinity. In a panic, he did not stop. He sped down and out of the school and was quite distant when he dared turn to look back. The first bite was just the beginning. The monster continued stalking the prey as they rapidly scattered, taking in dozens at a time.

Thäràc was anxious to distance himself from the creature as much as possible, and so his navigation began to falter. Though he did not realise it, the encounter had steered him off-course so much that, when evening came, he would not otherwise have spotted a speck of yellow light deep in the distance. It was way below his altitude. Soon, he began to notice other specks around it. As he drew closer he realised that the lights were flickering; almost like fire. At about the same time certain shapes began developing around them. As he continued to approach the lights he discovered that each

one was housed on a piece of land. These pieces of land were like islands floating in the deep. They were flat at the top, and were shaped much like cones with points at the bottom. Soon, more distant islands came into view, but the big discovery came when he found, to his amazement, that the lights *were* fire. Each fire had people sitting around it, and each island was adorned with around a dozen houses. The islands were connected to each other by bridges and staircases.

Thäràc approached one of the lower islands. As he drew near the people turned their heads in his direction. Eventually, he landed at the edge of the island. He proceeded to walk forward. After just two steps he found himself passing through a strange barrier. By the time he reached the other side he realised that he was no longer standing in water, but in air. He no longer had the appearance of Gerra, but was himself again. He looked around, and found that the surface on which he stood lay within a great dome of air. The people circled around the fire looked curious. They also looked strange. Their hair was very long, reaching down to about the middles of their backs, and was blonde. Their clothes were different too. They were mostly green and seemed to be made out of materials that Thäràc was not familiar with. One of them yelled out.

“Hello, can we help you?”

“My name is Thäràc, I have just discovered this place.”

“Care to join us?” asked another. They both had a highly unusual but very familiar tone in their voices. Thäràc accepted. As he approached the people he discovered something that shocked him: some of them were laughing. When was the last time he heard that? More surprises followed. When he reached them he found that some had smiles on their faces; he found that the people were actively speaking to each other; and he found other, more subtle,

symptoms of life. Thäràc was so delighted that he asked no questions; he just sat down with them and chatted away before a fire fuelled by some unknown substance. Both the fire and the conversations lasted throughout the evening, right up until it was time to sleep. One by one the people retired to their houses, which seemed to be made of some sort of clay. Thäràc saw the last of them retire, and then the last lights go out. The next thing he saw was daylight, as delivered by the colour of the open sea. Oddly enough, his more immediate surroundings were quite well illuminated. He was not sure if this was a natural effect or a magical enhancement. Then he saw people come out again, and go fishing for breakfast. This amounted to little more than dashing into the wall of water and coming back later with fish and other marine wildlife skewed on their harpoons, being clearly good at holding their breaths. Thäràc might have joined them, had he not been approached by one of the more senior members of the village.

“I have a friend who would like to speak to you,” he said, “please come with me.”

Minutes later Thäràc was climbing a staircase between two islands, alongside his host. The line dividing the water and the air was arch shaped from the stairs, which were wide enough for two to walk abreast. As he climbed the stairs Thäràc was running his hand through the wall of water beside him. Looking through the water it was not his own hand that he could see, but Gerra's. He watched as the ribbon like tentacles surrounding it flickered backwards as it tore through the water. While he did actually prefer to walk than swim, he could not help but wonder why on earth these people had bothered with building stairs in the first place, since it would seem to take so little effort for these people to swim from one island to another. Perhaps it was safer, which made sense considering the obvious disadvantage of any

oceanic predator who happened to slip straight into the tunnel of air.

“It just so happens that my friend is also a visitor, albeit a long term one,” said the escort, “when I spoke to him this morning I thought it necessary to mention that another had arrived. For some reason he seemed... astonished at the news. I understand it has been a long time indeed, but really, I don’t see the big deal.”

Thäràc continued to follow the man through several different islands connected by bridges and stairs. On reaching the guest house Thäràc’s guide knocked on the door. In a short time the door was opened by an old woman. The old woman just smiled and disappeared again. After a brief moment an old man appeared before them. For a brief moment he just stood there smiling while his visitor eyed him over with suspicion. Then Thäràc was knocked back with a rush of amazement when he realised who it was.

“Tôbit!!”

“Hello,” he said, smiling pleasantly, “You must be Thäràc.”

The man’s smile erupted into outright laughter as he embraced the child he knew. Over Thäràc’s shoulder Tôbit nodded to his friend, who nodded back before departing.

Moments later, the two were sitting in a plain but comfortable living room. Thäràc was sipping tea as his old friend prepared his own.

“It is a little salty I know,” said Tôbit, “their filters do the job, but they are far from thorough. That woman you met by the way is my wife. Anyway, now that we are done with the light chat...”

Still grinning, he came with his own tea and sat across the table from Thäràc.

“You must be wondering how we survived,” Tôbit began, and then eyed his guest with a sort of playful suspicion, “indeed, I find your survival as something of a marvel myself.”

“So you are aware of it?” said Thäràc.

“Well *I* am,” replied Tôbit, sipping his tea, “I have not told the others; not even my wife. You see I am the only person who has left this place since it happened. I left shortly afterward, I discovered the truth, and I remained silent. As far as the rest are concerned, the only thing in the world that has been different since the event is the fact that people no longer grow, age or die. And that does frighten them sometimes, but they have happy lives, and so it comes as a blessing, except of course for those wishing for parent hood.”

“You were here when it happened?”

“Sure thing. I left our village a dozen years prior, as you should recall. How I ended up here is a long story indeed. And do not ask me where this place came from, I haven’t the foggiest idea.”

“What exactly did happen?” asked Thäràc, “here I mean, during the Turning?”

“Is that what you call it? Well, not much. All we noticed here was the great star that soared overhead. It must have been great because of the fact that we were able to see it from this depth. We watched as it plunged into the sea and then disappeared, leaving nothing but the faint green glow, which we still see at night. That is pretty much all I can tell you about us. Of course, it is you that I am interested in. So what is your story?”

Thäràc explained everything. As he did so, Tôbit sat there listening with remarkable interest, and friendly eye contact, in much the same way as he had listened to a rambling thirteen-year-old over a century earlier. Thäràc, for that

matter, felt no less like a child, with no less reverence. When he finished speaking he was left with the impression that his host had not missed a single detail.

“How was your father?” asked Tôbit.

“Before it happened? Perfectly well.”

Noting a hint of sorrow in his guest, Tôbit decided to change the subject.

“My friend tells me you were sitting outside like a statue all night.”

“Yes,” said Thäràc with a smile, “I guess I did.”

“You were happy, weren’t you?”

Thäràc was silent.

“He also said that when they first saw you they thought you were a monster. Would you step back into the water for me? I would like to see it for myself if you don't mind.”

Thäràc agreed, so they went outside, forgetting all about their tea. They approached the wall of the great dome of ocean. Tôbit stood and watched as Thäràc stepped through, and then turned around to face him. Tôbit stepped right up and marvelled at the mighty shape of Gerra, a creature he had read so much about. Though he could have stared for hours, he contented himself with minutes before gesturing to Thäràc to return. Thäràc stepped out, and together they just strolled about the island, where the conversation continued.

“So you felt a great sting in your eye after witnessing the great star?” said Tôbit, looking straight ahead as they walked.

“That's right,” said Thäràc.

“After all these years I could never conceptualise that the great star was the Pa`räjí. But I was able to reason that it did have something to do with our survival. Now I can reason

that bits and pieces of the life must have broken off and fallen into us. Exactly when and in what manner they did so I cannot say. Perhaps they fell straight from above. Perhaps they were scattered when the great star hit the water. Perhaps it happened as it sank, or even when it hit the floor. But in your case I think I can say exactly what happened. I think that when the Pa`räji flew overhead a piece of it must have broken off and fallen straight into your eye. That was the sting you felt, and that was what kept you completely alive.”

Thäràc felt a mix of things, but most dominantly, he could not help but feel a little bit dim. What was suddenly so clear had managed not to dawn on him alone after all the time he had been given to think about it. However, perhaps he was being a little hard on himself. After all, when was the last time he had remembered the episode and not taken pains to get it off his mind again? But what about Gâbríel? Surely she must have seen it. She must have figured it out, with her apparent intelligence and wisdom. Why did she not tell him? Or maybe the terrible sting that Thäràc had felt on that night was hidden from her view. Indeed, she could not see everything, as had been demonstrated, and he did not recall her mentioning it.

“We have spoken enough. You must go now, and complete your task. But before you do I have something for you.”

Tôbit reached his hand into a pocket on his top and pulled out a candle.

“I found this on my travels,” he said, “it’s magic.”

With some strange contraption that Thäràc had never seen before he lit the candle. Thäràc stared into the flame. There was something wondrous and mystical about it, and he found it difficult to take his eyes off.

“This candle is a mystery to me. I cannot figure out what it was made for or what it can do. But I have made three... well actually four observations. First of all it will never burn out. I once had it burning perpetually in my living room, but it started to give me and my wife headaches so I had to put it out. I suggest you do the same. Do not leave it on for too long. The other two things I discovered I need not tell you when I can show you instead.”

At this point they were still reasonably close to the wall of water. They approached the wall, and when they reached it Tôbit held up the still burning candle in his left hand. He put it through the wall and held it there in the water. The candle continued to burn as though it were in the air. Thäràc was astonished. Tôbit pulled the candle back out.

“And finally,” he said, and then he put his finger in the flame and held it there for about four seconds.

“It does not burn,” he concluded, “it won't burn anything. Quite frankly it is of little practical use to a man like me. If anyone can discover its true value, it's you. Take it. And now, I am afraid you must be heading off.”

Tôbit killed the flame between his thumb and forefinger. Then, as he handed it to Thäràc he smiled.

“I know you want to stay, but you have a job to do my boy. And if you pull it off, I promise we will meet again.”

Thäràc took the candle, put it in his pocket and tied it shut. Then the two embraced once more. Having said goodbye, Thäràc turned to the nearest wall of water, ran straight into the sea, and swam away. Tôbit gazed out until his old friend was out of sight. Then he turned away and shook his head with a smile. Thäràc had not changed.

Chapter 18: The Shadow behind the Light

The green glow was no longer only visible during the night. Soon after Thäràc had left the isles, the light could be seen at any time without effort. He knew he was now close. As the light of the sky above grew greater towards midday, the light below, which should have grown fainter, also became more pronounced; even more so than on the first night. It must have been the early afternoon when finally he could make out the brightest spot on the ocean floor. He was just beginning to think about descending when he was hit by a sudden flash of intense light from the core of the glow. From that point he did not need to think before heading down to follow it. In fact, he ceased to think altogether.

It was a great descent. Above him the light from the sun faded away into total darkness as he neared the ocean floor. Yet, the glowing world beneath him seemed not to get brighter, but remained much the same as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. What really surprised him was what he found at the bottom. Standing on the ocean floor was an entanglement of natural stone structures in the

shapes of arches and various other curves. Some of them stood almost like great pillars, which bent and forked into intricate net like webs. In fact, from above the whole thing did resemble a spider web, lacking symmetry like that of a black widow. Thäràc was mystified. He was witnessing one of the many secrets of the earth. This was the region where it was said no ordinary form of life could survive. He descended through a wide, roughly pentagonal space within a ring of rock. Finally, he hit the ground about eight yards below.

He found himself surrounded by pillar-like stone structures. In a short time he was able to determine where the light was coming from. He found that he could walk across the ocean floor as though it were land. He walked beneath twisted and irregular arches; most of them about two or three times his height. It took several minutes of walking with great anticipation before the moment finally came when he caught a second direct glimpse of the light's source. When he did he was suddenly entranced. Behind the forest of twisted pillars it flashed in and out of view as he drew closer. Each time it caught his sight everything else in vision and mind became insignificant. Each time it was obscured he longed to see it again. Gradually, the light grew more and more constant until finally no object stood between Thäràc and the Pa`räjí.

At that moment, nothing else existed. He approached it slowly. It was not an act of will. Rather, it was more like gravity. When it was finally within arms reach, Thäràc took to collect it. As his hand drew near, he was replete with a sensation of unimaginable love. This ended when he touched it. The instant that the tip of his finger made contact with the life it exploded into thousands of pieces, sending him forcefully straight to the floor on his back. For a moment he just lay there and watched the galaxy of

heavenly specks spiral above him. Despite his euphoria, he now felt uneasy at the same time. He got back on his feet. He looked up at the now pale specks as they continued to spiral over his head. Something was changing. The pieces seemed to be coming together. Thäràc did not know what to make of it. He was not sure whether or not he should stand back. He did not actually have to decide because the mass moved away from him. He had nothing to do but watch as the cloud like cluster of life became denser... and denser... until finally it was once again a singularity.

But as Thäràc started to approach it, he saw something that took away his love and replaced it with fear. The piercing green glow of the life began to fade into a pale white. From this orb of ghostly light two black tentacles began to emerge. The tentacles were skeletal in appearance; much like spines, except they were a very dark grey. The tentacles continued to come out until they were about 5 feet long. At the same time, three more tentacles began to appear, this time looping back to the orb. The tentacles did not appear to be connected to the orb, but were entangled behind it. Before Thäràc could figure out what to do the entity, consisting of the orb and the tentacles, lunged itself towards him.

All of a sudden, he was caught in its tentacles. He struggled with all his might, or rather, the might of Gerra. As he struggled he found himself being lifted off the ground. Before it could lift him about a yard high he broke free. He swam away as far and fast as he could, trying to find some sort of vantage point, but he barely reached a dozen yards. Once again it caught him; and once again he found himself struggling to break free from its grasp. As he struggled he began to notice tiny specks of matter were being sucked into the ethereal core. Then, to his horror, he began to feel the suction himself. The force grew until he

was unable to resist. Although his strength had not yet waned, he drew closer to the desirable, yet threatening sphere. And closer. His heart was racing. At the last moment in all his fear he had an idea. In his right hand he held one of the tentacles. About a foot and a half of the tentacle extended from his hand, much like a short sword. Without wasting any time he thrust the tentacle into the core. All of a sudden he was free, at least from the tentacles. With his wings he swam well away, breaking free of the suction, and watched as the thing struggled frantically to pull the tentacle back out from its own trap.

Slowly but surely it succeeded. Thäràc prepared himself. When the parasitic creature was free from its host, its tentacles all started pointing in his direction. Intimidated, he started stepping back. The creature started looking very agitated. All of a sudden it charged at lightning speed. Thäràc seemed to have no say in what happened next. To him, the whole thing was a blur. When the life form reached him, he grabbed it not only with both arms, but also with Gerra's own tentacle-like extensions. Then, with a single effort he bent back, tossing the parasite over him; sending it crashing into an arch. And what Thäràc did not even realise was that right afterward, he spun around and literally whipped it with the single long tentacle that had suddenly extended from his left wrist. He then stood facing the creature, only this time with two great whips, one stemming from each arm.

Without wasting an opportune moment, Thäràc swung his left whip from right to left; then his right whip. Both swings struck the dark, spine-like tentacles cutting them clean off. The severed tentacles spread out for a moment and then came back to the creature, reattaching themselves. Disappointed, he swung again from left to right. This time only one whip hit, and once again the

severed tentacle was attracted back and mended. Thäràc decided to try it one more time. He swung, and as he did so the creature ducked below the whip, and then without warning it dashed at him. This time, Thäràc's reflexes were not so sharp. Rather than tackling him directly, however, the creature brushed past him. As it did, he felt as though he was being badly cut. Though what he received was a sharp blow, in the heat of the moment it meant little. He spun around to face the enemy.

Aware of its keen dexterity, he simultaneously swung his whips inward, then outward, then inward again. After succeeding in confusing it with the first two swings, the third stuck his target: the core. This seemed to stun it. Without hesitation Thäràc raised both hands together in the air and with one great swing he struck it again with both whips as one. This sent the parasite into a frenzy. It darted about sideways, up, down and then forward, towards its foe. It did not charge. Instead, it just faced off with him. As Thäràc kept his gaze fixed on the enemy he noticed something strange happening around him. Faintly but definitely, he could see walls starting to appear before him. Also, not far above him was a ceiling. He did not let this distract him. Actually, although he had no idea how he was able to tell, the parasite seemed to be badly distracted. Thäràc wasted no time. In the same manner as before, he swung both whips as one, diagonally through the ghostly orb. Then he swung diagonally the other way, this time in two individual strikes. It was during the second of these that he happened to be watching the wall in the background. He discovered that the exact moment he had hit the creature, the wall had become fuller and less transparent. It was then clear that there were also walls on the sides; they looked longer. The walls looked like stonework; quite bland, but not bare.

Of more immediate importance, however, was the fact that the parasite itself had become shockingly agitated. Thäràc started stepping back, as he watched the spine-like tentacles extend further out. Then, to his trepidation, more began to appear. All of a sudden there were many more loops and the sizes between them varied far more; some were as large as nine feet or so in diameter. Others were less than one. Some of them began rotating around the core. All this was driving Thäràc backward in near panic, until he bumped into a wall behind him. He did not have to look, he knew it was there. He appeared to be trapped in this long chamber; roughly twenty or so yards long, seven across. He stood in one end; the creature was in the middle. If he even had time to look around for a possible door, it would have helped. The enemy was not done changing. Its original two arms had tripled in length, and two more shorter ones were growing. Before Thäràc could react to this, a fifth started rising straight up from the core. This one, while not the longest, was far thicker, and had a dreadful looking blade at its tip.

Thäràc chose not to let it have the first move. He swung at it. He did succeed in hitting the core, but at that instant a tentacle grabbed the whip. As that happened, all of the tentacles flashed completely black. Thäràc, given no time to ponder that strange reaction, was abruptly slammed onto the ceiling right next to the enemy. From there he could only see the blade tipped tentacle. Not having to think, he instinctively drew his left whip almost entirely back into his wrist. He used it like a sword and slashed through the tentacle, temporarily detaching the blade. Before it could mend he swung vigorously at the core. Instead of releasing him, the parasite grabbed this whip as well, pulling him right in front of it. Thäràc readied himself to be cut to pieces by the blade that was just mending back onto its stem. The blade came. But far from being diced, he

realised that the ghostly ribbon like protrusions from Gerra's back had seized the weapon with incredible strength. The two were stuck in an intense grapple. As they struggled, more and more arms and loops began to embrace him. Again, they were flashing black almost randomly. Its grasp was quickly becoming overwhelmingly tight. Ending a test of strength that he thought he was losing, Thäràc suddenly ripped the tentacles completely apart. Just as it was starting to regenerate itself, he thrust what he had previously thought of as a whip straight into the core, sending it back and pinning it against the far wall like a long spear. With the other one he swung wildly, both attacking the core and cutting off the tentacles as they continuously reattached themselves. It was like a spider under a needle that just would not die.

While he was doing this he noticed for the second time a peculiar disturbance in his surroundings. He was swinging so furiously that the whip was going straight through the walls. Not only were cracks forming, but each time he struck, the entire room flashed a brief but bright white. And, more to his interest, the parasitic fiend reacted with what looked like violent fits of agony. Thäràc went nuts. He whipped the room repeatedly. He got so worked up, however, that he forgot about his duty of keeping the enemy itself helpless. Soon enough some of the tentacles grew back until they were sufficient to break his pin. His strange frenzy was broken by a knock that sent him back to just short of the opposite wall. He knew not that his last swing had again severed the blade that was potentially about to finish him.

He had also completely forgotten the fact that he was actually under water. Remembering this at just the right time he recovered by launching himself across the room before the parasite could reach him. He was now at a face

off. This did not stop him from continuing to hammer away at walls around him. The thing charged. This time Thäràc was ready. He cut through the tentacles like grass. At the same time he struck the core, stunning it. Once he had permanently established the sequence of simultaneously stunning it, disarming it, and hacking at its truly bizarre weak-point the battle was won. The walls broke into pieces. The ghostly pale white glow had become black. The tentacles were reduced to tattered threads. Thäràc did not stop until there was nothing left to destroy. When he was done he watched with a curious pity as the creature died. After reaching around, as if looking for something, the tentacles turned to ash. The dark remains of what had consumed the Pa`räjì retreated, uncovering once again the mystical green glow that illuminated the ocean floor.

As Thäràc had just been virtually possessed in the heat of battle, so was he completely out of his own dominion as he approached the Pa`räjì. Once again he reached out to touch it, only this time it let him. That was the beginning of its journey home; rising from the depths of nothingness in the hands of the strange creature obeying its command; ascending through the vastness of the world beyond land; rising toward the light of its dearest friend the sun, before passing swiftly from the water into the air, and from a pair of human hands into the talons of a raven. The Pa`räjì then travelled over the last great forest that ever stood on the land of Pán`gaia and then down into the place called Treecastle, where its presence drew its master Guardian from the most impossible of slumbers, to embrace and release it. Its next destination was not somewhere but everywhere; not to become part of the forest but that the forest never existed without it; no longer the possession of any of its creatures but the infinite sustenance of all things; no longer to be found, but merely to be.

Chapter 19: An Evening to Never Forget

It had been over three years since Thäràc had restored the earth to a state of livelihood. Although it was not a strictly kept secret that he was the saviour, he tried to keep a low profile. He wished only to live as he had in his early years. Now, however, he was living in the fruits of a victory whose worth would outlive him a thousand times over. Far more importantly, he was now sharing his life with a woman he loved more than he could grasp: Cära. After his duty was fulfilled, Thäràc had made a pilgrimage to the village where Cära lived. When they first met, it took a while for her to recognise him. When she finally figured it out she was so ecstatic that she almost knocked him down when she flung into his arms. The next few hours were like a dream; the following days like a reverie. Once he learned how to separate himself from her for a time, he was content with a reality which, after a hundred years of bleak solitude, had been forgotten for too long. The following autumn they had moved together to a town in the south-east of Me`ridía called Southlake. As it happens, it was the very same town that Thäràc had found around the lake through which he had entered the sea during his quest. He had not forgotten it, and

decided that he would be quite happy in such a place. He built himself and Cära a house there.

It was now early in spring, about two and a half years later. It was late in the evening. Thäràc was taking a walk down a path that ran through most of the town. There was still a little sun left. Cära was staying with a friend. She had been getting agitated at her recent lack of contact with many of her friends and was in the process of making up for it. Cära was funny sometimes. She would express a strong desire to be with Thäràc one day and then turn completely away the next. He often found himself having to develop strategies to accommodate her whims. In fact, for this reason they really did take a little while to create a serious companionship. When they first started it was wonderful. She was still overwhelmed by the sudden return of her childhood mate. Eventually, however, she became very stiff.

Somewhat disturbed, Thäràc did what he would later judge as the best thing he could have done when the early relationship went stale: he took a break and visited his parents. This was also a joyous time. Thäràc's father was, naturally, the first person he told about what he had done. As proud as the man was he was also rather pleased with his former pupils somewhat improved handling of weapons, despite his having lost the weapon originally given to him. For a good teacher little is more satisfying than having been surpassed by his or her own student; and Thäràc gave him that satisfaction times over. His mother, though sadly not half as influential, was still as joyous as a woman could be. After the visit he did not see them again for some time.

On return his relationship with Cära deepened significantly. At that time it was still the greatest difficulty that while Thäràc only ever wanted to be with her, she insisted on splitting her time between her various friends. While Thäràc did have friends of his own (*very* few people

did not) he had been alone for over a century, and had not built the sort of relationships that she had, having lived in the same place since childhood. Sometimes it brought him to tears, but Cära was understanding. The compromise was that the time they did spend together was as wholesome as they could make it. Thäràc had always been a traveller, while Cära was fairly domesticated. Nevertheless, she was happy to let him take her wherever he pleased. This was pivotal as their life at home was often a bit stagnant at that time. Thäràc, however, never took her to the dangerous places; they went instead to many wonderful areas where they could share the world in all its restored glory. The world was their playground. It was infinite and ever gracious. At times they felt as though it had been built just for them.

It was getting late and Thäràc was stepping onto the familiar pier that stretched out almost to the centre of the lake. Years back, on Thäràc's first visit, the water level had suffered about two stories of decline, such that some of its floor was visible. Now the rightful volume of water was almost completely restored, with the silent shining surface not a yard below his feet. This was his favourite place; his thinking place. He would come particularly often whenever Cära was away.

Cära's mother was not well. She was actually in a very fragile state. The task of comforting her was the father's alone, and so he barely had any time for her daughter. While their neighbours were more than happy to help they could not do what he could. Cära had been behaving rather strangely because of it; in ways that scared him, and sometimes drove him crazy. She would remain silent at the dinner table, something that Thäràc had had enough of long before they got together. He had been traumatised by what had since been referred to so uneasily by the people as 'The Turning', a fact that actually caused Cära more difficulty than

her circumstances caused him. It took a lot of work to keep things from breaking down. Neither had really been given any rest. This was the price of love.

The particular alignment of shallow water below was such that the pier was not straight, but twisting about with mostly square turns. At the end (which was a fair walk from the land) was the main fishing spot. When Thäràc had settled down with Cära he pursued a career in carpentry. This went well at first, and his skills were recognised, but unfortunately the demand was never high, and he was not the only one who so enjoyed the work. It was later that he decided to take up fishing. Thäràc had remained a hunter, and hunted more the less he could work. This, along with some vegetables and fruits he collected actually made up most of his and Cära's food, despite their settled residence. But as it happened, fishing turned out to fill his time rather well, and the village restaurant was as much his benefactor as his own diet. It was not as enjoyable as building, but he found it ultimately more rewarding than his normal hunting. Perhaps it was because he was still learning, while no living human he knew of could even approach his degree of hunting experience. He wished it were not the case. Cära, like much of the population, was voluntarily part of the agriculture pool. Sometimes Thäràc joined her.

The fishing spot was big enough to accommodate a full sized house, but tonight Thäràc was the only one out. He was facing towards the north; to the left of the platform. The sun was history, and the full moon was the main source of light; together with the stars and the lanterns that burned brightly throughout town. Beyond the north side of the lake, Thäràc stared into the flickering lights of distant houses that stretched almost all the way from the centre of his view to the end of the water to the left. There was something enchanting about them, as they vibrated and blurred before

his eyes whose mind knew that each tiny dot was another place where people occupied themselves in different activities he could only try and imagine. They were like stars in the sky, each one a unique world, begging him to reach out and touch it. More so than even the stars, these lights, each one standing for other peoples' dreams and adventures, really spoke to Thäràc the awesome vastness of reality. The moon was a fair way up in the East, and in the complete absence of any clouds whatsoever it dominated the sky. Its light danced upon the fairly still water, faintly illuminated the wall-like shoreline, and well lit the houses to the west. It was a sight that Thäràc would remember for the rest of his life.

He was still contemplating the lights in the north when the moonlight on the water began to darken. From the corner of his eye it was clear that the houses nearby had also lost their colour. Instinctively, but with great apprehension, he turned to observe the moon. It had become more pale, and now everything else looked as though a dull shadow had fallen upon them. Thäràc was paralysed with dread as his vision remained fixated on the changing white circle in the sky. A black spot then appeared, not right in the centre of the moon but slightly off. Seconds passed, and then it grew. He watched with horror as black cracks started spreading from the cesspool near the centre. These spread out until they consumed almost half of the moon. In the streets people were accumulating outside and watching with the same sense of terror. Many of them made it outside just in time to see the pale grey between the cracks begin filling up with a fiery red substance that both burned like lava and spilled like blood. Its light was draped over the water and the town as a red haze. The same haze had fallen upon Snapdrágon whose attention was then drawn to the bleeding moon from the Forest of Me`ridía. He called out to the others as he found a

spot where it could be seen clearly. First next to him, holding a very young offspring in her arms, was Cí.

“What’s happening?” she asked him with a frightened, broken voice.

“I don’t know,” he replied solemnly.

Suddenly, Cí screamed as the infected half of the moon began to melt. The child just looked with curiosity. Far away, in the very east of the forest, the Guardian stood on a lookout at the tip of the very highest branch of Treecastle, where Gâbríel had summoned him. He looked upon the omen not with horror but with apprehension. Miles over his head, the raven hovered where she could best watch as the moon continued to melt, bleeding fire into the black sky. Eventually, the proportion of sky consumed by this plague was five times the size that the moon had been. The remaining half, which up until then had been largely unaffected, turned black. Thäràc was still frozen on the same wooden platform for some unknown amount of time until he heard something that he had hoped he would never have to listen to in his life.

“Thäràc!!” a terrified Cära yelled as she ran towards him. He did not move from that spot; she came to him. They embraced. Neither said a word. They just stared at the now static object that now scarred the sky. Although Thäràc could not make out any motion, he could sense somehow that the moon’s tattered corpse was still burning.

PART II: THE THIRD WAR

Chapter 1: The Retribution of Gerra

How well can a simple community cope when one of the most supposedly permanent, unchanging and superior elements in all observation has been bled? The fever of intense anxiety that smothered Southlake over the next few weeks was not atypical. And what observation could be made of the moon's corpse? That while the blackened remains had since appeared to continue its orbit, the horror inspiring blood-fire had not moved, but stayed in the same place night after day after night. It felt as though Thäràc's home town was approaching breakdown. All of the important activity, such as food production, continued, but only with bitter reluctance. Some, (mainly indoor labourers), actually worked themselves much harder; anything to get their minds off of what had just happened.

Thäràc spent most of his time refreshing his fighting skills. He was not really scared; he was replete with rage that after so many decades of misery his life, which he had never been ungrateful for, might be taken from him a second time after so few years. He was so ready to defend it to the death that he was really scaring Cära, who was frightened enough as it was. Her man had slain the White Beasts of Me`ridía, stood before Ithamä, and fought the most alien of creatures in the

most alien of places, and all of that was before they had met. The only Thäràc she knew was a hunter, and an otherwise gentle man. She did not want him to be a hero any more than he did. But he felt he had no choice. He was ready to plunge himself into the darkest shadow and face whatever was behind this, even though he had a very good idea what it was.

Cära was not so eager. She could not continue working on the field or even get her share of the housework done. Her nights with Thäràc were so tense that he could no longer look at her. She spent most of her time in the evenings shut off in their bedroom with windows completely covered because she was too afraid to see let alone sleep in the red glow still emanating from the scar in the sky. Like many others she opted to stay inside all day where it was not in plain sight to constantly remind her of it. But there was no escaping from the signs. The worst thing was that nobody knew how anything could possibly be normal again, and the only possible answer to their fear was for the reality behind the aberration to manifest itself. And that was something that nobody wanted to think about. The people were trapped, and only fate had the power to release them. But did it have the mercy?

It was now a little over two weeks since the last peaceful breath. Again it was the evening, at sunset. The stress seemed to have mellowed a little. Cära was at the northern end of town, facing the northern horizon. To her left, the sun was declining. To her right, the blood-fire remained unmoveable. Was the sun giving up or did it simply not care? She had just taken, for the first time, a good long look at the aberration. The effect was positive. Fear no longer overwhelmed her, and cowardice was in the process of giving way to a sort of spirited defiance, and this testified by the fact that she was actually enjoying the sunset which, despite the

sun's apparent refusal to intervene, seemed to be whispering hope into her ear.

She was still listening to it when something in the north met her eye. At first it looked like a swarm of ants beginning to spill out from behind the distant hills. Then there was the flicker of steel. She did not stay to count them. She ran straight to Thäràc, warning everybody she met on the way. Thäràc told her to stay inside and hide. She complied. Thäràc got those in the north to spread the word through to the south. By the time the threat came, the information had not circulated very well. Thäràc was standing at the northern end watching the approaching visitors. His bow was out and he had two arrows in position. There were close to a hundred of them. This did not bode well for Southlake, having next to no real fighters. Few of the men there were even hunters. The burden was on him.

Those approaching were walking at a quick pace over the sunset covered field, made more red by the glow of the moon corpse. They were already sufficiently close for Thäràc to realise that they were not ordinary people. They wore little cloths; in fact, many wore none, and many wore a lot less. The more complete ones merely looked like whole corpses, while others were badly deteriorated. Some had as much as half their trunks missing, and a fair number had as much bone visible as skin. They were about in good firing range when they rapidly began to pick up pace, launching into an enthusiastic jog. Thäràc fired. Both arrows hit; one struck a head, taking him down, and the other only hit a shoulder. This latter did little. He fired another, striking a targets chest. This slowed the target down considerably, but did not stop him. He fired several more arrows taking a few more down until it was time to put his bow on his back and draw his sword.

When they were finally in range, three immediately went down. Thäràc was quickly the centre of attention, completely outmanoeuvring their fairly average sword work, and cutting them up by the handful. They quickly realised that this particular person should best be avoided. After this he had to start hunting them down like stray beasts. Soon he heard the first scream. This turned his stomach but he kept going. The rotten fiends moved quickly so he had to employ trick tactics against them, like emerging from behind a house and cutting them in two. While his efforts were great, the effect was minimal. He got out his bow again and began picking them off. By this time, several townspeople were already scattered; and there was more screaming. Thäràc tried not to stray from duty as he saw some of his neighbours slaughtered like dogs, irrespective of age or gender. The attackers were going in and out of houses. Most of the men did not have swords. They defended themselves with what they had. A couple were quite successful, but the sword wielding enemies were almost completely unbeatable except for those unfortunate enough to cross paths with Thäràc.

Even in her own home, Cära could not find a good hiding spot. She was standing in a corner from where she thought she could evacuate the house quickly when necessary. She was clasping the biggest and sharpest knife that she could find. She could faintly hear the screaming and sword clashing outside. She was trembling badly. She had predicted that once she learnt the meaning of the moon's slaughter she would be sorry. She now regretted that she had been right. Outside, the sound of barbarism gradually grew louder and louder. As she could hear thus in ever greater detail, the sounds of the horror became more rapid, while her heartbeat and her breathing quickened to keep pace. A scream right outside sent both racing. For a moment it was otherwise fairly quiet, until her front door suddenly came crashing down only one room away. She screamed, drawing the

intruder's attention immediately to her presence. Cära readied herself. The enemy was not very subtle. The moment he appeared through the doorway, he charged straight to her. The next few seconds were a blur of struggle, but somehow it managed to end with a kitchen knife in the enemy's lower chest. Cära twisted the blade as hard as she could. Then she withdrew it and thrust it straight into the neck. As she held it there, she then covered her mouth; sickened, as she realised that the person she thought she had just killed had obviously died over a decade or so ago. Thankfully, he did go down. In her panic, she ran outside.

She looked around her. Living corpses were raiding everything. Right across the footpath in the opposite house there was chaos in the window. The woman who lived there had lent her some spices just the other day. Now she and her daughters were crying and screaming. The sound of the cries ending one by one made Cära sick. Near the path, a raider saw her and immediately started towards her. Still holding the knife she dashed from the door. She manoeuvred around him; just. As she turned northward, she was hit by this notion that any house was less likely to be struck a second time than it was the first. She ran around the back of her house, while the man behind her seemed to have his attention diverted. She sped past the next house down, and turned swiftly back to the other side when she saw chaos in a backyard two houses down. Back on the main street, she ran as fast as she could through the nearest busted doorway in sight. No one appeared to have seen her. Inside was but a small number of unmoving bodies she had no mind to identify.

Before she could decide which room would be best for defence someone entered. Cära raised her kitchen knife in anticipation. The man at the door was definitely another one of *them*, but rather than rushing in for a kill he just stood

there with a surprised look on his face. He appeared to be stunted by what he saw in the room. For a brief moment the two just stood there on opposite sides of the living room, looking each other dead in the eye. The moment was broken when a second person rushed in. This one dashed straight past the first, surprising him, and chased Cära down a short corridor. At the end the back door was open, and Cära found herself outside.

She was about to bolt when a cold hand landed on the back of her neck. She screamed. There were two more right behind the house, and she was now struggling with one of these as the other two emerged through the door behind her. The struggle was vicious and ended with one of the men losing a whole hand to her knife. Another one then grabbed her by the hair, and dragged her screaming through the backyard. As they went she could see what they were taking her to: a chopping block. She struggled more violently as they neared it, and screamed desperately as her head was shoved and held against the wood. All four surrounded her. There was a brief delay before the next move. While Cära lay panicking on the wood she could see in the corner of her eye the sword readying itself to come down and end her. Watching from the other side was the first man who had entered the house. Not that Cära was in a position to notice, but the hesitation he had displayed was still there. The executioner's sword was still ascending when his hesitation vanished, and before any other could fathom his actions, he dashed over and seized the sword wielding hands with his own left hand, while the right brought a long dagger into and along the sword bearer's neck. Tossing his victim down backward, he turned to a second sword bearer. Cära stood up just in time to see the sword fall to the ground as the dagger was withdrawn from his upper chest. Only one more was left, who had a hand missing. After watching the first act of treachery he had already retreated, and was running away.

Only Cära and her lifesaver remained. Neither knew quite what to do. Then Cära ran. The man began to raise his hand in protest, but stopped. Cära had a new idea: find Thäràc.

By this time it had gotten quite dark. Thäràc had been desperately trying to get the villagers together so he could better defend them. But the panic was too great for any sort of organisation. While the first wave of attackers had quickly learnt to avoid him, many had forgotten themselves. Thäràc worked this to his advantage. He seemed to have cleaned out a large part of the invading force, but the damage was done. He could not think. All there was to think about was the countless men, women and children who had already been slain, and that it was still happening around him. He never stopped fighting for a single moment. That is, until he heard someone screaming out his name. He turned. She was running straight for him.

“Cära!!” he shouted, and started running. At that moment he was suddenly engaged from the left side. He reflexively swung his sword right through the already half missing lower torso, cutting him clean in half. As he did so, he saw in the corner of his eye a flash of steel again to his left; on the opposite side of him to where Cära stood. He met it with a swift defence and counter-strike, followed by a thrust through the chest of a third assailant. Finally clear of his enemies he turned to face Cära, just in time to see the sword leaving her bloody throat. Ironically enough, it was Thäràc who choked. Behind her stood a half rotten corpse holding in his right hand the sword that had just taken her life, and Thäràc’s along with it. Cära’s eyes were fixed on her lover’s. Somehow, she managed a smile. But the smile was so slight that in the relative darkness of the evening it was invisible and Thäràc never noticed. Then she fell hard on her knees. She would have stayed that way longer, but the fiend kicked

her down onto her face. He now stood face to face with Thäràc.

Thäràc was frozen, though the murderer dared not approach him. He began stepping back. Then he halted. He seemed to recognise an opportunity. He started to advance, but quickly ceased when Thäràc, not knowing what was happening, began raising his left arm. The stunned look on Thäràc's face did not change. His hand continued to rise until it was about level with his face. His palm was facing outward in the dead man's direction. For a moment nothing happened. Then, Thäràc began to tremble. He became pale in the face, and looked as though he was about to throw up. Then the trembling became severe, but his face was still fixed in the same expression. Also, his arm was becoming tense, and was quivering uncontrollably. He then drew his hand back. His enemy was not sure at all what to make of this, but continued to approach until Thäràc's hand suddenly thrust itself forward.

At that instant, a strange glowing dark purple matter started leaving his finger tips. It had the resemblance of a fine ink being ejected underwater. The matter spread upward from his hand into a shield like-cloud above him. Then it started spreading to the sides as though it were growing wings. By this point the dark matter had drawn the attention of many present villagers and raiders alike, including the man who had just saved Cära's life, who watched in astonishment as another dark substance started spilling out of Thäràc's hand. This one was not just smoke. It looked alive, with ribbon like tentacles flickering about like fire. Then the enemy was suddenly struck with terror when he saw a pair of sharp glowing eyes appear. As the eyes remained fixed on his the creature continued to emerge, rising through the ink-like vale, revealing a pair of powerful looking arms, each adorned with dozens of long tentacles;

not to mention hundreds stemming from behind, all wavering like fine seaweed in a tide. Its eyes were still fixed on Cära's slayer in terrifying judgement. Thäràc, whose gaze was equally unmovable, could just make out the half eaten lips of his enemy uttering with no voice the word 'Gerra!'

Before those lips could finish their task the dreadful spirit launched itself straight into him, knocking him back for yards. It was in the time it took for him to hit the ground, that the less fortunate witnessed the unbearable sight of Gerra ripping his soul apart like an old curtain. The raiders among these witnesses instantly scattered and ran away as fast as they could. The non-witnesses among the raiders still took the cue. Only one man stood his ground long enough to see the end of it: the one who had saved Cära. Gerra, his work done, turned to face Thäràc, and then he returned into him. As the last witness turned his back and moved on, Thäràc collapsed. He was not unconscious, but he wanted to be. He did not move from that spot. He simply lay there as the others solemnly removed the bodies. When he heard them moving Cära's body he actually did pass out. During the time he had spent lying there on the path he had seen the sun come and go three times. It was on the fourth day that he was greeted with the sound of footsteps that approached him and then stopped right by him. Thäràc smiled a slight, broken smile. He knew who it was.

"The Guardian wishes to see you," said Gâbríel.

Chapter 2: The Road to Treecastle

It was a beautiful day. The clouds were like a light, tattered blanket. The sun was shining through them graciously, and its rays were finely fragmented. At the top of a hill, a deer-like animal was grazing. It was alone. The grass was lush and sweet, the best for miles. It was also just the right size. The creature had rather keen hearing. For the briefest instant, it heard a familiar and somewhat ominous whistling sound. Before it could even begin to react an arrow pierced its neck. The creature stumbled about confused for a moment, but it did not suffer for long. Not ten seconds after the blow it had collapsed. After that its passing was well and swift. Sometime later, after standing over it for a few minutes, Thäràc finally bent over and got to work on the first meal he had eaten since his last breakfast with Cära four days earlier. That was the second meal from a catch that preserved well and would last well over a week. Thäràc dared not touch it. It took some counselling from Gâbríel before he could even consider eating. Even water was not quite as motivating. As he had lain on the pathway a young boy was bringing him food and water every day. He never touched the food, but he did drink. Even now, Thäràc was in no hurry.

As he got to work on his game, Gâbríel caught up with him. In her left hand was the lead of a horse. His neighbour had lent it to him. It was dark brown with a black mane. It had seen a few years but it was still in good health. Thäràc did not bother to cook his meat. When he was done eating he mounted and took off. The way from home to the forest had never been so strange. As he rode across the beautiful green hills followed by a raven the land had never looked so alive. For so long it had rested in limbo while Thäràc, practically its only observer, desired to see it with his very liveliness. Now the tables had turned. The land begged to shine itself into his eyes but he had no mind to look.

His horse was of a special breed known as the Ì`sôgí. These horses could travel up to 45 miles per day with a single rider. They were bred very carefully, and magic was also involved. The Ì`sôgí made up a large part of the domestic horses in Me`ridía. Thäràc did not stop to rest for the night. This suited Gâbríel just fine but the horse needed at least a couple of hours rest. Thäràc could spare it.

Early morning the next day, when they reached the forest, Thäràc halted. He dismounted, and then stepped out into the woods. He listened. The forest made little sound. Yet every slightest bird call or rustle was like a kiss. He took another step, and as he did he heard the twigs and leaves crackle under his feet. It was the sweetest music he had ever heard in his life. Then all of a sudden, as he was looking deep into the woods he discovered that he could see his dreams. He realised then and there what had been taken from the forest so long ago. This was what had been missing. This was what he had saved. He breathed it in more fully than he had done before. Then a tear trickled from his eye. Gâbríel stood right behind him.

“You believe it does not grieve with you,” she said, “but you are wrong. Can you not hear it? Do not feel taunted

Thäràc. The forest loves you more than you will ever know. And it loves Cära. That is why you can feel it so completely. It is holding you.”

“I don’t understand,” said Thäràc, his voice breaking up.

“Don’t try.”

Thäràc started crying. He knelt down, put both hands on the ground and let everything out. Gâbríel let him be. There was no guilt. Gâbríel’s wisdom was godly, but her touch was cold and meaningless, and could offer no comfort, for she was not human. *That* would have helped. Thäràc spent some time at the border of the woods, before continuing his travel on an increasingly slow and reluctant horse. By sunset, he had decided to give it a break, and continued on foot walking it casually along.

That night Thäràc got some rest. His dreams were a delirious blur of all that stalked him, loving or otherwise. When Gâbríel woke him at sunrise he was interrupted from a mysterious confrontation with Gerra. It was not fearful but rather questioning. Hours into the morning they had gotten close. The trees here were fairly tall but of average width. The odd thing was the variation in density. In some places they were widely spaced. In others, it was virtually impassable. As they progressed, the forest became more and more like a jungle. The wildlife became far more prominent, and the trees were short and entangled. Leaves ranged from large to gigantic; some as big as a child. Further still, they began stepping over various sized creeks trickling along from north to south. Besides this, they also came across very large boulders and slabs of stone. Some of them were moss-covered. Often the creeks got quite deep, but these all had logs and stepping stones crossing them. It was obvious that it was prepared for visitors. Thäràc just rode his horse across until they reached a particularly deep stream. From then on he travelled on foot leaving the horse behind. The Ì`sôgí

were very reliable to leave unattended. He went on foot for ten more minutes before finally he reached two great stone slabs. Between them was a narrow corridor, wide enough for one man. Gâbríel gestured for him to walk through. He entered the corridor. The stone walls on either side were incredibly straight. They were also very high. The other end of the corridor was about a dozen yards away. At the end he could see what looked like a tree. This became clearer as he approached, until finally he emerged before the most magnificent and beautiful thing he had ever seen.

He was standing on a bridge. It was a long, straight plank about two feet wide. On either side were wooden hand rails. Another dozen or so yards away the bridge ended at a wooden platform that circled around the tree, again about two feet wide and with a hand rail. The tree at this point looked about 20 feet wide. The hole from which Thäràc had emerged was part of a wall of earth that circled the tree completely and evenly. It was connected to the tree via two more bridges, one on either side. Each one led into other passages in the circling wall. He looked up. Above him the trunk extended many, many stories up into the colossal branches that almost completely blocked out the sky. Then he looked down. Beneath him the tree fell and fell into a deep hole. It looked something like one hundred stories down. The near bottom of the tree was twice the width of the trunk at his level. Scattered throughout the deep pit at various levels were several other bridges identical to the one on which Thäràc stood. Most of them formed crosses of three or four that connected yet more openings in the earth wall to the platforms encircling the trunk. Connecting these various rings were spiralling stairs. The stairs, again, were about two feet wide and fitted with the same hand rail. At many places these spiralling pathways disappeared into holes in the

trunk. There were also other holes, some leading out to balconies. While the tree itself and all its extensions were themselves a wonder to behold, it was the atmosphere that really brought everything to life. From the very bottom of the hole to the top of the visible trunk, which reached well beyond the walls, the space was saturated with tiny specks of pale white light. These danced gently around, illuminating everything with a mystical and serene glow. Also widely dispersed throughout the giant chamber were numerous hovering creatures. The means of their hovering was a helicopter like blade that spun over each one. They looked more like plants than animals. Their shapes varied from that of onions to virtual blocks. The second time he gazed upward he saw a raven descending from above. Over and along the bridge on which he stood the black bird swooped towards him until it landed. Gâbríel stood smiling roughly eight or so feet before him.

“Welcome to Treecastle.”

Just then, a curiously apple-shaped piece of vegetation with bark skin hovered over to directly above Thäràc’s head, dangling beneath a spinning blur of what looked like more vegetation. At the bottom was a solid looking handle. It seemed to be waiting for him.

“Grab it,” said Gâbríel, “it will never let you fall.”

Thäràc stared at it for a moment. Then he looked down. It was a really long way. Not one to back away from a frightening experience, he grabbed on to the wooden handle with both hands. Suddenly, he felt (and saw) the handle and the surrounding wood change shape, locking his hands firmly into place. Then it lifted him up until his feet were dangling above the level of the hand rails. Then it rotated to the right, and then hovered away from the bridge. He was a little scared, but he quickly came to enjoy the ride. He was spiralling slowly down the trunk, looking down the whole

time. From beneath the strange creature from which he hung the view was great. He watched as the various levels of wooden bridges passed him by. As he neared the bottom he had a strange feeling of wanting to be up higher again. His wish was not granted. To his disappointment, the trip came to an end. The plant creature unlocked his hands, and then started spiralling back up. Gâbríel, who had been circling above him the whole time, joined him at the bottom.

The entrance to Treecastle was on almost the exact opposite side to which they were on. The space at the bottom was far greater in diameter than where Thäràc had entered. The walls appeared to be made of vine covered stone. The ground was mostly dirt and rocks. The area encircling the tree was large enough for several houses. The tree itself, of course, was so massive that Thäràc had no trouble whatsoever picturing the palace-like interior that awaited him. The roots at some points had to be climbed over. At the point where they emerged from the trunk, the shortest ones were taller than houses. Having circled about half way around the tree they reached the entrance. It was surprisingly small. Thäràc had been expecting a gate the size of three houses. In reality, it was only about twice his height. It was the one place at the bottom of Treecastle where a large part of the trunk went straight into the ground. However, about three yards on either side, two massive roots protruded outwards decoratively. Through the opening he could see nothing but complete darkness. With a nod from Gâbríel he entered.

Chapter 3: A Favour for a God

When they emerged on the other side, they found themselves in a cylindrical chamber. It was as large as Thäràc had expected, yet quite different. Before him were a set of ascending dark wooden terraces. Each one was about ten feet high, and there were only six of them in total. Nor were they straight. The middle portion of the first one appeared to be in the dead centre of the room, while either side curved toward the front. In fact, they stopped only about three yards along the wall from the entrance, forming a crescent. The second and third terraces were progressively straighter, while the remaining three progressively curved in the opposite direction. Rising from the ground to the highest terrace with only slight breaks on each one was a staircase.

Scattered about on each terrace talking to each other were people. Attached to their backs were large pairs of wings, reaching up to three feet over their heads, and most of them reaching down to the knees. Their clothing was of light silk of many different colours. Their hair was white. These were the *cuôlva*, the spirit people. The *cuôlva* were known for their close association with the Guardian. They were the keepers of the world's secrets, and ethereal in their wisdom. They were rarely seen by human eyes, as they lived so differently,

and in hard-to-reach places. They were the spirits of the earth; and as such, had no place in the Spiritual Plane itself.

Gâbríel flew straight to the top. Thäràc proceeded up the staircase. As he did so he was noting the rest of his surroundings. On either side of the chamber were large window-like openings through which light was streaming through. It was impossible to tell, however, whether or not they were the main source of illumination. Above, was nothing but a strange blackness. For all Thäràc knew, another three terraces could have reached the ceiling, or rather the chamber may have reached half-way up the tree. The whole room was made entirely of largely unworked wood in such a style that suggested the chamber had been carved straight out of the solid tree, giving it a true forest appearance. As Thäràc finally reached the top of the highest step, he saw the Guardian. The Guardian looked pretty much the same as he had in Thäràc's vision before reaching the Palace of Gerra over three years before. He was very large; nine or ten feet tall, and in proportion his face was even larger. He wore a less than majestic robe of animal skins. He sat on a throne-like seat at the very back of the chamber, which, like everything else, seemed to have been carved out of the tree. Gâbríel stood beside him. He spoke with a deep, yet gentle voice.

"I have been looking forward to this moment, Thäràc."

"Nice to meet you," Thäràc replied.

"No words in any tongue in the world could thank you for what you have done."

"I wish I could say it was nothing," said Thäràc. The Guardian laughed.

"Indeed! But your reward was great. I am so sorry it had to end."

"*You're* sorry?" replied Thäràc, not with anger but irony.

“You deserve the answers. I will give them to you. And then I will ask of you a favour.”

“Sure,” said Thäràc, “why not?”

There was a short silence. Even Gâbríel was surprised at Thäràc’s tone of voice.

“It’s Effa isn’t it?”

“Yes,” said the Guardian, “the walking corpses that attacked your hometown and...”

“Don’t say it,” snapped Thäràc. The Guardian continued from the next sentence.

“They are the very same legion that Effa first mustered to spread chaos over Pán`gaia. They are the same pool from which the White Beasts of Me`ridía were originally drawn. They are the Army of Blood, ruthless gîajìn now stolen from their graves and almost completely restored to their former mindless selves. They are what we would call revenants.”

“Almost completely?” Thäràc said confused, “their bodies were half rotten.”

“Yes, but you must remember that they are ancient. Before the Resurrection they were little more than dust.”

“What was their purpose?” asked Thäràc angrily, “why did Effa, a dêva, have them do that?”

“We don’t know,” the Guardian said, “and your village was not the only one. Several have been plundered and we can not think of a motive. We do believe however that he must have some practical use for them; probably to suppress opposition.”

“Opposition to what?”

The Guardian was reluctant to answer.

“What you saw that night three weeks ago was an omen,” he began, “it has distressed people greatly to witness such

horror, but I have been dreading it ever since I awoke from my slumber.”

“What happened to the moon?” demanded Thäràc.

“The Second Coming is what happened to it. The moon itself does not concern us. What concerns us is the shadow that now infests that part of the sky; the shadow and the fire. Understand it is not a weapon or a vessel, it is simply the place upon which we must gaze when we are waiting for the Army of Black and Flame to return to the earth.”

“You speak of...”

“The billions that almost destroyed everything. The bringers of shadow. In your godly deeds you threw that shadow away from the earth. Effa wishes to bring it back; and he is not being subtle about it. He has resurrected the Army of Blood, and he has destroyed that which has served to soften the darkness of night.”

“How much time do we have?”

“I don’t know.”

“And the favour?”

The Guardian suddenly began showing discomfort.

“You do not want to hear what I have to say,” he said, “You lost your lover; you lost your life. I lost the world Thäràc. The grief drove me into a coma. In that coma I rotted for over a century. I never fully recovered.”

“What does this mean?” asked Thäràc, getting impatient.

“The Trinity of Legions must be re-mustered; as they were the first time. Otherwise Effa’s furious scourge will be unopposed. But I no longer have the power to do it. The Turning weakened me irreparably, and I am now next to useless on my own.”

“What can *I* do?”

“You must find the legions,” said the Guardian, “and send them here to Me`ridía. Once upon a time I could have the clouds do it. But times have changed, and now they must be sought in their homelands.”

“And I am to do it?” said Thäràc.

“Yes.”

“Where do I find them?” he asked, seeing no point in thinking back to his discussions with Gâbríel when the two had first met.

“The Flesh Cutters are to be found in a wasteland in the far west, a place we know as Ge`henna. It is a vicious place, even you would not likely survive; at least not yet. Your current weapons would not sustain you. You are now ready to receive the gift that helped the two great wars to be won.”

“The Setharòn?!”

“Yes. When the Army of Blood first walked the earth the people were without defence. The survival of humankind, of both kinds, was called into question. The answer was Gerra. Not only did he teach the people how to fight and lead them, but he also brought with him a weapon from heaven; the fire to which evil was as silk. He entrusted it to the cuôlva as its eternal keeper, and he selected the most worthy warrior to first wield it. The man’s name was Poiu. Armed with the celestial flame, Poiu played a large part in Effa’s downfall. Then came the Beast Wars. Once Gerra had returned to the Ethereal Plane, the task of selecting the wielder of heavenly fire was left to the cuôlva. They chose Cain, whose sword you now hold. Now, for the third time in history, war has come to the inhabitants of Pán`gaia; and you are to become the third bearer of the flame.”

At first Thäràc was thrown off by ‘the third time in history’, but then he remembered that the battle of the Turning was not of men or any other comparable force. The

Trinity of Legions were immensely powerful, immortal and numbered in the millions. Yet they could not defend the forest from Effa's creation. Nor was it a war at all, technically speaking. The Guardian continued.

"You must go to the cuôlva. They will assess you, and then they will give you Setharòn. With it your chances of survival in Ge'henna are fair."

"Fair," Thäràc chuckled sarcastically. He was just loving everything he heard. At this point in his life Thäràc's own death was not such a bad thing. In fact it was nothing compared to the dreaded burden of responsibility he had already had to suffer once.

"There is another thing you will need," said the Guardian, "although Setharòn is the ultimate weapon for any human warrior, second only to the one who inhabits your blood, it is still not sufficient to see you through your quest. You must also learn to use magic as a weapon."

"I have never been fond of tricks," said Thäràc.

"Nor will you have to perform any. The Setharôn, Gerra, the sword of Cain and the ability to channel magic through it, together with over a century of fighting experience will give you the strength of an army, and an army you will also have on the way to Ge'henna."

"What army?" said Thäràc, suddenly surprised.

"The Vîje'lîz of course," the Guardian replied, "after the moon was consumed by Effa's poison I sent Gâbrîel to assemble them for their first and most important mission. Gâbrîel if you may."

She nodded towards the Guardian nobly; then faced Thäràc.

“They will escort you a part of the way to Ge’henna. You may need it. I have tried to keep a low profile for you but they are still very excited and really looking forward to it.”

She turned back to the Guardian, who continued speaking.

“Gâbríel has informed me that one of them is an old friend of yours.”

Thäràc could only think of one person it could be.

“Snapdrágon?”

“That’s right, as well as your father of course.”

Finally Thäràc was hearing things that at other times would have exited him. He had intended to find Snapdrágon for some time. The few times he tried he had been unsuccessful. He had wanted to see what sort of person the damaged man had become once the Pa`räjí was returned. Not to mention introduce him to his father. Despite his temptation to dwell on that, he kept on topic.

“So where, and how do I learn magic?”

“There are presently two great mages living on the east side of Me’ridía. A week ago there were three. Dhas was killed in the raids. He was the greatest, and would have been a perfect teacher; especially for you. Tôbit and Izríá were very close friends of his. They will teach you well.”

“Tôbit?” said Thäràc surprised, “he is back on the mainland?”

“Yes. He has since left the isles in the deep. Both he and Izríá have been informed of your coming visit. He will be waiting for you at the town ‘Érías’, north east of your home town. It too was struck by the raids. Izríá lives by the mountains in the north, in the village ‘Hiúm’.”

“So once I have received the Setharòn and made myself into a powerful mage, I travel all the way to Ge’henna,

meeting the Vije`liz on the way, and *notify* the Flesh Cutters of the coming darkness?”

“Precisely, and I advise that you do that first. Entering the spirit world will not be as simple.”

All of a sudden Thäràc started laughing out loud. He knew this would come up, but he could not help but see some obscure little irony in that remark that he could not even explain. Inwardly frustrated at Thäràc’s apparent apathy the Guardian continued.

“I cannot tell you where in that place you will find the Soul Destroyers, but Gâbríel should find the means of getting there. Do not fear the Spiritual Plane, for the mystery conceals little but serenity. But be very careful when you get there. Your soul will be vulnerable, for it will not have a body to protect it.”

Thäràc knew very well that the last statement was not to be taken literally. If, in the Material Plane, he were to be assailed by a spirit his body itself would not really make much of a difference. What the Guardian meant was that in the world of the dead every enemy is a spirit; while in the living world, almost everything is material, and therefore the soul is quite safe. Thäràc decided to move on to the next topic.

“And the Steel Cleavers?”

The Guardians response was somewhat delayed.

“Once the Flesh Cutters and the Soul Destroyers are arrayed before the Forest of Me`ridía, which will obviously be the target, your essential mission will be complete. However, the Steel Cleavers will make a big difference; possibly the difference between life and death. The reason you took Gerra’s spirit in the first place was that he is the only being who could reach the lowest depths. He is also the

only one who can reach the heights at which the Steel Cleavers dwell.”

“That’s right they live in the sky don’t they? So you are saying that I must *become* Gerra?” said Thäràc.

“Yes. And I am afraid I don’t know if such a thing is possible. If it is, only he would understand how it could be achieved. Tell me, since the moment he granted you his soul, have you seen him?”

“Yes.” Thäràc told the Guardian about the faceoff between the heavenly warrior and his lover’s killer. As he did so, Gâbríel started listening with greater interest than before.

“I’m afraid that I cannot even begin to understand why he did that. Vengeance is a temptation that dêvas, let alone celestial beings, are wise enough, and strong enough to resist. But then again, Gerra works in strange ways. I should not doubt that his deed served a purpose.”

“It seemed to me like he enjoyed it.”

“That is because you did,” said Gâbríel.

He did not like hearing this one bit, but he knew it was true. The Guardian did not wish for this thought to begin cycling in his subject’s head, so he quickly concluded, believing it would divert Thäràc’s thinking. It did not.

“We don’t know how much time we have,” he said, “so we can not waste any. You must begin immediately.”

“Then why did you summon me all the way out here to tell me these things?” asked Thäràc, “could you not have her inform me herself?” he gestured towards Gâbríel.

“Smart question,” he replied smiling, “the reason I brought you here is that I need to personally give you the authority to dictate to the Legions. I can no longer send my commands to the sky, but I can still send them.”

The Guardian stood up, showing his great height. He stepped up to Thäràc and then knelt before him. This was both an act of honour and a position where the giant could easily grasp his subjects head. Thäràc was astonished at how gentle his touch was. The Guardian spoke.

“Gâbríel told me about the people you met on the isles; that they were alive. That was why I threw the Pa`räjí in just that direction. Nor was it an accident that it leaked. It seems you were the only one on the surface who received it. I am sorry it had to hurt so much.”

This made Thäràc laugh, only this time in a friendly way. He did not know if the Guardian was referring to the unbearable physical sting caused by the infusion when it happened, or to the many decades of complete loneliness and bitter depression that followed. Either way, the apology was accepted. The Guardian leaned forward, and kissed him on the forehead. Thäràc experienced the strangest sensation. It felt as though the Guardian had spat something really hot straight through his head to the bottom of his throat; though it did not hurt. The kiss only lasted a second; the feeling lasted several. Then the giant stood up.

“One more thing. Can you tell me, in your own words, about the creature you encountered when you found the Pa`räjí?”

Chapter 4: Three Strangers and an Old Friend

By the time early evening had come, Thäràc had not made as much progress as he had expected. His horse was tired; unusually tired for one of the Ì`sôgí. Gâbríel was no longer with him. She was required to stay with the Guardian for a time to see to some business of which Thäràc received no disclosure. He was on his own. Of course, without Gâbríel he felt rather lost; and the stamina of his carrier seemed to reflect that fact. The sun had begun to set, and so had his horse. Thäràc could not explain it. Was the horse sick? Had it been overworked? Was it the eerie red glow coming from the eastern sky bringing the animal down? As it gradually got dark, the steed seemed to become wearier and wearier until finally, not long after they had emerged from the forest, it collapsed. It did not fall asleep, but it was not terribly awake either. It was not dying; Thäràc felt sure of that. But he did not know whether it would be able to carry him the next day, or if he should just continue on his own. After thinking it through he took the chance that the animal would be better in the morning. Following the horse's example, Thäràc retired for the night.

Before the sun was up the next day, he awoke to the sensation of a horse's tongue rolling up his cheek. Lying on his side, he opened his eyes to the light of the sun emanating from not far beneath the earth. He was enjoying the horse's apparent affection for him, but he thought it quite strange. When his vision finally cleared he made out before him a rather startling sight: his horse was lying on the ground, much as he was, about three yards away. He quickly turned over and saw a second horse standing over him. It was a beautiful golden brown colour with a darker mane; the mane was actually about the same colour as the body of his own horse. It was about that time that he noticed a pungent invading his nose. He turned his head the other way. Plainly in his sight, in a kneeling position, was one of Effa's corpse-soldiers. Thäràc jolted from his position on the ground, and rapidly got to his feet. The man was reasonably whole in his appearance. He was kneeling right foot forward and head down as though Thäràc was a king, though he spoke in a surprisingly insubordinate manner.

"The idea of approaching you this way was that you would *not* see me as an enemy. Oh well."

He got off his knee and stood up, provoking Thäràc to unsheathe his weapon. Standing face to face, he inspected the stranger. He wore a helmet. Running right through his face was a line dividing pale but otherwise normal skin from aged dead flesh. His left eye was the good one. The line, going down, went in that direction denying him a nose then ran down crossing sides again so that most of his lips remained complete.

"What are you doing here?" asked Thäràc suspiciously.

"I'm not on their side," the man urged, "please believe me."

"Then you are...?"

“My name is Harrow. And who would you be, my polite friend?”

“Thäràc. Is that who you were looking for?”

“I have been dead for over three thousand years, how could I be looking for anybody? Well actually, I was looking for you, not by name or reputation but because of what I have seen.”

“Were you at my village during the raid?” asked Thäràc in a threatening sort of way.

“Yes. I saw everything.”

“Ok,” said Thäràc in restraint, “what is your story?”

“I joined Effa’s legion to get close to him,” Harrow began, “I had, and still have, a highly... *personal* issue with him. So you can see, my motives would have nothing to do with the reason I was brought here. That is just pure luck! Anyway, my work was unfinished, but now fate has granted me a second chance. But I cannot do it alone.”

“So you want to join me in the hope that I can lead you to him?”

“I am telling you the truth.”

“Gîajín know nothing of truth.”

“So you know the gîajín or just hate them? Do you think ill of me because another killed your wife?”

“Your mind works the same way,” Thäràc said through clenched teeth, “and why should I help you? I already have a lot on my shoulders.”

“Because I saved your wife.”

On hearing this, Thäràc felt a rush of mixed emotion. He was not sure if he wanted to thank the man or cut his head off. In other words, did he believe him or not?

“Go on.” he said.

“When I saw you cutting up my comrades at the northern border, I took special care to slip by without a confrontation. I had the choice between outwardly turning on them immediately and blowing my cover, or selectively turning a blind eye to the slaughter of some of your townspeople. My strategy was to follow one or two into a house, and cut them down before they could do the inhabitants any harm. At least it worked more often than not. At one time I saw movement in a house, I ran in. As always I expected to see a figure of guts and bones raging against a frightened family. What I saw was a dead family, no sign of the killer, and an innocent looking lady standing there with a knife. I was completely stunned. I had no idea what was going on or what to do, and before I could take any sort of initiative, one of the soldiers raced passed me as I stood stupidly, and chased her out the back door. By the time I got outside she was struggling in the hands of three raiders. I joined the party and played along as best I could. She did pretty well; managed to cut the hand off one. In reaction to that another one dragged her to a chopping block, and raised his sword. I had a split second decision to make and I made it. I cut that pig’s throat. I fought the other two. One of them got away. And that is why I am now talking to you. My cover may be blown.”

Thäràc granted this some thought.

“If I accept that, then you would have my trust.”

“Besides,” said Harrow with a half-chuckle, “Would I double cross you after seeing the weapon you are carrying? I am not talking about your sword.”

“You mean Gerra?”

“Oh yes. And if that is the best you have seen of him you know nothing.”

Before Thäràc could respond to that he felt the horse’s nose nuzzling at his left arm.

“Is this yours?”

“Well, not really,” answered Harrow, “I just found her yesterday. Or rather she found me. It was kind of strange really.”

Harrow watched as Thäràc returned the affection to the beast.

“And I am thinking, your horse looks like it has just about carried enough. If I go with you we could swap, as I am considerably lighter than you or any healthy living body. And this horse is most definitely Ì`sôgí, she is more than fit for your purposes. Besides...” Harrow began with an air of the slightest sarcasm as he watched his host stroking the horse’s mane, “she seems to like you. At least let me come as far as to take your horse to a resting place. Then you can keep this one, whatever you choose to do with me.”

Thäràc turned to him.

“Ok. You can accompany me to town. I will try and make up my mind on the way.”

Harrow seemed happy with this. With some effort, they managed to get Thäràc’s reluctant horse onto its feet. When Harrow mounted it seemed okay with the quantity of the load, though perhaps a little uneasy with its quality. When Thäràc mounted his new steed he felt great energy beneath him. With no further concern the two took off toward Érías in the north-east. The trip took a few days, and Thäràc felt that it would have gone by much quicker save the need to return the weaker horse to human care under the direction of its peculiar rider. On the way Thäràc questioned Harrow as to what use he could be. Apparently he was a good archer, and one could never have too many of those. Perhaps more importantly, he was a member of the Army of Blood, and could provide some information, if he could be trusted, of course. Related to all of this was the question Thäràc chose

to restrain from asking too soon: exactly what was this 'highly personal issue' he had with Effa? Not that having an issue with Effa needed an explanation itself. Harrow was a typical gîajìn. Not entirely aware of himself, and somewhat annoying, and he seemed to think that saying things like 'I am telling you the truth,' could make some logical difference to Thäràc's decision. The most unnerving thing, of course, was that he happened to appear just after Gâbríel had left his company. She would have solved the problem right away.

They reached Érías early in the afternoon. By this stage, the horse Thäràc rode was still in full stride, while his old one seemed near its end. He had decided that Harrow could at least accompany him to his meeting with Tôbit. Perhaps *he* could help him decide on long term company.

The West entrance to the village was not how Thäràc remembered it. Not only had it been rebuilt, but it was also heavily guarded, as was every other entrance. This was not what one would have seen anywhere in the land before Effa's legion of reckless revenants scourged it. The entrances were not guarded so much for being the only way into the town, but for being both the easiest way and the best lookout points. In fact, it was clearly more of a lookout than a guard, judging by the ease with which the two fighters were allowed to pass through requiring only an escort to keep them in plain sight, at least until they reached the house whose owner he knew was expecting at least one guest. Admittedly, there was some hesitation before accepting the presence of a type of person otherwise only experienced as cold-blooded slaughtering cowards. But they were aware also of the reputation of his new friend, who would cut him to ribbons if he turned to such habits. Of course, this did not help the fact that the guards, more than Thäràc, seemed particularly affected by the smell.

There was one big difference between this town and his: It was burnt, badly. Many of the houses had been destroyed, while others were being repaired, but from what he could see the people had not fared quite as badly as did his own people. The town was still quite lively. In fact, due to all the repair work being done, it seemed livelier than before. Ériás had always been a fairly ordinary town, with neatly patterned, criss-crossing streets and short houses. It was, however, one of the most socially vibrant places in all of Me'ridía, and even in such times he could observe circles of people sitting on the ground somewhere along the road and talking endlessly in a way that reminded him of the Isles where he last met Tôbit, to whom he was now being led.

On arrival, the guard agreed to take the horses to the staple, as one was well behaved and the other was in no state to do anything tricky. The latter was to be treated and eventually sent back to its owner in Southlake. The guard stated that he saw no need to return to keep an eye them. Thäràc felt complimented, while Harrow was a little confused.

Thäràc knocked on the door and waited. A few moments later it opened. The old man at the door was indeed Tôbit.

“Thäràc!” he said, greeting his old friend with a hug, “so good to see you.”

In the midst of the embrace he had a clear view of the decomposed figure behind Thäràc. He opted for friendly eye-contact.

“I was expecting you would be alone,” he said with a hint of uncertainty, and turned to Harrow, “but you're welcome. Right after we do something about that smell.”

The moment after Thäràc introduced the two, the old man insisted on casting a spell, on the spot, to relieve the walking dead man of his necessary odour. Tôbit was a most polite

man, but privately wished he could do the same for Harrow's looks as they all went inside. Once again, the living room was Tôbit's preferred venue. The three sat at a dinner table. The room was connected to another, presumably the kitchen. Although Thäràc could not see, he could tell there was someone in there. Tôbit was the first to speak.

"Well, how have you been?"

"Up to a few weeks ago, fantastic," said Thäràc, trying to keep himself composed, "I wish I could tell you it has been merely *difficult* since then."

"I see," said Tôbit solemnly; he seemed to have guessed what had happened. "My wife passed away a year ago. That's why I moved here."

"Sorry to hear that."

"Please, don't be. I'm fine. It's you I'm worried about."

"Well I don't want to lie and tell you that I'm great. However, time is short, and we need to get down to business."

"Straight to the point indeed!" said Tôbit smiling, "but don't be stupid. You know better than anyone that sometimes it takes a clear mind to get things done properly, or has Gâbrîel taught you nothing?"

Thäràc chuckled. He was amazed at the insight that Tôbit had given him with that last sentence. He was right. Gâbrîel's first priority had always been the mission. She counselled him whenever he needed it purely for the greater good of his quest. Now seeing the wisdom of it, he told Tôbit everything. All the while Harrow, who was sitting on the side while the others spoke face to face, was content to pass his time looking as disinterested as possible while gazing about the rather boring house of a dêva. It was toward the end of the conversation that he found himself suddenly looking at a serious-faced teenage girl leaning against the doorway of the

kitchen whence she had come. It was astonishing that the acclaimed hunter at his table did not seem to notice.

The conversation finished with the old man holding Thäràc's hand with both of his in a consoling sort of way.

"It will not be like this forever," said Tôbit, "I know how difficult it is to imagine yourself being happy again, but I promise, you will be."

He said this with such warmth that Thäràc actually felt a great deal better. The man was not much to look at. His hair was no shorter than it was the last time they met, but it was wasting away. He was well aged, but so wonderfully dignified that he was about the most attractive individual that Thäràc had ever met.

"On another note," he continued, giving Thäràc his hand back, "I have somebody here who is interested in meeting you. She will come out here eventually... ah yes, here she is now."

Thäràc joined forces with Harrow in beholding the girl with the unusually short black hair. Nor was she particularly tall for her apparent age.

"I suppose you must be Thäràc?" the girl asked.

"Yes, that's right," he replied, curiously intimidated.

"I have heard so much about you," she continued, "in fact there are a lot of people out there who have as well."

She certainly had his attention. It appeared that the girl was up to date on the Vîje`lîz.

"What interest am I to you?"

"I would not worry about that. I think I might be of greater interest to *you*."

"You think so?" he replied, trying not to sound too concerned.

“Put it this way, you look like the kind of guy who often has much asked of him.”

“Like?”

“Like soaping yourself up with an ancient weapon, learning a few tricks, making a grand voyage over thousands of miles while being pursued by an army of blood-thirsty revenants, and venturing into a deadly wasteland in search of a force that will help defend the forest from a legion of death.”

All of a sudden, Thäràc was on the defensive. This girl really liked to get straight to the point. Even more taken aback was Harrow, who Thäràc had so far left in the dark about his plans. Thäràc did not appreciate having the information spilt for him, and when somebody is this imposing one always prefers to know more about them.

“Who are you?” he asked with suspicion.

“My name is Smoke,” she replied, “and I want to help you.”

“How can you help me?”

“Seeing the moon melt is not exactly something that the ordinary person thinks trivial. As soon as I heard that the Vije`liz were being assembled I joined them. I am not one of them, but I can fight.”

“So you listened in on Gâbríel’s briefing?”

“With every intention of contributing, yes. However, once I knew what the mission was I thought I might take things one step further. I am of far greater use with you now.”

“How did you know I would come here?”

“Because Thäràc, I have seen Ge`henna. And I must say, whatever Gâbríel told you, she was not exaggerating. You need all the help you can get. So, it was obvious to me that you would seek a teacher like Tôbit.”

Until now, Tôbit had been listening to his lodger speak with some concern about her motives. From the start he had been unsure, but had decided to take the risk and comply with her wishes. While her flattery in addressing him elicited a bashful response, it did nothing to lessen his suspicion. All that he and Thäràc could be sure of was that this girl was frighteningly intelligent.

“As I said you need all the help you can get,” she continued, “that means me.”

“Why are you doing this?” Thäràc asked. The girl smiled.

“I just like to help. Besides, what is a good fighter with nothing to fight? I can help you make it to Ge’henna, and then through it. If you had any idea what sort of place it is, you would not be looking at me that way. The Setharòn is not all that easy to come by either. Your life is currently the most precious thing on earth, and I will take good care of it I promise.”

Her words seemed to be getting creepier by the minute. The offer was on the table, but Thäràc was too unsure. He figured that if she wished to kill him then she would have done it then and there. That thought was comforting in a funny sort of way. But he was already having to deal with Harrow’s offer, and Thäràc had less difficulty trusting him. He had only just been given a mission and already he was being confronted by two possible allies with possible agendas, both of them strange, one of them *very* confident. Why couldn’t Gâbríel be there at this particular time when he needed her the most? As if reading his thoughts, Harrow decided to introduce himself.

“Aren’t you a little young?”

Smoke looked at him, and tilted her head slightly.

“Pardon me for saying so mister but you look significantly *older* than anyone I ever expected to meet on friendly terms

in my life. And from what I have been hearing so far about comparably aged people these last few days, the sight of you right next to my new ally is the one thing that displeases me more than... the sight of you.”

Thäràc could see a great deal of restraint on Harrow’s face. It seemed as though the two strangers trusted each other as much Thäràc and Tôbit trusted them. Should he accept them both to go with him on his journey, it would be interesting to see how they got along. Until then, they were allowed to stay while Thäràc learned an exiting new art from the one living person whose company he felt he could enjoy.

Chapter 5: Bâbel

As student and teacher underwent two solid days of intensive magic training, life for the two extra guests was bound to be boring. Circumstance seemed to compel them to spend at least some of their time trying to get to know each other a little better. Evidently it failed. Firstly, they could not find a common activity. Smoke would not so much as touch a deck of cards, while Harrow, despite his insistence on the superiority of the male mind, was unable to entertain Smoke's particular love for history. Secondly, their personalities did not seem to mix, partly because neither was particularly appetising in its own right. Harrow was cocky, sarcastic and arrogant (and in Smoke's opinion, not all that bright). Smoke was intimidating, manipulative, and had an air of spite to which no human spine could be immune. Suffice to say, their relation showed little improvement.

Meanwhile, Thäràc was spending every waking hour learning how to use magic, something he knew very little about, as a means of defence. At one point, Tôbit told him that it was a good thing that Thäràc saw him first. For while his specialisation was defence, Izríà's was attack. It made sense to start with something more or less harmless. Most people would take months of lessons to master their first

spell. Thäràc, on the other hand, was exceptional at picking up such things. It was not that he could master it in a few days, but that he could learn primarily from his experience rather than from lessons. All that he really needed was the first two days of lessons to start him off. He was self sufficient. Tôbit knew this, but he could not help but be mightily impressed by his pupil's progress. This pleased Thäràc greatly. Just knowing the man was rewarding enough, but having him as a teacher was the highest of honours. His reverence was most manifest in his desire to impress his master. And that he did. By the end of the second day, Thäràc was able to generate a shield the size of an apple; an incredible achievement at such an early stage. He could also perform various other feats, but those were secondary. He was to practice as frequently as possible once he had left.

It was in the morning after the second night that Thäràc was ready to leave. Before training had commenced, he had this idea that somehow the following days would allow him some time to consider whether he should go away alone or with one or two suspicious characters at his side. As it happened, he had no time to think at all. The training demanded every bit of his attention, and especially his intellect. By the time of departure, he was no more ready to make the decision than he was when he first met Smoke. Since it did not go too heavily against Tôbits advice, and on the reasoning that he could always change his mind afterward, he decided they could both come along. Each was grateful for his/her own acceptance, but manifestly unhappy with the other's.

After bidding his master farewell, Thäràc took off to meet with his companions at the west gate. Harrow had left early in the morning to rent a new horse, and was waiting there with a beautiful black stallion when Thäràc arrived. Also waiting, in the care of the guards, was his own horse, which

Harrow had given him. He was just mounting when Smoke arrived. The horse she was riding was not the most attractive steed one would come across; its coat was a messy blend of various shades of brown, and its head was a little strange in shape. It was smaller than the other two, just the right size for a young teenager. No one knew where she had got it from.

Once they were together, the three headed off. The path between Érias and the next town had been badly neglected. It was not a popular route at all. The distance was about two miles. But the next village was too far off course towards their destination, so they strayed from the road. A few miles to the north loomed a mountain about three miles across, and half a mile high. This was Mount Miolnī, where they would soon be headed. Other than that the scenery for the first two miles was virtually featureless. The grass was there, but it was nothing special. Not that Thäràc had any interest in sightseeing. He spent that time practicing his magic. In fact, that was part of the reason he had chosen to go to Tôbit first; so that he had as much practice time as possible.

After a couple of miles, the trio crossed the road between Eridú in the north, and Cish in the south. Again they were about two miles apart. It was a block of four towns; Érias was in the south east, and to its north was Côba. In the west were Cish and Eridú. Southlake, Thäràc's home town, was a few miles to the south, to where the roads from Cish and Érias funnelled down. As he would eventually learn, it was the eastern towns that were hit by the raids before they reached his. This made sense, as the towns in the west were blocked from the north by the mountain.

By the time Thäràc and Smoke reached the line between those towns, the south-eastern river, which ran to their left, had come into view. This river ran from the north-west to the south-east, through Cish, and concluded at Southlake, which,

as few but Thäràc knew, was connected to the sea. It was the very same river Thäràc had taken in order to get there. The other thing that had come into view well before the river did was their destination, which sat about two and a half miles away. The place they were going to was an extremely narrow rock structure. It was some twenty or so stories high; at the bottom it was about as wide as a palace. A few stories up, however, it narrowed to about half that width. The tip was like that of a pin. It was a beautiful light yellow colour that had an almost mystical look to it. It was not entirely straight, except for the tip, and from top to bottom it was very rough and rocky. The name of this place was Bâbel.

Part of the river snaked right before it, compelling Thäràc and Smoke to bend their path just a little to the right when they drew near. When they reached the river, they discovered in a somewhat sudden manner that Thäràc's horse had become very thirsty. It went straight over and drank. Smoke's horse followed suit. And then, so did Thäràc. Smoke dismounted for a moment, but she did not drink, nor did Harrow. They just enjoyed the break. They looked around. To the north-east, Mount Miolnï loomed closer than ever. Straight to the east, of course, was the scar in the sky, and to the west, Bâbel. Immediately surrounding them, however, were strange rock structures that were of a similar nature to the great tower before them; including colour. They were of many different shapes and sizes. Some were Bâbel-like pins; others were complete loops that could be passed through on horseback. And the others comprised everything in between. Most were several stories high. There was barely any grass in this area, and the ground was quite solid. The river was very clear. Some years earlier, one looking through the water at a particular instant would have witnessed Thäràc in the shape of Gerra passing through. When Thäràc and the horses were done drinking they continued. Indeed, they did pass through

some large tunnels of rock, while steering clear of other more obstructive figures. All in good time they reached Bâbel.

On seeing it up close for the first time, Thäràc noticed that from top to bottom the structure was peppered with little openings. Occasionally flying in and out those openings were the same winged beings he had seen back at Treecastle: the cuôlva. It appeared that they had already seen Thäràc and the others approaching because when they arrived at the main entrance (if that is what it was) they were greeted by three winged gentlemen. The one in the centre looked quite old. He must have been the elder, thought Thäràc. To the old man's left was a woman about half his age, and to his right a young man. The old man spoke.

"You are here at last!" he said, "I am Mäcuïs. This here is my wife Nikita, and this is my son Tiúet. Please come in."

He was very 'proper' in the way he presented himself; a quick smile, an upright pose, and a very friendly, presentable tone of voice; but with just a hint of cheek. After inviting his visitors in he waited for their response. Promptly, they complied. On the way in, he continued.

"I was never told you would have company," he said.

"Neither was I," Thäràc replied.

This got a mean sounding giggle out of him.

"I see! Well not to worry, any children wielding lethal looking weapons are welcome here," he said having seen Smoke's sickle sheaths, "What's your name little girl?"

"Smoke," she answered, half smiling. Harrow rolled his eyes. He was not impressed by this person's strange sense of humour. After having their horses taken care of, Mäcuïs led them inside and then through an incredibly intricate maze of hallways and chambers of every shape and size. They eventually ended up in a rather small chamber with a single opening to the outside world. The room was empty.

“Like my room?” Mäcuïs asked.

“Uh... very nice,” said Thäràc, astonished at its plainness. Harrow searched the chamber for a single detail that would serve to preserve his sanity if he were to live in it. It reminded him of a model house he had made out of clay as a child, when he had not the skill to mould something as small and delicate as a lamp post.

“Yes, it has a great view. Anyway, let’s begin. I would hate to disappoint you but I cannot give you the Setharòn just yet.”

“Why not?” asked Thäràc.

“Because I do not have it. For complicated reasons we cannot keep it here. Sorry.”

Harrow was snickering.

“Where is it then?”

Mäcuïs gestured towards his window. Thäràc approached it, looked through, and found himself marvelling at a magnificent portrait of Mount Miolnï.

“I told you it was a good view,” said Mäcuïs, “It is there.”

“Then why in Ge`henna did we need to come here?!” said Harrow, loosing his restraint.

“Ah! That is the interesting bit. You see, Thäràc, this being the third war in human history, you will consequently be the third person in history to bear the celestial flame. I am sure you know your history. The first was Poiu. He was the hero of the war against the Army of Blood. You know that very well I am sure. Are you aware, however, of *how* he bore it?”

“Actually no, I don’t,”

“He carried it on a torch. You see, we were not given a great deal of knowledge about how the flame really works. Even Gerra himself could not tell us how to use it in this

world. So in the first trial the torch was the most advanced form in which we could give it to Poiu. Then came the Beast Wars. By then, and largely due to our experience with Poiu, we were able to make a great advancement. For Cain, the hero of the Beast Wars, we fused the Setharón into a sword; the very sword you wield now if I am correctly informed. Based on that experience, in turn, we are ready for the next step. When you come back with the Setharòn, we are going to tattoo it onto your skin.”

Thäràc did not really like the sound of that, but he was willing to go along with it. He had a bad feeling, however, that the worst news would be the answer to his original question: why come here first? That was exactly when the question was addressed.

“It will be a complicated and unpleasant process,” Mäcuïs continued, “before it can be done there is a procedure that must be performed on your body in order to prepare it. The effect will take two or three days to be complete.”

“It’s going to hurt isn’t it?” said Smoke with a smirk.

“Yep!” he chuckled wickedly, “please come with me.”

Chapter 6: The Fragile

Late in the afternoon, Thäràc, Smoke and Harrow were outside at the bottom-most entrance to Bâbel. Thäràc was in a state of induced weakness. The procedure that had just been performed on him over a matter of several hours had left him feeling as though his muscles were being tried by the simplest of movements. He also felt a bit nauseous. The procedure had involved needles, medicine and various other intrusive and painful tools, and he was told that for the next few hours his strength would be notably reduced and his sight and hearing made very sensitive. He now regretted the lack of exaggeration in that advice. Up in the sky, clouds were gathering. Beneath them, Thäràc and his companions were all mounted on their steeds and ready to leave; that is, right after some final words from Mäcuïs.

“As I said, the Setharòn is deep inside the mountain,” he said, “you will find the entrance at about an hour’s walk up the main path. Be careful though, the grèn`dela are savage, and fiercely territorial. Do not let their humanoid appearance deceive you, treat them as you would treat fèn`rïra.”

“Thanks for everything,” said Thäràc, massaging his aching upper arms, “I think.”

“And one more thing,” said Mäcuïs, “we have prepared something very special. And luckily you have come just in time to witness its beginning. It will happen in about ten minutes. I advise you not to stay here to watch it of course; it will be plainly visible wherever you are. When you come back I will tell you what it is.”

“Thanks again,” said Thäràc, “I will see you in a few days.”

“I hope so; farewell!”

“Farewell,” said Thäràc, and with that he and the others took off. Immediately it became clear that they would have to keep it slow because Thäràc’s condition would not allow otherwise. After riding toward the mountains at a steady pace for about five minutes, Thäràc started to look back occasionally to see if anything was happening. It was Smoke who first saw it, so the party could stop, turn around and watch. At the very tip of the tower there was a light. It was brighter and no bigger than a star. It was as though the tower was made of metal, and the sun was being reflected in the tip. Then the light grew. Along with its size grew its intensity, and the greater both became, the slower they grew. Eventually it had stopped completely; about the size of the sun, and almost as bright. A few seconds passed, and then the light shot up into the sky like a rocket. Thäràc watched as it passed through the heavy clouds and disappeared.

It was another twenty minutes’ travel before it occurred to Thäràc that the brightness of whatever that thing was would have been largely exaggerated by his present over-sensitivity of vision. When he asked the others what they saw he found that he was right. But what really bothered him were the clouds, and his anxiety would be justified. They were almost at the mountain when the clouds looked about ready to

produce a storm; something that really would not be good for Thäràc at all. Then it started raining. The rain felt very strange on his body, like it was coming out of him rather than falling on him. What is more, it did not fall lightly for long. It was not heavy rain, but it was heavy enough. Soon Thäràc heard distant thunder behind him. He became nervous. Then more thunder could be heard, as lightning struck in the distance around him. He started sweating. Then he started moving faster; enduring the pain, and becoming confused. Then he felt himself go faster still, though the effect was minimal. What it did do was increase his sense of urgency.

Soon, he reached the mountain. His destination was an area between the two inner walls of the mountain that curved inward into a ditch. He headed straight for it, hoping in all his pain that he could get there before the unthinkable happened. It did. At the exact instant that he was careless enough to gaze upward toward the summit, which was about a mile away, lightning struck it. A flash of light shattered Thäràc's fragile eyesight and for about a second there was a moment of silence where nothing could be seen but white. It was at the end of that moment while Thäràc had just put his left hand over his eyes when the sound hit him. The thunder was like an explosion in his ears. It sent him collapsing off his horse. He was still conscious, but terrified and helpless. He could not hear Harrow yelling at him, nor could he see him approach. It was not till he felt his hand on his shoulder that he had any idea of his whereabouts. Harrow stood him up, and as he was led back to his horse, Thäràc's vision started to return. Once he had remounted he could make out some basic details. The others knew that he had to get out of that storm as soon as possible. As it turned out Smoke knew of a small cove not far away; much closer than Híúm. She led them straight to it; allowing Thäràc to set the pace. By this point he was beginning to regain his hearing. While he was

now desensitized to the lightning and thunder they still hit him hard. And even the rain itself was starting to burn. After somewhere between one and five minutes of this they made it to the cove. Once inside Thäràc half dismounted and half fell off of his horse and lay face down on the floor covering his ears.

Eventually, Thäràc was able to regain his senses, which were even more sensitive than before. He sat up. Before him, in dim light, Smoke was lying on the floor with her arms crossed behind her head, while Harrow was sitting on a short flat rock. The difference between them was that Smoke seemed more bored and lazy than exhausted or traumatized, while Harrow looked like he was ready to call it a day. Thäràc knew he had to wait for the storm to end before he could leave. He decided it was best to lie down again with his hands constantly over his ears. This did not prevent them from clearly picking up Harrow's question, and the conversation which ensued.

"Aren't the cuôlva immortal?"

"Yes and no," Smoke replied. Harrow's question was obviously coming from the observation that some cuôlva were older than others.

"They do die, but they are reborn. Could you imagine how meaningless life would be if people never changed? If people never came and went? There would be no legacy; memories would remain stale. When the time comes, the individual's memories fade away and the spirit loses form. It is then reborn into a child, who lives and learns all over again. Their existence is eternal, but it is cyclic. Isn't it wonderful? Wouldn't you love to die knowing that you are about to live childhood once again? What more could you want?"

Listening to this, Thäràc was not sure if he approved. It did not seem that Smoke had ever felt the sort of loss that he

had. At this time in his life death was as bitter as reality could possibly be. When Cära died she took a lot of him with her, and the idea of not being reunited as lovers in a whole new world, but rather as a couple of infants introduced as strangers was not that appealing to him. Harrow did not seem to like the idea one bit.

“So Mäcuīs was born in the recent past but has existed for all of history?” asked Harrow.

“Precisely; *he* was a number of significant figures in fact.”

“Who exactly is this Mäcuīs anyway? Is he the one that makes all of the decisions?”

“Of course not!” Smoke snapped, “the *cuôlva* are not stupid you know! The Elder is simply consulted for his or her wisdom; as the person with the most life experience, he or she is generally regarded as the most reliable decision maker. Of course, that is not always true, and the Elders have been out ruled many times.”

Harrow seemed a little confronted by this remark.

“What do you mean stupid? That makes sense doesn’t it?”

Smoke smiled.

“To a *gîajîn*, yes.”

Harrow was quickly becoming agitated.

“Not entirely true actually. Some of us do not agree with that at all. Besides, if these *cuôlva* are so wise, why did they send Thäràc out like this when a storm was obviously brewing? Surely Mäcuīs was aware of the effect it would have on him. So they could not even predict the immediate weather?”

Smoke went silent, as though in thought.

“Hmmm, good point actually. You are right; it is not like them at all.”

“And since you are a dêva...”

“Am I?” Smoke grinned, “what makes you think that?”

“Please, only a dêva would say something like ‘they are not stupid so...’”

“You really don’t know how much has changed do you?”

Smoke was becoming particularly spiteful.

“Poor Harrow. I keep forgetting just how long you have been buried for.”

“What do you mean?”

“And I quote...”

In the beginning, when the Nameless Gods created the Earth and all of its inhabitants, they accomplished their task with great splendour, but not perfection, for their powers were limited by the laws of the infinite universe with which they coexisted. And thus they created humankind. Why do some among us look upon our race with optimism? At what time in our history has there not occurred the horrors of torture and tyranny on account of our feeble minded ways?

The Nameless Gods took pity on us, and so they sent us a most merciful gift. They poured their wisdom into the likes of men, and sent them to all lands, as angles of deliverance. Now this grace was received with joy and thanksgiving among peoples of all parts of the world except for one: that mysterious and strange land known by the name of Pán`gaia. In their pride and stubbornness, those primitive people regarded their salvation as an aberration of nature, and began a most horrible war, in the course of which the perfect ones were persecuted by their twisted king, who had even succeeded in destroying the great hero from heaven who had lead the perfect ones against the lurker in the dark.

His malice in war was unleashed with the power of earth's then fiercest creatures, and the perfect ones were made to respond in kind. When they won the war, the one called Mammon disappeared, and the original inhabitants of that land, who had sympathised with the king, were all but exterminated. The remainder, a minority in what was now the home land to the perfect ones, were governed over with compassion and good will, but in their ungratefulness, they maintained against all evidence that it was the perfect ones, not Mammon, who had started that most horrible war. It is written firmly in their history books even today.

But beyond the borders of Pán`gaia, the saviours were, though not without exception, welcomed and praised. Their wisdom was consulted in matters of law and religion, and their philosophy was unmatched by the most profound of human thinkers. And in the time of the Great War between the nations, their military council was unparalleled in logic, and their diplomacy, having alleviated so much conflict and suffering, ultimately brought peace. It is their contribution to the very survival of our unworthy race for which they have been almost unrelentingly praised. It was indeed a mercy of fate, for the onset of that unspeakable conflict occurred at a time when the perfect ones had barely accustomed themselves to the overseas world. What would have become of us, had the perfect ones arrived but a moment later?

Harrow responded immediately.

“So just because that story says that the dêvas are superior, you believe...”

“That the author believed them superior? Yes, most likely.”

“That is not what I was going to say!”

“No,” said Smoke with wicked grin, “it’s not.”

Chapter 7: The Lady at the White Lyre

The rain had stopped, and the lightning was long gone. By this time it was evening. Thäràc felt better, but was still weak. Without a moment to lose, he, Smoke and Harrow mounted their horses, which had waited so patiently, and continued on toward the town that lay before them. It was frustrating that Thäràc now had to move even slower than before. As they approached the village from its right they could already see many of the houses. Hiúm was a town embedded between two parts of the same mountain. It was a path that twisted around between the mountain walls and at places was very thin. There were also various houses built onto (and into) the mountain itself, though never higher than a few stories. Beyond the path was a wide, round area, that was completely enclosed by the mountain. In the centre was a lake, which was currently quite high because of the storm that had just passed. Around the lake and near the mountainous wall was a ring of buildings varying in shape and size.

When Thäràc and company finally reached the front of the town one of the first things they saw was a bar called the ‘White Lyre’. According to Smoke, it was one of Hiúm’s key features, the first and foremost reason being that it was a

gîajìn bar, one of very few known to common ears. Like most places, it had been built before the Turning, but had recently been restored. It seemed like the logical place to start. The man at the door was happy to take their horses to the town staple, provided he earned a few silver pieces in the process. On entering, the three found the White Lyre to be well furnished. From the front door the bar was on the left. At the far end of the room was the dining area. Elsewhere it was just round drinking tables. It was a pretty busy evening; the tables were about half filled with sober gentlemen, and half filled with drunken sods. Harrow insisted on grabbing a pint, and so he and Smoke went to the bar while Thäràc, not presently too interested in ale, started asking around for Izríá. Nobody was able to help him except for a mature blonde woman with piercing eyes, who was sitting at a round table in the middle with a pint.

“I can take you to Izríá’s house,” she said, “but you look terrible, can I buy you a drink?”

“I don’t think so,” said Thäràc “I must get moving.”

“Well I am not going anywhere just yet,” said the woman, “So you may as well refresh yourself. What do you say?”

She was smiling at him in this wicked way that Thäràc found oddly persuasive. Feeling like a puppet, he asked for a lager. He had to admit it felt good.

“Pretty good isn’t it?” she said, between sips of ale, “I was never much of a lager person myself though. Funny, you do not strike me as a lager type either.”

“You see a lot,” replied Thäràc.

“Pity. You look like you could use something endorsing.”

“You could not be more right.”

The conversation went on for about half an hour. This woman had a strange hold on him. When she spoke she

habitually tilted her head slightly forward, so that her eyes looked up at him. This accented the loose skin beneath her eyes, indicating that she was older than she looked at first glance. Yet, this subtle aging effect made her curiously attractive. The way she spoke to him with that wicked smile and completely unbroken eye contact gave her a lot of charisma. When she listened, however, she would rest her head on her hand and smile more sympathetically. Thäràc felt as though he could talk about anything.

“No one should ever have to walk the earth with a picture like that in his head.”

“You should meet this friend of mine, you sound just like her.”

“Oh, you mean Gàbríel.”

“You know her?” asked Thäràc surprised.

“Of course I do. She is amazing isn’t she? So incredibly brilliant, yet so incredibly dull. She can see inside people as though their eyes are little windows. Yet, she has little more value than her words. It is often easy to forget that she is merely a construct rather than a person.”

As she spoke her chin was rested on her hand, and her eyes were staring into the space above Thäràc.

“It seems sad but really it is not. If she was designed to take the hearts of men it would be a tragedy. Thankfully, no man could ever be any more interested in her than she could be in him, despite her looks. But then, you know don’t you, that although she is not a real human, she is, in fact, a real *raven*.”

“How do you know her so well?”

“Well, who do you think told me to wait here for you?”

Thäràc had completely forgotten the reason he was there.

“You’re Izríá?”

“Correct,” she replied, “Gâbríel told me so much about you. She never mentioned you would have company though.”

Izríá nodded towards Smoke and Harrow, who looked like they were in the process of making friends over at the bar.

“They are both still strangers,” said Thäràc, “both practically turned up on my doorstep, only a few days apart.”

“Do you trust them?”

“I don’t know. But they came to my aid when I needed them. So far they seem...”

“Honest?”

“I think they are reliable,” said Thäràc, watching the two socialising from behind his glass, “and responsible.”

Over at the bar, Harrow was seated on a bench with a pint in hand, looking incredibly board. Smoke was consuming the attention of a fairly tall and bulky individual. The conversation was unfolding thus:

“And what do you mean by that?”

“Nothing improper,” said Smoke politely, “why are you looking at me like that?”

“Because I don’t like you!” the man sneered.

Smoke pouted.

“That is a shame, I am sure you would like me if you got to know me?”

“Trust me,” said Harrow between lethargic sips of stout, “you won’t.”

Back at the table, Thäràc’s attention favoured Izríá, as she revealed the multiplicity of other occasions in which she had dealt with Gâbríel. Then, finally, she got to business.

“Anyway, to the point now, you are here to learn how to use magic in combat are you not? Splendid, I have not taught

magic for a very long time. I, am however, more capable than I might appear.”

“Is it difficult?”

“Not at all actually! You would think after driving yourself nuts trying to get that shield right that combat magic would be a killer. It will take longer to learn yes, but unlike defence you can practice it in a real fight without a disadvantage. And since you have already begun the practice of magic, your lessons should be far more productive, and the benefits instant.”

“Sounds great,” said Thäràc, “are we ready to leave then?”

Izríà rolled her eyes in apparent irritation.

“Yes, I suppose so,” she sighed, “let’s go.”

So the two left the White Lyre, collecting Smoke and Harrow along the way. Harrow would not leave before draining his glass, and Smoke regretted having to leave at all. After a brief introduction, in which Izríà understood completely Thäràc’s hesitancy toward the two, she proceeded to lead them to her house. On the way there she continued her debriefing.

“I understand, by the way, that you are in a delicate state right now, and I’m sorry to say that the training will not accommodate that very well. All the more reason to get some sleep first.”

Izríà’s house was built into the mountain. In fact, as it turned out, the mountain technically *was* the house. It was simply a walled up cave. The wall was like any other, with windows and a door. Inside, it was divided into two bedrooms, a living room, a bathroom and a kitchen. When they arrived, Izríà prepared a quick but surprisingly enjoyable dinner. Smoke, for some reason, did not eat. In fact, Thäràc had never seen Smoke eat or drink. Apparently she always went off and managed to find something of her

own. After dinner they retired. Thäràc got the spare bedroom, and Smoke was happy with the couch. It took some time to find a suitable resting place for Harrow, though Smoke did make some remark about the unfortunate lack of a good backyard.

The next morning the lessons began. Thäràc did feel better after that sleep, but day one was one of the most strenuous. The lessons indeed would have been easier if it were not for his handicapped physical state. They also would have been harder if it were not for his minuscule but significant background in defensive magic. After the first few days it started to come very naturally. Smoke and Harrow opted to spend the entire time back at the White Lyre, where they seemed to have finally found some common ground. Smoke took on the task of checking on the horses. The man who was minding them was doing a great job. They were well fed, and the man's daughter groomed all but Smoke's own horse out of pleasure every day. While she checked on the horses, Harrow checked on Thäràc. Once it looked like he was almost done, he and Smoke went back, stayed and waited. The effects of the procedure at Bâbel on Thäràc's body lessened every day and his condition improved greatly.

It was very early in the morning on the ninth day that the bare minimum training had been complete. Thäràc had almost completely recovered and was strong. All that actually remained were traces of his sensitivity to light and sound. He had no time to lose. He had breakfast and then left with the others, regrettably. His teacher bid him well, and he was sorry to be parting. She was a good woman to know, and Thäràc really needed good company at this point in his life. Thäràc decided, obviously enough, that they should leave their horses where they were. It was time for them to seek out the Setharòn. All they needed was to be led to the right path up the mountain. This occurred to Thäràc minutes after

they parted, and he ended up knocking on Izríá's door again. She agreed to show him. On the way she warned him about the grèn`dela; the aggressive humanoid creatures that dwelt up in the mountain. They did not sound like much of a threat to be sure, but Thäràc was never one to not take warnings seriously. When they reached the path Izríá saw him off with a kiss and a few quick reminders about combat magic. To his surprise, she was almost as warm in parting with Smoke and Harrow. She promised she would check on the horses, then she went back home. Smoke turned to Thäràc with a dark smile and said, "Lovely isn't she?"

They began up the mountain. The path they were on varied tremendously. At places it was very rugged; elsewhere it was smooth. Sometimes it was straight; sometimes it wound wildly. It varied from very narrow to a dozen feet wide; and while sometimes it ascended steadily, other times it was markedly steep. Some parts involved climbing. After about three quarters of an hour the sun had risen; though they could not see it. They had got quite high, and the path was fairly wide. Up in the distance Thäràc began to see movement, and continued to for the next ten minutes. Then, from around the next corner a few yards away, Thäràc could here light footfalls. Smoke, without the increased sensitivity to sound, heard them after he did. Harrow never heard anything. They readied themselves and waited.

A few seconds later a group of six humanoid creatures emerged. They were short; about four and a half feet high. They had loose grey skin, and were incredibly thin, such that their rib cages and spines were very visible. They were badly hunched over and their gait was feeble. They had human-like hands and feet, and their faces even more so; but looked badly aged and frail. Two of them had clubs. They stopped in their tracks for a moment, and hissed; showing surprisingly fierce looking fangs. Thäràc started focusing energy into his

sword. It was probably overkill, but it was practice. Realising that their intruders were not going anywhere the creatures advanced. They spread out and circled him, being weary of his companions. Then, they closed in. Before any of them could get too close, Thäràc started cutting through them. The magic made it feel easier than usual. As soon as the fight started they were having second thoughts. Three of them got away from Thäràc and went for Smoke. Thäràc, on slashing through the third, turned around just in time to see the last two hit the ground. It took another second for the blood to fall; though her sickles were hardly stained. This was the first time he had seen her fight, and he was now rather intimidated; not for the first time. Smoke did not smile or anything. She just kept moving, expecting Thäràc to do the same. And so, he did. Harrow followed behind sheathing his own blade, which was not stained at.

It took another fifteen minutes to reach the entrance to the mountain's interior. On the way there were three more attacks. The grèn`dela did not seem to have much of a sense of tactic, like that of the fèn`rïra. It was great practice for Thäràc's magic. They approached the entrance. Deep inside it they could see firelight.

Chapter 8: Mo`nera does not Care

As the party entered the mountain's interior the path ahead became increasingly clear. It was basically a rocky tunnel that twisted around, and was lined up with torches that lit their way. It was rather annoying to discover a fork in the path not fifteen yards inside. This had occurred to them of course, but they would have appreciated at least some progress before such an issue arose. Just when they were about to go left they noticed a small ledge of stone protruding from the wall above and between the two paths. Perched on the ledge like a statue was a raven. The moment they saw it, the bird flew down and transformed, not with a bang, but rather a curious tug on a strip of parchment. Before they knew it, they were standing before Gâbríel. Her gaze was fixed on Smoke.

“What are you doing here?”

“Nice to see you too Gâbríel,” Smoke replied, “how is the weather at Treecastle?”

Thäràc was surprised.

“You know her?”

“Yes. She and the Guardian have a history.”

Gâbríel seemed neither happy nor bitter to see her. Likewise, Smoke hardly looked intimidated; as one would be when suddenly confronted by an old enemy or competitor. In fact her dark smile suggested delight.

“Here to show us around?”

“Correct. This way please.”

Showing no sign of interest in the others, she led them down the corridor on the right. This path went some way before the party came across a lone grendel in a crouching position gnawing on what looked like a piece of meat. It was facing the other direction, and it appeared to be unaware of intruders. Smoke, standing beside him, eagerly began to move in but Thäràc laid his hand on her shoulder, gesturing for her to hold back. As she stood there pouting Thäràc stepped forward. Holding his sword in his left hand, he held up his right. With a bit of effort he started concentrating energy into his palm. It could be seen as a pale purple sphere that grew as the energy accumulated. As it grew, it started making a noise that could only be described as... noise. The grendel did not hear it, probably because it was obviously enjoying its food so much and did not appear to have ears. Once Thäràc felt his full power in the missile he pushed it forward as fast as he could without losing much accuracy. It was a direct hit. The grendel was knocked violently to the ground screaming. Then it was dead. Thäràc then felt Smoke’s hand patting him on the back. They continued on, and shortly came to another fork. Beyond this they came across a pack of grèn`dela. The size of the tunnel forbade them from circling Thäràc, who always stood in front. Using his magic as much as he could, he cut through the lot. He and the others passed through several more intersections and grèn`dela before they finally came to an open area.

It was about the size of a house, and had several stone pillars dispersed throughout. Each pillar had a torch burning

on it. In the far right was a large creature. It looked like a grendel, but was about twice the height, and was very fat. When it saw Thäràc and his company, it charged. Thäràc held his sword ready and filled it with energy causing it to glow with a strong purple aura. Then, when the creature was almost in reach, he stepped in and slashed it from the left shoulder to the right hip. Immediately he sidestepped left, and then he swung his sword straight through its torso from back to front. It hit the ground in less than a second. Gâbríel gestured towards the path opposite from where they had come. They proceeded. The path went through several more forks and similarly large chambers. As they went further, their path became infested with grèn`dela. The larger creatures appeared mainly alone or in pairs. As Thäràc went through them he felt his power grow stronger and stronger. He had never expected himself to improve so fast. Besides all of the encounters, there was one other thing that put a halt to their progress.

They were going through a corridor, dimly lit like all the others. After going through a bend in the path they saw that the next section was more brightly illuminated. When they got there, a small chamber that connected two pathways to the one from which they came, they were stunned to see writing carved on the wall; sandwiched between two rows of torches. This is what it said:

Dhòz hú síc dh Setharòn nô dhis. Mo`nera uaits
fó iú. Hí uill manifèst hìm`self to dh síce ov dh
hevenlí fíe. Hí uill mâc uí fít fó it. Iú uill lív uidh dh
Setharòn ó not at óll. Mo`nera dâz not cé.

Thäràc turned to Gâbríel. She shook her head. Nor could Smoke provide any insight. There was nothing to say. Thäràc

was now burdened with a sense of dread, as though he had just been informed that he was heading towards a death trap. But he would not let it interfere with his goal. They kept moving.

Eventually they reached a chamber far greater than the others. Its pillars were huge; up to seven foot wide. The ceiling was nine or ten stories high, and the walls went further than the firelight radiating from the pillars. Scattered throughout the chamber were several of the large grendel-like beasts. Some of them were wielding huge clubs; some of these were spiked.

“The path leading to Setharòn is down that way,” said Gâbríel, pointing towards their left, “we should try to sneak past them.”

“Good idea,” said Smoke, “boring but good. If we encounter one, I’ll take him. I can do it quietly.”

“Fair enough,” sighed Thäràc. For such a brilliant swordsman he never had much of an ego, but he really wanted to keep using his magic; not so much for pride, but practice. At the mouth of the tunnel, the party stood at a level a good few feet higher than the space before them. In fact, the ground throughout was very uneven. When the timing seemed right, they headed left, down a steep dip of about three feet. Gâbríel led them through the cleanest path.

They were about halfway through when they found themselves increasingly in close proximity to several of the large creatures. As hard as they tried to sneak through, one of the fiends spotted them from five or six yards away. Harrow, his bow in hand, drew back an arrow. Smoke, without the slightest hesitation, raced at the creature with frightening speed. It had just started to snarl loudly when Smoke leapt up and sliced straight through its throat in one wide swing of her right sickle. The sound ceased the instant

she struck, but it was too late. The snarl, though literally cut short, was heard. As the enemy fell, two more approached. Again, Smoke went for them. Luckily, neither had a club, so she lined herself up so they were parallel in her sight and leapt between them. This time neither got the chance to raise the alarm. Smoke landed on her feet behind them, seconds before they hit the ground. She turned to face her companions.

There was a silence. Then, more of the creatures started to appear from every angle. Some had huge clubs. They started charging. Thäràc confronted two, both with clubs. He charged his sword with magic and went for the closer one on the right. He went through its stomach. The other swung at him with its club. Instinctively, he held up his sword in defence. The club came down hard on it, and was instantly repelled. A purple haze was emanating from the blade, and it flashed white at the moment of contact. Before he could counter-attack, Smoke appeared out of nowhere, and started hacking into it furiously with both sickles. When Thäràc looked around him he saw that she had already cleaned out the area save for a few larger ones with spiked clubs. Thäràc and Smoke ran for them and took them on, one each. Thäràc dodged a deadly swing and thrust his sword through its chest. When the creature tried to raise its weapon again he twisted the blade as he pulled it out, cut clean through the club, and then through its neck. As the headless body fell to its knees and then thumped flat on the ground, Thäràc looked to see how Smoke was doing. She was not there. Her enemy was dead, and she had already moved on to another that had appeared behind Thäràc. While there were temporarily no more in sight, Gâbríel led them the rest of the way. Harrow, still standing in the same spot, relaxed his arrow, the same one he had first drawn from his quiver.

In good time, the pathway to Setharòn was near in sight. They were about seventeen or so yards away when a group of three more of the creatures gathered by the entrance; two of them with clubs. Thäràc, not slowing down, charged his sword strenuously; and when he was about ten feet away from the stupid creatures that remained close together, he tore his sword horizontally through the air. This released a wave of energy that knocked down all three. It did not kill them though. Thäràc just ran past them and proceeded straight down the corridor.

The next chamber was just starting to come into view when all of a sudden a barrier came down behind him, separating him from the others. Warily, he proceeded into the room. It was fairly large; about thirteen or fourteen yards across. It was square, but with curving corners, and the whole chamber was carved out of the rock. It was very brightly lit by a fire that completely circled the room halfway up the two story wall. Halfway from the corners of the room to the centre were four square pillars; about seven yards apart. The square within the pillars was like a terraced pyramid, with steps leading to a pedestal in the centre from all sides. It was not very steep. Sitting on the pedestal was what looked like a rock.

Thäràc approached the steps. When he reached them he was halted by some sort of disturbance in the space between him and the pedestal. All of a sudden the air around him felt cold. Then he saw something that could not be described without great difficulty. It looked like electricity but it was not. It was like a dark mist but it was not. It looked like a storm but it was not. It went on for a few seconds. Then it suddenly exploded in a blinding light whose colour Thäràc could not quite place. It forced him to cover his eyes. Then, about a second later, the light went away. Slowly but surely he uncovered his eyes. Standing before him was a horrific

looking serpent. It had three heads, each one stretching around two feet from the base. Each head had a ferocious appearance. The one in the middle was demonic; halfway between a human and a snake, while the other two were more snakelike. Even more bizarre was the fact that it also had three arms; one on the right and two on the left. In its left hands were strange objects that he could not identify. They were held by handles, and pointed in the same direction as the arms like extended fingers. More threatening (at least in appearance) was the sword in its right hand. It was not very long; shorter than his, in fact. But it was no less terrifying. The upper third was split into two claw-like shapes facing each other. The creature's arms were long and skinny, and seemed to be coming out of its back. It was hard to tell because much of its body was hidden behind a large solid steel shield. Below the shield the serpent stood on its lower body, and its tail was coiled in an almost complete circle around it. The creature did not look terribly diplomatic.

"You must be Mo`nera," said Thäràc.

"Unfortunately for you, that is correct," replied the middle head in a disturbingly human-like voice.

"Do you know my name?" asked Thäràc.

"No."

"My name is Thäràc; slayer of the White Beasts."

"*Who* you are does not matter," said Mo`nera, "it's *where* you are that matters: here. looking for the fire obviously. Or did you take a wrong turn at the White Lyre?"

So far the head in the middle had done all the talking.

"My feats go further than you might realise. You do not scare me. Nor do they."

He gestured with his eyes towards the other two heads. "Step aside lest I decide which ones I find too ugly to stay."

"Well, let's see you then."

Thäràc did not hesitate for an instant. He charged his sword to unprecedented power and went in for the kill. His sword went straight through Mo`nera's middle neck; and did nothing. Then he went through his lower body and then his right arm; again with no effect. Mo`nera had barely moved. Then, before Thäràc could make another attempt, the creature's tail rapidly uncoiled and knocked him violently off the steps. Landing on the ground, he was perplexed until he realised to his horror that he was facing a spirit being; a demon. What is more, he was at his mercy.

"I am afraid that thing is useless to you right now," said Mo`nera, "how do you expect to defeat a master if you do not even have the right weapon?"

Without warning, the demon tossed his sword to Thäràc; handle first. Thäràc caught it. Then Mo`nera held out that same hand and in a flash another, identical sword appeared in his grasp. Thäràc quickly got up, leaving the Sword of Cain on the ground. His new weapon felt very strange. It was extraordinarily light, and he did not feel the capacity to enhance it with magic. Feeling however deprived he went in a second time. This time his swing was met with a firm block; the fight had begun.

First off, Thäràc was on the offensive, swinging his sword at the demon from all angles. Each swing was stopped in a violent clash. Then, Mo`nera managed to shake off his opponent, and force him into defence. He forced him back down the stairs. The two combatants were both equally fast and agile, though Mo`nera had by far the superior strength. The fight circled the room as a frenzy of clashing metal. At times Mo`nera quickly slid around to take Thäràc on from an

unexpected angle. For a creature with no legs he could move incredibly fast. Thäràc was able to promptly counter these trick manoeuvres with amazingly swift retaliation. The pendulum of defence swung between them until it evened out into a perfect harmony of mutual combat with no subservience. Then it became faster; and faster. Soon the fight became so fast that when Thäràc finally faltered, he was thrown into a non-defensive stance. Without wasting a second, Mo`nera took this chance and knocked him onto the ground once again with his tail. He hit the ground hard. Then he swiftly looked towards his foe, expecting to see him moving in for the kill. In fact, the demon just stood there; the middle head smiling. Then he spoke.

“Enjoy your prize.”

Without another word, Mo`nera disappeared in the same inexplicable fashion as he had appeared before, leaving Thäràc with the otherworldly sword still in hand. He had a feeling that the weapon would come in use in the future. Furthermore, he was now free to claim the Setharòn. He was actually unsure which ‘prize’ the demon had referred to; but he was happy with both. He climbed to his feet. Then, he walked humbly up the steps and beheld the fire that sat on the pedestal. Except it was not a fire; it was a rock. It was indeed strange looking, like no rock he had ever seen before. It was like coal, only shiny and with a hint of blue. It was covered in veins of what looked like some sort of fiery substance. Cautiously, Thäràc reached out to touch it. It did not burn him. Nor did the fiery veins seem to produce any great heat. Caution aside, he picked it up. It was then that he saw Gâbríel, Harrow and Smoke enter the room; the tunnel having been reopened.

Chapter 9: Revelations

Thäràc did not have much difficulty making his way back out of the mountain. As it turned out, while he was separated from the others and busy fighting Mo`nera, Smoke had made her time clearing the previous area of any potential threat. When they were finally outside the mountain, it was still morning. As there were no grèn`dela nearby, Thäràc reported his experience with a demon as they descended back to Hiúm. The others knew nothing. Gâbríel on the other hand, had something to say about his new sword.

“This is a spiritual weapon,” she explained, “it is no more capable of cutting through jam than yours is of cutting air. But it can tear your soul to shreds without spilling a drop of blood. You cannot channel magic through it, not yet anyway. I advise you to see Izríá. She might be able to show you how.”

Gâbríel paused.

“But you currently have other concerns, and these lie less with your enemies than with your company.”

“What do you mean by that?”

Smoke, who had been taking the lead and pacing a few yards in front, suddenly spun around and moved right up to

him, smiling darkly. Harrow stopped in his tracks and watched with suspicion.

“What her lady of riddles is trying to say is: how much do you trust me?”

Thäràc looked at her as though he were a child who had just been threatened; by another child incidentally, as Smoke looked no older than fifteen years old herself.

“I was never quite certain,” he answered.

“Then you should feel lucky that you have come across some form of defence,” said Gàbríel.

“What are you saying?” asked Thäràc, missing the obvious answer as he sometimes did.

“Did she not tell you? She is a ghost.”

A white horror washed over Thäràc’s face. It was frightening enough travelling with an extremely clever and shockingly ferocious warrior with an uncertain ambition. Now it turned out she was almost untouchable and hence no less dangerous than Mo`nera. From that point on, he thought, he would be sleeping with that sword under his pillow. Though he did not show it, Harrow felt little more comfortable.

“I knew you were special!” he said, “what else do you have to tell us?”

“Don’t worry,” said Smoke, still addressing Thäràc, “Gerra will protect you, (though maybe not Harrow). Besides, you were not actually *defenceless*; anything that spills blood, such as my sickles, can be repelled by anything that also spills blood, such as your sword of ol’ what’s his face.”

“Cain,” said Gàbríel, not amused, “Smoke’s weapons, Thäràc, are what is called ‘Bi-substantial’. They are both material and spiritual, just like yourself.”

“Sickles with souls,” Smoke teased, “but again do not worry; if I turned on you your spirit would probably come out okay.”

“I am sorry, ‘probably’ does not quite do it for me,” said Thäràc.

“Well, put it this way,” said Smoke, “combine the slim chance of me turning on you, with the slim chance of me destroying your soul if I do, and you might find that the overall chances of the latter happening are far more slim, wouldn’t you agree?”

Her smile became more and more creepy as she continued.

“Unfortunately though, while *I* know that the chances of me turning on you are slim, *you* do not. Isn’t trust a wonderful thing?”

If this was supposed to make Thäràc feel better, it failed. Gâbríel, on the other hand, could.

“She speaks the truth.”

“Oh dang, I forgot about that. Gâbríel the lie detector has ruined the fun once again.”

“So what is your story?” asked Gâbríel, “what led you to him?”

It was not until then that Thäràc started to see that for the first time there was a marked lack of certainty in Gâbríel’s senses. This alone was too much. All of a sudden, everything about this girl was terrifying him. Smoke’s answer to Gâbríel’s question and Gâbríel’s response were no more comforting.

“She joined the Vîje`lîz,” said Harrow.

“Just to check out the happenings,” said Smoke, “when I found them out, I decided to maximise my service.”

“I did not see you while I was giving out my instruction,” said Gâbríel, looking increasingly serious, “a fully armed fourteen year old girl does not blend into a crowd easily Smoke; especially a familiar one. You chose not to be seen.”

“I like to keep a low profile,” she responded, with only the slightest trace of defensiveness, “now if you look behind you, you will see that the grèn`dela do not.”

Thäràc turned and saw a relatively large group of the creatures.

“If you will excuse me.”

And with that she ran back like a blood-crazed psycho. Gâbríel turned to Thäràc.

“Do not fear her. Her history with me is clean. I know you have never known me to have trouble reading a person’s motives, but I feel sure enough. And do not think lowly of her. She does not mean to make you feel so troubled. Smoke is just... to put it basically, mad. Besides, I have a surprise for you; and I promise it will make you feel better.”

Then Gâbríel turned to Harrow.

“And I don’t know what your business is, but your heart is true. Thäràc can at least rest any doubt about you.”

There must have been a lot of grèn`dela to keep Smoke from interrupting the conversation for this long. There were. After she returned, the road to Híúm was peaceful. Even she did nothing to break the silence.

Within an hour, the four were back with Izríá. She was examining the Soul Sword closely, going over it with her keen, beautiful eyes.

“It has been a long time since I have dealt with a spirit weapon,” she said.

“Can I channel magic through it?” asked Thäràc.

“No,” said Izríà, “not the sort of magic I do, anyway. But you really ought to hang on to it. It could save your life; your more *permanent* one that is.”

“But isn’t storage going to be a problem?” said Gâbríel.

“Whatever do you mean?” replied Izríà.

“Well how is Thäràc going to carry a spiritual item without keeping it in his hand at all times?”

Izríà laughed.

“You’re still pretty Gâbríel, but you must be getting old.”

She held the sword in her right hand. Then it disappeared. She then held out her left hand in such a manner as though she were holding a sword. The sword reappeared in that hand, the same way it had disappeared; and also the same way another such weapon had appeared in Mo`nera’s hand not two hours earlier. Thäràc liked the idea.

“I can show you how to do this Thäràc. It will take a few hours, but it will be worth it.”

And so, Thäràc spent his afternoon learning how to deposit the Soul Sword into some unknown storage area; and then summon it at will. Izríà’s was a friendly face that Thäràc needed to see, and her words were humane and uplifting. But Thäràc was still hurting in many ways, and amazingly it was the cold Gâbríel who had the answer. After the lesson was finished, she entered the room and gestured for him to come. It was time for the surprise.

Thäràc was not sure where they were going. Gâbríel had sternly told Smoke to stay. Luckily, she chose to comply. Even Thäràc knew better than to ask questions. Yet, when they arrived at the staple the horses had been deposited, he could not help himself.

“What are we doing here?”

Gâbríel did not say. Smoke's horse was at the trough, Harrow's and Thäràc's were grazing. Thäràc looked at Gâbríel with confusion.

"Do you not recognise her?" she asked, "look closer."

Thäràc had no idea what to make of this, but he approached his steed. It was certainly happy to see him; it came up and licked him. He stroked its mane and then watched it move on to the trough. Nothing yet. Thäràc kept looking. He stood there for minutes watching its behaviour and its movement, until suddenly he was struck with an overwhelming feeling of crazed joy and astonishment. He approached it while it was grazing. The animal rose up to greet him. He put his hands on either side of its head, and then stared into its right eye. Then he broke down into a strange display of tears and laughter. Still looking into its eyes he said in a broken voice and with a half smile: "Cära." He embraced her. Gâbríel gave them a good three minutes before deciding he was likely enough to listen to her.

"You remember when she promised she would never leave you," she said, "well as it turns out she never did. When she died she looked for a way to return to you; and to serve you. Her love brought her back to you Thäràc, and it has not weakened. But she forbids you from keeping her out of danger. She did not return just to make you both happy; she came to serve your cause. She is now the greatest steed in the world, and you cannot turn her away."

"Never," he said to Cära, "you will carry both me and my heart from here on."

"And I am afraid those are all the words we have time for," interrupted Gâbríel, "it's time to go. I will collect the others and then we will leave this village. Mount your horse Thäràc. I will meet you at the White Lyre."

And so Thäràc rode to the entrance of the White Lyre and waited. In good time, he saw Smoke and Harrow approaching on horseback. When they arrived, Thäràc started grinning at Harrow, who, so far, had no idea what he had done to deserve it.

“So, how did you say you came across this horse?”

Harrow looked confronted.

“Well... she seemed to like the look of me, I don’t know!”

Thäràc snickered before giving away the horses identity. Harrow was quite stunned.

“So you did save her?”

“I gue... I mean yes!”

Not too far behind the others, Izríà and Gàbríel were coming up together. The partings were brief. The party, now consisting of Thäràc, Smoke, Harrow, Gàbríel, Cära and two other horses, departed from Mount Miolnï, leaving Izríà to retreat to the White Lyre to drink to the success of her first pupil in over a century, and the finest she had ever had.

Chapter 10: The Walkway to Power

The return to Bâbel was a lot smoother than the previous trip from it had been. He was no longer weakened by the procedure whose purpose was about to be fulfilled. Nor was it raining, and the sunny afternoon always felt easier than a stormy evening. It was no time at all before they reached the tower. As before, they were greeted when they got there by Mäcuïs. This time only his son Tiúet was with him. He addressed Thäràc, Smoke and Harrow before their horses had fully halted.

“Looks like things went well,” he said.

“Hello Mäcuïs,” said Thäràc, “yes, I feel better now.”

“It would be disturbing if you didn’t. How do you like our new moon?” he said.

Thäràc had no idea what he was talking about. Mäcuïs, not surprised, pointed toward the sky directly over Bâbel. Thäràc looked up, and beyond the tower, which itself seemed to shoot up into the sky, was what could only be described as a large speck. Having something of the same nature as the bright missile that had launched from Bâbel’s tip some days before, it was about one third the size that the moon used to

be, but with no clear outline. Of course, it was not all that visible at that time of day. He turned back to Mäcuís.

“So that’s what you’re doing?”

“Correct; we are constructing a new moon to replace the broken one. It’s not easy I can tell you; but we’re getting there. Be thankful, it will help light your path at night. It is also lighting people’s lives. They miss the moon, and we could never truly replace it, but our creation should give people some much needed comfort.”

Minutes later, Mäcuís had led them to a large round chamber about a dozen yards across, about half way up the tower. In the centre was a round table; large enough for a human to lie on. They were waiting for Tiúet. He was the one who had previously performed the procedure that left Thäràc so frail. Likewise, he was the one who would perform the tattooing. As they waited, Mäcuís chattered away.

“Now this will not be as bad as before,” he said, “nor will it have significant after effects. But it will still hurt. My son is a virtual master at this; you could be in no better hands.”

“Good to know,” said Thäràc.

That was when Tiúet walked in. In his hand was some strange instrument that Thäràc could not have described. He asked for the Setharòn. Thäràc gave him the rock he had collected after crossing swords with Mo`nera. Tiúet observed it carefully. Then he asked his subject to strip his torso and lie face down on the table. Thäràc complied. He had no idea what was happening until he felt a very sharp, hot sting in the centre of his back. He did not make a sound; he just lay there and waited for it to end.

By the time Tiúet was finished, it was evening. Finally allowed to sit up on the table, Thäràc was very sore but not very weak. In fact, in many ways he felt stronger. It all came back to him; the feeling of intense power that he had

experienced when he earned Gerra's spirit. Now, of course, it felt different. To Tiúet's instructions, he stood up. The tattooist observed his work. The tattoo was dark red and had a burning appearance. It started at a pin point in the centre of his lower back. From there it went straight up in an increasingly thick line to the upper back and through an elaborate pattern that stretched from shoulder to shoulder, and from the top to the bottom of the top third of his back. It somewhat resembled a stingray. The line from the lower back continued from the top of the pattern and pinpointed at the upper neck. On either side, the tattoo ran over the shoulders and along the arms as multiple lines criss-crossing through one another in a unique pattern, and then into mystical looking star-like shapes on the back of the hands, before finally terminating at the place where the finger nails used to be. That was the most painful part. The nails had been removed so that the tattoo could be concentrated in their place. They would eventually grow back, but for the time being, the hardness caused by the tattoo would more than compensate, however painful it was. It took about ten minutes of instruction before he understood how to use the weapon, but once he had, there was not much more to learn. It was not like magic; a mysterious tool that took practice and study to master. His power had spontaneously tripled. He was advised not to demonstrate his true potential until practically necessary. This suited Thäràc just fine.

Shortly after all needs were taken care of, Thäràc was treated to a good, filling dinner to help start him off on the long journey to Ge'henna. It was close to three thousand miles away. There was one stop, however. It had been arranged for Thäràc to meet with the Vîje`lîz at the place called Lecríá; the land once ruled by the tyrant King Mammon, and the one major gîajîn territory remaining in Pán`gaia. It was roughly five or six hundred miles away from Me`ridía. They were to travel as fast as possible. Cära's

complete vigour would have to be realised. For this reason, both Smoke and Harrow were forced to abandon their horses, and ride with Thäràc. Since Smoke was a ghost and Harrow was a corpse, the weight was not deemed to be much of a problem with Cära's strength. Food was supplied to the max, while further provisions would await them at Lecría. After dinner, Thäràc and his company took off immediately. Tiúet, at that time, was busy, but Mäcuís was able to see them off.

When they left, there was still enough light to see the north-west horizon where they were heading. By this night, the ominous red glow of the moon's fiery blood had faded into near nothing, while the growing artificial moon was shedding a new white light over the land. Added to this was the original moon itself, which could still be seen moving its course but now fractured and shedding no light. When it got to well past midnight, the party stopped so that they could have some rest. This is what they did throughout the journey. The road to Lecría was very barren. Mostly flat land, there was little grass to be seen, and rarely so much as a mountain in sight. The only feature that really stood out in the scenery were the pieces of new moon that were still being propelled into the sky every day. Cära's progress was startling. It was in the very late afternoon after the ninth night that they arrived at the great city at the heart of Lecría.

The city had been very well preserved. The buildings were grand; mostly double storied, with elaborate patterns and carvings on all stonework. In the north of the city was the palace where the king was cornered by the victorious rebels at the conclusion of the Beast Wars. It was about seven or eight stories high, the sides were completely vertical, and the structure as a whole was rectangular. It was at the courtyard of the palace that Thäràc would meet the Vîje`lîz. The courtyard was on the northern side, and was easily accessible

from the east. The party entered through an opening in the high stone wall where a great gate had once stood. On passing through, they found themselves facing the largest congregation that some of them had ever seen.

The Vije`liz, camped out throughout the courtyard, numbered in the thousands, and the only thing that competed with their number was their sheer variety. They had been gathered from all over the continent. This was clear in the differences in the way they dressed, and to a much lesser extent, their behaviours. Many of them were obviously nomadic, while others seemed accustomed to luxury. They were mostly men, but there were women as well. They ranged from young to old; some were even adolescents. They also ranged in physical characteristics like hair colour and length, height, facial features and skin colour. Particularly standing out were the dark skinned peoples of the northern plains. These were known to some as ‘the masters’, though they were known to have rather mixed and peculiar effects on gîajîn. As Thäràc would learn, nobody there had travelled further; the peoples of the far east were still on their way. He had a feeling that their presence among the Vije`liz would prove noteworthy. As he and his companions dismounted and left Cära to make herself at home, they were already attracting attention; primarily because Gâbrîel was with them, but also because the companionship of one of the Army of Blood was particularly unexpected.

Mealtime, whether it was a late lunch or an early dinner, had just started, as though they had been waiting for Thäràc to arrive. He was just about to start looking for some food, when he spotted two familiar faces approaching him. One of them, to his delight, was Snapdrágon. And what was more, he was smiling! The other, who somehow came as the greater surprise even though he was to be expected, was Thäràc’s father. The man bore on him something as surprising as

Snapdrágon's newly discovered spirits. It was a necklace not all that different to the one Thäràc used to keep to his chest. Hanging at the bottom was a very conspicuous symbol: the great hook of the martyr, which represented one of the more gruesome known executions, as well as the faith of certain gîajìn. Thäràc greeted both with a handshake.

"Good to see you again," said Thäràc to Snapdrágon.

"It's been a while," replied Snapdrágon in his usual autistic way, looking not at Thäràc, but at Smoke, "I see you have met a new friend."

To Thäràc's surprise, Smoke approached Snapdrágon with apparent enthusiasm.

"Snappy!" she said in a celebrative tone, and then went and kissed him on the cheek.

"Smoke," said Snapdrágon, nodding slightly.

"You know her too?" asked Thäràc, almost with confusion.

"I met this lunatic not so long after I last saw you."

"That's right," said Gâbriel, "you didn't stay where I told you to."

"No, I didn't," said Snapdrágon vacantly.

"Well, I never realised he was a friend of yours," said Smoke to Thäràc, "how wonderful. Snappy and I go way back."

"How is Cí?" asked Thäràc, trying to change the subject. As interested as he was in the newly revealed relationship between the two strangest people he had ever met, the whole thing gave him the creeps.

"Faring like everybody else," said Snapdrágon, "the child came through okay if that's what you mean."

Next came a more formal introduction between Thäràc's father, who went by the name of Theran, and Smoke. Then,

following a slightly more awkward one between Harrow and both Theran and Snapdrágon, the group sat down to eat. Much of the conversation revolved around Theran's necklace. Smoke could never resist finding out the reason behind a dêva following a gîajìn faith, which was almost unheard of. Apparently it had become common place in Thäràc's former home village in the last few years (in other words, since the Turning was undone). It was related to a supposed miracle: that the 'hook' had appeared in astonishing detail on the backs of ducks in what was now considered a sacred pond. For some reason, this struck a bell with Thäràc, but he could not place why. The dêva converts, of course, naturally had a different way of understanding the 'Revelation' of the martyr, including, to even Smoke's confusion, the dismissal of the notorious 'reward and punishment' feature. When questioned as to the point of the religion without it, Thäràc's father could not explain it, but simply said there was some sort of experiential 'benefit'. Thäràc was not bothered by this, but made no pretence about understanding it himself. Snapdrágon did not seem to be paying attention. Smoke was intrigued to delight. Harrow thought the man was nuts.

"So," said Smoke, changing topic to something more serious, "are we expecting to encounter the Army of..." she finished that sentence off with a mock-surreptitious thumb-pointing to Harrow, who was sitting beside her. He refused to react.

"Probably," said Theran, "they seem to have found some purpose now."

"Purpose?" said Harrow.

"Sweet guess what that would be," said Smoke looking at Thäràc.

"So do I fear," said Theran, "and they are more organised."

“Organised?” said Harrow, “The Army of Blood are not organised unless they have a leader.”

“It appears that they do,” said Snapdrágon, “Gâbríel thinks that Effa may not have had much control over the force he resurrected. He took steps to bring the Army to meet his needs. According to Gâbríel, Effa has employed Bë`träda.”

“Bë`träda?!” said Harrow, actually getting on his feet at hearing that name.

“Have you two met?” said Smoke with amusement.

“Should I fear her?” asked Thäràc.

“We should all fear her,” said Harrow, sounding more serious than his character usually allowed. In fact, that was enough for Thäràc to take his words pretty seriously. Harrow began.

“Now Thäràc, you can see that I, and the others as you saw them on that night, are a little rough around the edges, wouldn’t you agree?”

Thäràc scanned Harrow’s face noting the bits of bone that could be seen around his right eye.

“Ah... yes.”

“But have you noticed an affliction we all have in common? Something of which we are all deprived?”

Thäràc shook his head. In response, Harrow raised his left hand with its back facing Thäràc. It looked ok, except that the pinkie was missing.

“Not one of us is in possession of all ten fingers. That is the sign of our membership.”

“I don’t follow.”

“Effa built an army out of confused and somewhat stupid mercenary wannabes. When Gerra came down he had

considerable success teaching people to fight back and win. Before Effa even thought about appealing to Mammon, he was approached by Bë`träda. She told him that she could make a *real* army out of them. Effa did not expect much success. Two weeks later she was standing before the entire assembly. She announced that to prove their worth, the condition of joining her force was for every last recruit to personally and publicly sever one of his own fingers.”

“And that worked?!” said Thäràc.

“Better than you would imagine.”

“How?”

“It inspired discipline, devotion, and, of course, maintained a sort of... quality control. And in order to show just how serious she was, she cut off *two*.”

Chapter 11: The Return of the Nefilim

The next eight hundred miles to Ge'henna were uneventful. The Vîje`lîz rode the Î`sôgí at maximum daily mileage; about 45 miles a day. This was roughly half the daily capacity in which Thäràc had been travelling before, not that Cära could have maintained that effort for much longer. In reality he was not really going much slower than he would have without them. The idea was that an encounter with the Army of Blood was more than likely; and that Effa must have had other forces working for him. The logic of travelling with an army seemed questionable, but Gâbríel knew that considering the enemy an encounter was only slightly more likely to happen this way. The plan was that if there was an encounter in which the enemy was considerably weakened, then Thäràc would move ahead as fast as Cära could travel; although with the Vîje`lîz trailing behind. In short, as long as they were unsure what they were up against, the extra stealth and speed of travel should be sacrificed in favour of double the power of defence. Indeed, Gâbríel had some ideas as to what was stalking them, but saw it wise to keep Thäràc in the dark for the usual purpose of keeping his heart up.

However, as he rode on Cära, alongside Harrow and Theran to his right, and Snapdrágon to his left with Smoke,

not to mention the raven that flew above him, his spirits were high. His father loved him, Cära loved him, and Snapdrágon was strange but good company. Gâbríel had been his saving guidance since the beginning, and Harrow was fun. Even Smoke, as unsettling as she sometimes was, offered the best of protection that anyone could provide save one: Gerra. He had often forgotten that history's greatest soldier was carrying him from the inside. What is more, he had almost every fighter in Pán`gaia with him. The thousands slept short hours at night, and had one meal break per day. Every 150 miles or so they stopped at a town for food; and for water whenever the land failed to provide. Otherwise, all they could do was enjoy the scenery. Unlike the land between Bâbel and the great city, the next eight hundred miles were rich in texture. The land was abundant in trees and forests, and there were many lakes. Otherwise the landscape varied dramatically; from bare ground to foot long grass; from flatland to rugged, mountainous terrain.

On the 17th day since they had started the Vîje`lîz settled down for a feed at about the same time of day as they had first taken off: very late in the afternoon. This day was particularly grey, and the sun was blocked by thick clouds. The ground here was very plain and flat. There was little in the background save some woods in the distance. As usual, it was a very social meal. Thäràc sat with all of his usual companions except for Smoke, who had gone all funny and wondered off. As soon as she was gone, Snapdrágon started talking about her.

"She is not the same girl I met," he said ominously, "she is different."

"In what way?" asked Thäràc.

"I can not really describe it. She has changed. When I met her," he paused for a moment. The others were wondering if

he was thinking about it or if he was just lost in some other place.

“She was never so serious,” he continued, “in fact, she was almost... demented.”

“*Was* demented?” said Harrow.

“Yes,” replied Snapdrágon, not seeming to recognise the humour, “she was unusually happy, especially for someone living before the Turning was undone; she was, to put it the best way, hyperactive. I don’t know. She still has *elements* of what she was, but she is almost a completely different person now.”

He paused again, this time clearly in thought.

“And now I’m told she is a ghost; it explains why she refused to carry a torch,” he was alluding to the one she had made him carry through a tunnel years earlier.

“Or play cards,” Harrow added.

After this they were silent. Before long the subject of their concern came running back from many yards away. This meant urgency, though when she stopped in her tracks right before Thäràc she did not look agitated.

“I think something is coming,” she said, “from the north.”

They all looked. For a time nobody could see anything; not even Gâbríel. Then she did see something. High in the sky she could see black specks before the clouds. Then the others saw them. Soon it became clear that the specks were moving towards them. Then they were discernable as winged creatures. By this point Gâbríel knew what they were. To lesser degree so did Theran.

“Icarî,” he said, “from Ge`henna. They are not often seen in this part of the world. They are dangerous, yes, but I don’t see why we should be concerned about them.”

“They are no ordinary Icarî,” said Gâbrîel, whose gaze was fixed on them, “they are the Nefilim.”

“Nefilim?” said Thäràc, “I have never heard of them.”

“But you know them well,” replied Gâbrîel, “only, you once knew them as the White Beasts of Me`ridía.”

On hearing those words, an intense fear washed over Thäràc. It was the sort of fear one experiences when reacquainted with a very dangerous enemy who has been given a good reason to want revenge.

“Enemy coming from the north!” Gâbrîel yelled to everyone, “be ready!”

She turned back to Thäràc.

“Like Ithamä before them they have taken new vessels. They are no longer white, nor have they anything more to do with Me`ridía. So we must now speak of them by their true names; the names of the spirits themselves. They are the Nefilim, and I believe they now have a master.”

“Effa,” said Smoke.

“Bë`träda,” said Harrow, “it has to be.”

They all watched as the Icarî came closer. Their silhouettes were dark and imposing. Their wings were much like those of a butterfly, but sharp, short and looked as though they were half eaten. The torsos were extremely slim, except for the upper torsos where the wings were attached on rounded stumps, giving their bodies something of a love-heart shape. They had long necks, and strange limbs stemmed from the upper torsos. They seemed to go down and then outward. They had awkward looking legs and appeared to have three tails each. By the time they were about five seconds away from Thäràc they were heading straight for him. There were eleven. Realising that he was not hidden by the crowd, he powered his sword with a blazing

fire, and at the same time charged it with magic. In the final few seconds before they reached him, he caught vivid sight of the Icarî's terrifying image. The parts of their inner limbs that went outward were fierce looking blades. Attached to the ends of the upper halves of the wings, were great hook-like claws. Similarly attached to the lower, inner parts of the wings were bayonets. They did not seem to have heads, just ugly gaping jaws at the ends of the necks. The most horrible thing about the Nefilim was that they each had a second jaw hidden behind the first. The teeth on both looked like they could go through bones like biscuits.

As the gap between them and Thäràc closed, his company stepped right back in anticipation. At that exact same time the Icarî were met with a wave of arrows. Finally, when the timing was right, Thäràc tore his sword ferociously through the air, releasing a strong wave of fire and energy. It struck five of them, though not with much stopping power. Two of them charged at him. He held his sword up and charged it. The creature's strange inner limbs were ready to decapitate him, and when they finally struck, they were repelled by the aura surrounding Thäràc's sword. As they passed him by, another three homed in on him from the front and sides. He wanted to strike but could not break out of defence. He blocked a flurry of attacks with a powered up sword. The first two were heavily occupied with Smoke, who was always the first to jump in and lend her support. In seconds, the three around Thäràc were all assailed by Vije`liz; one by Snapdrágon, and another by Thäràc's dad. Harrow was standing back and firing arrows aimed at the creatures' vitals. Then, another two came at Thäràc from above. Again he was able to fend them off, but not to strike back. They were promptly driven away by arrows. By this time, the remaining four had gotten busy with Thäràc's company.

Pretty soon, all of them were being assailed on two or three sides, with Thäràc and Smoke beginning to do some real damage. It was about this time that Thäràc started seeing a very distant figure in the south-western sky. At that moment he was way too occupied with combat to show any real concern. In time however, it became clear that something else was coming. He managed to withdraw from the fight and stand somewhere where he could watch in relative safety. What he saw was another winged creature, only much bigger. As it drew closer Thäràc could make out a long tail, a great pair of wings, and a long neck. To his added horror, he recognised the creature; one he had come across once before. It was just then that he began to hear the terrified cry, “Ithamä!!” coming from various places within the legion. He prepared himself, but then realised that the monster was not coming his way. He stood his ground. Soon, Ithamä was only a moment away. As the spot where he was to land became obvious, people started running from it. As it came within a dozen and a half yards, it was met with a stream of arrows. Of those under the great shadow of the beast, about two thirds made it out of the way when the nightmare landed with a ground shaking impact; crushing the rest.

On landing, the monster immediately started terrorising the soldiers. Flapping its huge wings on them and grabbing mouthfuls of two or three at a time; crushing them, and tossing them for several yards, not always in one piece. Only about half of the fighters were confronting it; the others were fleeing to join the archers who continually fired at the beast. These were the ones who could turn their heads around to see clearly the main target. For it was not just Ithamä, but positioned on an impossible saddle between the wings was a heavy set of armour, an impenetrable looking shield, and a thick helmet wrapped around an ugly human face. Less noticed was the shadowy figure behind her, with no obvious

armour over an obscuring grey cloak, all but the eyes covered up like a desert nomad.

The primary target for archers was the monster's eyes, which looked like the only vulnerable part of it. The secondary target was anyone unfortunate enough to be caught in Ithamä's ferocious mouth; to ease the passing. Harrow was the only one who dared focus all his arrows on the armoured rider, who he recognised unmistakably as Bë`träda. Most of the arrows bounced off her helmet, but one managed to just graze her large nose, forcefully gaining her notice.

But while Harrow put his efforts into the rider, Thäràc, in a foolish show of heroism, went for the beast. Forgetting all about the other Nefilim, he summoned Cära. He mounted her, and then started powering up his sword with strong magic and flames. Then he gave the word for Cära to charge. She did. As they neared the monster, Thäràc's sword began glowing and burning vigorously. Ithamä was so busy massacring the soldiers that it did not even notice. Thäràc focused on the creature's movements. And then, with perfect fluency, he rode straight under Ithamä's head, and slashed his sword through it as hard and fast as he could. The animal bellowed in pain, although it was hardly as badly hurt as Thäràc had hoped. It did, however, certainly get the creature's attention. Thäràc turned to face it. He decided at this point to dismount Cära.

At the same time, Bë`träda, after seeing one arrow whiz right past her eyes, was unable to turn Ithamä's attention from its attacker to hers. She whistled. In no time, a couple of icarî were hovering on either side with their backs to her. Without hesitating she stood up and leapt onto the one on her left, which was closer to Harrow. Now clung to its bare back as to a wild bull, she said something Harrow could not

hear. He let off one more arrow before the Icarus swooped down, forcing him to leap out of the way.

Thäràc also had his bow out, with a Setharòn enflamed arrow drawn back, aimed at Ithamä's right eye. He fired. The arrow landed close to the eye, and burned it shut. This time there was no cry. Ithamä charged. Rather than confront his enemy head first however, the beast turned and went at him with its shoulder. Before Thäràc could respond effectively, he was knocked down. His sword broke from his grasp and landed a couple of yards from him. With all of his strength and endurance he began to force himself up. Before he had gotten halfway to his feet, Ithamä came at him again, this time with gaping jaws. Thäràc, as a virtual reflex, rapidly drew a massive amount of energy into his left hand. It was bright blue, and had the appearance of a flame engulfing his hand. Thrusting his hand forward he released it. It tore from his hand and went like a shooting star straight into Ithamä's throat. The creature violently jerked its head up in agony. Thäràc went for his sword. When he reached the hilt he clenched it tightly. Then he turned to face, once again, a creature on the charge. He filled his sword until it was consumed with raging heavenly fire, and swinging it widely from right to left, he released a wave of flames onto the ground where Ithamä stood. The ground lit up instantly beneath him. What is more, the corpses that littered the ground acted as fuel for great pillars of flame that tormented the creature until it was forced to take to the air. He ascended remarkably quickly for such a large animal, and then started circling the area above Thäràc. Then, before his opponent could react well, Ithamä plunged into the ground where he stood, using its body as a giant hammer. Thäràc leapt out of the way as far as he could at the time, which was not very far. He was not completely crushed as he would have been, had he met the torso rather than the wing, but he was so heavily knocked down that while he remained

conscious, his body shut down. He collapsed onto the bloody ground, and could do nothing but watch Ithamä, who had merely brushed the ground and taken back into the air, continue to circle above him.

Before Thäràc's body could even begin to recover, Ithamä took another dive, this time planning to land and completely crush him. The next thing that Thäràc saw was Cära, not as an animal, but as a beautiful woman cooking with him in their older kitchen. In the strangest way time seemed to slow to a crawl. The image in the kitchen faded, leaving him only with the sight of the beast that descended ever so slowly; a shadow gradually consuming his sight. Then he saw another vision. This time it was the fight with the last of the White Beasts in that strange shaft years ago. Once again it faded back into the growing spot that was slowly overtaking the sky in his sight. Then he saw another vision. His sight was alternating between the descending death and the fragmented memories. He saw his whole life. A sweet childhood and adolescence followed by over a hundred years of misery followed by a mission, a life with Cära, the end of that life, and then another mission. By the time the figure above him had blotted out the whole sky his vision had turned to something else. He was back in his childhood village, on that plateau high in the mountains crossing wooden swords with his father so long ago. Then he shut his eyes, wishing that to be the last thing he sees. The next thing he experienced was not what he expected. He felt a massive surge of energy emanating from every part of his body. When he opened his eyes again he watched as a spirit ascended above him in the same horizontal orientation as he. In his confusion, he thought the spirit was his and that somehow he was watching it from his dead eyes. Then he realised it was Gerra. The spirit rose through the remaining two feet between Thäràc and Ithamä. Then it embraced the animal, and started pushing it away again. At this point Thäràc's

phase ended and time returned to normal. In a second, Gerra and Ithamä were about twenty feet in the air, and Ithamä had instantly let off a horrifying reptilian howl not that different to the one Thäràc had heard years ago in the snow where he first met the creature. The howl persisted as he struggled desperately with the spirit higher and higher above the ground. Although Ithamä was no match for the great warrior, nor was he mortally vulnerable to him. Gerra was not fighting the beast, he was torturing him. All that Ithamä wanted to do was break free and leave. And so, Gerra let him go. Ithamä gave no further thought to Thäràc and the Vije`lüz. It took off as fast as it could without looking back.

After seeing all this, the rest of the Nefilim retreated immediately except for one. Bë`träda was mounted and still battling with Harrow. She seemed to have lost herself in the conflict, and it took a particularly well aimed shot from Harrow before she would reassess the situation. After seeing the spirit of Gerra in the heights, she turned back to her opponent. And to the surprise of many, she spoke, or rather yelled.

“Harrow!!”

That word immediately gained the attention of Smoke.

“Your score will never be settled!”

And with that, she turned and went to join the others in retreat. As Ithamä and the Nefilim departed into the east and north respectively, Gerra descended back down to Thäràc and faded back into him. His eyes opened briefly, and then slowly fell back shut as his many friends started looking over him.

Chapter 12: Ge`henna

When Thäràc awoke, he was lying beneath a blanket. His father, Harrow and Snapdrágon were similarly bedded nearby. Smoke and Gâbríel of course, were awake to greet him.

“Rise and shine little mouse,” said Smoke, “is your head still hurting?”

“A little,” Thäràc replied, “how long was I out?”

“It is now drawing near the morning of the day after you so foolishly took on the Nefilim Prince,” said Gâbríel, “you are lucky to be alive. What were you thinking Thäràc? You are no match for him; not yet anyway. If it were not for Gerra you would be dead, and so would everybody else eventually. And to make things worse you put Cära in terrible danger as well.”

Something about the way she said that made it sound as though something had happened to Cära. Thäràc rose anxiously and looked for her.

“She is fine,” said Gâbríel. “And luckily so are you; save a weakened condition. We may as well leave now. I have decided that we should not leave the Vîje`lîz behind just yet.”

And so, the Vîje`lîz were woken up. Many of them, however, had been badly injured or killed the previous day. Luckily though, few horses had been slain, so there was no shortage. The able bodied men were to continue with Thäràc and his company. The wounded were to be escorted by volunteers to the nearest village to recover. They got there without too many problems. Thäràc and the others kept moving as they had before the encounter. This time however they were a little dispirited. Many of them had died, and several were grieving. Others were still badly shaken. Ithamä was a terrifying enemy, like a remnant of the Beast Wars, and many of them would have nightmares for the rest of their lives. Thäràc, however, had lived worse. It was the first time the Vîje`lîz had seen battle, and only now did they fully understand what being a hero was really all about. But they were not trained to be heroes, they were trained to fight. They were servants of love, and they had known it from the Ancient Days when they first began at the end of the Beast Wars. But disheartened as they were, they really were heroes, for they had the courage to face the horror as many times as they had to. And now they were required to accompany Thäràc and his companions for a further several hundred miles, and then stay behind them for the rest of the way.

The place where they parted with Thäràc and the others was at the eastern wall of a forest that stretched about two hundred miles from the shore. Next to Me`ridía it was the largest remaining forest in Pán`gaia. Gâbrîel had decided that it would be best for Thäràc to abandon his support there, beyond which he was no longer openly visible. It was also believed that Cära could pass through the forest more swiftly than the other horses. She could, even with no less than three passengers. After saying farewell to the Vîje`lîz, Thäràc, Harrow, Gâbrîel and Smoke disappeared into the woods more quickly than anyone would have anticipated.

Snapdrágon, without their knowledge, asked for the fastest horse available and then followed them.

The forest felt surprisingly alive to Thäràc. It seemed to be the case of shifting from over a hundred years in one forest into another, combined with the fact of entering a living forest when he was so used to a dead one. It was definitely different to the Forest of Me`ridía; in many ways it really was better. The wildlife was more exciting and the plantation richer. The trees themselves did not vary a great deal, but they were almost majestic none-the-less. Not that Thäràc or his companions had much of an opportunity to appreciate it. Cära was going at about 75 miles per day; not as fast as she had travelled at the start of the journey, but almost. Behind them, Snapdrágon was catching up. As he rode, he held an object he had taken with him from the beginning of the mission: a lyre. Having mastered the art of playing on horseback, he was alternately plucking two different octaves of the same note. When he first entered the forest, the tempo of his music was set by the footfalls of his steed. By the time he emerged, it was his music that seemed to have set the tempo of the horse, and he was not very far behind Thäràc.

Between the forest and Ge`henna lay about eight hundred miles of land that became increasingly bland as they drew near the end. The woods disappeared, the mountains faded away and the grass shrank into nothing. There were about 150 miles to go when one early evening Thäràc and his company met with Snapdrágon. They were somewhat surprised at this, and asked him exactly how on earth he was able to catch up with them. All Snapdrágon would say was that he had some help. After that Thäràc asked him what he was doing, hoping he would not say 'I'm coming with you'. Indeed, that was precisely Snapdrágon's intention. Harrow thought he was crazy, but Thäràc could not refuse. Gâbríel tried to push for the condition that Snapdrágon Share his

horse with Harrow, and got the reply that this horse had conditions of its own, leaving the other three stuck together on Cära. So together they continued all the way to Ge`henna. Thäràc had never imagined that another horse would have to slow down for Cära, but it did.

After a good two days travel, they came to a very strange sight. It was somewhere around midday; but it was hard to tell exactly when because the sky was consumed by an eerie bleakness that did not look natural. The land surrounding them was mostly red sand, and there was no other geographic feature in view. There was, however, something to look at. Lightly scattered about the area before them were objects that looked remarkably like beds. Thäràc, still on horseback with Smoke and Harrow, approached the objects with Snapdrágon trailing behind, and when he got closer, he found, much to his confusion, that they *were* beds. Many of them had what looked like scarecrows placed on them, along with other things. One of them appeared to have a large wooden stake driven through it. He went over to take a closer look. When he did he suddenly felt very uneasy. It was a single bed without blankets; only a mattress and pillow. Lying on its back on the mattress was a scarecrow. The pillow was actually quite thick, and the faceless head was sharply tilted forward. It was a simple mannequin without clothes or fingers. In fact it had nothing to draw any attention to itself except for the fact that it had a stake driven quite painfully through the left knee. It was some five inches wide – as wide as the knee - and the top was pointy. At the tip, and on the leg around the stake was some sort of red stain imitating blood. Thäràc however, had seen enough blood in his life to recognise that the stain really *was* blood. The stake itself went down through the bed and into the ground below. The display appeared to depict a man who was lying in his bed when a horrible stake shot out of the ground, went through his bed and through his knee. Though

the model itself was very fake, the picture in Thäràc's head was vivid. It was a very disturbing thought. As he gazed around at the other beds and wondered what other nightmares had been contrived, Smoke startled him with her dark voice.

“Pay no attention to them,” she said, and then laughed “and that means you too, Gâbríel!”

Gâbríel did not appear amused. Smoke continued.

“They are just there to scare you. This place is known as the Field of Sleepers, it was established with the purpose of warning people away. This is how we know that we have just entered Ge`henna.”

The party continued through the field. Thäràc tried to focus on where he was going, but he could not help but be somewhat distracted by the beds. Some of the things that caught his eye were far worse than the first, and there were some in the distance that he would rather not get a closer look at. But before he knew it, the Field of Sleepers had passed, and he found himself in a much more disturbing place. The ground appeared to be the same, but it was draped in some sort of shadow that seemed to creep about like the clouds. The clouds themselves had the same bleakness as before, but were more fearsome and oppressive. The land was crooked, and scattered about it were various objects ranging from hideous rock mounds, through bones and corpses, to pieces of metal and some strange junk. In the distance Thäràc could see movement; the wildlife that would quickly pose a serious threat. The wind was random and unpredictable; completely still one moment and difficult to bear the next. In the very far distance was a tornado. The air itself was also unpleasant, and breathing it felt like breathing gas. Speaking of which, gas also characterised the smell. It was a horrible odour that was very hard to tolerate. Despite Ge`henna's slightly desert-like appearance together with the

daylight, it was bitterly cold. And before too long, one other rather bizarre phenomenon was observed. On the ground here and there flames of widely varying colours flashed in and out of existence. A given spot would suddenly be consumed by an intense looking fire whose colour would flicker from green to purple or some other range of colours and then die just as quickly. All of these things gave the wasteland a very unpleasant atmosphere.

The party pushed through, but to Smoke's advice they did not go very fast. It was not even a minute before they began to hear and feel trembling. Smoke ordered Cära not to stop, but to speed up. The trembling chased them for several minutes, before leaving them alone. It was unusually convenient for that to happen before their encounter with icarî. Of course, these icarî were not as vicious as those possessed by the Nefilim, but they were still pretty fierce. Facing as many as four or five at once was exceptionally dangerous, even with Setharòn and Thärac's other powers. Even Smoke could only do so much. Some of the icarî were greater and nastier than the others; up to twice the size and triple the weight. To make things worse, they too sometimes came in pairs. The icarî were bad enough, but the wasteland was filled with all sorts of horrible creatures. Some had wings like an icarus, others lacked wings but were still airborne. These seemed to be using atmospheric gas to make themselves float. As many creatures as they encountered from above were found on the ground. Some of them were much tougher than the icarî and even more aggressive. Also there were lightning-fast lizard-like creatures that at times almost caught them completely by surprise. Not only were they equally as fierce as the icarî, but they also had a very tough hide that only Thärac's sword was able to penetrate, and only when it was enhanced would the animals immediately be rendered incapacitated (right before dying,

of course). Thankfully the reptiles were solitary, and so did not come in numbers.

The greatest danger however, and the primary reason it was impractical for the Vije`liz to accompany him – especially as an alternative to the Setharòn – was the subterranean creatures that continually stalked them. Usually they were able to avoid them as they did the first time. However, for various reasons many of them showed themselves. Standing still in their presence was out of the question, as most of them would grab their prey from directly beneath them. Sometimes the party would come across a hard surface, visible or otherwise, that would compel the hungrier serpents to surface. When they did it was quite a frightening sight. They ranged in size from negligible little worms to monsters that towered several times over the party, and were probably showing less than half of their length. Luckily, their hide was soft, and they were taken down with relative ease. Throughout the short journey toward the Flesh Cutters, Smoke helped Thäràc considerably, and even Harrow and Snapdrágon were more helpful than the others had expected. But the Guardian had been right. Ge`henna was a nightmare, and Thäràc really did need all the help he could get.

Smoke turned out to be a really big help for a particular reason, for she knew the land and suggested a place where they could rest; a building where no subterraneans could reach them. Thäràc promptly agreed. Before too long the party were standing in the shadow of a tall, round stone tower. It was about as wide as a house, and five times taller, though the top was broken, and may well have been much taller in its whole form.

“We are standing,” said Smoke, “before the oldest building known to living civilisation. It has existed for about as long as writing itself, and possibly many times over. Shall we?”

The party then proceeded to enter the building. On the way, Harrow seemed taken aback.

“I wish I knew more about artefacts,” he said.

“Harrow,” replied Smoke, “you *are* an artefact!”

On stepping inside they found themselves seeing through the medium of a strange sort of twilight. The source appeared to be half the bleak sky exposed above, and half the reluctant sun pouring through the many course windows carved into the curving walls. The light seemed to be flickering slightly and before long they noticed that the reason for this was the icarî that seemed to be circling the building. But they would not enter.

“Are they hungry?” asked Snapdrágon.

“Perhaps,” said Smoke, “or maybe they just want to *settle the score.*”

Harrow turned to face her, with a look of confrontation upon his face. Smoke continued.

“That is what Bë`träda said to you, isn’t it? ‘Your score will never be settled’?”

“What are you talking about?” asked Thäràc.

“Now, honestly it is not that score of yours that interests me,” Smoke continued, “what I want to know, is how did she know your name?”

“What?!” said Thäràc.

“And Gâbríel, I am also addressing you here. I know you know, and now, since everybody here knows that I know that you know that he knows why she knows his name, there is no point in keeping the secret further. So what do you say?”

Gâbríel was giving Smoke a look of quiet disapproval, but she agreed. She gave a nod to Harrow, who then stood quiet before beginning.

“One of Bë`träda’s regular contacts during the first war, was the first heir to Mammon’s kingdom: Princess Mïra. Mammon considered himself too good for any sort of formal cohort and so never produced a royal heritage.”

“Nor any offspring he seemed to be aware of at the time,” added Gâbrïel.

“No, and she was provided with a spouse.”

“Of course, their marriage was completely dysfunctional,” said Gâbrïel.

“Of course?” said Smoke, “she did have feelings for him.”

“Still, it was arranged.”

“As a favour!”

“More people have been recorded dying in the royal bed than laying in it. It gives you a clue on how gïajìn monarchies work.”

“Not that there is any other kind.”

“Are you finished?” said Harrow impatiently.

Gâbrïel was most definitely not, but she gave a silent nod.

“I suppose you both know which family she came from?”

“That was never recorded,” said Smoke. Aside from their different views, Harrow could sense a curious trace of competition between the two. It was Gâbrïel who showed the greatest restraint. She had figured out the answer a very long time ago, and she had seen it with her own eyes the moment she was introduced to Harrow. Better now to let him do the talking, despite his lack of any scholarly inclination, this topic made an historian out of him that even impressed Smoke.

“Does it seem a little strange,” he said to Thäràc, “that Mammon would choose a female heir? He was, after all, a typical gïajìn; a patriarchal one.”

“He was doing a favour.” said Smoke.

“Yes,” said Harrow, “and who would he be doing a favour for?”

Smoke smiled.

“Effa!”

“Why did Effa not take it himself?” asked Thäràc.

“Because he was never interested,” answered Harrow, “he is a dêva, remember. He was doing a favour himself.”

“For a friend?” said Thäràc.

“Or a family member,” said Smoke, getting more and more excited.

“Princess Mïra was not just any gîajìn,” said Harrow, “she was the daughter of the man who accepted Effa into his household. Therefore, she was Effa’s step-sister. He also had a step-brother: Mïra’s blood-brother. That brother had a son, and *that* is how Bë`träda knows me.”

“What was that ‘personal issue’ you had with Effa?” said Thäràc, remembering their very first conversation.

“And the score that you are never going to settle?” said Smoke.

“He betrayed my father, and grandfather with death,” said Harrow.

“No way!” said Smoke, her eyes lighting up.

“Effa was your uncle?!” gasped Thäràc.

“Not by blood, but yes, Effa is the greatest monster that ever lived, and I am his nephew.”

“So you joined the Army of Blood to get close to him, for what? Revenge?”

“That was my original idea. Now, I don’t know what I want.”

“And when Effa resurrected the Army he unwittingly brought back his betrayed step nephew,” said Smoke, “how beautiful. Times have changed you know. Getting even with Effa may have been possible in your day, but Bë`träda was right. Now, you better hope he does not have a score to settle with you.”

“No, I cannot get even,” said Harrow, “but I can still confront him. I don’t care what happens to me. But I have found a better purpose. I know Bë`träda better than anyone else here, and I am the one who should deal with her. I will then contribute to the salvation of the world.”

That was the end of the conversation. They rested for an hour and then left the tower, surprisingly unmolested by icarî. In fact, in good time the wasteland in its glorious infestation fell behind them. The land was basically the same; the atmosphere was no less forbidding. Only they were now in an area that for some strange reason was uninhabited.

“We must be close,” advised Gâbrîel, “the Flesh Cutters must not be disturbed, there must be some sort of repellent around them.”

Thäràc certainly did feel like he did not want to be there, even more than he had in the rest of the Wasteland. It was as though gentle threats were being whispered into his heart. He knew, however, that the feeling must be ignored. They kept pushing on, until finally, having travelled over a hill, they found themselves standing before the most bizarre sight that Thäràc had ever witnessed. In a crater-like valley before him were rows and rows of pillars that stretched beyond sight. Hanging like scarecrows from supporting horizontal bars, were strange, hairless humanoids. They lacked any of the features that distinguish a biological organism from a construct. Only their faces gave them the illusion of being anything like people, but still not much so. Their skin was

tanned. Although they were completely motionless, their eyes were open.

“They are asleep,” said Gâbríel. This was obvious except for the fact that in all of human experience, eyes open always meant ‘awake’, if alive at all. Seeing nothing else that he needed to do, Thäràc decided to address them. The problem was he did not actually know what to say, much less how they were all going to hear him speak. But the very decision to give the Guardian’s order did strange things to him. He felt an indescribable current ascend from his stomach, and his throat began to burn; not painfully, but noticeably. Then, of no initiative of his own, he began to speak in a booming loud voice that echoed impossibly in the featureless wasteland. It was the voice of the Guardian.

“Awaken!”

All at exactly the same time, the Flesh Cutters dropped to the ground and slowly climbed to their feet. They did not turn to face Thäràc, but they were obviously listening.

“You are to stand before the Forest of Me`ridía until the enemy returns. Le`viathan, Come forward. Everyone else, go!”

As soon as he had finished that sentence, the burning sensation was gone, and so were the Flesh Cutters. With no hesitation to notice they had vanished in a display of lightning energy with the exception of one. The leftover came forward as Thäràc – or the Guardian – had commanded. Thäràc turned to Gâbríel.

“Who is Le`viathan?”

“It is the name with which any individual Flesh Cutter is to be addressed. Your instruction meant for one of them to serve you in your cause rather than join the rest. He is now your bodyguard, and his name is Le`viathan.”

By this time, the humanoid stood before them. Smoke was the first to speak.

“Hello.”

Le`viathan did not respond.

“Is there something wrong with you?” asked Smoke. Gâbríel answered her question.

“The Flesh Cutters do not speak; nor the Soul Destroyers; nor the Steel Cleavers. They only listen.”

Thäràc as usual had a question of his own.

“Why only one?”

“Because any more would be a waste of resources. The forest needs as many as can be spared, and none but one can be spared. Believe me Thäràc, you will only ever need one.”

Chapter 13: The Chelis

“Now comes the hard part,” said Gâbríel. This really was not Thäràc’s sort of language, but it now bothered him a lot less than it did when he and the raven first met. Still, he had to ask.

“The hard part?”

“Yes, what is the hard part?” asked Smoke, “I must have forgotten it.”

“How to get Thäràc to the Spiritual Plane,” said Gâbríel.

“Not that hard,” said Smoke, “I can do that in one second.”

“That’s not funny,” said Gâbríel, “we must find a less *permanent* way of going about it.”

“Oh drat!” said Smoke. Gâbríel knew that she was lying. With her weapons there was no way she could kill Thäràc physically without likely breaking his soul in the process.

“And there is a way,” she continued, “and I believe Snapdrágon might hold the answer.”

“Me?” said Snapdrágon. Gâbríel turned to Thäràc.

“You remember the nomads, don’t you? Remember how hard it was being their bodyguard?”

“Of course. They seemed pretty lucky to have gotten far.”

“Yes, but do you remember what they told you?”

Thäràc went blank.

“They said they had some help from an outsider,” said Gâbríel.

“That’s right,” said Thäràc, “wasn’t ‘helper’ in fact the word they used?”

“Not quite, the man referred to a ‘healer’.”

“Yes! That even confused you.”

“Not as much as you think. Even then I suspected who it might have been.”

Then she turned back to Snapdrágon.

“Now, tell me more about this healer.”

“He just... healed us,” said Snapdrágon, “stopped our bleeding, sealed our wounds, cured sickness and poison. That was it really. Oh, except that on occasion he could save them from what seemed certain death. Come to think of it, in his company, no one ever died unless he had his head cut off or worse.”

“And did he ever reveal his name?”

“Strangely no.”

“That neither surprises nor bothers me. From what you tell me, it appears that Zhôcô, the Necromancer, still lives in our world.”

“Zhôcô!” said Smoke, “yes, he can do it!”

“If we can find where he lives.”

“And how are we going to do that?” asked Smoke, “what if we can’t?”

“Then Thäràc would have to die. Otherwise he is stuck here.”

“Stuck here...” repeated Smoke. Her face became absent, as though something had hit her. Then, in the quietest tone she whispered a word; a strange word that the others, save Gâbríel, could not make any sense out of.

“The Chelis.”

“The what?” said Thäràc.

“The Chelis!” she repeated, this time out loud.

“Are you serious?” asked Gâbríel.

“Yes,” said Smoke, “I don’t know why I didn’t think of it before.”

“Up until now I assumed it was because you were wise. The thought occurred to me ages ago; I dismissed it. The Chelis is too dangerous. In fact, it is the reason it took Snapdrágon to confirm Zhôcô recent existence to me. The only other way was the Chelis. I have been avoiding that avenue for a very, very long time. You seek the council of the Chelis when every last option has been ruled out, and that includes giving up.”

“What *is* the Chelis?” asked Thäràc.

“It is basically a trap,” said Gâbríel, “one that, yes, might have our answer, but no one in recorded history has been foolish enough to willingly approach it. It is a body of souls; they are *stuck* right here in Ge’henna. And I advise we use that to our advantage and avoid it completely.”

“So you have a better idea?” said Smoke; she turned to Thäràc.

“You know what ‘giving up’ means for you don’t you?” she said, “It won’t hurt, but you still won’t like it. It’s up to you Thäràc. I understand Gâbríel’s concern but it is the only lead we have. The Chelis knows many things; more than you realise.”

“How do you know?” asked Harrow.

“Because, while no one in *recorded* history has dared go near it, as Gâbríel said, I have.”

“That explains a lot.”

Smoke laughed.

“Trust me, I was not a fraction less peculiar before I did. The Chelis had no interest in depriving me of anything. It told me what I needed to know, and I cannot see why it would not tell you. I hope you realise it is not actually evil. Besides, I would not be recommending this so strongly if Thäràc was defenceless. He has the Soul Sword; if the Chelis does something dirty you can cut it up into ribbons.”

“That is exaggerating a bit isn’t it?” said Gâbríel.

“No,” said Smoke, “not at all. The Chelis is a great deal more frail than people’s imaginations have led them to believe. Even you have proven susceptible.”

“It’s not my imagination,” argued Gâbríel, “and I do take that into account.”

“Of course,” said Smoke, “forgive my ignorance. Obviously people’s imaginations are just about the only thing you have to go by. Clearly you must not dismiss the myths.”

“I don’t like the sound of it,” said Thäràc.

“Nor do I,” said Harrow.

“Neither does Cära for that matter,” said Gâbríel.

That certainly moved Thäràc, but he was decided. When everybody was done talking, they followed Smoke’s directions, which would lead them to the Chelis. As before, Thäràc and Snapdrágon were advised to keep a steady pace. As long as they were in Ge’henna and were not in close proximity to the place where the Flesh Cutters had been, the subterranean creatures were always a concern. Thäràc had become a little more used to the horrid, bitterly cold and erratic weather and the gaseous stench, but they were still

oppressive. The party were not bothered by any hostile life forms other than a solitary icarus that did not last ten seconds. Before it could come close, Le`vîathan shot it with some sort of missile. Nobody got a very good look at it, but it appeared to be made of an organic substance. In fact, it looked as though it were alive. But the really creepy thing was the noise it made. It was a vibrating hum, much like that of a cricket, only slower and low pitched. When the missile hit its target it exploded sending a few small chunks of meat falling to the ground, followed by the rest of the body, which remained intact but badly messed up. The missile returned to Le`vîathan, and disappeared somewhere among the contours of his body. The threat of the icarî was now negligible on its own, let alone in comparison to the uneasy feeling about this Chelis; a feeling that consumed all but Smoke and Le`vîathan (and obviously Snapdrágon's horse.) After about fourteen minutes travel, their path was obstructed.

They were now standing at the top of a hill looking over a piece of wasteland that sloped steadily before them. In the distance was a filthy looking tornado the colour of sand mixed with dirt. It was actually the third they had seen, but it was the first time one had interfered with their progress. It also happened to be the most vicious. It was not terribly large – only about forty stories high, but its velocity was frightening. They were compelled to wait until it was a partially acceptable distance from their path, (and obviously hope that it would not come their way.) Smoke was the judge. After watching it for some time, it became apparent that no choice of action would be completely safe. They would have agreed to wait it out were it not for the fact that according to Smoke, the tornados of Ge`henna usually lasted for several days, and also that they were hardly out of its reach where they were. They would have to run for it. Smoke watched its movements carefully. It was terribly

unpredictable. After a further twenty minutes or so, Smoke finally gave the word.

The party proceeded faster than what was usually advisable in the wasteland. Soon, it appeared as though the tornado had been passed. It had not. They were just beginning to feel safe when they noticed to their shock that the tornado was now approaching from their left. Thäràc did not need to tell Cära to speed up. Both she and Snapdrágon's horse went full pelt. Gâbríel assumed her raven form and flew along with them, with every intention of speeding up if the tornado got too close. Le`vîathan had no trouble running along at the same pace. The tornado was getting closer; but only very slowly. It was disturbingly quiet; but not quiet enough. Thäràc was beginning to feel optimistic, and believed that they would make it, when without any warning, the head of a large serpent suddenly emerged from the dirt/sand, right beneath Snapdrágon's horse with gaping jaws. They were just the right size to clasp the animal in its tracks, sending Snapdrágon flying into the upper jaw of a much larger serpent's head to which the smaller one was merely a tongue. He thrust his already drawn sword through the jaw before it could snap shut. Thäràc stopped, despite Harrow's screaming not to. Snapdrágon's horse was done for, but he was still fighting and without a serious wound. As he struggled he saw Thäràc who had just halted. He was not impressed.

"Keep going you idiot!" he shouted between the loud blasts of the bizarre missiles that Le`vîathan had started sending into the creature's tough hide.

Thäràc, after slight hesitation, complied. Cära took off with him, Smoke and Harrow. Le`vîathan summoned his weapons and continued running. The others, however, did not stop watching. Snapdrágon was soon able to fight his way out of the serpent's mouth; as well as escape its interest

in him. Now the serpent was not a problem; the tornado was. Snapdrágon ran as fast as he could. As Thäràc and the others drifted further and further away, the tornado to his left kept getting closer. Smoke turned away; Thäràc and Harrow did not. Snapdrágon was almost out of sight when he disappeared into the cone of sand and dirt. Now, Harrow looked away, but Thäràc still refused to. It was not as though he saw a good reason to keep looking, but as it turned out, there was one.

By the time the tornado was about a mile away – too distant to be of likely further concern – Cära slowed down. Just then, the tornado intensified. While Cära and Le`viathan kept going, Gâbríel stopped to watch. Thäràc decided to stop too. The tornado grew to about seven times its original height and its velocity went from frightening to ridiculous. Yet, one other thing happened that kept Cära from bolting with or without Thäràc's instruction: it stopped moving. That is, it became stuck in one spot for about ten seconds. Then, it started diminishing. It was just then that Gâbríel's eye caught a flash not far from it. She looked harder, and saw something flying in their direction. It looked as though it had been hurled at them by the tornado. It did not look dangerous. She pointed it out to Thäràc. He was not sure whether or not he should avoid it, and before he could make up his mind, he noticed it was not heading directly for them. And so he just waited. The object landed many yards from them.

Together they went to investigate. With a bit of trouble they found what they were looking for. Sticking out of the dirt/sand was a lyre. It appeared to be made of brass, and for something that had just been vomited out of a huge tornado and into a filthy surface about a mile away it was in amazingly good condition. The surface, in fact, was spotless, and the strings were clean. Thäràc picked it up, examined it,

and then plucked a string. The note rang in his ears in such a way as he had never experienced. It touched his heart, and cleared his head. It took Smoke to snap him out of it.

“It belonged to Snapdrágon,” she said, “I suggest you hold on to it.”

Thäràc took it back to Cära, and fixed it to her saddle. Then they took off.

Only moments later, they came upon a large hill, some eighty or ninety feet high. To Smoke’s instruction they stopped. She and Thäràc dismounted. By now they had entered another one of those places that no creature would come near. The hill certainly did look ominous; it was the only thing in sight that was higher than the ground, and there was something about the space between the rather depressing looking hilltop and bleak gray sky that made Thäràc shudder. Even Smoke looked a bit uneasy. And finally, lodged right in front of them at the base of the mountain, was a scarecrow.

“I suggest, Gâbríel, that you and the others stay down here,” she said, “it’s not worth risking your life or even Harrow’s, and Le`vîathan has no power over any spiritual being.”

“Fair enough,” said Gâbríel, “we will stay as you suggest. We have Le`vîathan’s protection *here*.”

So Smoke and Thäràc proceeded up the hill. As the top came closer Thäràc became increasingly nervous. Smoke was cautiously optimistic. She did not say anything to him, but had her hand on his back as if he found it the slightest bit reassuring. As they neared the top, the hill became less steep. When they got there, it was almost flat. They stopped and waited. For a moment nothing happened. Then, they heard a faint voice. They could not quite make out the words, but they heard things that sounded like ‘a visitor’, ‘what does

he...', 'is she', 'we would prefer', 'why did they', and most disturbingly of all: '...is wonderful'. Then they heard a very clear, but barely human voice.

"What could you possibly want that is worth coming up here for?"

By the time that sentence was finished a ghostly face had risen from the ground. It was completely human, but the image was so fuzzy that Thäràc could not tell whether or not the eye sockets were empty. It looked like a women's face but might not have been. Its mouth was moving as though it were still saying what Thäràc and Smoke had just heard. Thäràc, not intent on fooling around, asked his question.

"We are looking for Zhôcô."

"The Necromancer?" said another voice. The same face that had just appeared mouthed what looked like the same two words a few seconds later. Then a third voice was heard.

"Yes, yes, we know where he is."

Thäràc had a feeling that the Chelis was not about to get straight to the point. He spoke with the most firm voice he was physically capable of at that time.

"Is it your will to tell me?"

The response to that was a number of voices, possibly including one or more of the first three, paraphrasing in many different ways: 'Of course we will tell you.' Then he watched the face before him, which now had several overlapping mouths speaking simultaneously. It was indeed an eerie sight. Then some of the voices took turns in giving Thäràc directions. This really surprised him.

"Just a few hundred miles north-east from..."

"Ge`henna,"

"Is a village. Six miles east of that village is..."

“You will find trees.”

“Not a forest,”

“Just trees.”

“In the midst of them is a house, knock on the door...”

“And you’ll find who you seek.”

“The Necromancer.”

“Zhôcô will greet you.”

“Any questions?”

“No,” said Thäràc, “Thanks for your help and good day.”

“We regret that our guidance will come to no use,” said one of them, possibly the first one that had spoken. Thäràc was not hugely surprised at this remark, but he was scared. He was also angry, and his tone of voice became sinister. His facial expression became very dark and his eyes became fixed on the ghostly face(s) before him.

“Of course,” he said, “you could not just give me directions and let me leave could you?”

“We are sorry,” said three or four of them, “but we need you.”

That last statement was echoed by several voices.

“You have come to us, and we cannot allow you to slip through our fingers.”

As that was being said, ghostly white tentacles emerged from the ground all around the face, and started rising. It actually looked as though they were growing. Thäràc and Smoke started stepping back. The tentacles grew very rapidly, and before they knew it, they were standing before a pillar of them. It was about twice Thäràc’s height. They did not cease stepping back. Nor did the tentacles stop growing. When they reached a certain point they started growing outwards; mainly in Thäràc’s direction. Suddenly, Smoke

took off, shouting ‘run!!’ Thäràc turned to run away, but was instantly grasped around the torso by the ghostly tentacles. When Smoke looked back and saw this, she came to his aid. She started cutting the tentacles, but was swiftly grappled herself. Together she and Thäràc kept cutting with sickles and a Soul Sword. Amazingly, Smoke was the first to be subdued. The Chelis started dragging her into it.

Thäràc, realising he cared for her more than he had ever thought, cut his way through in her direction. He was rapidly getting closer to her, but she was more rapidly being pulled into the quivering ghostly pillar. He did not give up. By the time he was almost able to touch her hand, she started disappearing legs first into the pillar. It happened very quickly. At the point where Smoke’s hand was all he could see, he turned back and kept cutting. Now the forest of tentacles was thicker than before, and he started having a very hard time cutting through. He almost panicked when much of the tentacles’ attention became focused on his right arm; the one wielding the Soul Sword. With just his wrist he was able to cut most of them, but before he could use his partially restored manoeuvrability to free his arm completely, it seized again, this time not sparing the hand. His right leg was also taken. As more and more tentacles started wrapping around him, the Chelis started pulling him in to join Smoke. He struggled as much as he could but it was useless. He was being dragged into his death by his right limbs, and it seemed inevitable.

He was less than a yard away when he experienced a recollection of Izríá wielding the Soul Sword just before his departure from Hiúm. Thäràc’s left arm was being conveniently neglected by the Chelis. He raised it high in the air. Then, when he was less than half a yard away from the pillar, the Soul Sword vanished from his right hand and reappeared in his left. With one mighty swing he slashed his

way straight through all the tentacles from the higher ones that had his right arm to the lowest ones that had his leg. Then he transported the sword back into his right hand, grasped it with the other, and wielding the Soul Sword with two clenched fists, he tore through the pillar and completely severed it. The Chelis wailed with what sounded like hundreds of subhuman voices. Not planning to stick around for the repercussions, Thäràc bolted. He was no longer being bothered by the tentacles, because at that time there were none. He never looked back to see the terrible thick, white gas that lingered in the air where the tentacles used to be.

Chapter 14: The Necromancer

Thäràc, Harrow, Cära, Gâbríel and Le`vîathan were about 230 miles northeast of Ge`henna. They had left as soon as Thäràc returned from the Chelis, and they never looked back. The world looked so much prettier after having witnessed the wasteland, and Thäràc appreciated it, despite his grief. They had travelled for a few days now, and the landscape in this part of the world was very rich. The grass was as colourful as they had ever seen; ranging from the lightest green to the very darkest. By this time the artificial moon constructed by the cuôlva was complete, and it shone brightly at the top of the night sky. The great scar of the old moon, however, was still looming in the east, although its radiance had diminished somewhat. It was nearing night time, and the party was taking a dinner break. Of course, the only ones actually eating were Thäràc, Harrow and Cära. Cära was off grazing somewhere while the others sat with Gâbríel. Le`vîathan was on watch. Thäràc had been wanting to speak to Gâbríel ever since they lost Snapdrágon, and even more since they lost Smoke.

“I cannot believe it,” said Thäràc, “two of my friends are suddenly gone in less than half an hour, on two completely separate occasions.”

“It’s extraordinary I know,” said Gâbrîel.

“I honestly never thought it would be you coming down that hill without the other,” said Harrow.

Thäràc chuckled.

“You thought Smoke was going to feed me to that thing?”

“No, she just...”

“It’s okay. She may not have been the most rewarding friend, but she was still a friend; even if I never saw her that way. I tried to save her, and could not. What can you do?”

“But something does trouble you,” said Gâbrîel, “I can see that Snapdrágon was a better friend.”

“Yes. He was the greater loss for sure.”

It did not take Gâbrîel to see that he was troubled. It was written all over his face, and the heaviness of his grief seemed inconsistent with his less than sorrowful words. Harrow figured he was trying to be manly. At least, that would be the answer if it were him.

“It is not Snapdrágon that is bothering you is it?” said Gâbrîel. Thäràc shook his head.

“He lost his horse before he could do anything. He kept fighting; doing what he could to stay alive after his steed was consumed from right beneath him. If it were Cära,” he said, watching his life partner grazing in the distance, “I would have gone with her.”

“Maybe, maybe not,” said Gâbrîel, “from what I can see, you may well have chosen to end things then and there. Then again, you may not have. It depends on many things. Choice is a funny thing. Sometimes the right decision is clear. When it is not, there is no telling what you will decide. If you look very carefully into your own thoughts, and question what led to your final decision, you will find that much of choice is merely chance.”

“It’s not very reassuring,” said Thäràc.

“No it’s not, but the truth rarely is. The important thing is that you have not been put in such a position, and avoiding it is the best way to save you, or everybody, from the wrong choice.”

This was not reassuring either. Thäràc, like most people, wanted to believe he was in control, but not enough for him to reject Gâbríel’s seemingly infinite wisdom. He realised that the best thing he could do was to stop caring about such things. Harrow thought Gâbríel was spilling complete tripe, but kept that to himself. The rest of dinner time was silent. When dinner was finished, they headed off.

The next day of travel was as uneventful as the previous few. Gâbríel knew which town the Chelis had spoken of, and they reached it at early sunset. There was nothing of particular interest about it, nor had they any errands there, so they did not bother to stop. They proceeded east. Sure enough, about six miles from the village they found themselves in a landscape peppered with trees. They were of average size and shape, and were spread out enough that looking for a house was a fairly easy task. It only took a few minutes for Gâbríel to sight it. They made their way to the Necromancer’s house. It was a very basic dwelling, with one small window on each side, and it looked too small for any more than two rooms. It seemed to be made of sticks and mud. When they got there, they found a note hanging on the bark door: ‘Î am aut fó nau and uill bí bac lâte.’ Gâbríel spoke.

“You stay here while I go and look for him.”

And with that she flew away. Thäràc waited there with Harrow for about two or three minutes. He was somewhat nervous, which was understandable considering that the purpose of this visit was to die; and the very thought of

meeting a mage whose speciality was death was even more unnerving. When Gâbríel returned, his anxiety intensified.

“Come with me,” she said.

She led them for about six minutes through tree covered grassland with Thäràc in fearful anticipation. Gâbríel was completely aware of this and said everything she could to comfort him, with some success. Finally, Zhôcô came into view. He was standing at a tree with his back to them; a fairly short man. He wore pants but no top, he was bald and dark skinned, which meant that he was probably from the north. When they came near they also noticed several tattoos on his back that were harder to see from a distance because of his dark complexion. By the time Thäràc approached the man he still had not turned around. But he did speak; his voice was mellow.

“You must be Thäràc. I am Zhôcô, as you must know.”

“Thankyou,” said Thäràc.

“So, are you ready to die?”

Thäràc had never imagined such a beginning to a formal discussion, and he was expecting Zhôcô’s approach to be far more sensitive. He decided that the best thing to do was to simply answer the question.

“Not really.”

The Necromancer turned to face him. He was a friendly looking man, with a humble smile and understanding eyes. He had as many tattoos on his front side as on his back, and was thin but muscular.

“We are going to have to work on that,” he said, “surely a man of your experience could not really be afraid?”

“No,” Thäràc replied, “it’s just a little bit... strange.”

Zhôcô laughed.

“That is because you have only *accepted* death.”

“Huh?” said Harrow.

Zhômô greeted the third party with “well *you* should know!”

“I don’t follow,” said Thäràc.

Zhômô turned back to the tree and reached up both hands. Sitting up the tree was a large spider. Zhômô was using one hand to provoke it onto the other. Thäràc had some idea where this was going.

“People tend to see death as a bad thing, but it really is not,” the Necromancer began, “it is more compassionate than life.”

By now he had caught the spider. He turned again to face Thäràc, ever smiling in the friendliest way.

“Look at my friend. What do you see?”

Thäràc realised that the Necromancer was obviously more interested in his feelings than in his recognition of a well known creature.

“A threat.”

“Very good Thäràc, your instincts serve you well. What I see is one of the most beautiful creatures in the world. Do you know why?”

“No.”

“Because they are. Sure, there is no objective truth to that, but I have known many people who have overcome their fear of spiders, and not one of them has failed to fall in love. So how does one remove the fear that deprives us of that love?”

“Not acceptance?”

“No. Accepting what you fear will not kill your fear. You must embrace it.”

Zhômô held up his hand. The spider was sitting motionless on his palm. Thärac had to admit it was pretty attractive.

“Take it.”

“Will it bite?”

“Of course it will,” said Zhômô, “have you forgotten what you came for? Embrace it.”

Thärac was hesitant, but he was also willing. He held out his hand. The spider crawled from one hand to the other. This is the first time Thärac had ever done this. The strange thing was that while he was no longer actually afraid, his hand was shaking like crazy. It appeared that the spider did not like this very much. Before Thärac had time to reconsider, he felt two needle like fangs pierce the skin of his palm. It was a very nasty sting, but not enough to make him scream. Zhômô did nothing except take the spider back into his hand. Thärac immediately felt strange. There was no pain, but his hand felt numb.

“You have about half an hour before your heart stops beating,” said Zhômô, “it will not be very pleasant, but I assure you it is about as humane as lethal spider venom gets. The reason I am doing it this way is that the venom of this masterpiece is a preservative. Your body will be preserved by magic, but the venom is still required. Now just relax and listen to me. I know the truth about your horse; about the scar in your mind that was cut in when Cära was taken away from you. I also know that you have recently lost two friends. Add the fact that you are a slayer, and you have experienced death on almost every level. Picture a young child. His best friend is a dog. One day he finds it lying motionless in his back yard. What does he see? He sees that his beloved friend has become just an object. He grieves because he knows he will never see his loved one live and breathe again. It does not seem right does it?”

“No,” said Thäràc, his voice distorted both by sadness and by the venom, “it doesn’t.”

“When the animal is full of life, things seem to be complete. When it has drawn its last breath, the completeness is replaced by a shadow. The child wants so badly for that miserable emptiness to go away, and for the return of the way things were; when things were complete; when his friend still resembled a friend. Such is the ugliness we see in death. What I am trying to teach you, Thäràc, is that while the pain of death is real, the ugliness of it is an illusion. Why is it so ugly to us? For the same reason we are afraid of it. We fear and hate death because that motivates us to survive. We were made to fear what we should avoid, and to avoid what we fear. We want to avoid death, and anything that can bring it, just like this spider. We fear dangerous animals like we fear death itself. Both of these things help to keep us alive. But despite that fact, it is unhealthy to maintain that fear in respect of its inevitability. You must learn to love it Thäràc.”

This lost Thäràc completely, though at least he could accept somehow that Zhôcô was speaking truth. Harrow, who had been quietly listening and watching, was beginning to wonder if the mage had not possibly been living out in the wilderness with spiders instead of people for too long. For both, the thought of loving death was a most bizarre thing, and Thäràc was not taking it quite as seriously as he was supposed to.

“Like I said, accepting what you are afraid of is not enough. You must embrace it. Of course I am not expecting you to achieve that in the next twenty five minutes, but I am expecting you to return, and when you do you will have the rest of your life to embrace your fate.”

“Why would I still be afraid if I have already experienced it?”

“You won’t be,” said Zhôcô, “in fact, most people learn to accept it with age, but you will not be completely ready either. As we have already established, you have already accepted death. All that I wish is for you to learn to appreciate it for what is. Consequently, you will be spared any doubt or discomfort. What I have told you of spiders goes for death. Once you have embraced it completely, you will cease to have any fear of it whatsoever, and you will realise that it is not ugly, but a beautiful thing that deserves your love.”

Zhôcô was holding the spider in his left hand. He was looking down at it, drawing Thäràc’s attention to it. By this point he was still standing, but felt he would not be for long. The spider was still, but obviously still alive. Then Zhôcô put his right hand high up over it and held it there. Thäràc started seeing some sort of misty substance circulate between the two hands. However, he was, for that matter, seeing mist in many strange places so he could not really say what was happening. But Harrow did see it. Then the spider convulsed and died on the spot. Harrow was shocked.

“You said he was your friend!”

“*She* was my friend. But she was getting old, and she needed rest. I have given it to her; death has given it to her. Now Thäràc, it is time for *you* to rest.”

Zhôcô laid Thäràc down carefully onto the ground on his back. He said no more, and began the ritual. Thäràc’s vision failed not long after he was laid down, so he was unable to tell exactly what his host was doing. Not that he really cared. As time went by he found his pain growing. About twenty minutes after the bite Zhôcô was almost finished with the preserving ritual. Thäràc was still alive but just barely. Suddenly, Gâbríel noticed something.

“Something is troubling him,” she said, “he is agitated. Are any of his senses still up?”

“Only hearing,” said Zhôcô, “and vibration. Both are probably very sensitive now. Does he sense something?”

“Yes,” said Gâbrîel, “finish the ritual now.”

Zhôcô compacted the last five minutes of the ritual into about thirty seconds, knowing he was risking complication. Gâbrîel took off into the air to take a look. Then she returned with the news.

“We have to go, now. Bë`träda is coming from the east with over a hundred revenants,” she said, “they are moving fast.”

Zhôcô’s response was to retrieve a small and strange device from his pocket. He blew into it, and the air was filled with a faint whistling.

“I need *my* horse. There is a stone temple four miles to the north. We should be secure there. I still need to complete the preservation, and my horse does not need direction. Harrow, you take Cära to my house, you can let her inside. I need you to stay with her there until I return.”

Right then, a pale horse appeared in the distance and moved very rapidly towards them. It stopped right in front of Zhôcô.

“Help me,” he then said to Harrow, as he began getting the paralysed Thäràc onto the horse. Together they got him on quickly. Then Zhôcô mounted with Thäràc in front, and turned to Le`viathan.

“You climb up behind me, and hold on tight.”

“No,” said Gâbrîel, “he won’t be able to function that way.”

“Even still, we cannot afford to separate him from Thäràc before we reach the temple.”

“But surely he can take Bë`träda!” said Harrow.

“Surely is not enough! Once we are inside, then he can defend us.”

“So be it,” said Gâbríel, “go!”

At this, Le`viathan mounted. Then, Zhôco whispered something that only his horse seemed to be able to hear. Then the horse bolted, with Gâbríel tailing at its rear, leaving Harrow behind with Cära. Soon, the scattered trees had passed, leaving them racing in open land.

It was not long before Zhôcô could see the hoarding revenants coming from the east. There were over a hundred of them, and they were mounted on some sort of running bird creatures. At the centre of the vanguard was Bë`träda. They were already far more behind Zhôcô than to his flank, and were steadily closing in. They were still over fifty yards away when the first of Bë`träda’s arrows zipped past. Zhôcô watched very carefully. His enemy had the reigns in her right hand and a large bow in the other. Behind her he could see a shadowy figure in a concealing cloak, whose face was hidden. Luckily, none of the other assailants appeared to sport mounted weaponry. But Bë`träda was about to fire again. Zhôcô yelled to his horse. Bë`träda’s road was rough, and she had to let off her shot quickly and take the reigns. Her enemy was now running more to the left than before, making it a slimmer target. The arrow missed and the horse turned right again. She took this opportunity to quickly draw another arrow and was now ready for a sure hit. She was just drawing back when her exposed left hand was impaled by a foreign arrow. She yelled in pain, but did not drop her bow. But it did release her shot, widely missing Zhôcô. She looked to her left, and not far away was Harrow. He was riding Cära. Bë`träda, retrieved another arrow as quickly as she could. She drew back, forming a cross between her own arrow and the one in her hand, and fired. Ironically, this one actually

scored a hit, piercing Le`viathan's shoulder, and doing nothing. It was promptly avenged by an arrow bouncing loudly off her helmet. That was when she gave up on Zhôcô and ordered a slight slowing down from the vanguard, allowing her to steer her course to the left and easily depart from the rest in pursuit of Harrow.

On the way, she handed her bow over to the cloaked person behind her, and proceeded to clutch the head of the arrow in her hand and painfully pull it right through, feathers and all. As she was departing from the crowd she gave orders to keep going. She also passed the reins to her left hand and wielded a large axe in the other. Harrow was now moving away, but took another shot. This ricocheted off the blade of her weapon. Then Harrow turned southward circling the enemy. Bë`träda's beast was far more manoeuvrable than a horse, and she took advantage. Harrow sharply turned right again to avoid an axe through Cära's legs. He went as straight as possible to gain more distance, and fired another shot striking her animal. This did very little. She then turned back to the trail of the others, as if to ignore him. He was a little behind but gaining, and many yards to her left. He drew an arrow. Suddenly, Bë`träda took a swift turn in his direction gaining weapon's reach, and took a swing at him, just missing his scalp. Harrow went hard left; hard enough for Bë`träda to circle clockwise and obstruct Cära by surprise, causing her to raise her front legs and stand upright. In doing so she avoided a heavy blow from Bë`träda's axe, and Harrow, his bow still ready, fired right before falling off completely. Amazingly, it was a direct hit in the lower torso, such that as her beast turned left, Bë`träda rolled off, leaving the cloaked one alone at the reins.

The beast came to a halt. Cära took several steps back as Harrow got up from the ground. It took enough time for Bë`träda to collapse, that she was a dozen yards away. She

was still moving, but did not get up. Beside her was the still mounted beast. Harrow put his bow away, and drew his long dagger. He began to approach. Immediately, the cloaked person dismounted and stood beside Bë`träda, facing Harrow. All was covered but the eyes and the hands. No weapon was wielded. After a brief hesitation, he proceeded. The figure approached in return, in a way that looked just as threatening. Neither slowed down. Harrow raised his blade, providing every opportunity to get out of the way. When they were almost at arms length, the stranger's right arm rose behind and arced overhead as though swinging a sword to cleave his skull, while the left hand drew back, low and palm up, like a blade cutting the waste. The effect of this was some sort of disturbance in the air, as though the right hand was cutting through a thunder cloud. This stunned Harrow and he staggered back. The figure then elegantly spun anti-clockwise creating a second arc with the left hand, so that both were circling the body. Stepping forward and facing Harrow again, the left, then the right traced the same path. The left turning the disturbance into an intense storm, and the right sending Harrow flying for several yards. He had absolutely no idea what had hit him. As he started to recover from the ground, he watched the figure approaching, while removing the parchment wrapped around the head. Harrow soon found himself gasping at the sudden sight of a family member.

By the time the temple had finally come into view the revenants were not far behind Zhôcô. The doorway of the temple was conveniently facing them. When they got there, every one went straight inside except for Le`vîathan. He stood at the doorway facing the enemy. The Army of Blood were oblivious to what they were facing, and considering their numbers the sole Flesh Cutter did not seem all that

imposing. And so, they took no caution. Le`vîathan drew out his living missiles right before a pair of coarsely serrated blades thrust out of his left arm with a clang. Then he waited as the enemy closed in, and as soon as they were in range, he sent his missiles straight into the vanguard, tearing them to pieces, along with their bird-like steeds. He managed to take down several more before they reached the doorway. That was when he started clearing through them with his mounted blades as well. He kept fighting furiously, as the revenants kept pouring in. The air was saturated with the horrible vibrating sound of the Flesh Cutter's primary weapons, together with the grunts and groans of his shredded opponents and mounts, and the explosions of impact between them. It was a continuous mess. The revenants would not give up trying to break into the temple, only to be blasted or torn into pieces. Eventually, however, there were only about twenty left, as well as a few stray bird creatures. They stopped and watched Le`vîathan standing there before the doorway. His missiles were that excited that they were orbiting around him frantically, lusting for blood, and whistling horribly. Now that the Flesh Cutter had rent apart over a hundred of them along with their steeds, he now appeared more formidable to the remaining twenty. Seeing the obvious outcome if they were to continue, the remainder turned and departed without looking back, leaving the hungry Le`vîathan to remain at the doorway on watch until further orders, Bë`träda's arrow still lodged in his shoulder.

Chapter 15: Beneath a Brazen Sky

Thäràc's memory of his last ten minutes were a blur. He could not speak, and all he could see was the colour of sunset without any real details. But he could hear everything. He could feel the movements of the earth. After the first major gap in his memory came the sound and vibrations of enemies coming their way. Then he heard the voice of Gâbríel who so insightfully recognised his distress. Then a gap. Then he was on horseback with Zhôcô behind him doing the work. He heard and felt the intense trample of his pursuers. He could not tell how many times he zoned in and out in this scenario. The next thing he knew he was in a temple, listening to the chaos outside; the continuing explosions; the baritone humming of Le`viathan's creepy projectiles.

Then he was standing. He could now see only the vague outline of the inside of the temple. But it was strangely distorted, for while it looked as though he was in a chamber, it also looked as though he was standing on a steadily ascending land space. He realised somehow that he had a choice as to where he was. The obvious choice was the land space. His imagination told him that he should walk up to the higher end; so he did. As he went he looked back and watched the temple become increasingly distant. Looking

ahead he appeared to be approaching the edge of a cliff. When he got there he looked down and saw that the bottom of the cliff was as distant as the sky. It looked like land; strange land, radically different to any he had yet seen. He knew what he had to do. He was not afraid, nor did it take any mental preparation. He looked straight ahead, and stepped back a few paces. Then he ran and leapt off the edge in a diving orientation. He watched his surroundings race past him faster and faster, but the bottom was approaching ever so slowly. It took several minutes for it to begin to appear close. At this point it started moving faster, while everything around him was a blur. Then the acceleration of the coming land intensified. Even at this point he did not see the point in leaving his head and hands first position. Soon the bottom was coming to him faster than anything he had ever imagined. When he finally reached the bottom within that second, the ground looked like a brick would to an insect as it came down as fast as the man holding it could possibly make it go.

At that precise instant an insignificant and empty spot in the rock-like surface of a very strange world erupted in a spontaneous explosion of rubble as a man smashed through the surface from beneath. As he ascended with his hands high over his head in a diving pose, rocks were hurled away from him like shrapnel. Initially, his ascent was rapid, but instantaneously his velocity slowed down to a crawl, as though gravity had suddenly reversed its direction. He reached about twice his height from the ground, before he fell again, and finally landed on the ground, that seemed to have just reappeared in place of the gaping hole he had left. Moments after he landed, he could see and hear the remaining chunks of rock hit the ground.

Thärac looked around. He was standing in the middle of what looked like a fairly flat rock surface, circled by a ring of

rocky hills some thirty five or so yards in diameter. On either side was a corridor in the rocks. The sky above him was brazen, with randomly shifting clouds dominating the sky. At its far reaches was the sun. While it seemed every bit as bright as the sun above the earth, Thäràc had no trouble looking at it. It was not still, but with many fine looking rings of golden fire circling it in every conceivable direction. Just when he was about ready to start moving, he felt a powerful presence behind him. He turned, and found himself standing before a great creature with dragon-like wings, a lion-like head and body, great talons and huge clawed hands. Thäràc was surprised, as he had not expected any company, let alone him.

“Gerra!” he exclaimed, “what are you doing here?”

“Where else was I supposed to go?” Gerra answered.

Thäràc thought about it. Before, they were two spirits in one body. Now, with the body gone, they were simply two spirits. It made perfect sense. Thäràc had a lot that he wished to say, but before he could begin, they were boldly interrupted by a very loud and vulgar voice.

“EEEEAGGH!!! I just cleaned this place up!! Oh, why must they always go *up* the hill?!!”

The complaining seemed more amusing than threatening. Thäràc looked around for the speaker. It seemed to be coming from nowhere in particular. Then he caught his eyes on what looked like a monkey running towards him. It was carrying something over its head. When it was finally close enough to be seen clearly, the object turned out to be a skull. It looked like the old skull of an unusually large goat, with its right horn three times its length but bent up and then backwards. The left horn was severed. The monkey ran straight up and halted right before Thäràc, holding up the skull high over its head. The skull spoke.

“Ok, who might you be?” it was the same voice he heard before.

“My name is Thäràc.”

“Ah, excellent! I am Bëddl, and my purpose is to set you off in the right direction. So, is there anywhere in particular you would like to go?”

“Yes,” said Thäràc, “I’m looking for the Soul Destroyers.”

Bëddl’s jaw dropped; literally. The monkey had to reattach it for him.

“Um... ok. Are you sure that is what you want?”

“I’m not here because I died,” said Thäràc, “I’m here because I’m on a quest. The Army of Black and Flame is returning, and I have been given the authority to find the Soul Destroyers and send them to Me’ridía.”

“The Army of Black and what?” said Bëddl, seemingly confused, “what on earth is that?”

“You don’t know?”

“No, I have never heard of them. Does that make me such a dunce? I have seldom left this spot, let alone visited the material world. People don’t keep me informed of these things. Oh wait! Over a century ago, right before that cosmic veil of dullness fell over everyone, some spirits came here speaking of something like that. They had been incinerated by what they described as a *plague* of black and flame.”

“That would be it,” said Thäràc, “so, can you point us in the direction of the Soul Destroyers?”

“What? Yes, yes, of course I can, this way please.”

The monkey turned and started making its way toward the rocky corridor on the side Thäràc was facing. As it went it spun the skull back around to his direction.

“Well, come on!”

Then the monkey spun the skull back around to face where it was going. Thäràc followed it, with Gerra right behind him. They found themselves being led through a twisting space between two walls of rock, and stopping in a roughly round area about five yards in diameter. In the centre was some sort of stone disk that had been cut into the ground. It was about six foot across. Right next to the disk was a round stone pedestal, about three feet high. The monkey climbed up and placed the goat skull on top of it so it faced Thäràc.

“I have two purposes here,” said Bëddl. Since the jaw had no space in which to move, it was now the skull itself that moved up and down as he spoke. “One is to show you how to use these.”

“What is it?” asked Thäràc.

“It is your guide. It will show you where you want or will to go.”

“How does it work?”

“Simple. Just stand on the disk, and it will turn around until you are facing the direction of what you seek. In your world, you would use a compass, but we can not, since we have no ‘north’ to go by. Try it!”

Thäràc stepped onto the disk. For a second or two nothing happened. Then it started rotating clockwise with a loud grinding noise. It turned about 70 degrees and then stopped. He was now directly facing the wall.

“There you have it; the Soul Destroyers are yonder. Any questions?”

“Yes,” said Thäràc, “how far is it?”

“It is MILES away!” answered Bëddl, “it will take you weeks to get there.”

“I don’t have weeks. Effa’s legion could return any day, and without the Soul Destroyers the earth will be defenceless.”

“And that dullness thing will come back?”

“Yes,” said Gerra, speaking for the first time, “and this time it might not go away.”

“Oh shit. I am sorry great one, I never bothered to include you in my greeting. It is great to see you in the flesh... well sort of. Well, you could take the train.”

“The what?” said Thäràc.

“The train. It will take you there in a matter of hours.”

“Then why didn’t you suggest it first? And where is this... ‘train’?”

Just then, the disk started rotating again, changing the direction of Thäràc’s feet to suit his new intended destination. As it turned, Bëddl continued, answering the first question.

“Because my other purpose – remember I have two and I told you the first one – is to advise people against going anywhere near that place. It is infested with hostile life forms, and the train is kept by demons. They might not be so happy to lend you their favourite toy. Even if I am wrong, the area is a war zone. The demons have been fighting the resistance ever since they first brought their hairy arses here. If you need to throw yourself into all that crap to do your job then please do! But be careful. Although since you have brought the MIGHTY HERO OF THE ANCIENT DAYS with you, I suppose you must know what you are doing. Right! This way.”

The monkey snatched Bëddl from the pedestal, and started running with it back into the open area. Thäràc and Gerra followed them to the other corridor on roughly the

opposite side. When they got there, they were greeted with the strange and ugly howls of some sort of pig/baboon creatures that were perched on a surface high up on the rocks; about two stories high. Bëddl started complaining.

“See what I mean? As soon as you take this path you begin to encounter this sort of crap. SHUUUUUTUP!!!”

Immediately the howling ceased. The shout was so loud that even Gerra jumped.

Protruding from the wall of rock to their right a foot or so over Thäràc’s head was a branch-like piece of wood about two feet long. The monkey leapt up and clung to it by its tail, holding Bëddl below, still facing Thäràc.

“Well, just keep going down that way and keep checking the disks so you don’t get lost. It will take a few hours but you will get there.”

“Thanks,” said Thäràc, “nice meeting you.”

“Always a pleasure!”

And with that, the monkey hopped back to the ground and departed, carrying the goat skull back into open area, leaving Thäràc and Gerra to begin down the road that lay before them. From then on, the two travelled on foot through everything from open areas to narrow corridors between micro-mountains. It was a path of many options, and the various forks in the road were overcome by the guiding disks that kept them on the right track. After about two hours, they were now on a clear pathway along a ridge in an open area. On either side of them, the land dropped by somewhere between one and four feet, into sandy looking planes littered with strange unrecognisable objects of all shapes and sizes. Though the place was not in any way unpleasant, it reminded Thäràc of Ge’henna.

In the distance they could see movement. Seemingly hovering in the air up to ten feet from the ground were

strange ghostly figures with no discernible limbs. Though some were brownish in colour, most of them were various shades of red. They seemed to be able to move pretty fast, and as Thäràc and Gerra came close to the area, they seemed to be attracting attention to themselves. The first one to approach them was a dark red one. At close range it was almost a blur to look at. Most of what could be seen appeared to be some kind of hair-like substance, which wavered in all directions like seaweed in a tide. It had a mouth much like that of a baboon; protruding greatly and with very long fangs on both jaws. Other facial features could also be seen, some of which may have been eyes. These were difficult to make out, however, because the whole image of the creature was distorted by some unknown element. It wavered as though it were seen deep in moving water. Thäràc could not place how much the seaweed like hair was really moving, and how much the movement was being exaggerated by the water effect, if it was not merely a visual effect itself.

The creature did not just hover there to see what the two passing hikers wanted. It opened its formidable jaws wide and made a noise much like the roar of a lion. Thäràc summoned his Soul Sword into his hand and took a defensive stance. The creature charged, launching itself into Thäràc's direction like a torpedo through water. When it reached him, it stopped dead just short of his range. It obviously was not stupid. For a while the creature just kept repeating this ritual, until Gerra pointed out that two more of them were approaching. Thäràc kept his eye on his back as the three circled him. Suddenly, one of them charged and then stopped short as before. He could see what they were doing. That instant, he spun around and sliced the second charging foe into two. The other one was unexpectedly rent apart by Gerra. The remainder retreated. Thäràc and Gerra were pestered by these things almost continuously as they travelled. They made the habit of continuing when

approached, and keeping on alert until it either went away or found backup. At no point did the creatures get the better of them.

In time, the path along the planes gave way to a more mountainous environment, in which the path led them through complex corridors of hard rock with tunnels and platform-like surfaces at every conceivable height or orientation. The floating pests became far less frequent, but could now ambush them from ledges and spaces either hidden or above them. It was only now that they had to be taken more seriously, though still none were ever able to get past Gerra or the Soul Sword. In this area the bigger problem was the hideous reptiles that infested the rocks. They looked much like amphibian crocodiles, only with ghastly looking faces and front legs almost like that of a bulldog. Some of them had long heavy chains fastened around one wrist that they used as long-range weapons. These ones caused Thäràc a lot of trouble. In one fight, however, he made a breakthrough. One of the creatures with a chain somehow managed to seize the Soul Sword from his hand. It occurred to him that he might be able to teleport the sword back into his hand, and he was right. This gave him an idea. Before the creature could retaliate, he threw the sword straight into its head, injuring it badly. Then he warped it back into his hand, went right up to it, and finished it off. This strategy proved consistently effective, and the sword hurling technique was a great repellent against the hovering pests as well.

Soon, the mountainous structure through which Thäràc and Gerra travelled became increasingly complex. It was quite vertical, with high ledges lurching over pits and ditches. These were often connected to each other by tunnels and pathways that often twisted profoundly. It became very difficult to navigate and at times guiding disks only made things more confusing. The other element that added to their

surroundings was the man made structures they started seeing. Most of it was made of wood; simple rope bridges connected areas at any elevation, from the ground over pits to the two highest opposing cliff faces; wooden ramps gave access to higher places. There were even flying foxes that went over some of the numerous chasms. It was at this stage that they encountered the most horrific life-form yet.

After coming down a ramp onto a fairly flat area they saw something crawling in the distance. It seemed to be moving around aimlessly until it spotted them. As soon as it did, it started rapidly advancing. When it got close enough for Thäràc and Gerra see what it looked like, what they saw was a lizard-like creature that somewhat resembled a human from the head to below the shoulders, and like a long tail from there to the end, about nine foot long. It had no eyes, but a very human mouth snarling with very sharp looking teeth. It was dark brown in colour, and appeared to be getting around solely by pulling and pushing itself along on its amphibious hands. When it reached a distance of about four yards from Thäràc, it suddenly rose into an upright position, revealing its many rows of centipede-like legs. The other thing it revealed was an empty ribcage below the shoulders that moved in and out like claws. Since the tips of the ribs were very sharp, they obviously *were* claws; or perhaps fangs. Thäràc hurled his sword at the creature. It ducked right out of the way, and just as he warped the sword back into his hand, the creature lunged down at him with the jaw-like ribcage wide open. Having retrieved his weapon, Thäràc slashed through it, killing the creature. From that point on, most of the encounters with these life forms did not end so quickly.

Eventually, Thäràc and Gerra reached a path that descended steeply between two walls of rock about six feet apart. As they descended, the path bent and twisted in both

directions until having passed through a final right turn they found themselves in a trench. Standing sentry in the trench was a creature much like the demon Mo`nera, who Thäràc had encountered when he found the Setharòn. This creature was a serpent, with a pair of arms each grasping a Soul Sword. It had two heads, each with a unique shape and facial features, and like Mo`nera its middle section was protected by a heavy looking shield. When the demon spotted Thäràc it began to advance, when suddenly it was struck by some sort of missile. The demon was blown to pieces in a spectacular explosion of blue flames and sparks.

A few seconds later, a man hopped down into the trench from the ledge above, armed with a crossbow in one hand and a shield in the other. Then another; and then one more. They looked all around them and spotted Thäràc and Gerra. One of them recognised Thäràc, and approached him. In turn, Thäràc recognised him; it was Snapdrágon. The two met and embraced each other. Snapdrágon introduced Thäràc to his companions, while he was more than interested in meeting Gerra face to face. When they were finished with greetings, Snapdrágon spoke.

“We have been waiting for you. If you are looking for the train, come with us.”

Thäràc complied. He and Gerra were led by Snapdrágon and his friends through yet more complex mountainous pathways of trenches, ledges, pits, peaks, tunnels and corridors that were now too narrow for two to walk abreast. As they went, they encountered more demons. Most of these had either two or three heads, had two to four arms, had shields, and were armed with alien objects much like the ones Thäràc remembered Mo`nera wielding in his left hands. Mo`nera had not used them during their encounter, and that was great because what they did was send projectiles rapidly, and at imperceptible speeds, towards

their targets, filling the area with rapid loud bursts. They were referred to as 'guns'. Thäràc and Gerra had to stay behind as his escorts battled with the demons, as well as anything else that got in their way. Thäràc was surprised to discover that the bolts fired from the crossbows had the same sort of impact as the missile that had struck the first demon, only not nearly as potent. They did not blast their targets to pieces, but they did serious damage. Each encounter exploded in a melee of deafening gunfire and brilliant blue explosions. Some of these explosions were as powerful as the first one that blew the first demon apart. It took some time for Thäràc to notice what was doing this. During some of the battles, Snapdrágon or one of his friends would teleport his crossbow away and replace it with some sort of sickle. The sickles were very round and shiny; nothing like Smoke's grim looking tools of death. When the holder had a clear shot he would hurl the sickle at a demon, blowing it to pieces. This explosive sickle was always the weapon of choice for an ambush. Eventually they reached the base.

Thäràc and his companions were standing at a dead end in a small tunnel. One of Snapdrágon's friends approached the wall, placed his hand on it, and pushed it in about an inch. About a second later, the wall opened up, and they all passed through. On the other side was the usual complex of twists and turns. Eventually, however, it really began to open up. There were wide corridors branching off into chambers. As they passed through, they were greeted by several people. According to Snapdrágon there was one person in particular who wished to meet him.

"This person has met you before, and wishes to be your personnel servant."

As Snapdrágon led him to the surprise reunion Thäràc was utterly lost over who it might be. When they got there, he

forgave himself for this, because it turned out to be someone he never would have expected: Mo`nera.

Chapter 16: The Train

Thäràc's initial reaction when he was first reunited with Mo`nera, the demon he had crossed swords with weeks earlier when he found the Setharòn, was not fear, but weariness. Granted however, he was still polite.

“Good to see you again.”

“Pleasure,” said Mo`nera, “you look like quite the success story. I see my sword has served you well.”

“Could not have gotten by without it.”

“No. I didn't think you would. I would hope you appreciate it, because my clan was not very impressed when they learned I had given it to you. That's part of the reason I am here now.”

“So your story is?”

“Too long. All I can tell you in the time we have is that you need me. There is much you have not been informed of; Bëddl can be incredibly ignorant sometimes. Again we have not the time for me to tell you the story, but the train belongs to the demons, and they will not hand it over to you.”

“You can lead me to it? Do they know you are on my side?”

“Yes. So I can only serve you as a guide and soldier. I can also brief you on the way.”

“Okay, so when do we make our move?”

“Now. The only preparation needed is to show you your new weapons.”

Mo`nera held out all three of his hands in a grasping gesture. Then, all in one instant, there appeared all of the basic artillery used by the group he had joined. In his right hand was a metal shield, about fifteen inches wide and two foot tall. In his upper left hand was a crossbow, and in his lower, a very bland looking sickle.

“I trust you are familiar with these? The shield is actually about twice the size it appears to be. The crossbow fires explosive bolts, and the sickle is also explosive, only far more potent. You have to be careful with them. Like myself, the demons middle sections are protected by shields; aim primarily for the heads, and when practical, at the tail below the shield. Keep yourself armed with the crossbow and shield at all times. Do not put the crossbow away unless you intend to use the sickle, and have a clear opportunity to do so, and never, ever put your shield down. Are you ready?”

“Not quite, but I couldn’t be readier.”

“Excellent! Let’s go.”

Once Mo`nera had given Thäràc his weapons, they found Snapdrágon, who had gone off somewhere, and Mo`nera gave the announcement that everyone should muster in the main chamber. The main chamber was not very high; in some places it reached about three stories, but a lot of it was barely over their heads. It was however, vast enough to hold the entire assembly of a couple of thousand. Mo`nera, sounding much like a commander, selected a relatively small group of around one hundred. When everything and everyone was ready, they departed; a small army of seasoned

fighters, with Thäràc, Gerra, Mo`nera and Snapdrágon enclosed in the middle. Thäràc could not help but feel a little bothered by the pace. Not half an hour beforehand he had been travelling through the strange path with only Gerra as company. He had since been reunited with two old acquaintances, and was now on his way to what was being described to him as a lethal battlefield. That was war, he thought to himself, unpredictable and often less than comfortable and convenient. Once they had started, Mo`nera began to brief.

“The history of the Spiritual Plane seems to go much deeper than that of the living world. We are living in what is called the Third Eon. During the second, the Plane was a place of peace, but the two great wars of Pán`gaia threw it into chaos. It is now dominated in some places by gâjìn warfare. These people with us have been fighting the demons of the First Eon throughout the Third. I have played a significant diplomatic role in the wars, but it was not until very recently that I went into exile and offered to continue my peacemaking work with their enemies, these gâjìn.”

“Was this before or after the last time we met?” asked Thäràc. Mo`nera laughed.

“After, but that is another story. I have earned their trust, and that was how I was acquainted with your friend Snapdrágon here. He had actually asked Bëddl the same question that you did, which probably slipped Bëddl’s mind. So Snapdrágon, like yourself, was sent to find the train, allegedly surviving the pathway with just a hunting knife.”

Snapdrágon felt the need neither to confirm this statement, nor refute it.

“On the way there, and most fortunately, he was caught by us. When questioned, he revealed his wishes, and so was summoned to speak directly to me. I thought he was crazy

until he dropped your name, which you so pompously gave away during our encounter, and announced that you should soon be passing by. But more importantly, he convinced us that it was in our interest to assist you in any way we can. So we trained him in the style of combat you now see, and we prepared to launch an assault on the territory of the train, so that you can board it.”

That was pretty much everything that Mo`nera had to say, and from then on, the trip was silent, at least as far as conversation goes. The path they took once they had left the hideout started out basically the same as before, but after about ten minutes of travel, it became radically different. While previously very vertical, it was now almost completely flat. The mountainous walls and other obstructions about them had become smoother and more curved. As they went on, the rock structures became very exotic in shape. Some were shaped like waves; others were pin shaped, much like Bâbel. They also became light in colour, lighter than the brazen sky. The most significant thing however, was that the rocks became less and less dense. They went from spacious pathways that forked frequently to practically open land peppered with rocks of wondrous sizes.

It was in such an environment that they started encountering demons, or anything for that matter. Up to that point, the plane’s usual inhabitants had been wisely keeping out of the way. The fighters were capable of basically obliterating anything standing alone in their path, and the wildlife was not stupid. Nor were the demons. However, fighting was their only option, because while shields protected much of their fronts, their backs were bare, as that was where their arms stemmed from. They were not equipped to retreat, and if they tried, which they did not, they would be leaving themselves deathly vulnerable. And so fighting to a certain death was the only thing they could

realistically do. By this point the party had been travelling for about twenty-five minutes, and the train was close. A further ten minutes down the track and the rocks became denser, and very high. Some of them reached up to seven stories in height, and they became more intricately connected to each other, forming huge curved walls and pillars. Pieces of the train tracks were now in sight. The frequency of demon encounters at this stage was higher, and Mo`nera informed Thäràc and Gerra that the battle was fast approaching. He spent the short journey briefing Thäràc on everything he needed to know. As he had said, he did not feel ready, but that would not stop him; it never stopped him. He braced himself. The strategy was for the resistance to launch a distraction attack on the demon infantry that guarded the train, while Thäràc was led through an enclosed passage, with Mo`nera and Snapdrágon as body guards and Mo`nera as a guide. Gerra had his own plans.

The group was going through a twisted tunnel that bent left and right when the explosions began. Once again Thäràc braced himself, and got ready to follow Mo`nera ever so hastily through the chaos. Finally, and before he knew it, he was out in a wide-open area enclosed between right and left by sizeable mountains. On the far side was the train, a very large machine with several segments known as ‘carriages’. Scattered throughout the arena were pillars, up to six stories high. At the top of each one was a small fortification, each, apparently, housing a sniper. The resistance was pouring into the area, shooting off with the infantry there and attracting the attention of more. Thäràc could not waste a second. Led by Mo`nera, he and Snapdrágon started running towards the left. About fifty yards before them was the entrance to a passage that would take them to the train. As they went, Thäràc and Snapdrágon fired explosive bolts at nearby demons. Mo`nera however, was firing his guns. The fighters spent a lot of their efforts using their sickles to

gradually take down the armoured snipers, both on the pillars, and up on the mountains. At the same time, they used their shields to protect themselves from gunfire. The visible part of each shield was surrounded by an invisible extension that lit up in strange colours whenever struck. It was about the same shape, but twice the size. So far the resistance seemed to be doing quite well. They had taken the demon infantry by surprise, were suffering few casualties. So far, they had managed to knock down two snipers closer to Thäràc's side, and he was able to reach the closed area unharmed.

Inside the passage Thäràc and Snapdrágon were led by Mo`nera through several forks and plenty of enemy resistance. The tunnels reminded Thäràc of the place where he and Mo`nera had first met; walls of rock lit by burning torches. The encounters were very dangerous, and their survival was dependent on fast action and faster reaction. The demons' guns were deadly, and the best defence was to prevent them from firing in the first place. Eventually, they came to the other side of the passage, and found themselves once again out in the open, only thirty or so yards from the train.

They ran for it. Enemy resistance was next to negligible, as Thäràc's allies had done a good job of diverting their attention. Mowing down anything that tried to get in their way, they kept moving until finally they reached the train. The steel cockpit at the front was roughly three times Thäràc's height, and its six long carriages were a few feet higher. At first it was not clear how they would enter the cockpit, then Mo`nera stepped in, interacted with some sort of control system by the door, and opened it. Not wasting a second, they all stepped in. Inside the cockpit there was not much in the way of controls; just a few levers. Mo`nera pulled one. In an instant, the train jumped into motion. At

first it moved like a snail, but then it started to gain momentum. Before it could reach a significant speed, Mo`nera pulled another lever. All of a sudden, the roof of the cockpit opened up, and Gerra dropped in. He had waited for the opportune moment, and fought his way through the space over the battlefield to the train.

“A demon has made it onto the train,” he said, “he is on the first carriage and he is moving fast.”

Before anyone else could react, Snapdrágon turned and climbed up the back of the cockpit. When he was almost at the top, he performed an acrobatic feat that left the others’ mouths open. He jumped from the back wall onto a step on the short wall at the front side of the opening and leapt from there onto the roof of the cockpit behind the opening. On the second jump, he had his shield out, repelling the gunfire from the demon three yards away, and before he landed, he swung his right hand widely, hurling a sickle into the intruder. Just as Snapdrágon landed on his feet, the sickle struck the demon’s lower body, blasting it in two; a tail rolling around on the carriage, and a three headed torso thrown into the air and then crashing down on the rear end of the first carriage, before slipping between the first and second. Satisfied with this, Snapdrágon hopped back into the cockpit, doing a half twist to land facing the others.

“You can close the roof now,” he said, “our problem is no longer with us.”

Chapter 17: The River of Souls

Now they had been travelling for over fifteen minutes. The train was still running at far below top speed. But at over two hundred miles per hour, its speed was considerable. There was little to do in the cockpit but look out the front, through the glass, at the road before them. Much of the tracks so far had lain between mountains, but at this point the mountains were far more distant. They were very strange looking, not like in the material world. Most of them were dark green, others were brown, and some were even white. The mystic atmosphere that characterised the Spiritual Plane seemed to be responsible for these colours. The sky was its usual brazen colour with clouds shifting in ever random directions. Spirit wildlife was nowhere to be seen, and plantation was very little. As they travelled, the mountains surrounding Thäràc and his company were changing from closer to further and further apart.

In the distance, the horizon seemed almost featureless; that is, except for one little speck that appeared to be located on the tracks themselves. The first person to see it was Gerra, and when he alerted the others, they too were able to make it out. Soon enough they were able to confirm that there was something on the tracks before them. Not a moment later

they realised with shock that it was a person. Without thinking, Thäràc went for the brakes. They could hear the screeching of the wheels as the machine tried to stop itself. But at the speed it was going the brakes were next to useless. They felt themselves slow down gradually as they watched the human figure approaching; not moving a muscle. It almost looked like a child; a girl with a black hair. At this point Thäràc realised who it was.

“It’s Smoke!” he said out loud, “what is she doing?”

There was no more time for questions. Smoke was now just a few seconds away from impact. The brakes had failed, and the train was going at about 70 miles per hour. When the gap closed, she was still standing motionless. Then it hit. It was as if Smoke was made of some sort of indestructible and immovable metal and was fixed to the ground where she stood. The very centre of the train was stopped completely in its tracks while the rest wrapped around her. The back of the first carriage was hurled straight up into the air while it continued going forward. It bent and shattered under the pressure as the back soured over the spot where Smoke still stood undisturbed, dragging with it the two carriages behind it. The remaining three were pulled along beside the still airborne wreck of the first three. The back carriage slid sideways and collided with the back of the cockpit, which had been turned completely inside out. It bounced off and was propelled in the other direction. The smashed train would have gone for hundreds of yards, but it seemed to be pinned to the ground by Smoke. Instead, they were just tossed about like a giant metal snake pinned down by its tail, though trying to break free. By the time that the last pieces of debris had landed on the ground, the inertia had settled, and the train, utterly destroyed, lay motionless on the ground.

Standing unharmed amidst the destruction was Smoke. She began making her way to a certain place not far from the

point of impact. When she got there, she found Thäràc and his three companions lying alive and conscious on the ground. She was primarily interested in Thäràc. She stood over him and smiled in her familiar creepy way.

“Funny how some things are not what you think they are.”

At the time Thäràc could only see one realistic response.

“How could we have survived that?” he asked in delirious disbelief.

“So was my will,” replied Smoke.

Thäràc and Gerra struggled to their feet. The others were not in such a hurry, except for Mo`nera’s two extra heads, which were hissing at Smoke.

“Where are your sickles?” asked Thäràc, noticing that they were missing and thinking it might give him a starting clue as to what was going on.

“They are part material; I could not bring them here. Not that they make a difference; they are really little more than a disguise.”

Thäràc had a river of other questions, but he felt that one was sufficient to explain more or less everything.

“What are you?”

“Haven’t you guessed? You met my true form in Ge`henna.”

Thäràc could only think of one thing it could be, but it did not make any sense.

“The Chelis?”

“That’s what they call it,” she smiled darkly, “this will not be easy to understand.”

“Try me.”

“I am a manifestation of the Chelis; an extension and a weapon; an arm and hand. But do not let these things steer you from the true reality: I *am* the Chelis.”

“But *what* is the Chelis?” asked Thäràc anxiously.

Smokes tone of voice then became very solemn and almost broken-hearted.

“We were gîajìn,” she began, “many of us were born during the time of king Mammon; the rest of us came into the world before it. The extent of his oppression has not been recognised enough. We hated it, not that it mattered. What mattered was that many of our neighbours hated it enough to fight. Many of us were still very young, and most of us were innocent of the sight of blood. The legends of the Beast Wars do not do any justice to just how terrifying they were. Many of us had never seen so much as a dead man in burial. We watched men and some women being ripped apart and crushed like insects. You know what it looks like now. It drove you to face off with the Nefilim Prince. Creatures like that were once abundant. We left Lecría in search of refuge. Against great odds, we found a place where we could shut ourselves away; a fortress, at least as we saw it. It has since become known as Shôl.”

“I don’t think I have heard of it,” said Thäràc.

“Probably not. I could not imagine it being on the top of anybody’s holiday list. For us it was a prison whose boundaries reflected our fear. We thought we would feel secure in that place, but sometimes when you run away from a problem you never really leave it behind. Our paranoia continued to grow. In time, it was not just the war we were afraid of. We hid from the outside world for so long that our imagination began to twist it. We lost our prior intention to leave again. We had not the courage to break the seal we had created to lock everything else out. Ironically, it was locking

us in. None of us dared to open it except for one; a man named Balda. He tried to convince us that it was our only hope of ending our misery. We listened and believed but were still afraid. One day, when he had become tired of waiting, he chose to open it himself. Some of us were there when he started. We stood and watched as he slowly broke away the seal that kept us from the outside. Soon enough we were all there watching with great apprehension. The closer he got to finishing his work the more anxiety began to overcome us. When he was almost done we panicked. We begged him to stop, but he loved us too much to keep us from our freedom. When he refused to cease, we killed him. From that instant we knew that we were guilty. There was no denial. Not one of us bore any less guilt than those who had carried out Balda's sentence. He was a person unlike any other. He had the courage and wisdom to lead us out of Shôl. He was not driven by a desire to escape himself, but by a love and charity that in our fear we had forgotten. He gave his heart to us, and we smashed it. Some of us had this curious belief that he was still there, but they did not feel it. If they had, it might have given them strength. But he left us and we will never understand why. Balda was the only light that we had, and we blotted it out. From then on we were no longer afraid. We no longer cared what might have threatened us from the outside, nor had we any desire to go and see. There was nothing left but guilt, and we were convinced that we deserved no better. We saw Shôl as the perfect home for us even though we knew in our hearts and minds that Balda would not have. We had nothing left to do but die, so we did. We stopped eating, we slept without blankets at night, and we even stopped moving. One by one we wilfully lost the ability to stand up, and then we just lay there, and wasted away. Our souls however, could not sit still. Once free from our bodies it became too painful to remain immobile. So we became transient. Every spirit that emerged from the starved

bodies became part of a current of grieving ghosts that swept through the fortress like a raging river; the River of Souls. In time we became increasingly restless until we could no longer stay. We could not break out into the outside world, and so the only place we could go was here in the spirit world. It is almost funny to think about. By that time we almost felt ready. Our irrational feeling of the worthiness of our misery had passed, and if we made it here we might have had a hope for redemption.”

“Why couldn’t you?” asked Thäràc, who was feeling genuine pity for his new, and extremely formidable enemy. Smoke laughed.

“That is a very good question. Why? Why was the pathway between the planes built in such a way that one is not actually guaranteed entry? The pathway is mysterious. While it lies between the worlds it also seems to exist *within* them as well. As you have experienced for yourself, you can never truly see what is ahead. There was a place in the road that we could not pass. Nor could we turn back from it. Each of us became trapped there, and when we did, we could do nothing to warn the others. One by one we stepped unknowingly into a trap between the worlds, and the River of Souls became a cesspool. We have since realised that we were so burdened by guilt and despair that we were too heavy to take. The place where we became trapped corresponds with a specific location in the material world; with Ge`henna of all places. The cesspool of the great wasteland became known as the Chelis.”

“So where did you come from?” asked Thäràc.

“Think of me as a defence mechanism,” Smoke replied, “like I told you before, as spirits it hurt us to remain still. So when we got stuck in Ge`henna we had to suffer until we gradually became used to it. It weakened us. If we stayed that way we would have perished. We needed, at the very least,

the ability to reach out and touch the outside world somehow. We needed some sort of limb through which we could make contact with either world. That was when I came into being. I was a reaction; a consequence of our imprisonment. But, and this is the bit you might not be able to understand, I do not just represent the Chelis, I *am* the Chelis. In fact, 'Chelis' is the closest thing I have to a single real name, for we are many. I am exactly the same as the entity you saw at Ge`henna; we share the same thoughts and awareness, the same substance and the same pain; and *I*, the River of Souls in the form you see before you, am the perfect illusion. You must have wondered by now how on earth Gâbrîel could not have seen this. While I am hundreds in substance, I am manifest as only one. I am a single spirit with a unified personality. I am no less a real soul than you are, and no less a multitude than the vîje`liz. It is impossible to actually see both of those realities, so Gâbrîel could see little more than you could. She could not even see my intention; I hid it in the places where the truth is invisible."

This left Thäràc with two questions. While one was by far the more important, the other was more appealing. He started with that one.

"Why a young girl?" he asked.

Smoke smiled sadly.

"I suppose because it represents the innocence we once had; the innocence we lost forever. You have another question don't you?"

"What is your intention?"

By this time, Snapdrágon and Mo`nera had managed to get on their feet, and so Thäràc felt ready for the answer.

"I told you that I materialised with the purpose of, to put it one way, stirring the water to keep it from decay. However, Smoke can only do so much to relieve the torment. While I

can move from one place to another as I wish, the River of Souls cannot move at all. Only when I summon it to wherever I am can it even stretch its legs. The pain never went away. Nor did the grief. I did what I could to occupy myself; to distract myself from the combined agony of the guilt and the confinement. I became everything I could be, except a friend. We could not relate to anybody, nor even to each other. I never believed that it could ever get worse. There was one night that every single one of us will ever remember more vividly than even you could. The night that the Guardian took the life from all things though gave it back to some, one would think that our suffering would have been eased. Somehow it was almost doubled. I remember standing at the edge of a cliff. It was a place in the central south not too far from the Palace of Gerra where I could stand and watch the forest burn in every direction. It was tall and narrow and we could not have found a better view. I was facing the south-east when it happened. I felt it instantly. The life was sucked from every one of us, and we suffered a grief that would make you pass out. I have been told that you felt a little sting Thäràc. I felt the broken souls of a thousand ghosts. I collapsed onto my knees, feeling sick and shaking in pain. My face was so paralysed that I was completely unable to cry. And from my knees, I fell onto my hands and my face. For some reason I wilfully struggled to keep myself up, I suppose I could not close my eyes or allow my sight to be consumed by the ground beneath me lest I leave myself naked of the senses that ease the sorrow ever so slightly. That was when I saw it. In the far corner of my left eye I saw the most beautiful thing a person can imagine. As it soared past toward the south it flowed through my eyes and into my heart like rain into a pond. It did not *allow* me to climb back to my feet, it *made* me; and I forgot about the pain. That changed everything. After that evening I had seen something that promised greater life than any of us had ever had: the

Pa`räjí. I vowed to find it, and I did. All I had to do was follow it. It led me to the south and beyond the shore. It led me into the sea. I followed the glow until I found its source, and I embraced it. The instant I laid a finger on it my despair turned into a joy beyond that of love. For over a century I was floating in bliss.”

“That was why you were so strangely happy by the time you found me,” said Snapdrágon, speaking for the first time, “happier than a child.”

“Correct,” said Smoke, “until Thäràc took it from me.”

She turned back to Thäràc.

“You remember don’t you?” she said, “it was the first time we ever met.”

Right then, Thäràc had a sudden and very intense flashback. He was back at the sea floor; an ethereal spirit fighting to the death with a terrifying parasite that possessed the sphere of life he was trying to take; a warrior, struggling with a mysterious and faceless enemy that would haunt him for the next three years. It was suddenly so clear.

“It was you!”

“Right again,” said Smoke, “you should understand now why I was not going to give it up without a fight.”

“Indeed,” said Thäràc, “I am sorry if I hurt you.”

Smoke started laughing.

“Don’t worry, I am not angry at you; but once the Pa`räjí was taken out of my hands, I was back to the way I was. That is, the way I was before the Pa`räjí was taken from Pán`gaia in the first place, only worse of course, since I had fallen from such a great height. But all had not been lost. After years of woe I found hope; I found it in you.”

“Me?” said Thäràc, “what have I got to do with anything?”

“What do you think?” replied Smoke, “you have a piece of it in you.”

“The Pa`räjí?”

“Yes. It is only a fraction of what I had, but it is more than enough to break me free of this misery. When I started hearing rumours of a man who had lived through the century unharmed and even empowered, I figured it must be the same person who fought us so well at the sea floor. Unfortunately, we could not see your face, as it was hidden behind him.”

She gestured towards Gerra with her gaze. As much as Thäràc was confounded by Smoke’s alternating between ‘Me’ and ‘Us’, he was becoming very anxious at where her story was going.

“The timing of that new lead could not have been better, as it was just then that our good friend Effa decided to tear the moon asunder, as his way of announcing that he would soon bring back the bleakness for everybody, not to mention intensify our torment once again.”

“You must hate Effa more than anyone,” said Gerra.

“Oh yes. We would never wish him even half the torture he brought us of course, but we would take an extended pleasure in putting him out of his own misery. However, once he made his statement, I began to notice a lot of activity among the Vìje`lìz. And so I joined them for the time being, just to learn what I could. What I learnt was your name, and where I might find you. All I had to do then was act as your bodyguard until you reached Ge’henna, and then lead you to the Chelis.”

“To take my life?” said Thäràc nervously, “why do you need me there to do it? You could not just take it on the spot like you did at the seafloor?”

“No,” replied Smoke, “I can summon the hand of the Chelis to wherever I stand, in either world. That is indeed how I embraced the life at the sea floor. As a single spirit I could not actually get close to it myself; only Gerra can do that. I only needed to find it so that we, the Chelis knew where to reach. We can go anywhere in these two worlds that we want; we only need know where we want to be for us to reach it. That is my other purpose. I am the eyes, ears and voice of the River of Souls. And you Thäràc, are the spirit that can free us from our agony. Why can’t I take your life right here and now? Because I cannot achieve such a feat from a distance. I never actually stole the life of the world, all I had to do was touch it, and when I did it was utterly impossible to let go until you forcibly wrenched it from my hand. I wish I could just do the same with you. But your life must be extracted and taken for ourselves, and to do that you must come to us. And since I failed to take you peacefully, I must now take you by force.”

“Before you do there is something I want to know,” said Snapdrágon.

“Very well.”

“When we first met, before you were deprived of the Pa`räjí, you took me back home. You helped me understand the past that I had forgotten. I am still grateful for that favour. Why did you do it for me? How did you even know and why were you so interested?”

Smoke started smiling in such a sweet way that the others were confused, given how sinister her ambition was. She looked almost lovingly at Snapdrágon.

“I have been meaning to tell you, Snappy. Thanks for asking. We come from millennia before your time, yet the bond is still so strong. The reason I gave you that gift is because you are my family.”

“How?” said Snapdrágon.

“Because many of us are, in fact, your ancestors.” All of a sudden Smoke’s voice disappeared and was replaced by the combined voices of some thirty or forty people.

“We knew it the moment we saw you. You are our descendent, our grandson. And we are proud of you. Obviously, we knew you were a music maker from the southern tribe, and we believe it is a miracle that you alone survived among them. We will grant favours whenever we can, but you can not stop us and the others from our goal.”

By this point Thäràc had just about had enough. Everything he heard was making it harder to cope. The combined weight of Smoke’s virtually incomprehensible nature and structure, her grisly story and her stated desire was bringing him down like a house in a flood. Nevertheless, they did not detract from his sympathy, and ultimately his current sense of selflessness.

“When I have completed my task and this whole thing is over you can have it. I don’t really care.”

“I’m afraid I cannot wait any longer,” said Smoke, “you are coming with me now.”

“He is not going anywhere,” said Gerra, drawing a long sword out of nowhere, one that had not previously been seen. Smoke turned to him. Her facial expression and tone of voice became far more serious and dark.

“Effa is afraid of you Gerra,” she said, “*I am not.*”

Thäràc drew his own sword, and readied his crossbow.

“But he is right,” he said, “I’m not going anywhere.”

Smoke smiled.

“Then it begins.”

The second she finished that sentence, a cluster of four or five ghostly tentacles sprang up from the ground before her and grappled Thäràc. He started cutting through them as quickly as he could. At the same time, Mo`nera started firing his guns directly at Smoke, and Snapdrágon started firing arrows. The combined firepower had some effect; mainly it distracted her. When the tentacles were finally subdued, all four of them ran in and went at her with swords. But before anyone could land a blow, she forced them all away with more tentacles. They all started cutting their way through. Mo`nera continued blasting away at her. Eventually, the tentacles disappeared leaving everyone to rush in once again. This time, instead of tentacles, two large blades appeared in her hands. When her enemies closed in, she started fighting them all off, their four swords against her two. She moved incredibly quickly, spinning back and forth and blocking all swings from any position. This display only lasted a few seconds. All of a sudden, she leapt into the air and then landed outside the circle on top of a wrecked train carriage. Mo`nera blasted her, and Snapdrágon hurled a sickle at her, which exploded but still did not have much of an effect. Then, she made a second leap from the carriage to the ground on the other side of her opponents. The closest person to her was Gerra. Before he could react, tentacles sprang out of her knees and inner elbows, combining into one and grappling him. In that same instant, she violently lifted him off the ground and used him as a mace; hurling him into the others without letting go. Before she could toss him away a spinning soul sword slashed right through the fused tentacle and completely severed it, before vanishing and reappearing in Thäràc's hand. He had been knocked down like the others, but was able to recover just enough to retaliate. At this point Smoke changed tactics. She sprang once again into the air, and as she approached a height of about six yards in the air several thin arm-like tentacles burst

out of her body and landed on the ground, turning her into some sort of freaky seven legged spider thing. Her opponents had recovered from the last blow, but could not react before the pseudo-arachnid's back four legs sprang from the ground and went over its body (Smoke), flipping itself upside-down with Smoke dangling over her enemies and the legs surrounding them. In her hands her swords reappeared. Thäràc swung his arm widely and threw his sword near the joint where one of the legs was attached to Smoke. She deflected it with one of her swords, along with various other projectiles from the others. Before it could fall down and hurt one of his friends Thäràc summoned it to his left and threw again; this time spinning straight toward a leg further from the joint. The leg grew back in an instant; yet, by this point he had begun to realise somehow that striking these shreds of Smoke's true form seemed to be weakening her.

“Hit the legs!” he yelled.

For about a minute the four fighters were severing the legs at every opportunity while the creature was continually trying to toss them onto the ground and into each other, as well as crossing swords with them. Both sides were getting very beaten up, until Snapdrágon and Thäràc managed to simultaneously hit her with two crossbow bolts. Amazingly, she failed to block either of them. This time she was so vulnerable that the double blast knocked her, including six of her legs, off the ground. Rather than land back down she flipped over again, and retreated several steps onto a wrecked train carriage. As she did, she was being peppered with Mo`nera's gunfire, Snapdrágon's explosive sickles and Thäràc's Crossbow bolts. Then the legs disappeared leaving just her. Then, not a second later, she vanished in a cloud of shadow; leaving nothing behind. The firing ceased. They stood silent for a moment. Then Thäràc Spoke.

“Is she...”

“No,” said Gerra, “She just retreated. She has gone back to the Material Plane. We have beaten Chelis for now but she will be back. If we can find a way to reach the Soul Destroyers before that happens it may not even matter; at least not for the world.”

Chapter 18: A Convenient Trip to the Shroud of Mystery

Exhausted from the previous encounter, Thäràc and his company looked onward down the train tracks toward the place where they had to go. Their transport had been destroyed, and their destination was a long way away. They waited there for some time to see if anyone had any bright ideas, and they decided that the best thing they could do is to start walking; so they did. They went for several hours, with little need for rest, and no need for food or water. Spirits lack many of the needs that burden a body, and travelling a great distance on foot could only ever take time. It was Snapdrágon who first spotted the thing that would save them that time. Deep in the distance to their left, there was something in the air high above the mountains. It was moving towards them at a notable speed. Soon enough, all could see what it was: a ship. It was a very basic vehicle, made of wood, and with no visible parts other than a simple sail. As it approached them it fell gradually toward the ground, obviously aiming to land just in front of the party. It was about a dozen yards long, and the sail a dozen high. As it finally came to land Thäràc recognised a familiar object

sitting on a tall pedestal that could now be seen near the front of the ship: a large goat skull.

“EEAAGGHH!! What in the four planes have you done this time?!” Bëddl yelled.

The frantic movement of his jaws as he shouted had knocked him off the pedestal. Not a second later, he reappeared in the monkey’s hands hanging off the side.

“That train you left behind is one of the most solid constructs in this world and you still managed to demolish it!!”

“Bëddl!” yelled Mo`nera with delight, “what are you doing here?”

“WHAT DO YOU THINK?!” Bëddl yelled with a rather amusing aura of frustration, “I am giving you guys a lift since you had to go and blow the first one!”

Right then, the monkey put down the skull and slammed its fists on something, causing a plank to unfold itself onto the ground.

“Coming?”

The party looked at each other, gave the nod, and then stepped onto the plank and climbed aboard the ship. Once they were all aboard, the monkey slammed its fists on the deck again, and the plank withdrew. Then, without waiting for anything, the ship took off, and went high above the ground in the same direction as the tracks.

The vessel was only a fraction as fast as the train had been, but it was still pretty fast. As hours passed, the landscape changed markedly. The mountains below them grew and shrank, and changed in colour, and the ground in general varied from rugged to flat. After a couple of days had passed, the party began to notice something strange: it was getting darker. In the spirit world there was no day/night cycle. Yet,

while the sun stayed in exactly the same place as it always had, its light was fading. It was as though they had crossed over from a region of light into an area draped in shadow. Within hours, it had become completely dark. The sun could still be seen, but ever so faintly. Far down beneath them the land was lit very dimly by occasional white lights scattered throughout the area. The land was other wise unchanged, at least for the first few hours of darkness.

After that it was different. The mountains were gone, and so was the sun. The reason soon became apparent: it was being blocked. Above them, where once was nothing but sky, they could faintly make out a roof of rock. It appeared that they were now travelling within some sort of giant cave. After a further two days of travel, the chambers of the great cave became smaller, and in some places the ship had to drop down almost to the ground, where mystic white lights sat at the tips of many of the familiar looking stalagmites protruding from the ground, keeping the ground beneath it faintly illuminated. The structure of the place also became more complex. Passages curved away in all directions, vertical or otherwise. The various chambers varied greatly in size; ranging from spaces the size of small forests to tiny tunnels that the ship really had to squeeze through. All of this was dimly lit by the same mystifying white lights, both on the surface and in midair. In good time Thäràc lost his sense of direction; he had no idea where they were facing, and felt as if the complex extended for countless miles in all directions; above, below, behind, before, to their left and to their right. The question of how he was ever supposed to navigate this place without Bëddl's ship did occur to him. Mo`nera thought it was a good occasion for a story.

“Chelis was not the first person or people in history to covet the Pa`räjí.”

This struck a bell with Thäràc, as Gâbríel had explained something of this before.

“At a time beyond the reach of human memory, before even the words dêva and gîajìn would bare any meaning, humans tried to steel it. The Guardian responded by ripping the Flesh Cutters into existence, and sending them unto the earth as a bucket of water to a small fire. On earth, it was the end of an empire; in this world, it was the beginning, the time before which has been completely lost from all knowledge. The souls of those vanquished came to dominate the Spiritual Plane in what is called the First Eon.”

“The demons?” said Snapdrágon.

“Yes,” said Mo`nera. As he was speaking, his other two heads were facing him, as though they were paying keen attention to his story. Bëddl found it quite amusing. The speaking head continued.

“The traumatised souls of those who had received the Guardian’s wrath became unrecognisably distorted in form. They grew ugly, vicious and strong. That is what the demons are; that is what I am. Under their rule the spirit world was a place of chaos and perpetual warfare. Its alleged purpose as a place of rest was betrayed. That was until the demons made a second attempt at taking the Pa`räjí for themselves. They created a portal in this place.”

Mo`nera gestured, by gazing around, toward the giant cave in which they were travelling.

“And they created a mode of transport.”

“The train,” said Thäràc.

“Right. And they used it; almost every one of them. I am still here today because I had to stay. They took the train to the portal, and the portal to the material world. They thought they had found a way around the Guardian, whose Flesh Cutters had no power over them. They did not reckon that

the Guardian could do the same thing all over again, creating something that could meet their spiritual bodies; the Soul Destroyers. That was the end of the First Eon. The demons remained in diminished numbers as the ugly legacy of the wilfully forgotten past. The Soul Destroyers were sent to guard the portal, and would use it to return when the Army of Black and Flame came upon Pán`gaia.”

“And that is why the train leads to them,” said Snapdrágon.

“Exactly.”

Without any forewarning, in a particularly huge chamber, the ship stopped.

“Here we are!” said Bëddl.

“You mean to say here *they* are?” said Thäràc.

“Look up.”

Thäràc slowly tilted his head upwards. Hanging upside-down from the ceiling hundreds of yards above him in partial visibility was an endless array of naked humanoid figures. At that moment, the rising, burning sensation he had experience in his stomach and throat when he found the Flesh Cutters consumed him once again, and the Guardian’s booming voice returned to dictate to the Soul Destroyers through him.

“Awaken!”

There was movement, but the lighting was too weak to see exactly what it was.

“You are to stand before the Forest of Me`ridía until the enemy returns. Iómuñgãnd, Come forward. The rest of you, Go!”

The second that the final word was uttered the Soul Destroyers started to fall from the ceiling. When they reached a point not too far above Thäràc and his company

they vanished successively, except for one. Íómuñgãnd landed on his feet on the ship; a humanoid with the same lack of humanity and animality as Le`vîathan, only thinner, less tanned and seemingly taller. Knowing his task was complete, Thäràc addressed Snapdrágon.

“Are you coming back with me?”

“No. Mo`nera and I have things to see to; you have all the help you need.”

“Then, I will see you around; you too Bëddl,” said Thäràc.

“Good luck with whatever it is you have to do now, and please try to be careful; you’re like a one man tornado!” said Bëddl.

“Where is the portal?”

“Never mind where it is, just use it! All you have to do is walk the plank.”

“What?”

“Walk the plank! See that wooden board hanging off the side of the ship over there? Just jump off it!”

“Íómuñgãnd and I will follow you,” said Gerra, “but before you go I have instruction. When you reach the other side, go to my palace.”

Thäràc, trying not to forget that, turned to the side of the ship. Once again he knew that hesitation was not in order. Without looking back, he lined himself up before the plank, ran up onto it, and leapt off. Gerra followed right behind him, and then Íómuñgãnd. Warping once again into an illusion Thäràc fell through what seemed like some sort of tunnel that quickly became shrouded in a bright light. Also shrouded was the sensation of falling. Before he knew it, the white that consumed his vision steadily faded into total black. Then he opened his eyes.

Thäràc was lying on a hard bed looking up at a fairly high stone ceiling. He felt very funny, which did not surprise him after what had just happened. Then he heard a voice.

“Can you move?”

It was Zhôcô. Thäràc lifted his right hand. No trouble there. Then he tilted his head up, again with sound success. He had a bit of trouble sitting up though. When he did, he found himself in what looked like a very bland rectangular temple. Standing over him was Gâbríel, Zhôcô and Le`vîathan. Now Íomuñgãnd was part of the company.

“I have to return to the Palace of Gerra,” said Thäràc.

“I know,” said Gâbríel, “and unfortunately, so does Effa.”

Chapter 19: Rise of the Vîje`lîz

Once again, Thäràc was riding Cära over a long distance, this time into the east. Around him, as he moved, a raven accompanied him, and trailing right behind him were Iómuñgãnd and Le`vîathan. Zhôcô had to stay behind. They had been travelling for thirteen days, and had some 150 miles or so before they would reach the Palace of Gerra. Gâbrîel had explained everything. Harrow had disappeared. Witness had been borne only to his interfering with Bë`träda in her pursuit of Zhôcô. However, Gâbrîel had ventured out to observe their surroundings and later found Cära stationed safely at Zhôcô's house, before escorting her to the temple. Gâbrîel had also anticipated Thäràc's next task. So she went to the palace to check up on things, and found Bë`träda waiting there with the entire Army of Blood, and the Nefilim. Furthermore, she found that the front entrance had been blocked off. Now, Thäràc was on his way to the same place, and he was anxiously preparing himself for a great struggle that may well be his end.

Yet, something was different. Since his return from the Spiritual Plane, most of the strangeness he had initially felt had disappeared, but some had remained. He felt a sort of weakness that paradoxically made him feel stronger. He

could not quite place it, but he had the feeling that something about him was not quite the same as it had been before. It did not bother him, although he did suspect that his condition would soon reveal a consequence of some sort. By the time the Palace of Gerra came into view it was early in the sunset.

It was a very hilly area, so at first only the top part of the palace could be seen, circled by the Nefilim; including Ithamä. Though they must have seen him, they did not come near. They must have been wise enough to stick with their revenant allies, particularly after their last encounter with Thäràc. Before the hill that concealed most of the palace was another hill. When Thäràc reached the top of this hill he could not believe what he saw. Between the two hills, in a space deeper than he had imagined, was a great multitude. He recognised them as the Vîje`lîz. He went down to meet them. From what one of the soldiers told him, they just happened to be near the area when Gâbrîel had made her visit. She had spotted them and requested that they approach the palace from the west, and remain hidden there until Thäràc arrived. The plan went like clockwork, and he wished he had the time to ask exactly how they managed to stay out of sight for that long, not to mention how they reached that part of the world so quickly in the first place, as they did not have their horses with them. For now, it did not matter, without any need for preparation, the Vîje`lîz started to make their way toward the palace, and Thäràc followed close behind them.

The Army of Blood were incredibly bored. They sat on the ground doing anything they possibly could to pass the time, as Bë`träda paced about. The shadowy cloaked person who had accompanied her in her previous encounters with Thäràc was nowhere to be seen. At that moment, the legion finally saw what they had been so eagerly waiting for: the

Vìje`lìz pouring over the hill ready to cut them to pieces. Bë`träda ordered them onto their feet, into ranks, and ready to receive a full frontal assault. The Vìje`lìz looked just as eager; they were charging. The Nefilim made their way over to support their revenant allies, but when they saw their true target riding behind the enemy force, they went straight for him. Thäràc steered south of the engaged armies at full speed, quickly realising that the Nefilim were closing in fast. Ithamä was at the lead. Wielding his sword, Thäràc started charging it with power. When he did so he was suddenly astounded by how much more quickly he could bring it to its usual full strength, and even more so by how much stronger he could now make it. All of a sudden he understood the feeling he had been left with when he returned to the Material Plane. He waited until the Nefilim were near, and with a mighty swing he unleashed a wave of terrible energy into them. Ithamä was not greatly affected but the others were practically swatted out of the air like flies. As Ithamä approached, Thäràc readied himself, charging his sword to the brim again, when the Nefilim Prince was thrown off course by a simultaneous blast of all three of Le`vîathan's missiles. The monster crashed into the ground, while the rest of the Nefilim continued to pursue, this time scattering themselves into a semicircle behind Thäràc. Before Ithamä could rise completely to its feet, it was assailed by both Le`vîathan and Iómuñgãnd. It tried continuously to break away and pursue its target, but was having some trouble.

The Nefilim were quickly closing in on Thäràc as he continued toward the palace. He repeatedly turned and sent powerful blasts of energy from the palm of his hand. Most of these hit their targets, but eventually they closed in and knocked Thäràc off Cära. Before they could move in and do some serious damage, Thäràc created a powerful shield that domed around him, repelling anything that tried to harm him. Then he quickly stood up, and transformed the shield

into a series of missiles, sending them into the nearest enemies. Then he charged his sword again, and started fighting the Nefilim hand to hand. They were losing badly, and quickly became exhausted and weak. Then Thäràc, deciding to finish them off for good, sheathed his ordinary sword and summoned the Soul Sword. Then he went on the offensive, taking on the nearest foe with a vicious spiritual weapon in his right hand, and Setharòn fire consuming his left hand. This was a deadly combination, and it did not take ten seconds for Thäràc to start exterminating them. Anything he did not first take down with the Soul Sword he finished off with it, and before any of them thought to retreat, it was too late. Those that did try and escape were struck down with fireballs, and their fiery spirits were extinguished. When the Nefilim were no more, Thäràc remounted, and headed straight for the palace. He was able to reach it without hindrance. The Army of Blood was still busy with the Vije`lìz, and Ithamä was having great difficulty with Iómuñgãnd and Le`víathan. When Thäràc reached the palace however, he was somewhat confounded as to how he was supposed to get inside. That was when Gâbríel appeared. She had been circling the battlefield and waiting for him to reach his goal.

“There is a staircase on the left side,” she said, “this way.”

Thäràc followed her to the left side of the building where there was a small opening that led to a set of stone stairs. He had just reached the top of the staircase when that section of the palace suddenly shattered in a deafening crash of great force. It was Ithamä, who had finally managed to shake off its foes. Now it had smashed straight into the side of the palace, shattering a significant portion of it. Thäràc was now standing at the broken end of a long balcony, and the entrance was so conveniently at the other end. So he ran for it. He could hear the Nefilim Prince catching up behind him,

but he knew he would make it, and when he did make it through the doorway he kept running into the mystically lit first floor of the palace not a second before Ithamä came crashing sideways through the wall. Knowing that running was no longer practical, Thäràc turned to face it.

The creature did not choose to stop running for dramatic effect, but went straight in for the kill. Thäràc powered up his sword until it was exploding with Setharón fire and fierce destructive energy. When the gap closed he blocked the charging beast as though it were a sword strike. This almost stopped Ithamä in its tracks and then sent him stumbling back a few yards. Without hesitation, Thäràc ran in and repeatedly struck the beast in the torso with the same intensity of fire and energy. This beating up did not last long, as the animal's huge tail promptly came in and knocked Thäràc off his feet. He recovered quickly before his enemy's gaping jaws could lunge straight into him. He blocked this with an energy shield, and then took a few more swings. The creature was repelled a little, before it viciously retaliated, forcing Thäràc into the defensive. Then he decided he had had enough. He charged his sword to the point of exhaustion, and went in so quickly and lethally that Ithamä was quickly forced back out of the building onto the balcony. It was at precisely that time that Iómuñgãnd and Le`viathan finally caught up with it. Standing on opposite sides, they assailed it. The Flesh Cutter was continuously battering it with his living missiles, and the Soul Destroyer was cutting away at him with a pair of incredibly delicate looking swords. Ithamä, of course, was using its weight and its fearfully sharp teeth as its weapon, and was giving its assailants some degree of difficulty. This fight would take a while.

Thäràc could hear and feel the chaos of the struggle right outside, and was once again confounded as to what to do next. Once again he promptly received an answer. From his

left wrist he felt and saw something oozing out, draining him somewhat. After a moment had passed, he found himself standing, once again, before Gerra. The warrior did not speak, he just gestured for Thäràc to follow him, and so he did. He led him through a complex of chambers, hallways and stairs until they finally came to what looked like a stone door. It was very tall and wide, but there was no obvious way that it could be opened, except perhaps for two ditches at the bottom. Within a moment of their arrival though, Gerra went and stood before it. He bent down, placed his mighty hands into the two ditches, and began to lift the door up. It appeared to require a huge effort even for Gerra; It moved ever so slowly, and made enough grinding noise to drown out the melee outside. Eventually, the door was open, and Gerra led Thäràc through.

Ithamä and its opponents were now on ground level, though still fighting amongst ruined architecture and rubble. All three of them looked badly beaten up, but Ithamä in particular was a total mess. Sizable portions of flesh had been shredded off of it, in some places revealing bones. It was in great pain, but it fought on regardless; lunging forward at Le`viathan, who usually managed to dodge out of the way and strike it in the face with the terrible serrated blades coming from his left wrist – it had already lost one eye to this tactic – and Iómuñgãnd, who was simply too quick for him at this stage, always ending up somewhere where the creature could not reach him. Finally, after dodging one last attack from Ithamä, the Soul Destroyer somersaulted onto the beast's head, and thrust both swords dead into its skull. The creature screamed something unimaginably horrible to listen to, and squirmed like a pinned lizard for about half a minute. Then it stopped. Iómuñgãnd drew his swords back out of its head, and treasured the bleeding corpse on which he now stood. The greatest and the last of the Nefilim had been slain. He and Le`viathan looked toward the battlefield

where the Vije`liz had engaged with the Army of Blood; neither were still there.

The Vije`liz had been badly beaten down; they had less than half their original numbers, while the revenants had held up better. They retreated into a small mountainous complex to the southwest of the palace, apparently hoping to lose the Army of Blood, who pursued them. They chased the Vije`liz through several forks in the twisting pathways with walls of rock, until the Vije`liz found that they had gotten themselves caught in a dead end. The final path they had taken led into a great ditch in the earth, wide enough for twenty or so people to stand abreast and many times longer. The part where they emerged from the mountainous maze was already several yards below the surface and from there it sunk steadily and quite steeply. At the other end from where they had emerged the cliff-like wall was almost a hundred stories high. The walls were filthy and dark. Yet, with the Army of Blood still hot on their tail, they had nowhere to go but down, and so they did. They had not even gotten close to one eighth of the way down when they could see Bë`träda emerging from behind the last turn. They kept running until they were finally trapped at the bottom. They turned to their foes, who were now standing still halfway down the ditch.

Bë`träda appeared to be savouring her victory, and was ready to move in for the kill, when some of her men, having thought to look back behind, received a terrible shock. Standing at the top of the ditch and looking down on them with vengeful bloodlust, were many more of the Vije`liz; many more than the number at the bottom of the giant ditch. In that moment, the Army of Blood went from victorious pride to absolute terror, as they realised they had just been tricked into their doom. The Vije`liz were never running from them, they were leading them into a fatal trap. Bë`träda suddenly left her post at the vanguard and moved toward the

rear, with a look of stunned amazement on her face. She was halfway across when those now before her started moving in. This did not change her expression. She paid no more attention to her own people, who seemed to be beyond discipline. By the time she reached the rear of her legion the Vîje`lîz were not far away. While the others panicked and descended into utter disarray, Bë`träda proceeded to remove her helmet and take it respectfully into the embrace of her left arm, her eyes still fixed on her opponents. Then she dropped down and kneeled on her left knee, her helmet still in hand. This was the last time she was ever seen alive, as her figure vanished into the charging multitude, before the entire Army of Blood was crushed between the two divisions of the Vîje`lîz. When the last fell, the Third War was over.

Back at the palace, too far away for the final kill to be heard, Íómuñgãnd and Le`vîathan stood looking on into the corpse filled plain before them, feeling a sense of serenity. Above them, a great winged creature was flying over their heads. It was Gerra, as he had not been seen for thousands of years: alive and in full flesh. Once again, Gerra was a living and breathing warrior exactly the same as he had been before his death at the hands of the Nefilim. He circled the area a few times, and then landed before Íómuñgãnd and Le`vîathan. As they looked on, the creature began to shrink. His wings retreated into his back, his claws receded and the rest of his features became less animal and more human. Eventually, every sign of the creature from the stars was gone. Now the veterans were looking upon another great warrior: Thäràc.

“Go and join the others,” he said to them, “your service to me is complete.”

Chapter 20: The Becoming

For a good moment, Thäràc just stood before the Palace of Gerra and observed the horizon fading into dusk. At that moment, Cära, who had stayed away from the battle once her limits were seen, came to him. He smiled and stroked her mane.

“I have to leave you for now,” he said weakly, “stay safe. Go to Izríá and let her take care of you. Go south until you reach a river, and follow that. It should take you to Southbank.”

The horse nuzzled him, and then it took off into the south, taking the same basic path that Thäràc had taken when he departed from the Palace after his first visit. As he watched his love disappear, he no longer felt like a man with a task or a burden, he felt like a hero. So when he saw the raven approaching him in the distance, he welcomed the sight. The raven came from the west, and landed in her usual fashion; fully human in appearance by the time she reached the ground.

“You have been given a most extraordinary weapon,” said Gâbríel, “you must now use it before Effa’s nightmare is

unleashed. Come with me, and when I drop down, you ascend. Are you ready?"

"Yes."

"Then let's go."

Without another word, Gâbríel assumed her raven form and took off into the north. Likewise, Thäràc transformed into Gerra and followed her. Soon enough, they reached the clouds. The land beneath them was new to Thäràc, and from so high above he could only acquire so much of an idea of what the land was like north of Gerra's Palace. After a couple of hours it had gotten dark, and Thäràc really had to keep an eye on Gâbríel as she was not very easy to see. The stars above really came alive. Never before had he seen them from such a great height, and they were fuller than ever before. What also shone with enhanced brilliance was the new moon that sat directly above him. To the east, was the blood of the old moon, which had since lost most of its colour. The fiery red glow was still there, but was now only faint. It was however, more ominous, giving the impression that the Plague of Black and Flame was at hand. It had always been disturbing, but now it was especially fearful to look at.

Finally, after about five hours travel, Gâbríel suddenly dropped her altitude until she was out of sight. This was his cue. Flapping his wings mightily, Thäràc ascended. As he rose higher and higher, the world continued to sink beneath him. Soon enough, the clouds appeared to be about halfway between him and the earth's surface. The clouds were thick, and looked like a blanket draped over an invisible surface, waiting to catch him if he fell. Then he saw it. High up above him and equally as distant horizontally was a floating isle much like the ones he had seen in the sea years earlier. It was roughly cone shaped, with an apparently flat surface at the top and a needle point at the bottom. The whole thing appeared to be a dark coloured rock. The surface was about

the size of a large city, and when Thäràc flew high enough to look over it, what he saw was a hard and flat stone surface, and on that surface he could see concentric rings. When he got near enough to see, he discovered that those rings were none other than the Steel Cleavers. They were lying down in circles on their backs with their heads facing outwards. The innermost ring comprised thousands of them. They looked pretty much the same as the Flesh Cutters, only less human, and were likewise sleeping with their eyes open. Thäràc landed in the centre. Then the Guardian's voice returned.

“Awaken!”

After he said that the soldiers in the circle nearest Thäràc steadily got up on their feet. About the time they were all standing the soldiers in the next inner circle rose. Then the next. Before he knew it, all the other rings from the inside out were standing. Thäràc continued.

“The enemy is coming to the Forest of Me`ridía. Prepare to descend.”

After this, the Steel Breakers made their way to the southern end of floating isle. They stood in ranks, with the vanguard looking down toward the forest, well over a thousand miles away. The other ranks just stood there waiting for the first to make the dive. Thäràc just sat down for a while. His mission was finally complete. Now he could relax until the Black and Flame returns. Then he would fight; this he had already made up his mind about. He felt it was his responsibility, even though he knew that he could now only make the slightest difference. When he was done congratulating himself for his second grand accomplishment he got onto his feet, stepped over to the southern side beside the ranks, transformed into Gerra, and leapt off. Then he part flew, part glided to Me`ridía.

By the time Thäràc arrived at the forest wall it was well into the morning. He arrived to find the Flesh Cutters and the Soul Destroyers ranked up in their millions, and Gâbríel standing behind them. Thäràc met her.

“Any news?”

“No,” she said, “All we can do is wait.”

“Then wait we will.”

And so, for the next few days, Thäràc spent his time living off the land, something he was all too used to doing. He camped as though it would happen that very day, although as far as he knew, it could take years. As it turned out, the darkness came on the fourth day.

It was late in the afternoon. Thäràc was off hunting, when Gâbríel came with the news.

“It is time.”

Thäràc left what he was doing, and went and stood before the vanguard of the Flesh Cutters. Then he just stood there and stared up at that blood-fire in the sky. Around him, the landscape was a little rugged, but not hilly. It was covered with grass. Thäràc however, took no interest in the scenery, but in the melted moon. The redness had become black, but the burning motion had been revived; what was now black still looked like fire. After about ten minutes, he realised that the movement could be likened to a swarm of bats coming from the sky. Right then, Thäràc became very nervous. As the swarm before him became increasingly clear, his anxiety intensified. After a further ten minutes, what was once a growing blob of burning blackness was now a plague of hundreds of thousands of almost distinguishable black dots. Thäràc’s blood grew cold. He had never seen such a terrible force. The Trinity of Legions were vast, but were not half as terrifying as the millions that were now bleeding from the sky; the ultimate manifestation of Effa’s inexorable fury. It

was no longer just the plague itself that he feared, but also the spirit whose uncontrollable anger had spawned it. As he watched the swarm coming down with the purpose of destroying life, he felt as though he were staring straight into Effa's raging eyes. What on this beautiful earth could have created such a terrible monster? No man, woman or child should ever have to live to see it, and he knew that if he survived, it would haunt him for the rest of his life. It was as though all of his worst nightmares were being spilled onto the earth, and he was at the forefront to fight it. About twenty five minutes after it had begun, he could make out both the humanoid bodies of the swarm, and the horrible, inhuman shrieks that saturated the air. Thäràc's fear had turned to sheer terror. By this time they were not far from the ground, and they were soon to land. As they drew closer to the surface, their figures became clearer, and the shrieking became louder. By the time they finally landed, the shrieks had become deafening.

But something strange happened at that instant. While Thäràc's terror was not extinguished, he was suddenly filled with a curious sense of power and the responsibility that comes with it. He suddenly felt ready to fight. The feeling consumed him like fire, to the point that he was having difficulty controlling himself. Then, when the plague was less than several hundred yards away, he almost instantaneously transformed into Gerra, and then launched himself into the air. Incidentally, it was at about that same time that the Flesh Cutters started to charge, followed promptly by the Soul Destroyers behind them. Thäràc accelerated toward the point where the fiends were five or so yards away from the ground, thinking it a good place to do some damage. Beneath him, the vanguards of the two sides clashed in a bloody mess as the Flesh Cutters' creepy projectiles tore the first few ranks to shreds in a second. Thäràc was not watching. His eyes were fixed on the stream above the ground he was

quickly speeding towards. As he got close he drew his sword and charged it until it was glowing and burning white. He was approaching fast. He braced himself, before finally plunging straight into the swarm. Suddenly, at the very moment of contact, he was knocked clean out of the air by a fearfully strong and violent impact that seemed to have moved against the current of shrieking fiends. It was as though the earth itself had emerged from beneath and swatted him down from behind like a fly. He hit the ground hard.

Determined not to succumb to death he opened his eyes as quickly as he could. He was now directly beneath the swarm. Several yards over his head an endless stream of shadows raced past, dampening the light from the sun. For that brief moment Thäràc was okay, but his heart started pounding with terrible intensity when he saw what was standing right before the bottom of the overhead stream where the shrieking shadows landed: a short, black-haired, childlike figure he now knew as Chelis. Thäràc recovered instantaneously, purely out of defence. Chelis started stepping towards him, smiling wickedly, against the background of a black curtain of death. Thäràc sheathed his still glowing sword, and summoned his Soul Sword into his left hand. Then he restored his previous form as the ethereal warrior, which he would maintain for the duration of the next few hours, and then summoned *his* Soul Sword, which was almost twice the length of the other, into his right hand. While he could still hear the deafening shrieks of the black swarm above them, it also sounded curiously silent, as though the sight of the River of Souls had completely consumed his attention.

It did not matter. All that mattered was that Smoke was now running towards him, pulling out her sickles on the way. Thäràc braced himself as she closed in. When she was about

two yards away, she suddenly swung her right sickle from right to left. While the blade was facing inward, the blade of the ghostly second sickle that extended over a metre from it was facing outward. Thäràc managed to fend it off with his shorter sword in his left hand, and counter attack with the longer one in his right. It was a direct hit, but did not do very much. With long ghostly extensions stemming from both of her sickles, Chelis kept swinging in every angle, forcing Thäràc to defend against a lethal flurry of terrifying incorporeal blades. Eventually, he successfully threw her off, leaving her open to attack. Not missing a crucial opportunity, Thäràc hurled both of his swords at her as hard as he could. Both of them stuck into her, one in her side and the other in her head, causing her to further stumble.

Without hesitation, Thäràc turned and launched into the air as fast as he could, desperately trying to escape. Before he could pass through the stream of shrieking fiends that flowed endlessly overhead and lose her, he was suddenly grappled by the wings by two great dark tentacles rooted in the ground far away on either side. Then he was being tossed around like a ragdoll. While the ends of the tentacles remained on opposite sides of him making it very difficult for him to get a hold on one, the roots coming from the ground started coming together, and then went to Smoke. When they reached her feet they quickly crawled up her legs, over her torso, and down her arms into her hands. Then she raised her hands high into the air, holding the tentacles like reins, and hurled them down, sending Thäràc crashing hard onto the ground. Before she could lift him up again, he finally managed to grab the tentacles, and tear them off of him. He used his wings to get back onto his feet quickly, and just as another bunch of tentacles came at him, he was able to summon his swords back into his hands and sever them. Suddenly however, one grabbed him from behind. Thinking quickly, he back-flipped behind it, and cut it clean in half,

releasing the grip on his back. Then he went into a frenzy, cutting all the tentacles that sprouted up around him, and making his way toward Smoke as he did so. When he came near, the tentacles retreated, and Smoke came at him again with her spiritually enhanced sickles. This time, however, he was on the offensive, and managed to strike her repeatedly with his longer sword, while avoiding hits himself. Now when he struck her it had some effect, and the third time he knocked her down.

A second time he made a break for it, getting almost up to the stream of shadows above when he was grappled by the wing, leg and wrist by three tentacles sprouting from Smoke's face and hands. This time he was able to keep going, lifting Chelis off the ground, and pass through the stream, repelling the fiends with a shield stemming from his free hand. Once he had passed through, he continued to ascend until several yards above the stream where he was stopped abruptly, as though he had reached the end of a chain. Now that he was out in the open he could see the immense battle taking place before the forest.

Many yards away the ever shrieking fiends were being torn apart by the hundreds at the hands of the Flesh Cutters. For every one that perished however, a terrible black ghost arose holding a torch burning with a dreadful flame, and moved towards the forest at frightening speed, only to be cut into pieces by the Soul Destroyers. From above, thousands of what had to be the Steel Cleavers were falling to the earth like shooting stars, burning with a fierce green flame. Wherever one landed, one of the ghastly attackers was disintegrated. Once they were on the ground, they continued to smash them with balls of energy.

Thäràc was still trying to break free, but could not. Then, the chain-like tentacle grappling his body started to hurl him down toward the stampede beyond the point where the

soldiers of darkness landed. He watched the chaos approaching fast, before finally being slammed into it headfirst. He hit the ground hard, and just as he did, the tentacle, which at that point ran horizontally from him into the stream, launched itself high into the air with Smoke at the other end. She flipped past over his head as though she was pole-vaulting, and landed on her feet on the other side of him, facing him. Thäràc cut the tentacle with his shorter sword as his enemy approached, and got up onto his feet. The two were now facing off in the midst of a thick stampede of shrieking fiends racing toward the forest. As Chelis approached, she slaughtered with her sickles anything that came within reach. Thäràc, having his back to the coming creatures, was occasionally collided into. However, he decided that since every attempt to escape was ultimately used to his enemy's advantage, his only option was to fight until she was subdued. Without giving her any warning, he pounced onto her, grappling her and trying to toss her. However she still would not budge, and ended up tossing *him* to the ground with great force. Before he got up, he summoned his longer sword and swung at her. She dodged, and retaliated with a flurry of sickle swings with spiritual extensions, almost all of them blocked by Thäràc's shorter sword, the others wounding him spiritually; a very strange and unpleasant sensation. Then he lunged at her with both swords. She fought him off, and then grappled him with her own two hands. At this point he noticed that whenever Smoke handled him herself without summoning obvious pieces of her true form to do the work, her image flashed with a white taint, sometimes rapidly. Flashing wildly, she threw him over herself and smashed him onto the ground, before lifting him up to throw him a second time onto the ground back on her other side. In mid-flight however, Thäràc managed to get a powerful hold on her. He landed on his

feet, and then threw her over him, successfully out-grappling her for the first time. Then she disappeared.

Thäràc looked around him, trying to spot his foe in the midst of the intense stampede of vicious fiends. The shrieks were deafening. They were dashing past so violently that it was almost impossible to see past a few feet. While he tried to keep an eye out in all directions, he preferred to face the onpour so that he could kill some, rather than have them come crashing into him. The third time he turned in that direction he saw Chelis coming at him very fast. He managed to grapple with her just in time, and for a moment the two struggled. Eventually, it was Chelis who overcame her opponent, and had him on his back. The next thing he knew was that tentacles were holding him down like a net. His hands were bound so he could not cut his way out. But it could not hold for long. Gerra's strength was eventually the victor, as he broke free; tearing the tentacles apart with his bare hands. Thäràc summoned both swords and swung furiously at the River of Souls, who fended him off vigorously with some sort of umbrella shield, and counterattacked by closing it into a lance and thrusting it at him. This went on for a good long moment; a swordfight between Thäràc's two swords and Smoke's lance/shield. Then, keeping the shield between them at all times, Chelis leapt over her foe's head and landing on the other side, knocked him down. As he got up, she ran back several yards, and then did something he never expected. She grabbed one of the shrieking fiends with a tentacle and tossed it at him, knocking him down again. He managed to get up in time to start repelling Smoke's poor faring projectiles with powerful blasts of energy, blowing most them to pieces. When he did, most of them became ghosts, and before he knew it, Chelis was tossing these at him as well, compelling him to fend them off with his Soul Swords. After the sixth soldier of black and flame had been hurled, Thäràc was taken by surprise by a tentacle that

sprouted up from beneath him, grabbed him and then slammed him hard onto the ground right before Smoke. Almost instantaneously he somersaulted onto his feet and aggressively came at her swinging both swords wildly. Chelis fended him off with her strange shield and counter attacked by using it as a lance. Finally, Thäràc successfully got her off defence, and hurled both of his swords at her, this time sending her stumbling back for yards. He took this opportunity to make a third attempt to break free of the struggle. Summoning both his swords back into his hands, he launched himself into the air, successfully cutting away the last few tentacles that desperately tried to bring him back down. Within seconds, he was finally out of her reach, as she disappeared into the mass movement.

Thäràc halted flight in mid-air and turned to see what was happening. The invaders had not yet reached the forest, but were not about to stop trying. He then looked at the stream. The enemies stretched on as far as the eye could see. The Steel Breakers were still raining from the sky. With great difficulty, Thäràc chose to turn away from the battlefield, and focus his energy on staying as far away from the River of Souls as he possibly could. The enemy was getting ever closer to the forest. By this time there were still no storm clouds, as the Guardian no longer had the strength to stir one. Thäràc watched with a sense of despair as the first tree was set alight. Then he flew away to the peak of Mount Miolnī and proceeded to watch as the Forest of Me`ridía was slowly burnt away. By the time evening came, it was gone. What had once been his home for over a century was now just a smoking waste. He thought it would all be over in the end. But somehow it was not. Thäràc had known that all of the other forests would already be gone by the time Me`ridía was destroyed. The heart of the earth had now been completely destroyed. So why, he asked himself more and more seriously as the hours went by, was he still alive?

PART III: EFFA AND THE FORTRESS OF SHÔL

Chapter 1: The Dividing Line

The room was dark. The only source of light was that of the lantern that poured through the thin gap in the doorway. He sat on the bed; a young man staring at an object sitting on the bedside table. It was a rock the size of a fist on which half a human face had been calved. He heard footsteps. Then his door opened. Another man walked in, this person a generation older. He spoke.

“Are you hungry?”

The young man did not speak. He did not even look at the man standing at the door. The latter waited some time for a reply, and then gave up.

“Your mother is afraid of you, you know.”

There was a change in the young man’s expression, but his eyes and tongue remained still.

“It happened an hour ago,” the older man continued, “I am over it.”

The younger turned his head some way in the other’s direction. The latter smirked.

“And you think *you* should be angry at *me*?!”

This time there was no response at all.

“I’m not sure if you even have the right.”

Still silence.

“Effa?”

Silence.

“What is the matter? Nothing to say?”

The main source of light was a fire on the ground. Beyond the radius of the people sitting in a circle around it, it was quite dark. The only other light came from dimly lit torches, which had been prepared by the mage to last forever. There was very little conversation. One of them was observing the others. Before him was the familiar sight of blank faces, the classic sign of that mysterious mental blockage under which gîajîn decisions were known to be made; of which the dêvas often said it would be better to role a dice.

“You want to get out of here just as much as I do,” he said.

“We cannot go back,” said another, “what if the war is still on?”

“What if it’s not?! Then what are we doing? Spending our lives in a cave while the world cleans itself up?”

There was no response. The man climbed onto his feet.

“I have had enough!”

And with that he stormed off. After a moment of awkward silence a current of dread went through the others, and they got up and made for the first chamber. When they got there they found the man, Balda, standing before the great seal that separated him and his company from the outside world. It had the form of a great wall of rock, several stories high and just as wide. It had a very strange texture; as though it were mixed and hardened on the spot. It was very smooth

but not entirely flat. It was also light in colour, in comparison with the dark interior of the great cavern. Balda was standing right in the centre of the very round platform on which the mage had stood when the seal was first solidified. It was almost identical in colour and texture, and was aligned precisely with the middle of the seal, as though it were a mirror and the seal was merely the light that shone off it. Balda stood at its heart with his gaze fixed on the seal. More people entered the room as he began to raise his arms.

“What are you doing?” one of them asked nervously.

Balda did not answer. As his hands ascended, a strange golden light in the shape of a rotating spiral appeared on the dead centre of the seal. For a brief moment the people were captivated, but they quickly became scared. When the light began expanding outwards, they began to panic.

“What are you doing?!”

Soon enough, the golden light consumed the entire seal, and with that same light, Balda’s hands were now aflame.

“STOP IT!!!” a person shouted as the light grew brighter.

Effa’s father was now pacing about the room, moving from one sketch on the wall to another and examining it closely in a half-mocking sort of way. He continued speaking as he went.

“In order to be angry, first you have to be *human*.”

He was now standing at the wall right before Effa and with his back to him.

“Pity you have to miss out on that.”

“If *you* are the embodiment of humanity...” came Effa’s voice from right behind him. Then he choked in pain as he felt a heavy blow to the side of his head. He fell onto his knees, making an effort not to fall further. Effa was standing

behind him with the unfinished 'half-face' rock in his right hand. He watched the man before him clutching his head helplessly, and listening to him moaning. Both of them were shaking violently. Effa watched for a moment, feeling sicker than he ever had in his life. But he could still finish the sentence.

“...I would rather be a rat.”

Then he struck again. This time his father fell onto his hands. The blood was dripping rapidly onto the floor. After a third hit, his arms gave in and he fell flat. Effa did not stop. He himself fell to his knees and struck the man's skull again, and again. The more he hit, the more rapidly the blood gushed out, and the more rapidly he hit. Then he stopped. Though he was not really crying, tears were streaming from his eyes, as he stared at his father, lying absolutely motionless on the ground; a pool of blood accumulating around his ruined head. He did not stay in that room for long.

The veil of light engulfing the seal was still golden in colour, but now it was coming out in patterns. It was a spiral of dark lines of shadow surrounded by sun-like spots in various shapes and forms, moving about continuously. Balda put his hands together; both were still aflame with golden light. Then he slowly started to pull them apart, looking as though it was actually taking some effort. As he did so, the dark lines on the great seal began spiralling into the centre, while the sun-like spots gravitated outward. Then all of a sudden many of the people in the chamber had to cover their eyes as a circular ray of bright light poured out of the rim of the seal, illuminating the whole area. The people started crying out. As the light grew brighter and brighter, Balda's hands started literally burning as he put them together. Then he raised them high in the air, and with great effort, as

though his hands were bound by some sort of knot, he hurled them down and wrenched them apart at his waste. At that instant there was a deafening boom that seemed to shake the earth. However, the seal was still standing. He did it again. The people screamed. Now Balda started again, only this time he put in several times the power. He had no intention of having to try a fourth time. The people watched with terrible anticipation and a feeling of helplessness as the seal was about to be shattered. This time Balda's hands themselves became so bright that many shielded their eyes. Then Balda saw a different light which the others did not see. This was accompanied by the pain of impact at the back of his head. Then all the light was gone as he stumbled off the circle, before receiving a second blow in the face. His pain was immense and his vision blurred. With the next few strikes it became clear that there was more than one assailant. There was no resistance from Balda as his body was broken one part after another. There was no thought going through his mind except a question, of which it could not be known whether it was his own or the mere memory of the voice that had cried out 'what are you doing?'

Behind the front door to Effa's house was a short hallway. His room, from which he was leaving, was at the other end. The door was already open, but as he approached it his brother appeared from one of the front bedrooms. As Effa came near he had a worried look on his face, though he did not step back, even though his brother did not slow down or alter his course. Then he said the last thing he would ever say.

"What have you done?"

When finally his brother was in arms reach, Effa swung his right arm from right to left as suddenly as he did quickly. The young man stumbled to the side as if deliberately getting

out of Effa's way, as he clutched his hands onto his bleeding throat. Effa did not stop; he just kept walking until he came across a small table that sat in the hallway. Sitting in the centre was a framed portrait of the family that Effa had so skilfully drawn himself into. After staring at it for a moment, he slammed his fist into it, shattering the glass and breaking the thin rock in two. With glass still stuck in his bloodied hand, he continued to the doorway and disappeared into the night; with a stained kitchen knife in his right hand; leaving behind his brother, lying on the ground and bleeding to death, and the broken image of a happy family covered in shards of glass. That broken picture would be the first thing that Effa's mother would see when she woke up a few hours later.

Chapter 2: A Second Invitation

After several hours of aimless and disorganised travelling by air, the apparent survival of the material world was not the only thing that Thäràc had established. There was one other thing that had not changed after the great battle: the presence of the Army of Black and Flame. After the first battle in the Northern Plains had ended with the taking of the world's life, the fiends had apparently simply disappeared. Now it seemed that they were there to stay. It was a measure of their astonishing lack of self direction that the Trinity of Legions was not. After the forest was destroyed, they had all returned to their dwellings. For that reason, the remaining Soldiers of Black and Flame were now a serious problem, as they seemed to still have some sort of purpose. Whatever it was, doing away with Thäràc seemed to be a high priority. One thing, however, had changed: the bleak shadow that had once encompassed the earth had returned, only now there seemed to be a far more pronounced effect on the environment. The sky was grim, the wind was stronger, and the air seemed somehow colder. It was like Ge`henna, only now it was everywhere.

By the time it occurred to him to seek Cära he was miles and miles away from the area. With the River of Souls

lurking about, he could not afford to stay in the same place for too long. But the real threat was that in all likelihood, Chelis would have anticipated his return to the place to which she knew he probably would have sent Cära. But he had to go, even though he really did not wish to see her, not to mention Izríá, in whatever state they would now be in. And so he went.

When he came near Mount Miolnī from the north-west, he started seeing Soldiers of Black and Flame scattered about. They seemed to be migrating northward. It was then that he began to think that before retrieving Cära he should attempt to clean up the area a little. His experience in fighting the things being rather limited, he decided to try at least once and see how it went. From up in the air, he picked out a group of around twenty. Only a few of them were in spiritual form. He drew his sword, and charged it up with Setharón. He braced himself, and then dove straight into them like a missile, creating a shockwave that sent all the material beings into flames. Then he summoned his Soul Sword into his left hand, and with that and the Sword of Cain in his right he fought his enemies to their destruction.

When the last had fallen, he gave himself a moment to breath. It was then that he noticed something strange. He could feel something warm near his heart. He cautiously reached into a pocket he had in that spot. He felt something hot, though it was cool enough to handle. From that pocket he retrieved a familiar object, something he had been given a long time ago but had all but forgotten about: a candle. Tôbit's gift was glowing a very light yellow colour, and the wick, though not aflame, appeared to be radiating something hot and bright. He had no idea what was happening, nor what to do. After minutes of staring at it in confusion he managed to think of one thing he could try. With great caution he held the candle from the bottom and as far from

his face as possible. Then he prepared himself, and lit the candle with the Setharòn. His weariness was not unjustified. The candle seemed to be erupting. The yellow glow intensified to the point that it almost blinded him. Then, the light left the candle and took off like a firefly, leaving a trail of what looked like a brightly enflamed string, only there was no discernable physical object within it. It was almost ghostly in appearance, like the Chelis' tentacles. It was heading at great speed toward the south-west; toward the former Forest of Me`ridía.

On impulse, Thäràc took to the air and pursued it, still holding the candle in his hand. He was hardly able to keep up with it, and he found himself having to fly higher and higher in order to see the beginning of the trail. It took him into the area of the former forest, now an ocean of burnt out stumps, and then continued on into the heart of the land. By the time he spotted the ruins where he had fought the Nefilim so long ago he was almost in the clouds. It was actually astonishing that he could still see the shooting trail when it suddenly stopped. He flew towards it until he was close enough to see that the trail had not ended, but gone underground. He was still several hundred yards from it when he noticed something emerge from a hole in the ground. It was alive. Thäràc cautiously lowered altitude and flew back while keeping it in his sight. The creature ascended straight toward the sky. It was not any sort of creature his own experience could enlighten. Though airborne, it seemed to travel like an eel in the water, looping around as it slipped through the air without any apparent use of wings or other conventional means of flight. It did not even seem to remain the same shape, but shifted from one eel like form to another. Luckily, it showed no sign of having noticed him.

Nor did Thäràc show much more interest himself when his attention was hijacked by a massive explosion of bright

yellow light that must have come from the same spot as the creature. At that instant he was hit by a shockwave that sent him back for a dozen or so yards. When he caught himself and faced the explosion he found himself staring into a myriad of concentric domes of strange orange and red illumination. They were expanding outward, and kept doing so until they reached a certain point, where they stopped and accumulated. More were yet appearing from the core at an accelerating rate until all were finally in one place, forming what looked like some sort of shield, of the sort his magic produced. It covered an area some six hundred yards or so in diameter, and was ironically darker than the previous display; a strange yellow. Nothing further happened. Nor was the alien life form anywhere to be seen. He dropped down and landed right before the wall, being very careful not to get too close. Bracing himself, he fired a small energy charge into it. The missile struck the wall dead on and dissipated just as it would on any other hard surface. He could do nothing but keep gazing.

He must have been standing there for at least half an hour when he heard a familiar voice from behind him.

“You found him,” said Gâbríel.

“Who?”

“Who do you think? Effa.”

Thäràc was as surprised as he was frightened.

“What is going on?”

“I am not the person to explain it to you,” said Gâbríel,

“I have not the time; but the Guardian does. He wishes to see you. Go to the great rock beyond the south shore beyond your home town; you will meet the Cuôlva, and they will escort you. Now go!”

At the same time, both of them took into the air; a great lion-headed beast and a black bird. The two diverged, one into the north-east and the other into the south.

A few miles to the north-west of the former forest, three other witnesses observed the dome. Most noticeable was a large creature which could probably be described as a dragon. Standing next to it was a man called Harrow. The third witness, standing some number of yards in front of them, was the cloaked figure who had departed from Bë`träda after encountering Harrow. Only now, though her manner of dress was the same, her face was now completely uncovered. She was both a significant historical figure and Harrow's auntie by blood; she was Princess Mïra.

After she had intervened in his attempt to finish Bë`träda, she basically stole him from the area and headed south-east for a place where the two could catch up. He was almost like a prisoner, but since he was given little choice his time with her was for the best, especially now. Like Harrow, Mïra had also been resurrected among the Army of Blood by Effa, although being a great mage she was able to make herself more complete than the others, both restoring her living beauty and maintaining a more youthful appearance than even her age at the time of death should permit, with long blonde hair and fair skin.

Having seen enough of the dome, she turned around and approached her nephew.

"There is something I have not told you," she said.

"I have been waiting for you to tell me a few things actually," Harrow replied.

"Just listen to me. Ever since I was brought back to life I have had an agenda."

"Is that why I'm here?"

“No. It’s actually partly why *I* am here. You are lucky I did not kill you; but being family...”

“We both know how much *that* means,” said Harrow, “that is your agenda isn’t it? Confront your brother?”

“Yes!”

Mira seemed surprised that he had figured that out.

“It was my agenda too,” said Harrow, “then I realised I could serve a much better purpose. I was about to fulfil it when *you* arrived.”

“I am sorry, but I could not let you kill her.”

“Whatever, it no longer matters. I helped Thäràc to the best of my ability, which seems now to mean nothing. I feel no need to find my uncle.”

“But what if you could?”

“Could what? Track him down? What are you telling me?”

“I have found him, Harrow. I know where he is, and I am going to face him, whatever the consequences. Come with me and you can too.”

“No way!”

“Huh?”

“You think just because you are my auntie you can still tell me what to do? What sort of man takes directions from a woman anyway? Besides, just what are you planning to do when you get there? Just walk up and say ‘hey Effa! I have a bone to pick with you!’? I was never sure myself but now I see...”

“Harrow!!”

This actually made him jump slightly.

“Do you not want to at all?!”

“Well... I suppose I still do. But I choose not to.”

“Very well.”

It was just minutes after the conversation had finished when Harrow saw something coming towards them from the south-east. They looked like ants, and seemed to be moving just as fast for their size. It took a moment for him to realise that they were the same things that had just been pouring from the sky. He drew his bow and readied an arrow, before Mīra’s hand came down upon his left arm getting him to lower his aim to the ground. He turned to face her. She was focused on the coming enemy. There were less than a dozen. She stepped forward, leaving Harrow and the dragon behind her, and began to approach them. They were less than a hundred yards away when Mīra’s hands began glowing light blue. She moved them apart and held them such that her arms formed the shape of an incomplete circle. The light blue glow now seemed to be running through that circle like a current. Then she put one leg behind her as though preparing for hand-to-hand combat. She closed her arms together, straightening them with her fingers outward like a venus fly trap. Then, three like-coloured missiles shot out rapidly from between her arms in the enemies’ direction. They travelled as fast as arrows and landed at the ground about a yard in front of the creatures, exploding in a brilliant blue blaze that engulfed the lot. From the blaze emerged the same number of spiritual forms, shrouded shadows with torches, now moving beyond the speed generally permitted by legs. This time she waited for them to arrive. When they did they simultaneously stopped in their tracks and stood shaking as though colliding with an electric fence. Mīra turned and ran back to Harrow.

“They are only stunned,” she said, “they will not hold for long.”

“I see. On second thoughts I think I will come with you.”

“That is what I wanted to hear!”

And so they both mounted the dragon with Mïra at the reigns, and left the ground before the ghosts regained themselves and continued moving wherever it was they were planing to go.

In the air, Harrow and Mïra were climbing in altitude and heading for the north. They flew for some time before setting eyes upon the same weird creature that Thäràc had seen emerging from the ground before.

“What in Ge`henna...?!” said Harrow.

It did not appear to be heading anywhere in particular, but rather looping about at random, making it appear much less predictable and more dangerous.

“I think we better wait it out,” said Mïra, as though the creature were a tornado, “I know somewhere we can stay.”

With that, she had her dragon turn around and head south. Thankfully, the creature did not follow them.

Chapter 3: The Assassin

Thäràc knew the rock that Gâbríel had sent him to. It was perfectly visible from the heights of the mountains on which his home town was based. As a child he had observed it with wonder and curiosity. Now, as he flew over that same town, he could see that it was as treeless as the forest below. The lights coming from his old home assured him that his mother was ok. In the distance he could just faintly spot the great mass of rock that stood sandwiched between the utterly colourless sea and the bleak heavy sky. As he drew near the shape became clear. It was a volcano; one that had never erupted in human memory. Not far from the surface of the water he could make out an entrance, as though it were some kind of temple. He entered it.

Upon landing he illuminated the darkness before him with Setharòn from his finger tips. It was a narrow rocky corridor; twisted and unpredictable. He made his way through to a small chamber that branched into two further corridors. He took the left. This led him into a matrix of pathways where the only seemingly logical option was to go in the direction that appeared to be forward. It seemed to work. Before long he caught a glimpse of sky. It took surprisingly long to reach the open afterwards. When he got there he was taken aback.

He emerged from a round passage into a vast area. The piece of sky he had seen was only a window in what seemed like a giant nutshell. He was standing on the ledge of a cliff that dropped straight into the carpet of sea below. The surrounding structure was complex. The outer surface was in no sense flat. In fact, in no sense was it really a surface, but a myriad of all manner of caves, cliffs and protruding masses. The entire complex was draped in the murky dim light beaming from the window. It made him feel quite small. He looked around for company. Nothing. He called out.

“Hello?”

There seemed to be no response. He then realised that there already had been an answer when he spotted the faintest figure in the dimly lit distance over and above. It was very hard to make out. Three entities were approaching him. Eventually he could make out humanoid shapes with wings, though they hardly looked human. Upon closer observation, they looked more like skeletons. They were trailing through the air and steadily descending on angel-like wings. He took a few steps back, not so much for fear, but to give them room to land. They never did. They stopped a few yards before him and greeted him solemnly. Thäràc was hesitant to speak, but he did.

“Are you...”

“The Cuôlva? Yes,” the one on the left replied, “I regret that you must see us like this.”

“What happened to you?”

“The Turning,” replied the one in the centre, “we are spirits Thäràc, this is what spirits are reduced to without the Pa`räji.”

Thäràc had never before seen the true form of earth’s destruction, nor had he expected it. Every person he had seen in the hundred so years up until his union with the

immortal Gerra had physical bodies to conceal their inner nature, and afterward in such circumstances things were no different. But now he could see it. Not for the first time, he decided that the best way to go would be to get down to business and part promptly.

“You can take me to the Guardian?”

“Yes,” said the one on the left, “We will lead you to Treecastle.”

Thäràc was shocked.

“Treecastle? Then why did I have to come here?”

“Because how else could we lead you there?”

Now it made even less sense.

“I already know the way to Treecastle!”

“Not any more. The Guardian could not stay where he was, nor could he leave Treecastle.”

“So he took it with him?!”

“Yes. Now let’s get going.”

With that, they turned and started toward the great window. Thäràc followed, and so they emerged together into the void between the sullen sea and the ever darkening sky. Even in their weakened state the Cuôlva could travel remarkably fast, though not enough to outfly Gerra. He only had to follow them for about four minutes before his eyes finally set upon a vague figure on the near invisible horizon. It was almost ghostly in appearance, but it was big; almost the size of the cave he had just left. It was only a little nearer and clearer when Thäràc realised what it was: an iceberg. As he drew near, somehow, the ghostliness of the entity seemed to intensify rather than fade. He was hardly within 60 odd yards from the berg when his guides stopped before him, and so did he. They turned and faced him, their wasted-away appearance also augmented in the grey skylight. They spoke.

“The entrance is beneath the surface. He is waiting for you.”

And with that, they departed, heading back in the same direction whence they had come. Thäràc faced the iceberg, readied himself, and dove into the water. As soon as he did he marvelled. It was then that he realised just how much bigger the mass was beneath the surface. It was absolutely vast. That being said, it took no time to notice the colossal rift that tore straight through the centre vertically. It was actually less a rift than an opening. When Thäràc entered it, he found himself in a mighty corridor between two great walls of ice that then opened up until the tunnel was as wide as it was high. It was like the inside of a massive crystal box, large enough to build a castle in; the majestic image of the courtyard of an ancient underwater kingdom. At the end he saw the entrance, which stuck out quite plainly as a grand piece of architecture surrounded by coarse rock-like ice. Upon closer inspection he could make out a platform extending outward, before a great rectangular doorway. Beyond that was what looked like a staircase leading up. The light was so dim that it was surprising to be able to see anything. Yet, somehow his surroundings were clear to him. Also clear was his purpose; he went straight to the platform and landed onto his feet. Then he proceeded to walk up the stairs.

By the time he reached the top he had realised that he was now in air as opposed to water. The strange thing was that he could not tell exactly where the water stopped and the air began; as there was no distinguishable line. However, this was hardly as unbelievable as the sight that treated his eyes when he reached the top. He could not believe it. What now lay before him was the very sight that had greeted him some months ago the first time he ever paid the Guardian a visit: a gigantic tree surrounded on all sides by basic wooden bridges

on all sides and at multiple levels. Once again, it was a long drop to the bottom. This time, however, while the tree itself seemed the same, everything else was frozen solid. Of course, where once there was earth and sky, there now was simply ice. Even the strange life forms that had hovered about beneath spinning blades and assisted him to the bottom on his last visit were nowhere to be seen. Obviously they could not function in this temperature. Thäràc jumped off the side and flew straight down to the bottom. Then, without hesitation, he proceeded to the entrance and entered Treecastle.

When once again Thäràc stepped into the great hollow to meet the Guardian he was stricken with a strange nostalgia. Treecastle was not the same. Where once was a sacredness beyond comprehension, that which he could only understand now, there was only ice. Like everything outside, the interior of the tree was frozen over. In fact, the large terraces that led to the top were hidden beneath an inch of solid ice, as was almost everything else. The chamber was inhabited by some of the Cuôlva; who were once again reduced to mere skeletons. Having no interest in mourning about he took to the top platform by wing. When he got there, of course, he found the Guardian. His appearance was the same as it had been at his last visit: like a giant. Yet, something was different; something Thäràc could not quite place until the Guardian spoke.

“Welcome back Thäràc,” he said in a rather jolly tone, “I am so thankful you are still alive.”

By now it was clear. The impotent character observed in Thäràc’s previous visit was gone. The Guardian no longer seemed like an old man, but almost like a soldier. This provoked a somewhat apologetic response from Thäràc.

“I’m sorry I was so rude during our last meeting.”

“And *I’m* sorry this place is not as you remember it,” the Guardian went on, “you know it is not the ice that is doing this.”

“I know,” replied Thäràc, “but you?”

“I am sure that is the least of your questions.”

The Guardian paused. And then he begun a long dialogue, explaining everything to Thäràc. He had had his doubts from the beginning. He had remembered the Army of Black and Flame and their seemingly limitless numbers. How they had still erupted from the abyss in the north by the time he tore the Pa`räjì from the earth. He had decided this time to take matters into his own hands. Before the second great battle began he went outside, in all his frailty, to the nearest tree. In the greatest of penance and regret he placed his hand upon the tree and took its Pa`räjì. However, this time he did not take it into his hand as before, but into himself. It gave him strength; strength enough to take that force of life from further away, though still far from his original power. He then drained a second tree from just a few feet away, increasing his capacity further. The third was yards away. And so he went on until once again he had the power to draw the Pa`räjì from the farthest tree in Me`ridía. And thus he had prepared myself. When the fiends reached the wall of the woods, he saved the Pa`räjì of each tree before they could get to it. And as the enemy burned through, he continued to summon these pieces of spirit into his grasp, keeping just ahead of the fire at all times. The Guardian smiled, seeing the excitement in Thäràc’s eyes.

“You thought that the enemy had succeeded. In actual fact they did nothing. The entire Forest of Me`ridía was saved, and with it, I have now redeemed my former strength three-fold.”

“What about the others?” asked Thäràc.

“The forests?” the Guardian sighed, “we had to let them go. We could only fight on one front, and so by the time the other forests were in my reach, they were gone, having been left completely undefended. It does not matter. When this war is over, everything will be made right.”

“War? What war?”

“It is not over yet Thäràc, have you already forgotten why Gâbríel sent you here?”

It took him some time to realise just what the Guardian was saying.

“You are asking me to fight Effa?!”

“Exactly.”

“Can no one else do it?”

“We once thought so.”

“So you have already tried? When was that? What happened?”

The Guardian hesitated for a moment, and then began.

“There was a defining point in history, only years before the Turning, when we decided that Effa had become too dangerous to be allowed to exist. We sent an assassin after him; a deranged freelancer who answers to know one, with whom you are well acquainted.”

Thäràc’s eyes lit as he recognised who the Guardian was referring to.

“Chelis?!” he said.

“Yes. We had no idea what she was or where she came from. But she said she could help, and she did. She returned with the news we did not want to hear. Effa could materialise.”

“Materialise?” said Thäràc.

“Listen carefully, because this might be difficult to understand. As you know, it is impossible for a spirit of any sort to enter the Plane of Power. So how could Effa do it? What is the only conceivable possibility? What if he could cease to be a spirit and become a living, breathing and above all, *soulless* creature? According to Chelis, that was exactly what he could do. Effa can transform from a soul with no body, into a body with no soul. It is called materialisation, and against it, even the River of Souls could do nothing. But you can Thäràc. You are a master of both forms of combat: corporal and incorporeal, and after today your mastery will be overwhelmed by your power. Thäràc, the only way we can end this threat once and for all is to destroy the mind behind it, and that candle of yours has just revealed his whereabouts. Effa, as I suspected, has taken refuge in the Fortress of Shôl.”

“You mean the place that spawned the Chelis?” said Thäràc, “and what about *her*?”

The Guardian grew very serious.

“All you can do is to go out of your way to avoid her. Smoke is an incredibly shrewd bounty hunter, she may well anticipate your actions; it is hard to think she would not guess the purpose of that great barrier over her former prison. I am afraid I can do nothing to help you defend yourself against her, or any other purely spiritual beings. But I can help you overcome material enemies, most importantly Effa, in his material form.”

“How?” asked Thäràc.

The Guardian held out his arms.

“Give me your hands.”

Reluctantly, Thäràc reached out and let the Guardian take his hands into his own. At that moment, Thäràc began to feel stronger. He knew that nothing was happening to his

muscles, but somehow strength was boiling up inside him nonetheless. Then the Guardian let go. Thäràc knew not what had happened, and he felt strange. This he had come to understand as the nature of the Guardian's touch.

"What did you just do?" he asked the Guardian.

"I have just shared with you a piece of the power that I gained from the Forest of Me`ridía: the true power of the Pa`räjí. This will greatly enhance your capacity for magic. If you wish to be a match for Effa, you will need it."

"So what now?"

"Now you must find out how to get inside the fortress. Tell me Thäràc, how much do you know about the people from the North?"

"You mean Zhôcô's people?" replied Thäràc, "I know they are said to be the most advanced mages among people."

"Very good. This I bet you did not know: they are the ones who built the Fortress of Shôl, and they have told us that they know a way in. The strange thing is that they won't tell us how. Instead, they wish to see you in the flesh. You must travel to the Northern Planes and find out what they want."

"Why would they wish to impede me? Are you expecting anything in particular?"

"No," said the Guardian, "I'm sure they mean well. That is not what I'm worried about. You remember what people were like in the recent century before your victory over shadow don't you? It has happened again Thäràc. Life has been sucked out of them and it is my doing. In their current state they may not be much help to you. In fact, that they responded to us as they did is remarkable. But don't worry, I have not only invested you with the power of the Earth, I have also given you authority."

"You have given me what?"

“Authority; that is to pass pieces of the life I have given you onto others.”

“I am not sure I follow,” said Thäràc, meaning every word.

“Whenever you wish, when you encounter someone of importance to you, you can bring them back to life; as long as they are physically alive of course.”

“Anyone I want?”

“Yes, but within reason. You must not forget that every time you choose to do so you will lose power, so do it only when you must. Believe me you want to be in top condition when you find our enemy.”

The Guardian noted a wave of dread wash over his guest. “Once Effa and his legions have been wiped from the face of the earth, and only then, it will all be over Thäràc; and you and every other person can live in peace. Do not be afraid. No prior expectations have matched your feats. Effa is terrifying yes, but if he realises what he is up against, and I think he does, then he would be even more scared of you than he is of Gerra; and you know you still have *him* on your side.”

“So what now?”

“Now, you go. I have only one thing left to tell you: to get into the Fortress of Shôl you need a key.”

“Where do I find it?”

“Gâbríel is taking care of that.”

Chapter 4: The Heart of Balda

It was a bleak evening. The sky was smothered with clouds the colour of a sick man's skin, and the sunset produced only the faintest orange glow. There was but the faintest sound of thunder in the distance. Deep within the complex of the great Cemetery of Gèth`semaní, a tall and sharply arched hallway opened up at one end, and sunk into the ground at the other. Not far away a black spot fell from the sky; a raven descended before the open end of the corridor; and then a young woman landed gracefully at that spot. She gazed on for a moment, and with nothing to stop her she entered the hall. As she moved further away from the outside, the lighting did not darken but rather changed into something less familiar than the thin illumination of a pale grey sky. The colour was impossible to place, but the new light source had the curious effect of revealing intricate patterns from the top of the arch down to the height of Gâbríel's shoulders on either side of the three-foot-wide corridor. These patterns gradually changed from one thing to another as she progressed downward; by the time she reached the first bend, they had cycled back to the original pattern and repeated the previous sequence.

As she continued to descend through the increasingly sharp turns and occasional intersections the strange light became stronger, and the patterns above her became clearer. Every now and then her path led her through various shaped chambers. Most were identical in appearance to the arched hallway while the others were far more elaborate. All of them, however, besides the odd statue or alter, were empty. But they were by no means quiet. From the second room she could just make out an eerie soft growling sound coming from ahead; and by the time she entered the sixth she could hear the sound in frightening detail.

Not far away was a great chamber, fifty yards long, half as wide and six stories high. At the far side the ground ended several yards before the wall, leaving a deep chasm. The structure of the hall was magnificent, lit by mounted lamps in carefully conceived positions. The stonework was simple, yet beautifully crafted, and not far from the rear chasm was a marble statue. This place, however, was polluted. Infesting the chamber were many dark entities; some of them were humanoid figures with maces, the others were more like shadows and wielded torches. These Soldiers of Black and Flame numbered about fifty, and were each making growling sounds which blended together to produce a sickening drone. All of a sudden, their attention was drawn to the sharply arched hallway at the side of the chamber, near the opposite end of the chamber to the chasm; a hallway that only went for about five feet before twisting sharply to the left. They could clearly sense a presence, and it was quickly approaching.

Gâbríel was navigating her way through the now rapidly twisting corridor, and the source of the sound was getting close. Eventually she could tell from the lighting ahead that beyond the sharp turn to the right was a particularly well lit

chamber. With little need to brace herself, she continued until finally reaching the bend.

Back in the large chamber, the dark creatures readied themselves as they watched their guest emerge from the hallway. It was a girl, fairly short with black hair, and quite young; almost a child in fact. In each hand was a sickle, and on her face, the sinister grin of a hundred vengeful souls. She kept walking, and as soon as she was well within the chamber, the whole room was filled with a deafening eruption of shrieks and the entire number of fiends rushed straight at her. In an instant, a handful of them were violently torn into pieces. Chelis was moving like a flame in the wind; twisting from one side of the chaos to the other and meeting each enemy with a swift cut of death to which no flesh or shadow was an obstacle. This did not stop the rest from coming. After the first wave had fallen, ghostly grey hooks shot out of Chelis' sickles and were swung through a further dozen surrounding creatures, some of which were completely unaffected; the others were either chopped in half or impaled and thrown into the mass. Before even half of them met their targets, the River of Souls literally shot straight into the middle of the multitude in a ghostly white blur, cutting a clear path to the heart of the melee. From there she proceeded to cut up the remaining half of the black plague with her sickles, along with various spiritual weapons of equal destruction. Not ten seconds after she had first walked in, the Soldiers of Black and Flame were completely obliterated.

Gâbríel had been watching this from the not-comfortable-enough distance of an opening several stories up the wall beyond the chasm.

With nothing further in her way, Smoke continued on, and headed for the statue across the hall. The statue stood in a rather peculiar position. It was not in the centre but near the

wall to the left, facing the opposite wall; about seven yards from the chasm. Of course, it was mounted on a raised platform with steps leading up to it. Smoke was not far from the statue when something caught her eye from above. At that instant, a raven descended. A moment later, Gâbríel was standing at the other side of the statue from Smoke. For a moment there was silence; then, the first one who spoke was Chelis.

“You know who that is, don’t you?” she said, glancing briefly at the statue.

“Yes,” said Gâbríel, “it is...”

“Balda,” snapped Chelis, “I think it is more appropriate that I utter his name, wouldn’t you agree?”

“What are you doing here?”

“Just in case the Guardian was foolish enough to send Thäràc here. Since he did not, I have no business to mention.”

“So you know what I’m after?”

“Of course,” said Smoke, “you are going after Effa. You have my sympathies Gâbríel but I don’t think Thäràc or any of his friends have much of a hope.”

“We will see.”

“Oh, you will. I had him in my sights once, but he has a remarkable means of slipping away.”

She approached the statue. It was of a man; a fairly simple man. He had long hair but was clean shaven. He wore a loose shirt, and ordinary pants. There was one peculiarity. His left hand was holding the left side of his shirt open, exposing that side of his chest. In his chest was a gaping hole, and suspended in that hole, exactly where it should be, was his heart. The heart was not of marble, like the rest of him, but gold. It looked anatomically normal. His right hand was held

underneath it with the palm facing up, as though he were presenting it. The expression on his face was not blatantly sad, but his eyes were facing away to the left; almost in the direction of the chasm. Chelis reached out, grabbed the heart and carefully removed it. She held it before Gâbrîel like an apple.

“Do you know what this is?” her expression had never been more serious, “I’m not going to let you take it until you do.”

“I think so,” replied Gâbrîel, “it is your bane isn’t it?”

“This was a gift to us,” she said, staring at the object in her hand, “This is what Balda left at our mercy. Were it not for our lethal cowardice, we would have taken this, our only medicine, and set ourselves free. Instead we smashed it. So you wish to enter the Fortress of Shôl? The entirety of light in that terrible place came from but one source; the most minute of candlelight, and we wilfully blotted it out, leaving ourselves in the pitch black of despair. In destroying that purest of innocence we destroyed our own. Somehow, it seems that someone has learnt this story and so has built this statue in honour of the heavenly one. So you understand what I am?”

“Yes,” said Gâbrîel, “I have been informed of your history.”

“Really?” said Chelis, “how interesting, I could not imagine a schedule as busy as yours allowing you the time.”

“Well, I am sure we will find occasion to discuss it later. If you may, I have to go. The heart?”

“My gift to you,” said Chelis, handing the heart to Gâbrîel, “I hope you can make better use of it than we did.”

Having taken the golden relic, Gâbrîel placed it into some hitherto invisible hip-pocket, then she turned and began to walk away, but Smoke was not finished.

“The Guardian took it didn’t he?”

Gâbríel stopped and turned back to face her.

“Took what?”

“You know very well what I mean. He took the Pa`räjí into himself this time. And he gave it to you.”

If Gâbríel were human, she would have been stricken with terror.

“How do you know this?”

“What baffles me is: ‘how did I not know until now?’ It is written all over you. So, the Guardian has once again preserved the Earth’s soul, and he has enriched you with its power.”

Smoke’s eyes were aflame with a craving that the darkest dreams could not imagine, and her voice became frighteningly dark.

“He made you stronger... didn’t he?”

Gâbríel knew at this point that nothing could be hidden. As if from an invisible sheath, she drew out a short sword; especially slender, it was so thin that unless held very still it was as a blur.

“Yes,” she said, “he has.”

“Well,” said Chelis, drawing her sickles, “you know what that means don’t you?”

At that instant, she leapt at lighting speed straight into Gâbríel, who fended off both of her sickles with one motion of her sword. There was no opportunity for counter attack. Smoke had gone straight past her, and was now standing on the opposite side.

“You, my very good friend, are all I need to be free.”

As sudden as before, it was as though Smoke had become a tornado. Perhaps even faster than the first time, she moved

towards Gâbríel, spinning with unimaginable speed, with her sickles extended, threatening to sever anything in her path. The instant her opponent was within sword's reach, Gâbríel fought off the flurry and swiftly struck back, sending them both into a furious melee. Both of them moved incredibly fast, and came at each other from just about every angle imaginable. They seldom stayed in one spot, but rather moved frequently from one place to another in a chaos of clashes. But while Chelis relied entirely on her weapons for defence, Gâbríel's primary defence was her agility; she spent most of her time simultaneously fending off Smoke's swings and dodging them in whatever way she could best find an opportunity to land a blow. By the time she did, they had moved from the statue of Balda to about the centre of the room with Chelis closest to the chasm at the end. Chelis swung her sickles at Gâbríel's legs. However, before she could reach them, Gâbríel leapt off the ground, and as she did so, she swung her blade down onto Smoke's shoulder, holding it with both hands. As she got higher, the blade penetrated her opponent, and then slid straight down about half a foot through her torso. She somersaulted forward, until, when she was right above Smoke, upside-down as she impaled her, she did a half spin, twisting her sword as she went. Then she landed on the other side of her, retrieving her weapon. She now stood facing Chelis, with her back to the chasm. Chelis was on her knees, looking as though she were dying. For a moment they both stood there and said nothing. Once again, the first one to speak was the River of Souls.

"Like I said," she began, slowly getting back onto her feet, "I hope your new found prize can serve you well."

Just then, as she finished standing up again, a multitude of faint dark sparks started emanating from the ground around her. They did not seem to concern her; Gâbríel knew they were of her making. She started stepping back.

“Because if you get out of this...”

As she spoke the sparks continued to rise above her, and more kept coming from the floor. They were quickly forming an increasingly thick purple cloud, and the cloud seemed to be forming a wall.

“And are left with nothing...”

By this point the wall of dark cloud was several stories high, and before Chelis uttered another word its wall-like formation broke apart into a colossal swarm, and it started moving quickly towards Gâbríel who, still stepping back, turned and ran toward the chasm. Chelis just stood where she was. As Gâbríel ran, she retrieved the Heart of Balda from her pocket, and held it tight in her hand. She did not have to run far to reach the chasm. By the time she did, the terrible swarm behind her was only yards away. Without hesitation or looking back, Gâbríel leapt into the chasm. The swarm followed her. As she fell, she let go of the heart. Then she morphed into her raven form, and snatched the heart into her talons. Clenching it tightly in her grasp, she dove straight down, with the dark swarm right on her tail. The chasm was incredibly deep; stories and stories of surrounding course rock stretched from the chamber to the bottom. Before she even got halfway, however, she reached an intersection, and took a passage that went straight out horizontally. The sharp bend seemed to slow her down more than it did the swarm, and it was getting ever closer. The tunnel, just as rocky as the walls of the chasm, ascended and bent to the left, and then, up ahead was a fork. The raven with the Heart of Balda, navigated her way through several more intersections, with the cloud of death chasing her restlessly. Eventually, and not a moment too soon, she finally caught a glimpse of the grey sky as she turned into a shaft that went diagonally toward the surface. With an extra boost of speed she rocketed to the end and shot out of a short

mountain in the midst of a rugged plane. Behind her, the dreaded swarm erupted from the same opening, only to spill out into the air like smoke. The raven did not slow down. When finally she looked back, she saw the swarm of Chelis' wrath fade into the distance as it began to withdraw back into the mountain. Looking on, she changed course to the North.

Chapter 5: A Lively Reunion

Not much could be said about Thäràc's journey to the Northern Plains except that, despite the fact that he had the capacity to make far greater progress by air, he insisted on riding Cära instead. When he picked her up from Izríá's house for the second time she was the first person, if not person in form, to receive his gift of life. Then he mounted her and began towards the north. He would later explain his actions in terms of sheer impulse. There was no advantage whatsoever to his decision, but as far as Cära was concerned, she was probably safer under Thäràc's protection, even if it meant facing whatever he did. The greatest danger, of course, was Smoke. Either way, Thäràc was determined to stick with her whenever circumstance allowed it. Though rationalising it, he could not help but have a sense of foolishness. Foolish or not, he also could not help but feel dependent on it. Sometimes, he would actually dismount and fly some of the way at a reduced speed to give her a break from his body weight, always keeping his eye on her. Naturally, Gâbríel was able to meet them along the way and guide them in the right direction, as was her usual function. Of course, she never commented on Thäràc's choice, for she knew it would achieve nothing. The number of miles they

crossed was in the thousands, and took many days. It was probably about midday when they finally reached their destination: a swamp.

Though the waters were very low, and Cära's feet rarely sunk beyond an inch, there was an eeriness that went far deeper than the scattered puddles among the infesting growth (much of which was dead.) That being said, some areas were more difficult to travel through than others; indeed some were intensely burdensome. But regardless of how slightly the mud went up Cära's legs, both felt unwelcome, almost repelled. Soon enough, they reached a village. They had arrived. The houses were not the sort one would expect to find in a swamp. Though comparatively simple, they were a lot more solid and well built than the huts that one would expect in a swamp environment. Of course, one thing was the same: no one was outdoors. It did not matter all that much to Thäràc. He knew what the Northerners looked like; dark-skinned, exotic, and curiously elegant. What is more important, he knew they were mysterious, admired, and rightly so. They were the most brilliant mages in the world, and as he had just learnt, they had been the unwitting architects of one of the most formidable single entities in all of human history: the River of Souls. The possibility of Chelis anticipating his visit was becoming more and more present in mind, and he most sincerely hoped that this marvellous people had some sort of defence in stock. The house that Gâbríel led him to was by no means special, but it was the first to be accompanied by a human figure.

On approach, the figure - a man - greeted them. His voice Thäràc did not recognise, and his face, though passing for human, mysteriously lacked any distinction, as though upon seeing it one lacked the ability to tell one face from another. Yet, Thäràc knew exactly who it was; the man's mannerisms

and body language were unmistakable. Thäràc knew what to do. Once on his own feet, he approached his host, and then, just as the Guardian had done, he took his hands into his own. As the speck of life force coursed through the man's body, his face lightened up into something more familiar: an old friend named Snapdrágon. When they were finished, Snapdrágon said thankyou, but he did not smile or otherwise act affectionately, not that Thäràc expected him to. But something *was* different. One could not describe it, but his behaviour had gone from one sort of deranged madness to another. Before he had been simply introverted and childlike; now he was all those things, but more disturbing. After saying thanks he said nothing, and then turned to lead Thäràc into the house, showing a hint of aggression that he had never displayed before. Thäràc found it frightening. Nevertheless, he followed Snapdrágon into the house, leaving Cära outside, with Gâbríel behind him. Once inside, Thäràc was practically startled by the sheer luxury of the place. While the outsides of the houses were enough apart from a swamp atmosphere, the insides it seemed, were ironically grand in comparison. The ground was smooth, the ceiling and walls lavish, and the furniture of top craftsmanship. Thäràc was led into the living room. Standing alone by the table was another familiar face: Zhôcô. Thäràc should have been surprised to find his old friend smiling.

"You can save your kiss of life for the next person," he said, having noted Snapdrágon's redeemed appearance, "until my time truly comes, death has no dominion over me; not this time."

"What are you doing here?" asked Thäràc, in a friendly way of course.

"Helping you, obviously. Could you think of anyone better?"

“I suppose not. But why won’t you tell us how to get into the Fortress?”

Zhôcô paused and sighed. Small talk was over.

“To go now would be potentially suicidal,” he began, “there is one very serious loose end that must be considered and dealt with. I speak of the legion in one person that still stalks you.”

“The River of Souls?”

“Yes. I’m sure the Guardian mentioned our responsibility in her becoming? Did he also mention that we hold her history? When Smoke revealed herself, how much did she explain?”

Thârâc went through it.

“When we created Shôl, we bestowed it with a monitor, a spy through which the inhabitants of the Fortress could be seen from the inside, and through which such knowledge could be preserved. We never expected someone to find it. The fortress that is.”

“Why was it built in the first place?”

“For pretty much the same reason for which it was used. We never actually put it into practice, but the idea was to take refuge in it ourselves and to share it with a careful selection of others until the War was over.”

“So it was built not long before those people found it?”

“Correct. If we had any idea of the tragic consequences of our actions, we never would have dared. It is not exactly the sort of thing that one would have anticipated.”

“Why is this important?”

“Because this knowledge has led us to an understanding that we are not as powerless as we once thought; that our understanding reveals the key to this terrible reality.”

“What are you telling me?”

Zhôcô smiled with a hopeful sort of joy.

“We can save her, Thäràc.”

Thäràc hesitated a tad and began to speak.

“You mean to say...”

“The burden that so tortures the Chelis can be undone.”

Thäràc had somewhat mixed feelings about this idea. He was, first and foremost, terrified of Smoke; he would have been a downright fool if he was not, and the idea of getting her off his tail offered immense relief. Yet at the same time he could never quite get his mind off the sort of torment it must have taken to make her so desperate. No amount of pity could ever be worthy in the face of what drove her to such reckless selfishness. But it was almost disappointing as well. He did not hate her, but the unfinished business of his last encounter had inevitably left him with a sense of vengeance he could not quite shake. When put in perspective, that really did not matter at all. He was ready to listen, though he could not imagine how Harrow would have responded.

“If you are going after Effa you cannot afford to have an enemy like Chelis on your tail. It is our responsibility not to let you go until she is dealt with. Her salvation will be as much for the world as it will be for her.”

“And how are we to do that?”

At that moment, Gâbríel pulled some sort of object from a pouch and placed it onto the table. It looked like a heart, only it was made of gold.

“Do you know what this is?” she said, echoing Smoke.

“No,” Thäràc replied.

“This is the key to the Fortress of Shôl; the Guardian sent me to find it. When I did, she was there waiting. She almost let me walk right out with it, before she managed to figure out that my master had given me a share of the Pa`räjı.”

“He gave it to you too?” asked Thäràc.

“In a much smaller portion than yours, but yes. It seems she had no personal use for the heart, but then she decided she wanted *me*. It’s very strange though, because this heart really means everything to her and she knows it.”

“Why? If she had no ‘personal use’?”

“Because it’s not just a key; this heart is also a symbol. It is the Heart of Balda, the man from whose blood the River of Souls sprouted. Balda is the key to Smoke’s anguish; Balda is the key to her salvation.”

“Thäràc,” began Zhôcô, “you must find Balda. Find out why he abandoned those people, and how he can redeem them. And while we are on the subject,” he continued, “You should be aware that you and your friends are safe here. We have produced a repellent that will render it impossible for Chelis to enter our land, and we will know if she tries again.”

“So she did anticipate my coming here?”

“Yes. But as I said, you need not worry; at least for now.”

“So how am I supposed to find Balda?”

“It just so happens that again the answer is with us now. This time it belongs to you Thäràc.”

“And you are referring to?”

“The Lyre,” said Snapdrágon, speaking for the first time, “When I met Smoke she did me a great favour.”

At this point he started chuckling unexpectedly; a strange agitated spontaneous spitting of laughter that frightened the others.

“She showed me what I am. And that was long before I had any idea we were related. She took me to the place where my people died.”

“The Music Makers?” asked Thäràc.

“Yes!!” Snapdrágon snapped, “show me the Lyre.”

Thäràc reached behind himself to the place where he had attached the stringed instrument, and retrieved it. He displayed it before his disturbed friend.

“That is what I found there. At first it did not really do much; my skills had been long forgotten. But in time, and with help, I came to rediscover its potential. By the time I met my mortal fate I still had not mastered it, but I knew well enough not to let it disappear. In my last living moments inside that tornado I played a song that would guide the Lyre to you. It appears to have worked.”

“So that is what happened?”

Snapdrágon chuckled.

“That Lyre can do amazing things Thäràc, I suggest you hold on to it as you so wisely have up until now.”

“That instrument is our link to Balda,” continued Zhôcô, “We know that much.”

“How?” asked Snapdrágon.

“We know because we have already reached him through it. We are not musicians my friend, but we know magic. It seems as though that Lyre was somehow connected to the incident at Shôl. Snapdrágon can you still play it?”

At that moment Snapdrágon seemed to be completely absent. Even Gâbríel was surprised when he started sweating. Then he reached out his hand to receive the Lyre. Thäràc gave it to him. Then Snapdrágon just held it there for a moment, running his fingers over the strings. Then he spoke.

“I can still play,” he muttered, “but I can not talk to it. I will need some time, and even then I may not be much help.”

As he spoke he seemed to be getting agitated. When he was done talking, his expression suddenly became bitter and twisted, almost as though he were ready to pull out his crossbow and fire at someone. Then he turned, and virtually ran out of the room with the Lyre. The others looked at each other in astonishment, no words were spoken but the shared impression was clear: Snapdrágon had gotten worse.

Chapter 6: The Mystics of Time

By the time Snapdrágon had started up the summit, he had already been very tired. Smoke seemed to be exempt from the necessary rule of limitation. Sometimes she seemed to be without mercy, though she did stop occasionally to wait, arms-crossed, for her friend to find her around the next corner. About an hour ago they had left the landmark that seemed ready to swallow them: the great serpent coiled around the wondrous temple to which they were now progressing via a steep pathway not unlike the tunnel that had led them to the serpent's maw. Smoke had a knack for impatience.

"We finally made it. See it was not... Snappy!!"

He was just becoming visible behind the last bend.

"*I* made it," she said as he caught up with her. She gave him a funny vacant look.

"*You* made it. Behold!"

The summit path cleared into a flat mountain top. On the opposite end from them was what had to be the top end of the great temple. Smoke skipped across. Snapdrágon lagged behind. The structure before them,

though somewhat plain, was big enough to be a temple itself, though it was just the very tip. Egg shaped, the only outstanding feature in the undefined stonework was an opening, curiously showing no attempt to keep out unwanted guests. That meant them. Snapdrágon was now sufficiently curious to ignore his exhaustion. He quickly moved over to join Smoke, who was standing cross-armed before the opening. When Snapdrágon caught up, she took his hand and dragged him inside. The path descended down a spiralling staircase lit by the same sort of torch light as the tunnel before the snake. It was many yards below that the two proceeded through another friendly opening. They were now in a network of tall but narrow passages. Smoke seemed to know exactly where she was going, but often not where he was going. It was incidental luck that they were together when they came to an apparent dead end.

The chamber was the size of a small bedroom, and appeared bare except for a pair of levers on the wall. Smoke was standing before them with an uncharacteristic indecisiveness. She was looking at both of them in turn with her fingers on her lips as though trying to remember which was the right one. After a moments hesitation she snapped her fingers and approached the one on the right. She was well within arms reach when she decided to lunge for the left lever and pull it down. The small space was filled with the sound of machinery coming to life. With it, the wall to her right was moving upward revealing a strange alcove which could only be described as a cage. She stepped in. Snapdrágon followed. When both were inside the wall dropped again, and the two found themselves beginning to move as the cage, which hung on some sort of rail, accelerated along a shaft, illuminated only by the lantern above them. The trip was not freakishly fast, but fast enough for Snapdrágon to feel uncomfortable. Nor was

it straight, but went in almost every direction imaginable. The truth was that Snapdrágon felt no less as though he were tumbling down a rabbit hole as he had back at the cemetery, and his present sense of inertia was symbolised by the speed of the travel, especially when it came to an abrupt halt. The brakes had left the lantern swinging, throwing their shadows around until the light was finally drowned in the far superior glow that flooded in as another wall opened.

The two were now standing before what looked like an ancient library, except that no library in Snapdrágon's experience had been round, with all of the bookshelves circling the area from the ground to beyond the reach of the modest light above. Several other features made it unique. The first was the contraption in the centre. The device comprised a number of wheels of greatly varying sizes, from the size of a barrel to that of a wedding ring, each one fixed with a wooden handle. Snapdrágon could see from where he was that beneath the surface, the wheels were all connected by like-sized cogs. Beside the contraption was a book stand. Another peculiarity was the dilapidated skeletons lying closely together near the one other entrance (or exit) to the right of the machine. For once, Snapdrágon was the first to venture into the curious chamber. Smoke waited back.

"So cosy isn't it?"

Snapdrágon ignored her. He was consumed in a strange sense of familiarity; much like that he had felt back in the crater, only this time he felt a nasty sting that he could not explain.

"Something terrible happened here," he said.

"Hmmm yes," Smoke replied, "I wonder?"

She walked over to the skeletons, and bent down to them smiling.

“Excuse me?”

No response. Suddenly smoke whipped out one of her sickles, and slammed the flat of the blade onto the skull, smashing it in two, and making Snapdrágon jump.

“I will make you talk!”

With that, she went over to the machine. She grabbed the handle on the biggest wheel, and proceeded to turn it anticlockwise. At that moment, the strangest thing started happening. Snapdrágon could not decide what he was seeing. It was as though the room was moving, yet remained still. Then he turned to the skeletons and realised with great shock that the skull Smoke had smashed was again whole. Smoke turned the wheel faster. The sensation intensified. It was then that he noticed flashes of what looked like people appearing at the wheels and before the bookstand. But the real shock was when he turned again to the skeletons and noticed flesh beginning to appear on their bones. The process persisted, as though the corpses were decomposing in reverse. Before long they were no skeletons, but covered in loose flesh. They would not stop. Smoke slowed down. Snapdrágon noticed one more somewhat shorter person flash before the wheels and bookstand right before Smoke stopped. At this point the corpses were almost whole, but badly decayed. Smoke released the handle and reached for a smaller wheel. The moving/still phenomenon resumed in a more mild form. Snapdrágon continued to watch the bodies recompose; now coming very close to a completely restored form. When they became so well that they almost could have been sleeping, Smoke changed to a smaller wheel. Now the usual effect was barely noticeable. Now the bodies were changing little, while the stains on the floor began to gain

colour. Smoke slowed down. A moment passed as the blood became a full red fluid, and then finally a man appeared back first from the passage to the right. He paced very quickly (and backwards) to one of the bodies, in fact the very one Smoke had assaulted, stuck his sword in its chest, and froze. The wheels were still. The man was young and angry. The man was Snapdrágon.

With great anxiety, Snapdrágon approached his spectre. He looked at Smoke.

“Go on, say hello!” she said.

“I would like to,” he replied, “these people were my friends.”

“Did they say something wrong?”

“Yes actually,” Snapdrágon’s voice was starting to break at the memories that were suddenly flaring up at accelerating speed.

“They were gîajìn, and they were thieves and thugs. And I... I made them proud.”

“Go on.”

“They had raised me to be like them, and it was the only way of life I knew. They taught me my swordplay, and I was the best. I was guilty of murder by the age of fifteen. I was ruthless, and for that I was respected. And I respected them until I over-heard what I was never meant to hear.”

“And you overreacted?”

“You can judge that. Before I was born they held a raid in a village. One of them committed rape,” while saying this, Snapdrágon was half falling to the floor, “but not on his own kind.”

Smoke smiled, “I hope you are talking about a dêva.”

“Yes. Evidently her beauty and his madness broke the rules of nature. Even more amazingly, she gave birth.”

Smoke gasped in delight, “you! I knew you were special. I knew they existed but I never thought I would meet one, that rarest of creatures. Your mother was a dêva and your father was a gîajìn. Why that would make you... a dêva-jìn, he he.”

“I don’t find it funny.”

Smoke was behind him. With a completely unexpected show of compassion, she bent forward and lay her chin on his left shoulder, her right hand patting him on the head, both staring at the young Snapdrágon frozen in rage.

“There, there,” she said childishly, “one of my mothers...”

“What?”

“Never mind.”

“The reason they knew,” said Snapdrágon with a tone as familiar as Smoke’s sympathy, “was that they returned. They found my mother, and they killed her. Then they found me. I lay in a basket; the father knew. He decided to keep me. The others liked the idea; a grand addition to their gang. They raised me to their satisfaction. My father was blessed to die in my favour before the others met the consequence of his choice. A hundred years ago it vanished from my memory, along with everything else except my name.”

“That’s ok,” said Smoke as she stood up behind him and then patted him on the head like a dog, “I have forgotten already. Let’s go.”

Not a further word was spoken. The two left the wheels where they were, and departed the way they had come. As far as one could tell from body language neither of them

currently had any interest in the other, which was rather normal. Only this time, Snapdrágon had a good deal to think about. He no longer felt the chaotic rootlessness that had broken his will the moment he picked up the lyre; the spell that convinced him that there was no past nor a real future, but only the strange girl whose ambition seemed the only thing that was real. Now that ambition seemed to have been fulfilled, and the world had returned to Snapdrágon, now clearer than it had ever been in his life. Was this the reason that, when the cage stopped at the other end and the path whence they had come was opened up, Snapdrágon could faintly hear a strange sound where no sound had been before? For what it was worth, Smoke also only seemed to notice it now.

“What could that be?”

The sound was rhythmic, and appeared very strong in percussion. In fact, only thumping could be distinguished, as well as a strange horn sound. As he and Smoke continued through the corridors, Snapdrágon noticed that Smoke had chosen a different route than before. And as they progressed the music grew louder and louder. Although Smoke loved to pretend that she was oblivious to her surroundings her choices in direction, often against following the music, made it very clear that she knew where she was going. Before too long, they reached a long corridor at the end of which an open area could be seen. The sounds were now very loud, and could be better identified. Somehow the thumping was able to sound stranger than it had when it was more obscure, with a tonal element that did not fit Snapdrágon’s expectation that it was a drum. The horn was the real surprise however, for as it turned out, it was actually a voice! It was chanting and singing in a strange tone and an even stranger tongue. At the end of the corridor the two

emerged into a very large room. They were standing on a small balcony, with a staircase to the left leading down to a smooth shiny floor two stories below. Stopping any drunken dope from falling off the balcony was a barrier about chest high, comprising marble pillars and a smooth flat top. Both through and over this, Snapdrágon saw people.

“Get down,” said Smoke, pulling him down by the shoulders.

Now he was watching them completely from between the pillars. The thirty or so people on the ground were dancing. It was such a dance that it seemed no individual was to be recognised, but rather merely part of an elaborate whole. After staring for long enough he ceased to see people, but an ever changing shape, shifting through every degree of symmetry from complete to nothing, of such colours that could only be accomplished by a masterful selection of ceremonial robes dictating each person's precise position on the surface. The shape was composed primarily of heads shoulders and arms, with ever finer details achieved by the hands and fingers. The robes they wore were long and adorned with strips of some golden material Snapdrágon could not identify. Also part of these robes were the elaborate hats extending from their heads and adorned with what looked like bronze ropes stopping everywhere from their necks to their lower backs. Snapdrágon had watched a good moment before realising that the thumping sounds were coming from the dancers themselves, either through voice, or merely breath he could not tell. And the horn-voice, was coming from one man Snapdrágon had only just noticed. He was not dancing like the rest, but merely walking in a clockwise circle in the midst of the dance. In fact, he was walking through a pathway whose ends, beginnings and

intersections were in constant flux; an ever changing labyrinth that made the man's path curiously clear, even when it evaporated into an asymmetrical chaos before reforming into a distinctly different shape. The language, Snapdrágon finally noticed, sounded much the same as that which Smoke had used back at the cemetery right before the ghostly woman had appeared. It took him longer to note that the man was not walking in a pure circle, but spiralling gradually into the centre. He looked at Smoke. She seemed as impressed as he was. So they waited for many more minutes until the man reached the end of his journey. At the core the man stopped chanting, and stood still a moment. Meanwhile, the patterns of the dancers appeared to change more profoundly than usual, but otherwise continued as normal. After some silence, the man began calling out in an upward intonation in what sounded like a commanding tone. All of a sudden Smoke, who was very near to Snapdrágon, began speaking quietly but harshly, as though taking the words very seriously, with a slight grin on her cutie face.

“We are tomorrow, we are today!

We are the living and the dead!”

Every line immediately followed from a comparable exclamation from the speaker below, making it clear that she was translating.

“We are the bride of time!

We are the bridge between the children and the sun!

We are kings yet we are dust!

We surrender to the stars!

We are infiltrated by the One!

We are the keepers of the peoples of the past!”

Then the music and the dancing stopped. In this sudden and unexpected silence the man gave one more cry, once more for only Smoke to understand.

“Eternity is now!”

Following a brief silence, the people began to move about more casually, and to begin conversation when the man still at the centre began an announcement.

“Hmmm, that is strange,” said Smoke, “he is cancelling the Toast of the Liturgy.”

The people began leaving, while the man at the centre remained at his post. It took about a minute to empty the room. When the last of the footsteps down the numerous corridors had been heard, the man called out in a clear and majestic voice.

“You said we would never see you again.”

Smoke stood up.

“I know. I just wanted to show my friend around. We have done no harm. Good day!”

“*You* have a *friend*?” said the man, “show yourself.”

Snapdrágon rose to his feet.

“Come down please.”

Snapdrágon and Smoke made their way down the stairs to their left. They approached the man. On stopping before him, Smoke gave an exaggerated bow. The man was as amused as Snapdrágon. But was interested in this *friend* of hers.

“What is your name?”

“Snapdrágon.”

“How do you know the person beside you?”

“I found her in the woods.”

“Correction, she found you.”

“Yes.”

“Tell me, did she coerce you in any way?”

“Not at all. I had been abandoned by my former companion.”

“You had a companion? That is a rare thing to hear nowadays, at least where you are obviously from. This companion have a name?”

“Yes, Gâbríel.”

“Gâbríel?!”

“What on earth did *she* want from you?”

Snapdrágon, with some effort, managed to explain some bits and pieces of his story. By the time he was done, the man’s eyes had lit up. While he did include Thäràc’s intention to claim the great bounty of Gerra, he made no mention of why.

“You have spilt the blood of one of the Nefilim?”

Snapdrágon had never heard this word before.

“If you don’t mind, could you wait here? There is someone I would like you to meet.”

“Oh, OK,” said Smoke, “but make it Snappy, Snappy!”

The man vanished down one of the corridors, leaving the two to stand about idly.

“Nice room,” said Smoke, looking around. After putting up with comments like this for minutes on end, Snapdrágon was relieved to see their host returning, and with company. This other man looked older, but not much so. He was still dressed in his ceremonial gown. On approaching their guests this one was introduced by the other (whose name was yet to be given) as Tec.

“I met Gâbríel myself once,” he said, “when I was a boy. My village had been destroyed and its inhabitants massacred. I was the one survivor. She made me swear never to tell anybody of my encounter with the Nefilim, that no more blood be spilt on their account. I obeyed her until I was adopted by my spiritual brothers, for they have no place in that world. For millennia I have agonised over my denial of justice. And now I meet you, who have partaken in precisely that, and I am in your dept.”

Snapdrágon had nothing to say.

“You are a musician, are you not?” said the other person, obviously having noticed his lyre.

“I am,” said Snapdrágon.

“In honour of your deeds, we will teach you the true power of your craft.”

“Are you saying he can use his lyre (which I helped him find by the way) for magic?” said Smoke.

“Something like that. So, do you accept our gift?”

“I suppose so,” said Snapdrágon.

“Excellent! We will begin whenever you wish. You are our honoured guest.”

Then he turned to Smoke.

“But you are not. Though we have next to no power over you even in our world, please understand that you are not welcome. We would appreciate it if you leave.”

Smoke pouted.

“Fine. I know I have to let my Snappy live his own life.”

Without warning, she virtually tackled Snapdrágon into a tight hug, her face buried into his chest. He only just had the presence to return the embrace.

“I’ll miss you!” she half squeaked.

“Goodbye,” said Snapdrágon solemnly.

Then she let go, and the others departed. Smoke just stood there and watched as Chelis’ descendent disappeared into a corridor with his hosts. Then she turned, and began walking back towards the stairs. Then she suddenly froze. For a moment she was so still that time may as well have stopped. Her expression was vacant.

“No,” she then said to herself out loud.

“No,” she said again, in a higher pitch.

“No no no no no no no no no no no,” her pitch falling as she went, shaking her head as if in denial. She then started pacing around in circles saying ‘no’ with every right footfall. Then she stopped.

“No...” now in a sinister tone, “You...” now beginning to snarl, “DON’T!!”

At exactly the same time many miles away, Thäràc became violently entangled in the macabre black tentacles of what he had understood until then to be the Pa`räjí; the beginning of a great battle that he would eventually win.

Chapter 7: A New Kind of Winter

It had been a week. Thäràc had been a welcome guest at Zhôcô's home, and his stay there had been more comfortable than he was used to, but not pleasant. Gâbríel had taken off the day they arrived to see to business elsewhere, and Snapdrágon had been spending all of his time out in the swamplands alone with the Lyre. Cära was no less restless than he, and she was not the one charged with the task of confronting Effa, (not to mention the risk of encountering Chelis). It was in this state of reckless impatience that Thäràc dared decide to pay Snapdrágon, the crumbling ghost, a visit. He had waded through the swamp for some time before finding who he was looking for. Snapdrágon, sure enough, was standing in the mud playing the Lyre. His eyes were shut, and Thäràc hesitated to disturb him, lest he be greeted with an adverse reaction. The music he was playing was less entrancing than it was flat. It was solemn and sad, but not profoundly moving. He would have been less disappointed if he had not already been exposed to the melodies of the Music Makers way back in the ruins of those of the North. Preparing himself for anything, Thäràc spoke.

“Any luck?”

Immediately, the music stopped. Snapdrágon opened his eyes and for a change looked straight into Thäràc's.

"I cannot do it."

The two stood there for a moment, speechless. Then Thäràc broke the silence.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes I'm sure. I'm too weak, and it seems as though..."

His words ceased spontaneously, as though he had been zapped out of reality. Then he started mumbling a new sentence, and this time it was Thäràc who interrupted him.

"I don't know what has happened to me but I cannot..."

"Can you teach me?"

Another silence. Thäràc was doubtful, but he had to try something. Snapdrágon answered.

"No, that is impossible."

"Then have you any ideas?"

At this point Thäràc decided that patience was the best way to go. It did take some time but Snapdrágon actually managed to give what turned out to be a constructive answer.

"I don't think any ordinary person could do it. Only a Music Maker can show you how to find what you are looking for."

At first Thäràc grew frustrated. His answer showed it.

"Aren't they dead?"

"We could always ask."

"What?"

"Shhh!"

Snapdrágon closed his eyes again and embraced the lyre. Then he started playing something very strange. It was so strange in fact that Thäràc could not tell whether or not it was an improvement over the lifeless cycle of repetitive notes he had been performing before. Yet, the music seemed to have a strange hold on him, as though it possessed a hidden beauty. But Thäràc was sick of waiting, and decided to turn his back on it. He was just beginning to leave when his autistic friend spoke.

“They are alive!”

Thäràc was taken aback.

“Huh?”

“The Music Makers of the north still exist; they have answered me.”

Thäràc was beginning to wonder if Snapdrágon had finally caved in. Was it possible? It did hit Thäràc at that convenient moment that his friend was from the southern culture. He was the only survivor supposedly, but of the Northerners he knew nothing.

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure; I’m a Music Maker, you are not.”

“Where or how do I...”

“They are in the deep south. Go Thäràc.”

“Where exactly...”

“Fly to Me`ridía, you will not miss them.”

“Me`ridía?”

“GO!”

Thäràc, in the heat of the moment, assumed Gerra’s form and took off from the ground and was ready to head off when he heard Snapdrágon's voice.

“The lyre!” he yelled, handing the instrument out for the great winged beast to collect. And without further interruption, Thäràc took to the sky. He was not planning ahead much as he headed for Me`ridía. Indeed, it was some time before he thought of Cära. By this point he chose to sacrifice her comforting company for the sake of haste. He was not happy with such a decision, especially being far from certain that the whole thing was any more than a product of Snapdrágon's madness. He knew not what he would do if he reached Me`ridía and found nothing. He simply ignored that possibility for the time being.

As Thäràc flew over thousands of miles of land in an uneasy haste, day and night seemed the same. As he remained below the bleak clouds, whose presence was oppressive, the sun never seemed to make a difference. It certainly never shone very brightly, and beneath him the surface of the land always seemed dull. So there really was not very much to distract him as he searched for whatever it was that Snapdrágon was talking about. The closer he came to Me`ridía the more anxious he became, even though it would still take something ridiculously large to get his attention. He was not far at all when that was exactly what he got; there was something in the sky before him. It was at about his altitude, and looked like a cluster of specks. As he came closer they began to take shape. They looked like rocks floating in space. Still closer, and he could make out what appeared to be cones. At this point he felt a sudden rush of familiarity that for a moment he could not place. Then, with an ecstasy of excitement, it hit him. It was a place he had been before, some years ago in fact. Only, last time it was under water. At this place he had seen Tôbit, and in turn, inherited the strange candle that, for better or worse, he had never put away.

“They were the Music Makers!” he said out loud. He was referring, of course, to the strange people that had inhabited the place. He was hit by another thought. Back when he had first visited the place, he was perplexed as to the logic of having staircases to connect the platforms in an underwater environment where people could easily swim from one platform to another. In the air, however, these platforms made sense, presuming the Music Makers could not fly, suggesting that this was not the first time the Isles had taken to the air. As he drew near, the structure seemed different somehow. This was understandable considering its new location. But that was not all. Something else was different. There were no fires. Nor even movement. Suddenly he noticed something deeply disturbing. He would rather have found that the people were simply not there. But they were. They were scattered about throughout the complex, and were frozen in place. Thäràc's blood ran cold. He approached the nearest platform and landed. On this surface he could count six or so figures. With great apprehension he went to examine one, dreading what he might find. The woman before him was engulfed in some sort of strange ice. The ice looked as though it were made not of water, but smoke. This made him think, could Chelis be behind this? No; this definitely did not look like her work. Then he had a second idea: what if it was the Turning? After all, it always seemed to have unique effects on the Music Makers. After some consideration he placed his hands on either side of the woman's head. A few seconds passed and Thäràc found that he could no more give life to her than to a statue. He moved on. He approached another person whom he recognised. It was the man who had introduced him to Tôbit. His condition was identical to that of the woman. As he lifted his eyes off of him, Thäràc spotted something else. Across a large gap, on a platform on the other side of the complex, one of the houses

had been half demolished. It was a moment before he realised, to his horror, whose house it was.

“Tôbit!” he gasped, before taking off into the air and venturing toward the distant platform. He did not land until he reached his friend's dwelling. He could see it already. Tôbit's back was facing the doorway from the inside, where he half-stood, half-crouched, as though in the middle of being knocked down from in front. Thäràc entered what was left of the building to investigate the fate of his beloved teacher. In the right hand was a small dagger. With little else to do, Thäràc prepared himself, and circled around to look at Tôbit's face. The face he saw was that of one in a deadly struggle. He saw pain and fear, but above all he saw fury. Tôbit had not gone down without a fight.

For the next half hour Thäràc just strolled about the complex thinking to himself. This was the time it took for him to decide that the best thing to do would be to thoroughly search the place. There must have been something there that could point him in the right direction. What he did not realise was that that 'something' was seeking him. In fact, he was just starting to turn over the first stone when he heard something scuttling behind him. He spun around to face a very young looking man with curly blond hair. He did not speak. Nor smile. Thäràc stepped up and took his hands into his own. When they let go, the man reacted as though he had just emerged from a temporary daydream. Then he stepped back in apprehension.

“Hello?” he said in a nervous and very youthful voice.

“Hi,” said Thäràc, “what is your name?”

“Lôcí.”

“What happened here?”

The man went silent. Then he broke out.

“We were just... it was just a normal day. We were... delivered.”

These words were coming out less like a whimper, and more like a very slight hysterical chuckling

“Delivered?” asked Thäràc confused, “how?”

“We were summoned from the sea.”

“And?”

“Delivered!”

“To what?”

“I don't know. It was not an animal; it could not have been. It was more like a shadow. I was able to hide. The... creature seemed to be after Tôbit, on its way... went after everybody else. I was able to hide. It was like...”

It was about now that Thäràc finally figured out what this creature was: the strange entity he had witnessed as it emerged from the Fortress of Shôl. What else could it have been? He put his hand out to comfort the man.

“Don't touch me!”

“Sorry,” said Thäràc, “are there any other survivors?”

“Not that I am aware of.”

Thäràc decided that it was advisable to give this person some good time before confessing his responsibility in bringing this plague among his people. He took the chance, however, at asking him if he could play the Lyre.

“Yes, but how... I'm an apprentice.”

“Could you be a teacher?” asked Thäràc, steaming ahead.

“It is very rare for a Music Maker to teach an outsider.”

This was the first long sentence that the young man had uttered without a problem. Thäràc suspected that pride was decisive here. Trying to work carefully between this pride

and the man's fear, he explained his story and mission. Lôcí was understanding enough to forgive Thäràc for unleashing that terrible creature upon him and the others, and was somewhat relieved that that was not the purpose of their emergence from the ocean. Ultimately, Lôcí agreed.

“OK,” he said, “I will teach you how to play the Lyre like a Music Maker.”

Chapter 8: The Plague

It seemed to be that the moment Thäràc had reached the isles, they had stopped moving, for apparently before then they had been moving steadily toward the north. He never had to leave them, for the empty dwellings contained ample provisions of food and water. Nor did he even care to look down to the surface. He would have been surprised at just how close he was to familiar territory.

For the next nine days, all of Thäràc's time was consumed in intensive training and practice. Lôcí was actually quite a clumsy player himself, but he was a surprisingly good teacher. He was patient, comprehensive, and friendly, and on occasion he had a great sense of humour. This was all just as well, because the magic of the Music Makers was based on improvisation. Each spell was not a pre-written melody, but rather a pre-conceived framework for one to improvise over. The principles of improvisation required a great deal more than basic teaching skills. It required both great wisdom (seemingly well beyond Lôcí's years) and a thorough understanding of the delicate technical aspects of the art. Thäràc found it difficult to imagine learning as quickly and efficiently by any other means.

It was late in the morning. Thäràc and Lôcí were indoors as usual; in the particular house they had chosen as probably the best shelter in case the 'plague' – as Lôcí described it – should return. They were in the living room. Thäràc was sitting on a chair, playing the lyre. Lôcí sat on the table before him, listening carefully. By this time, Thäràc's music had become impressively dynamic. Though his technical ability was reasonably undeveloped, his musicality was far ahead of his experience level. That is, he seemed to have an extraordinary sense of when to play louder, softer, faster slower. He played with feeling, and never tried to impress himself. It was at this point in his progress that Lôcí had finally decided that it was time for his student to learn his first song; that is, in the strict sense of the word. He had learnt a few spells, which would require much practice before they would be of any real use, but none of these were pre-composed, unlike what he was about to learn.

“This is the signature song of the Northern Music Makers,” he began, “It is almost as old as the Northern Music Makers themselves. No outsider has played it for a very long time. In fact, very few have even known of it. What I am about to teach you, must never be passed on, should we survive. If we don't... if *I* don't, it will be your responsibility to preserve it, along with all the other knowledge I have given you. Do you understand?”

Handing over the Lyre, Thäràc nodded. Then he sat and watched as his teacher played a curiously simple melody. It was also very short; only about ten seconds long in fact. Over the course of the next half-hour, Lôcí walked his student through the sequence, and all its subtleties. By the end of that time Thäràc seemed to have nailed it, he was amazed at just how long it had taken to get through such a short piece. It appeared that while his improvisational skills were exceptional, his ability to learn a pre-written melody was

relatively poor. Feeling satisfied, Lôcí declared that the lessons were complete, and that the only thing left for Thäràc to do was practice. He further proposed,

“A Toast! To our progress and final achievement.”

“Does this place have wine?” asked Thäràc.

“Certainly, well it should. Wait here, I won’t be a moment.”

Before Thäràc could protest, Lôcí proceeded to the kitchen, which, unusually in Thäràc’s experience, was not immediately connected to the living room. Lôcí searched around the kitchen for wine, knowing that the house lacked a cellar. He found none. He noticed the back door. Lôcí’s house did have a cellar. In a quick decision, he vanished out the door, keeping Thäràc in the dark about his actions.

The air outside was more forbidding than usual. The sky was black, and in fact colour, in itself, did not seem to exist. Lôcí felt somewhat oppressed, but he did not let it crush his spirits. Whistling softly to himself, he walked fairly quickly toward one of the neighbouring houses. He reached the door without too much trouble. He entered. He went down to the cellar and searched around. He found wine, but to his disappointment, discovered that there was no *toasting* wine in stock. After some thought, he recalled one other house that should have what he had in mind. He went back outside. The house he wished to get to was on another platform. It had not been his initial intention to cross platforms, but now that he was out there, he decided to see this through. Wearily he half jogged up a staircase to the next platform. Thankfully the house was close. As it happened, this was the home of the one who had led Thäràc to Tôbit during his first visit. When he reached it, he promptly entered and went into the cellar. He only had to search for a number of seconds. He reached out and grabbed a bottle good enough to toast with, but

hopefully not good enough for the owner to get upset if he ever sees the light of day. Then he hurried out of the house. He started back toward the staircase. He had gotten about half way when he was distracted from his path by a faint sound. Just then, he started shuddering. By the time he consciously recognised the noise, he had already spun around in a panic. When he saw what was in the sky he froze in terror. A black, eel-like creature was looping through the air as though it were in water. It was moving towards him. Then it stopped looping about and started straight in his direction. It advanced so rapidly that Lôcí only barely had enough time to drop his bottle, but not enough to scream.

Thäràc was still sitting at the table. He had been trying to practice his newly learnt piece, but since Lôcí left, he had been expecting him to return any moment. At first he was able to concentrate reasonably well, but as the minutes went by it became increasingly difficult. Now, he was at the point where he could no longer stay put. Putting the Lyre on his person, he went into the kitchen. Finding nobody, he called out Lôcí's name. No answer. He noticed the open door, which led straight outside from the kitchen. This came as a bit of a shock. He went through the door. Once outside he looked around. No sign of Lôcí. Then, not knowing what else to do, he drew first the Sword of Cain and then the Soul Sword, not sure which would be needed, then he stepped out into the open. After a moment of pure silence he caught something in the corner of his eye. In the distance, slightly camouflaged against the dark morning sky, was the same squid-like creature he had seen just hours after the destruction of Me`ridia; that which had emerged on the occasion of the forming of the great shield over Shôl. Thäràc was somewhat hesitant to face the creature, but he knew that it might give him the opportunity to find answers. He also had serious concerns about Lôcí and what may well have just happened to him.

Conveniently, he was spared this tough decision when it became clear that he had already been seen. The creature advanced with some apparent caution, beginning at a moderate pace, and then it accelerated rapidly, coming to a terrifying charge. Thäràc pumped up the Sword of Cain with all the power he had, and readied himself. The creature came at such lightning speed that Thäràc had no chance to swing his sword. The precise instant after he saw his enemy at ten feet he became engulfed in a myriad of sensations that could not possibly be described. He saw colours he could not identify; colours which could have been anything between black and silver. He completely lost all sense of time and bodily orientation. He was in a strange sort of agony for which he had total tolerance. Every other sense was infested with what could best be described as noise. He could not think, not even about the sensations.

After an interval of time that could not possibly be measured he found himself grappling with the nightmarish beast. He was in the form of Gerra, and both swords had been knocked out of his hands. He had just been lifted off the ground and was quickly taken well away from the platforms. Thäràc quickly noticed that not only had those sensations not quite gone away, but he was hardly able to fly. He could move well enough to struggle. In mid-air they grappled each other ferociously, Thäràc trying to overpower the creature, the creature – many times larger than he – simply trying to shake him off. Somehow this whole thing reminded him of his fight with the last of the White Beasts years earlier. What happened this time was that he managed, unbelievably, to find a way to strangle the creature. It let out a sickening squealing sound that rang in Thäràc's ears to join the various other noises still left over from the initial impact. The creature was clearly desperate to escape, but Thäràc held it in an iron grip. All of a sudden, before he knew it, the creature, while not dead, seemed to have lost its ability to

stay in the air. Thäràc felt triumphant for a brief instant before recognising the fact that he just disabled the only thing that was keeping him from plummeting to the earth.

He promptly tried to move his wings, but with little luck. They seemed to be of some use, so he let go of his enemy and did what he could to slow his own fall. His enemy was doing the same thing. But despite his efforts he found himself falling faster and faster until finally he met the ground. The next thing that happened to Thäràc should have been the last, but somehow it was just another passing occasion, a bizarre resurgence of the same sorts of things he had experienced back at the beginning. This time, however, the vale passed away notably soon. Now the confrontation had become even more reminiscent of the last of the White Beasts. Yet, several things were different. First of all, he was not rendered unconscious. Secondly, and more importantly, his enemy was still alive; or at least the body was nowhere to be seen. What could be seen? The first thing Thäràc noticed was that it was raining. The rain was fairly heavy. There was also a certain mist that shrouded much of the horizon. He was standing on a soft grass-less ground; mostly dirt and some mud. Surrounding him on all sides were pointy black stake-like protrusions from the ground. Thäràc quickly realised what they were: burnt down trees. He was standing in the remains of the Forest of Me`ridia, still in Gerra's form. One further thing caught his attention. Emanating from himself was a familiar sort of ghostly string-like flame. It was the candle again. Only this time the line was not yellow, but something more like the colour of his enemies' frozen victims; a strange icy-smoke colour. Once again it seemed to be leading somewhere. Given the candle's previous association with that creature, Thäràc could only guess that the strange trail would take him to it. He made an attempt to take off on wings and failed. He also noticed that he was

missing his Sword of Cain. He summoned the Soul Sword's, both his and Gerra's, and began to follow the trail.

The trail was reasonably straight, but seemed to be curving gradually to the right. It was as though he was following a scent. Through the rain and mist he caught in the corner of his eye some of the fiends still left over from the battle that had ended more than a week ago. For the moment they took no apparent interest in him, so Thäràc paid likewise attention. Then they started to charge. Thäràc still felt incredibly strange, but he still felt confident enough to fight. The creatures came rather quickly, and most of them were in spiritual form. When the two sides met the initial greeting was the cutting to pieces of the ghostly figures in the vanguard. In the heat of the melee it came so naturally for Thäràc to switch immediately from spiritual opponents to corporal ones that he unleashed a devastating wave of Setharon on a pair of corporeals without thinking. But when he did he was taken completely aback by what he actually ended up releasing. It still looked something like fire, but it most clearly was not. It had the same colour as the trail he had been following; the icy metallic colour he had now got used to. The really strange thing was that it still behaved partly like fire and partly like frost. The two unfortunate entities in its path were frozen, before pieces of them began withering away. Thäràc finished off his opponents before he could take the time to really marvel at what had just happened. Then he promptly continued following the ghostly trail.

The rain had since become heavier, and then mellowed to a light shower. In time Thäràc could begin to make out a mountain through the mist. Had his vision not been so disturbed by the strange infection he would have seen it earlier. As he approached the mountain the trail bent to the left. He followed it down the side, past the mountain, and

found himself running beside another. The trail wrapped around it a bit and then went up a rising path of rubble into a tunnel that seemed to lead straight into the mountain from some distance up. He climbed the rubble and then entered. To his utter surprise he soon found himself emerging into a wide open area. Before him lay a vast landscape surrounded on all sides by a looming summit, much like a giant bowl. The first thing he noticed which really struck him was the trees. Littered throughout the area were trees varying greatly in size: from regular to downright tremendous. And not all of them were solitary; some were connected, forming all manner of structures. This was a reminder to Thäràc that the great conflagration did not stretch to every last corner, and also that the forest, as he had often imagined it, was not just a mass of trees on a relatively flat plane. Trees were not the only thing that stood out. Through the now light rain, Thäràc could make out houses, hills, and largely dried up creeks and ponds. In fact, it appeared that the place from where he had emerged was a drain. Only when he realised this did he even notice the stream of water trickling down between his legs. There was also some grass, but not much.

The trail bent sharply to the left. Thäràc continued to follow it down a fair way from the drain shaft, until he saw that at one point the trail suddenly leapt up a few stories from the ground. Where it then led was an opening in the mountain beyond what looked like a half filled moat. When he got there he stopped at the edge. The opening was well over his head, and it looked so steep and wet that it would clearly have been impossible to climb. Thäràc made one more attempt to fly. No use; his angelic wings were paralysed. He searched around for something that could help him. In fact, there was something: carved into a stone slab right before the mountain cavity was an inscription. It read thus: “Jãst spíc au uëd and th rain ìt`self uill lift yú”. Thäràc stared at this for a minute. He was confused. Was this of any

value to him? Or was it just some proverb? What it seemed to mean was that whoever wrote the inscription, had such authority that their delegates alone could command the forces of nature to do extraordinary things. After all, how could the rain lift a person? It was that phrase that repeatedly tempted him to dismiss the whole thing as sentimental nonsense. But he could not deny the connection between 'lift you' and the fact that he did need to be lifted.

He searched the area for other clues. He found nothing. Trying to keep a balance between double checking and working on what he had, he contemplated the words carefully. 'Speak our word,' he reflected; this must have been the key. Whose word was it? And more to the point, whose word did he know? Was it the Music Makers who once called this inspiring place home? They were the only people he could think of that were, in any sense, so mysterious. Furthermore, he knew that he was well within the proximity of the place that the southern Music Makers called home. Whether or not he was actually there was the question. Could he speak their word? Yes he could! He had just learnt it not half an hour ago. He reached for his lyre, and was positively astonished to find that it was not broken. Even the strings were intact. Thäràc braced himself, and performed the song he had just been taught.

The notes seemed to ring off of every object around him. About half-way through he noticed something amazing. The rain quickly became heavy. When he got to the end, another miracle occurred. When he was finished, the notes continued to play. The song was played again, only this time it was different. Now, instead of finishing, the music went off on its own. As this happened, lightning struck. Thäràc was now paying less attention to the music and more to the fact that the place seemed to be flooding. The rain was being collected by the surrounding mountains and flowing through the

drain. Everywhere he looked Water was streaming through, filling the ponds, and more significantly, the moat before him. In fact, it was filling up at an astonishing rate. As the music played, the water level went from half-way to almost full. Then it stopped. The music, and the storm. Thäràc was left soaking wet and standing in mud. Then there was silence. It was still reasonably dark despite the time of day. Thäràc was just beginning to wonder what the point of that display was when he was frightened out of his wits by an explosion of water right before his eyes. It was as if some invisible object the size of a whale had just landed in the moat, except that the water was thrust into the air in the one spot: right between him and the opening in the rock above him. The water reached quite a height, towering completely over Thäràc. Then it fell. As it did, something quickly became visible. At the heart of the falling water there was ice. The water slipped by the solid and eventually all that was left was a sparkling white staircase of pure, white, rock-hard ice, leading straight from Thäràc's feet to the opening above. Thäràc half smiled. "The rain will lift you," he said out loud. Without hesitation, he proceeded up the stairs.

The passage beyond the opening in the mountain was long and dark. It was narrow enough to suggest that the creature he pursued would probably have had some difficulty squeezing through; if indeed it was that creature that the candle was leading him to. The ghostly trail stuck mainly to the walls; often near the ceiling, indicating that the beast had been moving along the ceiling as well. In good time, the corridor opened up into a grand chamber filled with lavish pillars, statues, and various other constructs. There were also streams of water sprouting from the walls into creeks that gathered into a sort of pool. With great caution, Thäràc ventured into the room. The candle trail was almost everywhere, making it very difficult for Thäràc to track his

target further. Standing as Gerra with one Soul Sword in each hand, he readied himself for anything.

He went steadily forward, listening carefully. All he could hear was the gentle trickle of the streams. Eventually, he stopped in the centre of the chamber. At this point he was surrounded by pillars, well spaced as they were. He kept listening. His senses were still haywire, but they seemed to be working, for just then he began to feel uneasy. It was an act of sheer instinct that he spun around and hurled a Soul Sword straight towards the large creature that then leapt off the ground just yards away from him, missing the sword by an inch. The weapon swiftly made its way back into Thäràc's hand. The beast seemed to have lost its ability to swim through the air like a terrifying eel, but despite its weight it managed to hurl itself straight towards Thäràc in like manner to the sword. Thäràc leapt out of the way, and the beast collided into a pillar behind him, smashing it down. Not one easily knocked off his feet, especially with the body of Gerra, Thäràc lunged back with a heavy swing of his right sword. The creature squealed horribly, and retaliated with a fierce whip of its tail. This did knock Thäràc over, and his enemy came down to try and crush him. Thäràc held his swords up, ready to impale anything that landed on him. The creature stopped just in time to prevent the swords going more than half way through, and wailed as Thäràc, lying on his back, used them to toss it straight over him, and once again into a pillar. This time, however, the pillar landed on the creature, holding it in place. The pillar must have been incredibly dense, for it was little wider than one foot across. Thäràc sprang back to his feet. He approached his opponent. Then he lifted both of his swords high over the creature's head.

He was ready to stick them both in when his eye caught something peculiar. This was the first time he could get a

good look at the terrible thing up close. Of all the grotesque things that stuck out from beneath the fallen pillar, the tongue was just about the only thing he could identify. It was long, flat and pointy. And on the end of that tongue, as amazing as it was, there was a carved inscription. It looked like a lyre spell! Thäràc could not miss the opportunity. He pulled out a dagger – the only corporal blade in his possession – and ran it through as hard as he could. The creature howled in agony as its tongue was severed with some difficulty. In good time Thäràc held it in his hand. As he slipped it into his pocket, the creature began to behave very strangely. It trembled and flicked its various tentacles and other appendages up and down. All of a sudden, the pillar was hurled into the air and landed well behind it. The creature continued to tremble until it finally began to shrink. Thäràc stood back as his enemy seemed to be collapsing in on itself. It kept on shrinking until the entire body, which had just been the size of a large shark, was now about the size of a human face. Even more remarkably, however, it was also just about the same *shape* as a human face. It appeared to be a mask. It was being held by a hand. The hand belonged to a short, thin man, whose face was still hidden behind the mask that Thäràc had just met in battle. The man slowly moved the mask away, revealing a feeble, bony looking face. Then he tossed the mask over his shoulder. It landed with a hollow sound, as though it were made of ordinary wood. Then he let off a sickly, high-pitched cackle. Thäràc took yet another step back. The man spoke cheerfully.

“Hellooo Thäràc how nice it is to see you.”

“Who are you?” replied Thäràc in a no-nonsense tone.

“You know very well who I am. Or do I really need to STATE IT? You have met me before. I paid you a visit once. Though it was not me you were looking for was it? Remember now? The Forest? of Me`ridía?”

It was clear enough now, Thäràc needed no more clues.

“Mammon!”

The man laughed wickedly.

“Well done! You must have a lot going through your mind right now.”

“What on earth was that thing?”

“Oh? My favourite mask? Just a little pet of my master’s.”

“Effa?”

“That is the one. When you set off that candle of yours he knew that he had been found. He set up a reinforcement.”

“You are talking about that shield?”

“Yep. Heh Heh. You know what he did? Pure genius. He managed to harness the seeking power that you unleashed upon him. He gave me a weapon – a creature from the depths of Shôl – and used that seeking power to guide me to the owner of the candle with an obvious objective. But can you guess what happened? It appeared that the power was attracted not to the current owner of the candle, but to the *long term* owner. And so, I take it that old fool gave it to you recently?”

“That’s correct,” said Thäràc sadly.

“So I find him, I PARALYSE him, but before that he pulls out a knife on me, and carves some rubbish on my tongue! He was not worth the effort, Effa has no interest disabling old coots. But then, the real target comes along: YOU! The man who I can only assume is out to get my master. Heh. Good luck in that state! You know you are not going to last much longer don’t you? At least *you* lasted longer THAN A SECOND!”

Mammon’s voice was becoming increasingly squeaky.

“What exactly is this filth?” asked Thäràc. “What have you done to me?”

“It’s a poison. It is partly my genius and partly a trait of that splendid monster I cloaked myself with.”

Thäràc had one other question.

“Why do you still serve him? What’s in it for you?”

“He is just a friend,” cackled Mammon, “my only friend in fact. He was the only person I could ever count on. He made me king. He became my father and in return I am his slave. But enough about us. I am far more interested in why you are trying to help the River of Souls.”

Thäràc shuddered.

“You knew?!”

“Of course I knew,” Mammon snapped, “that is my purpose. I spy, and I sabotage. So tell me, do you really care about Chelis? Or are you just trying to get her out of the way?”

“Smoke terrifies me,” Thäràc answered, “but she is still a friend. And no one deserves to suffer like that.”

“How sweet.”

“Yes, now get out of my way!”

“Oh, be my guest.”

Mammon gestured towards the door.

“Since you are now DYING I need not be your burden.”

Thäràc proceeded past the deranged ghost and continued out of the mountain unhindered. The stairs of ice were still there. Mammon was not lying about him being in a bad state. His senses had become clouded by ‘noise’, and though not limping, walking was a struggle. By the time he reached the drain, he felt like he was going to collapse. As he disappeared down the drain hole, a short, bony man stood atop a giant

tree watching. Mammon then raised his hand high over his head. With that hand, he then hurled what looked like a string of seeds down to the ground far beneath him. Oddly, these seeds hit the soil with a curiously loud slapping sound. They landed between the drain and one of the tree-masses. Thäràc made it outside again. Then he collapsed.

Chapter 9: A Candle, a Lyre and a Severed Tongue

When Thäràc opened his eyes the first thing he saw was something that seemed to make everything worth while: Cära. She was standing over him, and standing by her side was another horse. He then realised that these two animals had not come alone. He sat up, and a few yards away, sitting down as comfortably as they could, were Zhôcô and Snapdrágon. Thäràc looked around. They were in an enclosed area surrounded by mountainous rock, between the two mountains. It appeared to be evening. Thäràc spoke; to no one in particular.

“How long was I out?”

“I would say a good few days,” Zhôcô replied, “though we only found you a few hours ago. Good thing too. I just saved you.”

“What happened to me?”

“You were infected with a terrible venom; one with some of the hallmarks of frost. It had infiltrated every part of your body. It had disabled your ability to fly and corrupted your Setharòn. Thäràc, I could not just bring you back to normal.”

“So what happened? What even brought you here?”

“Snapdrágon and I took off not long after he sent you here. We thought you might need help, and as you can see, we brought Cära along.”

“And what about me?”

Zhômô hesitated for a moment.

“You were corrupted by what can only be described as a curse of winter. I looked hard for a way to take it from you. But it was no use. The cold was devouring you, and the only way you could survive the ice, was to become it. I bestowed you with the most fearsome and most burdensome power of my people: the power of winter. Stand up.”

Thäràc did as he was told.

“I believe that before I found you your Setharòn came out as ice. Am I right?”

Thäràc nodded.

“Well now you should be able to separate them; try it.”

Thäràc found a clear space, braced himself, and produced a moderately sized Setharòn flame. Zhômô clapped.

“Very good. Now I must show you how to use frost.”

It only took a quick lesson for Thäràc to acquire a basic understanding of how to produce ice in much the same way as he could fire. Zhômô was impressed.

“Remember, I did not give you this power because you need to use it, I gave it to you because it was your only hope for survival. Treat it well, it is now part of your system.”

Thäràc was feeling somewhat optimistic. Despite the apparently burdensome nature of this new power, he saw it as a gift. He stepped around practicing his frost on the dagger he had used to cut off that nightmare's tongue. He was interrupted by Zhômô.

“How did you do it?”

Thäràc stopped and faced the dark-skinned necromancer.

“That poison should have paralysed you on the spot. I have never seen such a constitution.”

Rather than answering, Thäràc had a question of his own.

“What about the others? Can they still be saved?”

“Hard to say. It is a very strange venom that now flows through your veins. I have reason to believe it may be preserving them. I might be able to save them but I would need to be there.”

“What about this?” asked Thäràc, reaching into his pocket. It was empty. Zhôcô reached into his own pocket and pulled out what Thäràc was looking for: the severed piece of tongue with Tôbit's inscription.

“I examined it myself,” he said, “this does not look like any sort of healing spell, but it is worth a try. You should hurry Thäràc, there is no telling how much longer they have, if they are still alive. It is time to test your power to fly.”

Thäràc took back the tongue, and transformed.

“Give my regards to my cousins,” said Snapdrágon, speaking for the first time, “if they are still there. We will be waiting here when you come back, then we will decide what we will do then.”

Thäràc nodded, and took off.

Although he felt confident in his ability to reach the floating isles, Thäràc still felt quite strange. His senses had recovered, but they were still not the same. He saw the shadowy world beneath him in a metallic haze; the sound of the air whizzing past his ears had a different tone; though the sound of Zhôcô's voice seemed the same. By the time he reached the isles, Thäràc was tired, but far from exhausted. He landed near Tôbit's house. The atmosphere up here was

no less sullen than before. The sky was black, and the air was ghastly.

He stepped through what was left of Tôbit's doorway. Tôbit was still there, in the exact position he was in when Thäràc saw him last. Thäràc readied himself. He pulled out his lyre with one hand, and then the tongue in the other. He studied the inscription carefully. After several minutes he finally felt ready. He stood before his friend, and began playing a dreary piece of improvised music. At first, nothing happened. The piece had no end, so Thäràc just kept playing in hope of a result. Finally, after but a few minutes, the smoky ice engulfing Tôbit began to melt; not into water, but into vapour. As it did, the man started to fall gradually to the ground; as though the strings holding him up were being lowered. The dagger fell out of his hand and clanked onto the floor. Then all of a sudden Tôbit's weight took over, and the ice shattered as he plummeted to the ground, luckily not onto the dagger. For a moment he just lay there like a dead man, then he came to. He struggled to his knees. As he held himself there panting in exhaustion his old age was showing as it never had before. It took some time, but eventually the old man turned himself over and sat there a while. Just then he noticed Thäràc. He smiled.

“I knew you would make it,” he said.

“You wrote that spell for this?”

“Right you are. I did *not* know what that thing was or what it wanted, but when it came for me I learnt quickly that I could not beat it. So in my last waking moment I grabbed my dagger and made sure that whoever defeated the monster would find my secret. It is a spell I have spent my life perfecting, and I was the first test subject; luckily it seems to have worked fine.”

“How do you feel?”

“Surprisingly good. Who taught you to play?”

“Lôcí did. He was the only survivor.”

“Well weren't you lucky. I cannot say if I could have taught you as well as that, and I am a good teacher as you know,” Tôbit grinned and winked.

Thäràc was joyous to see his friend again, but he had to ruin the moment.

“It got him too,” he said.

“Well, let us not wait,” said Tôbit, “let's see if we can still save the others.”

Slowly enough, Tôbit climbed to his feet.

“Give me the lyre.”

Thäràc handed over his instrument. Tôbit stepped outside. He held the lyre in position and startled Thäràc as the first note rang loudly throughout the area. The spell reached every corner of the isles, and everyone there emerged from their dreaded blankets as confused, but healthy individuals. When Tôbit was finished he handed the lyre back. Thäràc, remembering where he had dropped his sword, decided to go for a stroll; Tôbit followed. As they went, Thäràc explained what had happened. Before too long, they reached the Sword of Cain, which lay on the ground; thankfully still in one piece. Thäràc picked it up, examined it, channeled a current of fire, ice and energy through it, and sheathed it. It was about then that it became Tôbit's turn to explain things.

“Ever heard of Princess Mïra?”

“Effa's sister?”

“Yes. She was the one who made the candle I gave you, thousands of years ago. It seems that she built it in order to track down her brother.

“You knew this?”

“Actually I only discovered it very recently. I did mean to inform you. The really fascinating thing, of course, is how you got it working. I think I can explain it to you.”

“Go on,” said Thäràc.

“The candle is a complex object. It was designed so that none but Mìra herself could use it. The mechanism for that is a spiritual seal; a lock of sorts. I can not figure out what sort of key she would have used, but that does not really matter because it appears you have broken the seal.”

“How?” said Thäràc.

“Ah! That is the clever part. What has happened to all things spiritual, now that the Guardian has removed the Pa`rājì once again? They have become weak Thäràc, and so the seal on Mìra's candle was also weak.”

“But it would have been the same when you first gave it to me.”

“Ah! But you did not possess the Setharòn back then did you? No ordinary flame could have done it; and when you did receive the Setharòn the seal would have been at full strength. And, even better, the candle seems to be able to lock onto other targets as well. Effa was even able to redirect it, and use it to guide an assassin of his own. The creature you encountered was sent to track down the owner of the candle and kill him. Unfortunately, it did not seem to detect the more recent ownership, and thus the target, though neither Effa nor Mammon would have known it, was me.”

Thäràc had a manifest guilt wrapped over his face.

“Do not feel sorry,” said Tôbit, “it was all for the better. Hand me that spell for a moment.”

Thäràc passed on the creature's tongue. Tôbit held it between his hands. For a time it just sat there but then it started to shrink and harden. Then he handed it back.

“I could just copy my spell onto paper, but you have earned this. I have preserved this as a token, and not to mention, I have removed the smell. It should last well beyond your lifetime. And thus I pass my life's work onto you. Use it wisely.”

“I will,” said tharac.

“So tell me, what brought you here in the first place? You still have not told me why it was in your interest to learn the mysteries of our music.”

“Do you know anything about Balda?”

The old man looked curious.

“A few things,” he said, “concerning?”

“The River of Souls.”

“The what?”

“You don't know of it?”

“No, I cannot say I do. What does it have to do with Balda?”

Thäràc recalled at this point that up until he learnt it himself, only his hosts in the north seemed to have any real knowledge of the Chelis and its history. He explained how the strange young girl Tôbit had introduced him to turned out to be what she was. He was somewhat surprised.

“Balda is a founding figure among the Music Makers,” he said, “he was never associated with anything but our music. But now I know of his lifetime deeds, for we have only ever known him as a spirit.”

“Is it possible for me to speak to him?”

Tôbit looked surprised.

“What for? What is it that you have been sent out to do?”

“Save Smoke.”

Now Tôbit looked puzzled.

“Well that is very nice of you but what has it to do with Effa? Aren’t you trying to find him?”

“That's right.”

“Then why go through so much over Smoke?”

“Because as long as she is out there my cause is under threat. Her suffering is her motive to find me, and if she does, my mission may be over, and so will I.”

Tôbit went silent for a moment. Then, even when he did speak, he seemed hesitant.

“There is a way.”

“To speak to Balda?”

“Yes. There is a place where you can go. There you will find a song engraved on a stump. Play it, and he will appear to you. Mind you it is a sacred song; never to be played outside those walls. I have never memorized it, and neither must you. Am I clear?”

“Yes,” answered Thäràc, “where do I find it?”

Suddenly, the old man chuckled.

“What is so funny?”

“That is the beautiful thing. You have probably already walked past it. It is back down in that crater.”

Tôbit gave Thäràc directions on reaching the sacred chamber from the drain. When he was done, Thäràc said goodbye and parted. The old man watched as his beloved former student disappeared beneath the edge of the isle, transforming as he left just as he had back when they were in the sea.

Chapter 10: Mammon's Labyrinth

Snapdrágon and Zhôcô were sitting on a very large tree root. The two horses were grazing. Though it had gotten rather dark, Snapdrágon was able to clearly spot Gerra coming down from above. He landed several feet away from any of his four acquaintances. Then Thäràc changed back into human form, and spoke.

“I think Cära and I should do this alone.”

Zhôcô nodded. Snapdrágon said nothing. In fact, he never even looked at his old friend. He did not look angry; he did not look like anything. Thäràc mounted Cära, and took off, out of the small encirclement of rock that lay between the mountains, and around the volcano-like place to the drain. When they reached it, Thäràc paused and said: “from here on we will stay together.” Then they entered. Thäràc was filled with a renewed sense of wholeness and hope. His confidence was brimming, and he was not afraid. All this changed as they emerged from the drain into the open land of the crater.

Thäràc could not understand how he could have missed such a thing from above as he had come down from the sky. Before him, and over his head, lay a tunnel of thick vegetation. Right from the rock from which he and Cära had

emerged, dark green vines the size of small tree-trunks were twisted into pointed arches that blended and merged into each other forming an ominous corridor about three times Thäràc's natural height, and twice his height in width. Though the walls looked impenetrable, they were still loose enough to let in streams of (artificial) moonlight. When Thäràc looked back he was even more disturbed to find that the entrance had been closed off by the same vegetation. He drew his sword. He approached the wall on his left, charged up his sword with fire and swung through the vines. Little sooner were the vines severed than they grew back into a solid barrier. Thäràc knew there was no turning back. He prepared himself, and moved forward.

Not far from the entrance the passage twisted to the right. When Thäràc came around he found that the path immediately split off into a T-intersection. It was then that he realised what it was he had walked into. He and Cära were trapped in a giant maze, and it hardly took a second guess to realise that Mammon was the architect. Swallowing his fear, Thäràc pushed on. At about every second corner the path was split into two, sometimes three routes. At first Thäràc navigated as carefully as he could, but he decided not to bother when he realised that the maze was changing. Thäràc had no way of knowing whether or not he and Cära would ever get out of there alive. He knew little about Mammon, but he knew he was a trickster. It was just as conceivable that he would render it impossible for Thäràc to escape, or at least reach his destination, than otherwise.

After well over half an hour of navigating the hopeless mass of overgrown weeds the two came to a halt. Thäràc heard something. In the distance, ever so faintly, the air was filled with strange snickering noises. Thäràc dismounted. He went forward cautiously. He stood as still as he could. The snickering sound faded. Then there was silence. Thäràc took

a few steps forward, his sword ready. As he listened, the snickering came back louder than before. At about that time, something also grabbed Cära's attention. She turned to face the other way. Thäràc was aware of this, and he asked her to stay close. But he did not look back. For a good few minutes his attention was fixed on noises in the distance. Then he decided it was time to move on. He turned, only to find himself facing a dead end. Cära was nowhere to be seen. Thäràc panicked. He tried to peep through the new barrier. He could see nothing. Then he could do nothing but go forward, trying to navigate his way to wherever she might be. It was no use. They were separated. This frightened Thäràc very much. It also disgraced him. He had no idea what had possessed him to dismount in the first place. He called out her name but there was no reply. Once again, Thäràc swallowed his fear, together with his shame. He carried on through the maze as normal, hoping anxiously that the two would be reunited.

While Thäràc began moving right away, Cära at first stayed put. She did not know what to do. For a while she just stood there, believing it better to wait for Thäràc to find her. But as time went on she became so anxious that she could not stand still. That was when she started searching around herself. Cära was in no better or worse a position to make correct choices in direction than Thäràc. She just went with her wit. She was actually not as scared as Thäràc was, but she was less confident. In the distant atmosphere she could hear the strange drumming that had made her lose sight of Thäràc in the first place. What she never heard was the snickering that had compelled Thäràc to dismount. Although her animal eyes saw the world differently to a normal man, let alone frost-venom infected Thäràc, her surroundings looked no prettier. Every path she took with apprehension, and she always felt she could encounter anything around the

next corner. The interesting thing was that although she never knew it, her companion was never far away.

Thäràc never knew it either, and although he was reasonably calm outwardly, his fear remained constant. Not that there was anything that could possibly have come around a corner and be worthy of his terror or submission. At this point nothing mattered but Cära. The snickering became only so slightly louder. But at no point, despite the closeness, could he hear Cära. Eventually he came to the realisation that wherever he thought he was going, each choice was just as likely taking him in Cära's direction than toward the end, or the beginning, of the maze. If indeed he could make it to the end, he would be more likely to meet her there. Understanding this, Thäràc forced himself to try and not worry too much about her and focus on solving the labyrinth. It is a wonder though, that it never occurred to him to try to use Mïra's candle.

Once again, Cära had a different attitude. She had no present interest in escaping that place; that could wait. All she wanted to do was find Thäràc. Like Thäràc, however, she was still fairly patient. She moved at a moderate pace, taking whatever path she thought would bring her closer to her goal. But before too long, her cautious optimism was undermined. She was treading down a relatively straight path when, not far from where she was, thin vines started leaking through the walls. These vines started to merge and became entangled. Then, to Cära's horror, they took some sort of humanoid form. Before she knew it, Cära was confronted with three little-man-like figures made entirely of vegetation. They also had little weapons. One had a club, one had a whip and the other had what looked like a morning star. All three also appeared to be adorned with thorns. Cära turned to run the other way, but when she did she only ended up facing four more of the creatures, armed with

similar weaponry. When they started to advance she panicked. Realising there was nowhere to go, Cära took a defensive stance. But when her enemies closed in, there was no fight.

Thäràc was walking through a narrow passage. What was originally an acute sense of anxiety became a sudden rush of panic the very moment he heard the loud cry of a horse being assailed in a not too distant place. He ran. When he came to the first split he hesitated in sudden confusion before choosing to go left. He ran some more. By this point he had already lost all sense of navigational logic and just picked his paths right away as he tried desperately to come to Cära's aid in time. He could still hear her being attacked. Thäràc could not think; all he was capable of doing was hopelessly trying to follow the wails and the beating as he ran frantically from one random guess to another. As time drew thin he started to change direction at whim, as though he were chasing a spectre. By then he had become so restless that he never even noticed when the cries faded. He turned a corner. Though it was not a dead end, he decided to turn back and run the other way. But the instant he turned he was stopped dead in his tracks by the sudden embrace of a woman. Her arms were wrapped around him and her lips around his before he could even catch a glimpse of her. The first thing he did was stumble back in utter confusion. That did not stop her. He knew it was Cära. Her kiss was so familiar, but it was not the same. She felt different. She even looked different but he could not see it because his eyes were shut; so were hers. Though he was brimming with passion, the tears rolling down his cheek were of despair. Cära never loosened her grip. Even as she faded the two embraced each other with all their strength, until finally Thäràc was left holding nothing but air. Once again he was alone. He never bothered to open his eyes. He just let himself drift to the ground into whatever position gravity took him, and cried alone in the malicious

garden he would come to remember as Mammon's Labyrinth.

Chapter 11: The Deiàds

Hours had passed. Nothing had come to disturb Thäràc. Nor had he moved. He lay on his side with his hands on his knees. Midnight had well passed, and the artificial moonlight had dimmed. Although Thäràc kept his eyes shut, somehow he was able to sense the nearly invisible figure that approached him from one end of the corridor, even before she landed on her feet. Then he heard the ever so familiar voice of Gâbríel.

“It’s time to continue.”

Thäràc opened his eyes. In a state of near total apathy he struggled to his feet.

“You can get out of here, just follow me.”

The two started moving.

“How do you know the way?” asked Thäràc.

“Before entering I had ample time to observe the maze from above,” said Gâbríel, “I watched it shift and quiver until I was certain I could identify a pattern. I learned how this maze moves, and it does not appear to be designed to keep its inhabitants contained, just to make it difficult.”

“Well, I’ll have to thank Mammon when I next see him. So what were you doing before this?” said Thäràc.

Gâbríel was not amused. He seemed to be showing some of the same sarcasm he had the first time he lost Cära.

“I have spent the past two weeks organising and commanding the Vîje`lîz. I promise you I came as quickly as I possibly could.”

“Don't worry I am not blaming you for anything. How are they?”

Gâbríel showed some hesitation before answering.

“They are dead,” she began, “With the land infested with Soldiers of Black and Flame I figured that the Vîje`lîz, for their survival, should be brought together and led. What I had not anticipated was that when *we* became unified, so would *they*. Before the Vîje`lîz understood what was happening, they were standing inside a circle of the only land spared by the shadows, like an island in the ocean. I stood there myself, observing the dark shores of destruction about to wash over everyone within. If I were a real human, I would have joined them. As a raven, I left them, ascending skyward as everyone under my command met their end.”

“Including my father.”

Gâbríel nodded. There were no more words. Gâbríel had always known when to keep her mouth shut, and now was no exception. Thäràc was not destroyed to hear of his father’s fate, but it was more news he did not need. Gâbríel had actually seen what happened to Cära when she was deciphering the maze, and she could still see it in Thäràc, knowing that while she could take her eyes off at will, he could not. But she could also see that Thäràc finally understood his duty. When the time came, he would grieve for his father and for his lover. But grief had to wait, and that was all there was to it. Before long, they reached the end.

After following his guide through corner after turn after corner, he was somewhat relieved when finally they emerged into a chamber. There was little joy in the fact that the composition of the walls and ceiling was not all that different to that of the maze. Thäràc was standing in a large chamber encapsulated by tree trunks that twisted into a tight shell. At the heart of the chamber was a stump.

Thäràc knew what it was for, and he was ready. He retrieved the lyre, completely unaware of the fact that this was the very same place where Snapdrágon had first discovered it years earlier. He approached the stump. Not far above the two spikes on which the lyre had once hung was an inscription. This was it. The sacred melody of Balda. Thäràc held his instrument in position while Gâbríel took a few steps back. Then Thäràc began playing. It was a surprisingly simple song. There was no clever dynamic or intricate transition, nor was it in any way atonal. It was also very short. While a lyre spell or melody was usually followed by a brief period of inactivity, Thäràc was not even finished when the space above the stump suddenly opened up with a sheering light that filled the chamber and forced Thäràc to take several steps back. The light did not stop there. It shot out of the chamber and filled the entire labyrinth. The mass of vegetation that made up the maze began to retreat. But before it was even given the chance to loosen, the labyrinth dissolved into nothing more than fragments in the wind. All that was left was the corpse of Cära's humble former host, a steed through which she had served him well. Thäràc noticed none of this. His attention was centred on the angelic silhouette that was taking shape before him. His eyes were just finally managing to adjust to the light when it started to fade, leaving but a simple looking man standing on the stump. The man was obviously waiting for Thäràc to speak, so he did.

“Are you Balda?”

“I am,” the man replied, “did you wish to speak to me?”

“Yes. My name is Thäràc and I need to know about the River of Souls.”

“Oh,” said Balda, “I have been waiting for this day for a very long time.”

“Balda, Chelis is after me. My life is an answer to her pain and I must find another one before she finds me and prevents me from restoring peace.”

“The River of Souls is my responsibility. It is my fault it came into the world and with your help I can redeem myself. But before I can explain how, we must go back to the beginning...

In the time before time, before all things were, was a child. The poor child, as nothing in the vastness of the universe, was lost. Nothing did he know of home, yet nothing less did he need. Every child needs what this boy wanted, but what he wanted he could not say. So he sat weeping. Unknown to him, another child like himself was also lost. When she saw him, she held back her own tears for his sake, and approached him.

“Excuse me, why are you crying?” she said.

“I am lost!” said the boy.

“Me too!” said the girl, smiling, “why don’t we look together?”

The boy agreed, and so the two began wondering the cosmos in search of their homes. They wondered for years and became the very best of friends. In fact, so slowly they could not notice did their sorrow melt away as the two came to find a home in each other, such that in time their quest for a home was gradually forgotten. No longer lost,

they danced in joy, and danced for fun. And when time past, and they were no longer children, they danced in love. For that time, they were lost in each other, and had no desire to be found. But it was not to last. The one who was a little boy, now a man, began to find that his desires went beyond what he had. His enjoyment of his companion became marred by the relentless dreams of enjoying her more, and soon he was no longer happy. She noticed this.

“What is wrong?”

“Must we dance for all eternity without an embrace? Must we remain together whilst remaining apart?”

“I do not know the answer,” she said, “we must ask the gods.”

And so they consulted the nameless ones in their plan. They advised against it, for they said that this particular woman was too fragile. If he were to marry her, she might not survive. They understood, and agreed to the divine wisdom. But the man could not shake from himself the need to go closer than he was allowed to go. In his selfishness he wooed her, such that even knowing the consequences, she could not resist. And so she agreed to marry him.

Their marriage, which took place under the sorrowful gaze of the gods, was the happiest of occasions, right until the very end, which was met by disaster. For in their growing passion it seemed that they were moving closer and closer together until eventually they would find they were no longer apart. But when finally they reached the moment of climax, the Woman exploded in a cosmic blast that shook the universe. In all the violence of this explosion her body was not destroyed. Her flesh and bones came together to form the earth. Her blood rained upon it, bringing with it the seeds of life. Her heart, which, from her conception, had served to maintain her body and her blood

in their mutual dependence on each other, continued to play its role. We now call it the Pa`räji.

The man wept. But the gods said to him

“Why do you cry? Do you not see the miracle that has occurred in your mistake? Look around you...”

The man saw about him the legacy of the woman he loved. A most beautiful and harmonious order began to appear about her bodily grave, as little creatures ever so slowly began to crawl out of her most precious blood.

“This is the world you were trying to find as a child,” said the gods, “this is the reason she could never get close enough to you as your heart sort her to be. In her death, she has become life, a greater life than both of you could ever have had, greater than you can even imagine. This world is your doing. So what do you wish to do?”

The man said, “what I did to her I can never allow to come upon her innocent offspring. I will live among the fruits of her blood on the site of her sacred body, and I will protect it forever. A Guardian I will be, in order to pay forever the debt I can never fulfil.

“Do you understand?” said Balda, “as a dêva you may find the story’s patriarchal flavour distasteful, but of all the gâjîn creation myths it gives you the most accurate idea of how the world came about, and what the Guardian is. We know this, as he has said so himself. You always imagined him as though he were a God, but now you know he was once as clueless as we. Tremendously powerful; but somehow still as a child. Where he came from is utterly beyond human knowledge. What you must first understand is this: the Pa`räji is an inseparable part of this world. It is the source of all of what we call ‘life’, not only on this material planet, but even in the spirit world. Life and death are but two sides of

one surface. The other world is merely a reflection of this one, and together they are one. The two planes, and the Pa`räji are all one system. They are inherently imperfect and incomplete, but they are well, and are there to be enjoyed by those gifted with life. But there are two other worlds which are entirely distinct from your own in its two halves. You know of the Plane of Power, the source of what we call magic. Mages such as yourself can tap into it. I was a mage once too. The other world is known as the Ethereal Plane. You have a piece of it living within you.”

“Gerra?”

“Yes. The higher place is one of perfection, and for that reason, all conscious beings possess for it a certain hunger, yet only so many can survive to reach it. And of it, no mortal being can know anything. But everyone knows it is there; this was made so clear when it broke open and delivered upon us Gerra and the Setharòn. Before that time those who considered the heavens accepted its gaze as all that would ever be. A leaf broken from a tree, so they thought, would sooner float up to the sky than would any intervention occur from above. But that is exactly what happened. History records that certain of the stars themselves left their places to become the very creature they were believed to represent. The supposedly eternal balance between heaven and earth was broken, and a piece of heaven, called Gerra, entered into human history.”

“Does Gerra possess the power of the Ethereal Plane itself?”

“Only that portion of it that he once was: some stars. And as you can see, it is not as mind blowing as one would imagine. The Guardian was once infinitely more powerful than Gerra and the Setharòn combined. It is Effa who walked upon the Plane of Power itself, who comes out over all other beings. The Ethereal Plane was never a place of power, and it

still seems as though Gerra's descent, which broke so many rules, was an accident. But it was not the first."

"There was another intervention?"

"Not one that has ever been sufficiently noticed. But somewhere between the beginning of the earth and the recording of the earliest history, something so much more amazing happened: the two worlds began to intersect. Parts of the Ethereal Plane broke away and came to earth, not just entering it, as Gerra had, but becoming part of it."

"I don't understand."

"Imagine two roads running side by side. A lion is walking down one and decides to cross to the other. That is what Gerra did. Now imagine if the two roads crossed over and switched sides. The bit of road at the intersection is not just one road; nor just the other; nor is it two roads layered one upon the other. It is simply one place both roads truly become one. Certain beings began to appear on earth in whom the nature of both worlds existed, not with each other, but as each other, completely undivided. It was through these beings that the nature of that almost unreachable world, in bits and pieces, became part of this one. For they were not outsiders to this world, and thus the words and deeds which sprang from the nature of the heavens could enter into normal life, indeed they were an inseparable part of normal from conception. Gerra was and still is an outsider; he and the Setharòn can be a cause to our effect, but nothing more. In the greater miracle, the Ethereal Plane shared with us not its power, as with Gerra, but *itself*. And the only logical way it could do so, was through a point of contact, where the two are not separate but are one and the same. In reality there were several of these beings, called 'the Deiàds'. Most shone their light only to the benefit of people; they are instruments of peace and compassion beyond even the dêvas. But they were mortal, vulnerable, and capable of

mistake. One of them made the very gravest of mistakes. His name was Balda.”

“Chelis spoke highly of you,” said Gâbríel, “but not *that* highly.”

“Nor should she. I did give everything to help those terrified refugees in the Beast Wars, but ultimately my works came to nothing but the creation of a terrible curse. Those people found a place of refuge called Shôl, but their deepening paranoia transformed it into a place of torture. I was the only person among them who could see where they were going. But my pleading was useless. The only thing I could do was free them myself. But when I tried they tore me to pieces. Their fear became smothered with guilt. I could have returned and put their hearts to rest, but I never did.”

“Why?”

“I fell in love. When a person dies, sometimes he or she must find what they are, even if they are divine in nature. I needed to find a place where I could breathe and regain my strength. I was a nomad, drifting from one place to another; becoming what I needed to become. That was when I met the very first Music Maker. He taught me to play the lyre, the most ancient of instruments. He was also a mage, and he succeeded in mixing his two skills together into an amazing power in which we danced together in boundless bliss. Taken as I was by the beauty of the music, those who I had left behind drifted further and further from my mind. My love became so strong that I surrendered my very soul so that I could be part of it for as long as I exist. I became the power of the Music Makers, the spirit that lived in every spell and melody. In fact I chose a particular home. The lyre of the first Music Maker; the most sacred instrument in both the North and the South; the very same instrument you now hold in your hand.”

“That is why it is unbreakable,” said Thäràc, remembering how he had fallen from the sky with the lyre still on his person.

“Yes. By the time I ever thought to remember those people in Shôl it was too late. I had chosen my path, and it could not be changed. I had left them to rot, and I have never forgiven myself. But now we can end that, Thäràc. I betrayed the River of Souls; I can reconcile with them; I alone can put them to rest. I only need a host.”

“A host?”

“I lack a body Thäràc, even a spiritual one. What you see now is merely an image of what lives inside your lyre. I need another.”

“Another what?”

“A Deiàd, through which I can speak and act as my own soul used to.”

“Where can I find a Deiàd?”

“Actually, there is one right behind you.”

Thäràc spun around. If he had ten guesses, he never would have come close to who it was. Standing before Thäràc, with all his usual pride, was Mo`nera.

“You are not really a demon?” said Thäràc.

“No, I am actually,” Mo`nera replied, “no less than I am an angel. I was able, somehow, to grow into a monster like the others of my age. But I chose to fight for order in the Spiritual Plane, and to promote peace. Up until recently, I worked from the demon's side. I did everything I could to mitigate the servants of chaos, while I fought so fiercely for them to conserve their trust that I was the most feared of all by the others. Once you became part of the picture that whole thing collapsed, and I became their most formidable enemy.”

“So why did you challenge me when I found the Setharòn?” asked Thäràc.

“That was another job I had. As you well know, when Gerra descended to the aid of the world he brought with him the celestial flame and entrusted it to the cuôlva. What you do not know is that after the Beast Wars the cuôlva felt that the flame that supposedly no evil could touch was no longer safe in their hands. The Setharòn was passed into my custody. I took it to Mount Miolnï and put up the words, which you may remember, making it clear that anyone who wished to take the flame would have to face me. It was perfect because not only would potential thieves believe that the Setharòn had fallen into the hands of demons, but so did the demons themselves. Had I known your intention, I would not have resisted.”

“I see,” said Thäràc, “so what now?”

“Now,” said Balda, “your task of preparing yourself for the Chelis is complete. Mo`nera will go with you to the Fortress of Shôl. Whatever you do, do not lose the lyre. Although it is sacred in its own right, I cannot be present without it. When you encounter the River of Souls I will reveal myself through Mo`nera, and through him I will set them free. Now go. The Fortress awaits.”

At that moment, the ghostly figure of Balda began to fade. As he vanished, he left these final words:

“Even if Effa is no more and Chelis has not been seen, please find her. My love has never died.”

By the time those words had been spoken, Balda was gone. Thäràc turned to his two companions.

“We have no more purpose here,” said Gâbríel, “we go back to the others.”

Mo`nera's middle head smiled at Thäràc.

“It is my honour to be at your command once again.”

Thäràc gave a polite nod.

“How exactly did you get here anyway?”

Chapter 12: Snapdrágon Takes his Stand

Zhôcô and Snapdrágon were in the usual area waiting. They were very bored. Despite Zhôcô's willingness to converse with his deranged companion, it was so difficult and so awkward that he mainly kept to himself. It was to his utmost relief on multiple levels when Thäràc returned with Gâbríel, and an utterly monstrous creature that could only be a demon. Snapdrágon was at least pleased to see *him*. Mo`nera introduced himself to Zhôcô and went to catch up with Snapdrágon. Zhôcô could see that Cära was no longer with Thäràc, as much on his face as in her absence, and was wise enough not to bring it up. After a short informal chat, Gâbríel publicly made an announcement aimed chiefly at Zhôcô.

“Your request has been fulfilled. We have found the answer to Smoke, but we cannot wait for her. If we meet her in the Fortress of Shôl she will be saved. It is time for you to show us the way.”

Zhôcô smiled.

“I agree. You have done as I asked. There are no more loose ends. There is just one more thing I must ask.”

Thäràc became annoyed, but he was listening.

“I would like to get some sleep.”

The others did not seem all that terribly enthusiastic about this idea. It was hours past midnight, but few of them felt that they needed sleep at all. Thäràc granted Zhôcô a good few hours to rest, in which the others made themselves as comfortable as they could. Thäràc never slept. Not that he ever needed much sleep, and he had managed plenty after that venom knocked him out. He just lay there staring at the sky. Gâbríel, who of course never slept, could not help but stare at him. While from the beginning Thäràc's thoughts were preoccupied with the ever hanging grief left by the loss of Cära, in time they started to shift to another problem: that all too soon he would face Effa. His anxiety was justified. Soon enough the sun was up, and a few more hours later, so was Zhôcô. He certainly felt no need to keep things waiting.

“The entrance is many miles from here,” he said once he was on his feet, “It will be a trip, but as long as your multi headed friend can keep up with two flyers and a horse?”

“I can,” said Mo`nera.

“Good, then follow me. Snapdrágon, you...”

“I’m coming,” said the ghost.

“Why?” said Thäràc.

Everyone, including Snapdrágon, understood very well that he was by far the least significant fighter among them. In addition to that, whatever other use he had previously proven seemed to be waning with his increasing loss of sanity. But he surprised everyone when Thäràc made his other point.

“Don't you remember what happened last time you tagged along like this? In Ge`henna?”

The instant Thäràc finished that sentence, Snapdrágon suddenly jumped up, ran to Thäràc, and violently seized him

by the throat. Everyone, including Thäràc, were paralysed with sheer shock.

“Of course I remember!!” he shouted furiously into his friend's face, “why would that make a difference?! Was I such a fool that I knew the risk any less that day than I do now?!”

Thäràc said nothing. After a moment Snapdrágon let go. He turned to Zhôcô.

“All right then,” said the Necromancer, “come if you wish. Shôl is no less treacherous than Ge`henna, but you know that well, don't you? Well, Snapdrágon, you ride with me. The rest of you will follow.”

With that, Zhôcô and Snapdrágon mounted Zhôcô's horse, and the two set off. Behind them a raven, a winged beast and a demonic serpent followed. It was indeed a long trip. Zhôcô's horse was Î`sôgí, but it could not travel nearly as fast as Cära. They were heading north and slightly westward. The strange thing was that despite the relative closeness of the surrounding landscape to what Thäràc had called home for over a hundred years, the further they went the more alien his surroundings became. The land became so barren, that at one point Thäràc seemed to lose his awareness that in many instances, a familiar place was practically right around the corner. Although the whole world seemed to be darkened by the mysterious weakness of the sky, the darkness still helped to give Thäràc the impression that he was on a different planet altogether. Pretty soon, however, the group did reach an area that was very much isolated from anywhere anyone had been before, and increasingly distant therefrom.

By late afternoon, the party arrived in a valley in the middle of nowhere. It was a colourless place, surrounded by a short, hilly landscape. It was lit, less than brightly, by the bleak sky that filtered out almost every ray from the sun. The land seemed to be made exclusively of dirt, dust and rock.

The air was oppressive, and grotesquely warm. At the centre of the valley Zhôcô and his followers came to a halt at a hole. The hole was several yards wide, and very deep. While Thäràc and Gâbríel could reach the bottom easily, the others could not fly, and so had no choice but to climb down. Obviously Zhôcô's horse had to stay behind, and Zhôcô had his hopes that he could return before too long to take it back. No words were necessary. As Thäràc and Gâbríel flew down and landed at the bottom several stories below, the others began their long climb. Mo`nera in particular had some trouble with this since he lacked legs. Though it did take some good time, eventually the entire party reached the bottom. Now they were standing in a large rocky cave-like chamber that stretched far in all directions, including down. Before them, the ground continued to sink down steeply and ruggedly. It was very dimly lit, enough so that Thäràc thought it wise to light their way from there on. He unsheathed his sword, and in his hand the blade burst with a searing light that reached every corner. This was the first time he had ever used magic just for light. It was not a specific spell meant for that function, but rather a mere harnessing of the tendency of magic to produce visible effects. Thäràc had come a long way since his first lesson from Tôbit, and had developed a more general handling of magic, understanding progressively well that magic was not a set of discreet powers, but one power which could be shaped in different ways. Now far more could be seen. The one newly visible thing that really mattered was at the bottom. At the far end of the cave, some four stories below Thäràc's feet was what looked like a pond. When they all made their way down, one way or another, they discovered otherwise. It was not a pond, but another deep hole, very much like the one they had just descended through. The surface of the water was well below the rim, but through it both the depth and shape could be clearly seen. The

downward tunnel, as it were, was hardly straight. Nor was it narrow, but opened up considerably not far below the surface.

“This passage will take us all the way to Shôl,” said Zhôcô, “it is best we avoid the lifeforms down there.”

“Breathing should not be a problem for us,” said Gâbrîel, “but what about you?”

“I have my own way around that,” Zhôcô replied, “Is everybody ready?”

There were no negative answers. It began. One by one the party submerged into the watery pit; their path lit only by Thäràc's beaming sword. When they reached the bottom a most incredibly vast underwater cave lay before them, one which stretched for countless miles.

This place bent and twisted in all manner of ways, and took almost every shape imaginable. More than anything, it reminded him of the similarly cave-like place he went through in the spirit world where he found the Soul Destroyers. About him, by his sides and at times in front and behind, swam a ghost and a demon. Neither, being spirits, had any need for air. Also in Thäràc's vicinity was Gâbrîel, swimming in human form, who also apparently had no need to breathe. The only ordinary human being among them was Zhôcô, who somehow was able to go on as well as everybody else without surfacing in the various air pockets that stretched through the passage. He was swimming ahead, as he had some privileged sense of direction. As for Thäràc, the ability to breathe underwater, among more exclusive feats, was his reason for finding Gerra in the first place.

What was a problem for them was the myriad of different creatures which they occasionally encountered. They varied greatly, of course, in size and in shape. While most were insignificant, some posed a serious threat. Their primary

defence was Mo`nera and Snapdrágon's firepower, on which, thankfully, the water seemed to have no effect. Also, Thäràc could hurl his Soul Sword like a sort of torpedo before teleporting it back into his hand, and his whip-like tentacles had not gone anywhere since his very first encounter with the River of Souls when he found the Pa`räjí. While Gâbríel dealt no blow of her own, she was able to shield herself somehow, an ability Thäràc had not observed in her before. The only one who seemed to be defenceless was Zhôcô. For this reason, Gâbríel had a tendency to swim very near the front where she could defend him herself. The party encountered everything from bizarre jellyfish creatures to frighteningly large sharks. By far the most worrying encounter, however, was an utterly monstrous entity that crossed paths with them about half way through, and then stalked them almost all the way to the end. It was gigantic, far greater than a whale, and could probably be best described as a giant lobster. To Thäràc it was eerily reminiscent of Mammon's demonic disguise. The initial greeting was a brief skirmish that kept the creature at bay from then on, as it followed them for much of the remaining distance to the fortress. It was a very intimidating experience, but the creature seemed to drift further and further behind until it was out of sight completely. From then on, the trip went by without an issue.

At the end of the passage the party surfaced at a wide pool that dominated a vast chamber, which was illuminated by an eerie white light with which Thäràc was familiar. Emanating from pointy metal objects dotted about the walls and ceiling, they did not seem terribly bright, but the room was so well illuminated that there was not a single detail that even the least well sighted members of the party could not make out clearly. They were the very same sort of lights that Thäràc had seen years ago when he chased the last of the White Beasts into a mysterious complex. It only made sense that he

was in the same place. At the far end of the chamber was an equally familiar steel door. The party emerged from the water, and together they stood before what just looked like a thick chunk of metal.

“Beyond this door,” announced Zhôcô, “lies the gateway to the Fortress of Shôl. Prepare yourself.”

Zhôcô stepped toward the door, and as he did, the door opened as though it knew he was coming. When Thäràc saw what was on the other side he gasped. Beyond the steel portal lay a smaller chamber; still composed largely of earth, but reinforced with metal structures such as pillars and what looked like some sort of circulation of pipes that ran from hole to hole in the rock. Standing in the centre of the room, smirking spitefully at the party, was Mammon.

Chapter 13: A Problem on the Bridge

The initial response was hardly antagonistic. Of the five people, only Thäràc and Gâbríel recognised him. The others were merely surprised to find a visitor, and somewhat disconcerted by the man's dwarfy appearance and ugly facial expression. The first person to speak was Zhôcô.

“Who are you?”

The man answered with a demented tone.

“Um... Gâbríel if you may?”

“His name is Mammon.”

“King Mammon?” choked Mo`nera, “What on earth is he doing here?”

“The same thing he always does,” answered Gâbríel, “Getting in our way.”

“He killed Cära,” said Thäràc.

“What??” said Mammon “Who ever told you that? I did no such thing. You think I’m lying? Gâbríel, tell him I’m not lying.”

Gâbríel's response was unmoved and to the point: “Kill him.”

On Gâbriel's command, Mo`nera practically startled the others by opening fire immediately. Mammon's reaction was to start somersaulting and teleporting in mid-air all the way to the back of the room. The party started chasing him immediately after the demon's initiative. At the far end of the room was another steel door which opened as Mammon approached it. As he dashed through the others were just beginning to pass the centre of the room behind him. Beyond the doorway was a narrow, straight and flat pathway made of metal grating. It stretched over a rocky pit and rose up a few steps half way across before leading through another steel door. As the party crossed the path, Mammon was only just still in their sights. When they entered the next chamber, Thäràc was hit with a sudden *deja vu*. The chamber was square, and in the centre was a smaller square with a pillar at each corner. Thäràc had been here before. He had taken that lift from the bottom to the top on his way out of the complex years earlier. Only now it was clear that he was not on the top or the bottom floor, nor was the lift on his level. Seeing no sign of Mammon anywhere else he ran up to the shaft. Below he could just catch a glimpse of Mammon dashing off on the floor below. Thäràc jumped down and spotted an open door to the left. The others followed. It was a measure of Thäràc's frenzy that he failed to spot the blood stain that trailed through the same portal. It also escaped his notice that he was standing once again on the bottom floor. He and his companions did not stop to look around, they just kept on chasing the deranged spirit through whatever path he led them. Beyond the doorway was a maze like passage with many corners and turns, though thankfully with no forks in the path.

After a surprisingly long run the passage finally opened up into some sort of great hall. The ceiling was several stories high. The floor was of a dark and shiny metal. The walls and ceiling were more or less the same. The chamber appeared to

be square, and eighty odd yards in diameter. The party had hardly occupied the hall for a second when suddenly they heard a loud thump coming from their left. Then a brief silence. On that side of the room was yet another metal door; a very large one. Very slowly the door opened. As it reached knee height movement could be seen in the darkness. When it reached chest height the party could make out a creature of some sort. By the time the door had fully opened a beast had emerged with which Thäràc was regrettably familiar; so were Gâbríel and Snapdrágon. It was a giant raptor; the very same raptor that Thäràc had chased into this strange place years ago, and sent falling to its ugly death after a vicious struggle.

That is not to say it did not look like it had been dropped from countless stories and crushed under a large stone disk. About half of what Thäràc had once witnessed was left. The rest had been replaced by metal. Both the legs and the torso were half devoured by grotesque machinery, and while one arm was still intact, the other had been replaced with some sort of cannon. Of the six eyes the creature once had, two remained on the left side of its face. On the other side the entire face seemed to be missing. In its place was a very ugly contraption indeed. Reaching far out from the head and facing dead forward was what looked like some sort of set of talons. It was composed of three razor sharp blades pointing out like swords in a triangle shape. They were curved slightly inward like claws. For a very brief moment they lay still, but then they started to rotate. As the rotation speed gradually increased Thäràc began to speak.

“Gâbríel...”

“It’s him,” she answered. Then they were silent. As the party readied themselves the blades on Mammon’s face started spinning very rapidly. The party would later repent having stood there like meerkats as the blur of spinning blades began to glow a brilliant bluish white. At about that

moment a very visible wave of electricity started rising from the ground around him like an ascending ring of lightning. And the very instant it reached the blades a near blinding beam of white light shot out from the blades straight into the party; in particular towards Thäràc. Before they knew it, they were faced with a strange wave of lightning that seemed to start at Thäràc's sword and sweep over and around them without causing any sort of harm. Thäràc, out of sheer reflex, had created a shield that engulfed the entire party. Not half a second earlier, Gâbríel had taken off into the air above. Soon enough the lightning became wrapped around the dome-shaped shield, and eventually fell. When it hit the ground the whole area surrounding them exploded in a blast of energy so bright it forced everyone's eyes shut. High over their heads the raven ascended not far beyond its reach. After the blast the energy rapidly vaporised into a strange but harmless looking mist along with the shield. There was no more time wasted. Always quick into the game, Mo`nera charged forward, guns blazing as Thäràc ran in with his sword erupting with fire and magic. Zhôcô, knowing his powers here were insignificant, turned back towards the entrance, and seeing it had closed on them he ran to the right side of the hall; the opposite side to Mammon. Snapdrágon, for some reason, did nothing. Gâbríel remained high in the air; very difficult to see against the dark ceiling. Mo`nera quickly realised that his gunfire was useless; Mammon seemed to be well protected against spiritual weaponry. He decided it would wiser to leave this one to Thäràc, and so he went to join Zhôcô, dragging Snapdrágon along with him. When Thäràc was but a few yards from his enemy he swung his sword vigorously. The energy and Setharòn made a bizarre shrieking sound as it tore away from the weapon, and shot into the cyborg.

While the force was immense, the impact itself was almost negligible. Though Thäràc knew he had done damage. As he

was charging up again, he was suddenly and painfully pelted with some sort of fireball from the cannon where the raptor's arm used to be. Once again his first reaction was to create a magic shield on reflex. It was a good thing, because that fireball was only the first in a series of extremely fast and rapid missiles that pounded on his shield like a jackhammer, only many times louder. Still holding the shield, Thäràc decided to slip into something more comfortable: the body of Gerra. Then he took off into the air bringing the stream of fireballs with him. He flew up and over Mammon, and as he did so the fireballs, not far behind him, pounded explosively onto the ceiling making an astonishing amount of noise. As Thäràc flew over Mammon he shot down some more fireballs of his own, again making a tiny contribution to the creature's downfall. It was only in the corner of his eye that he then spotted the strange spike-like objects that seemed to come from his enemy's heavily mechanised tail. He tumbled back in the air, missing the spikes which practically shook the room when they hit the ceiling, but copping a heavy blow as he fell through the fireball stream. By the time he hit the ground, that stream had stopped.

Thäràc leapt to his feet to face his opponent, only to find that once again the blades protruding from his face were spinning and glowing bluish white, and that not far from them a ring of lighting was travelling up the body. With all his strength he leapt markedly high off the ground right before it exploded in a blinding white-hot fire that was so destructive as to evaporate a good portion of the metal floor about it. Thäràc's counter attack was a thick barrage of frost missiles that came down like meteorites onto a flatfooted Mammon. Now Thäràc was starting to make a real impact; the frost seemed to have thrown Mammon into a fit of agony. He stumbled along the wall backwards, randomly spitting a stream of ultra fast fireballs across the hall as he went. The rate and accuracy of the projectiles was so precise that from a

good distance, the stream when held still looked like a blur of fireballs moving slowly toward the cannon rather than away. Thäràc was not hit. Instead, he dropped to the ground, swinging his sword vertically as he went, creating a wave of fire, frost and energy straight towards his foe. Mammon managed to dodge it. The battle raged on like this for about two minutes, though it seemed like forever. Thäràc kept on hammering Mammon mainly with Setharòn and frost, and Mammon answered with his cannon, but increasingly with the strange missiles from his tail in almost overwhelming numbers; sending massive waves of incredible destruction all over the room. He also made good use of the death weapon on his face. It soon got to the stage when Thäràc was becoming too weak to keep it going from a distance, and so he closed in. When he did, he proceeded to meet his lover's killer with a flurry of solid blows with the same sort of destructive power as he had landed from a distance, and finished off with his sword, screaming with fire, magic and frost, straight into the creature's heart. Thäràc held it there for a good ten seconds before withdrawing. The beast, Mammon, remained on its feet just long enough for one more heartbeat, then it fell.

Thäràc never took his sights away. He just stood there for a while staring at the corpse. He had never imagined that he would find himself in a more intense struggle than his last encounter with the beast before him, let alone with the same creature, despite the different spirit within. Beside him, Gâbríel landed. For the first time since he met her, Gâbríel was hardly in top condition. It appeared she had taken quite a battering up near the ceiling as she dodged the insane bombardment from below. But she was alright. In fact, everything seemed to be alright except that Zhôcô had been blown to bits. He had been standing with the others near the opposite corner, but while the others, being spirits, were completely untouched by the mundane weaponry, it was

inevitable that any living creature without great defensive powers would perish. As Snapdrágon and Mo`nera came to greet Thäràc, he started muttering.

“He is just going to come back again isn’t he?”

“Probably,” said Gâbríel, “but I doubt he will bother us now. When Effa is destroyed his motivation will collapse. Whether or not it is replaced we cannot say. It is not worth worrying about. I know how much you want him to die, but you can not pursue that now. It is time to leave.”

After paying their due respect to the late Zhôcô, a truly great man whose companions bitterly regretted not having time to mourn, the party left the way they had come.

Chapter 14: The Abyss

The party had emerged from the world of metal into a cave-like chamber and arrived at the gate of Shôl. While his companions were doing well enough, Thäràc was limping slightly. Of even greater concern was the fact that his powers seemed to be badly drained. The previous battle had exhausted him both mentally and physically. Now he had really come to appreciate his company. They were standing before a very large round barrier of strangely textured rock. It was light in colour, in stark contrast with the rest of the chamber, and looked like some sort of mixture that had hardened in the middle of a stir. It was also half shattered. Gâbríel turned to Thäràc and held out her hand.

“Give me the heart.”

“The key is for this?”

“The seal is stronger than it looks.”

Thäràc complied. Gâbríel then stepped up to the round barrier. Dead on the vertical centre, and about shoulder height, was what looked like a simple chip in the rock, about the size of a human face. Gâbríel reached in and placed the Heart of Balda into the deepest nook. It fitted perfectly. Then they stood back. The heart was glowing. Then it began to

shine. The audience began to squint as the object escalated in brilliance, until it was like the sun. Above and around it the cracks in the rock multiplied rapidly. Then, all in one moment, the light went out like a snap, as the seal collapsed into rubble. The party approached with some caution. Thäràc started looking over the mess for the heart. Gâbríel saved his time.

“The Key has served its purpose,” she said, “you will not find it.”

Beyond the pile of rubble was Shôl. The party was now gazing into another cave-like chamber. This one was bigger than the last; much like a hall. Not far beyond the broken seal was something interesting: a round platform; one that had the same basic characteristics as the seal itself. Though the fire-lit chamber was little different to the first, somehow Thäràc could tell he was in Shôl. The place had an air of failure and loss that managed to pervade every sense, a sense of despair that said 'turn away'. It felt like the River of Souls. Right now, the multiple pathways that were already branching from this first chamber presented Thäràc with a problem.

“Which way do I go?”

Gâbríel's answer was obvious, and he was almost silly not to have thought of it.

“Use the candle.”

Thäràc retrieved the candle and gazed at it for a time, thinking back to what happened back when he first activated it.

“Once this is lit, Effa will know we are coming won't he?”

“That is correct. Effa will panic, and there is no telling what he will do. Be prepared Thäràc.”

“And how am I supposed to face him in this shape?”

“If Effa is not dwelling in the furthest reaches of Shôl, he will be soon. Effa is a coward Thäràc, and like all cowards he will strive to avoid us. But once we have him cornered, he will fight. The fortress is a vast place; I suspect that by the time you find your enemy, your powers, and your limbs, will be well rested. Either way, now that the seal is broken there is no turning back. It is time.”

Thäràc swallowed his dread, and lit the candle. When he did it exploded into life, and sent a ghostly trail into one of the pathways faster than the eye could follow. Beyond the area observable by the party, it went on a very long journey, falling down slopes, wrapping around spiralling stairs, criss-crossing, bending, and twisting through a path of miles, attracting the curious attention of many life forms along the way. Ultimately, it attracted the attention of one particularly hideous creature, which then ran as fast as it could in the opposite direction, bringing the trail along as it went.

Back at the beginning, Thäràc and his companions began to follow the same trail down a path that went through a number of unique caverns and narrow pathways that opened up into a most gigantic underground space. Illuminated by a strange dark, yet colourful light, the walls, ceiling and floor stretched far in every direction; only the ceiling seemed to be reasonably flat. The rest was extremely rugged, with pockets of space the size of living rooms. In fact, the structure was so chaotic that the place could not be clearly classified into chambers and pathways. Nor was there an apparent end to the area, for it bent around a corner instead. The most outstanding thing about this place was the amount of strange lifeforms that crawled about throughout, on the ground, on walls, on the ceiling, and hovering about in the air. Most of them were quite small, but some were occasionally considerable in size. The trail from the candle crawled down and along the ground and around the great leftward and

downward bend well over a hundred yards away. When they were done sight seeing, the party got moving.

They were stepping down a slope that soon broke away on its own and became reasonably narrow; about two yards wide. Their first encounter with a hostile life form came as they were crossing over a ridge. The person at the front was Gâbríel. Before she could spot it, a strange four legged creature with a hard exoskeleton launched at her from behind the ridge. On reflex she slashed it from the belly up with the upward thrust of a sword-like blade that the others never even knew she had. The bug-like creature landed on its back, unable to get up. Gâbríel thrust her sword into its exposed underside and put it out of its misery. The next moment the sword was gone. The others, though somewhat surprised, kept silent and continued to follow her until the narrow path opened up into a roughly round plateau some dozen yards in diameter.

They had hardly reached the centre when more of the bug like creatures started emerging from all sides. The party took a four corners position, and fended them off as each of them sprang up towards their faces. Gâbríel cut them up; Mo`nera blasted them before they could get close, even though they could hardly have been much of a threat to a spirit; Snapdrágon stuck with his soul sword, and Thäràc found he could take them out best with small blasts of frost. When the influx was over, there must have been at least twenty five or so of the creatures. Thankfully none of them had landed a blow, for there was no telling what sort of venom the bugs might have possessed.

From the plateau the trail ascended a sloping pathway that led into a tunnel. The tunnel was infested with rat sized leech-like creatures crawling on walls, ceiling and floor, but they showed no interest in the intruders, who in turn thought it wise to return the gesture. The tunnel soon opened up into

a catwalk that ended abruptly in a steep staircase that spiraled down. It was very hard to tell whether or not they could now be said to be in a different room. Right before them was a huge wall of rock, but below that was what looked like a whole new area, at a much deeper altitude. The spirit trail went down to the bottom of the stairs and continued down a dangerously steep rocky slope. With Gâbrîel at the lead, Thäràc and his allies followed the trail. It was a measure of Thäràc's fragile condition and need to rest that he chose not to fly. When they reached the bottom of the slope all seemed well. They had gotten about half way there when some of what they had been seeing as rocks suddenly started leaping up at them. This made things a lot more difficult, but they managed to fend the chameleon-like creatures off well enough.

Near the end, however, the slope became so steep that while Thäràc and Gâbrîel simply glided down, the others had to climb. When they reached the bottom they found themselves standing before a very rugged – even hilly – landscape beneath a very low ceiling which in some places connected to the ground via bulky pillars. Hovering about this space were a handful of very frightening entities. They could best be described as skulls with great claws attached to them by ghostly strings. The skulls hardly looked human, but had huge jaws and multiple eye sockets of different sizes. The claws were like giant hooks that pointed straight up. They were about the same size as the skulls that bore them. Thäràc had a feeling these were spiritual creatures so he summoned his Soul Sword. Indeed, they were aggressive. When the first one fell within a few yards it dashed towards them with the claw following behind ready to swing forward and slash its prey from beneath. But before it could reach them, it was cut up by Mo`nera's gunfire. This showed that it *was* a spiritual being. Were it a living breathing creature, the damage would have been the same, but the corporeal body would have been

untouched. For this reason, Mo`nera took the lead, although Snapdrágon seemed to be on the offensive side too, with his Soul Sword and crossbow at hand. As they made their way through the lumpy plane – at times having to duck to avoid the ceiling – they fought off the nasty spirits before making it through with minimal injury. At the end, the candle's trail led into a rocky circular area infested with bat-like creatures. This, the whole party saw. Standing beside one of the pillars in the periphery, was the faint figure of a lady. This, only Snapdrágon saw.

Chapter 15: Unfinished Business

In the very same hollow mountain out at sea where Thäràc had met with the cuôlva before setting off for Treecastle, Harrow and Mïra were now camping in a relatively small niche of rock about as far from the water below as any surface could be found. Mïra's dragon was at the very top, watching the horizon. In the north, its sharp eyes could just make out the flickering lights atop the mountains near the shore of Pán`gaia, One of which was coming from the house where Thäràc had grown up. Its master and her nephew had all the shelter they needed. They sat by a fire; not the first one that had got them through the night there.

"I have been thinking," said Harrow.

"Really?" replied Mïra.

"Auntie, please. Remember what I told you about Thäràc and his history? And the Guardian and the Forest and all that?"

"Yes."

"Shouldn't we be, you know, dead?"

Mïra just stared at him. She had seen goat-skin helmets with more color than much of her nephew's face.

“You know what I mean!” he said.

“No, not really.”

“That forest that just got burned down, that was supposed to contain the source of all life.”

“I hear you.”

“And nothing has happened to us at all. We were unaffected.”

“Well technically our *lives* ended some millennia ago.”

“So...”

“So, Effa must have started us up on something else.”

“Like a portable life source? Make us self-sufficient?”

“I guess. I would rather not talk about it.”

“What about him?”

“Huh?”

“Do you think my uncle is still alive?”

Mira was silent.

“I suppose he would have to be,” she said, “it would be suicide if he was not.”

“Would that really bother him?” said Harrow, “from everything I have heard, he never had any self-interest in mind.”

“So he just wants to destroy everything including himself?!”

“Apparently yes.”

“Why? I cannot understand that. I know dêvas make strange choices sometimes, but they are meant to be rational. No gîajîn has ever made less sense than my brother.”

Harrow thought it wise not to explicitly state the factor that was her father, of whom his own memories were not entirely grand.

“Well, I guess... they are corruptible.”

“Corruptible?!”

Harrow could not help but notice the tension in her pretty eyes.

“His treachery hit you a lot harder than it hit me didn’t it?”

Mira then lied down and rolled over onto her side.

“What are you doing?” asked Harrow.

“I’m going to sleep.”

“Always when it gets interesting hey?”

“Shut up Harrow!!”

“Okay, sorry!”

Not another word was spoken by either. Harrow just sighed quietly and turned his attention to the fire while Mira put every effort she had into mentally escaping from his company. But words *were* being spoken. Not in the audible world where both bodies subsided in the mountain, but in the space between Mira’s conscious memory and her fast approaching dreams, certain words whispered like a lullaby into her retreating mind...

“How did you find me? Is that... a candle you are holding?”

“Why?”

“Yes. I knew this moment would come sooner or later.”

“You have destroyed everything!”

“If I had things my way it never would have come to this. I wish I could have spared you the sight of me for the

monster I really am. At least I no longer wish that one of us were never born."

"Well, how good to know! You were meant to be my brother, not a criminal!"

"Oh please, will you wake up! Every criminal is someone's brother, or child or parent. Isn't it interesting what can happen when they treat him like a criminal when, in fact, he is not? He decides 'why not live up to their expectation?' he becomes the very criminal he was believed to be. They used to accuse me of malice. At the time that was false. Now, Mira, I am afraid my feelings are beyond malice."

"He never meant that! He thought you were a good person, and so did I."

"And I still believe I was, despite efforts to the contrary, but I guess I was... corruptible."

"What sort of explanation is that?!"

"I am not trying to explain anything. I gave that up a long time ago."

"I don't think you have an explanation at all."

"I don't care."

"What do you want?!"

"From you? Nothing. What do YOU want Mira? Are you under the impression that you are safe in my company? And if I let you leave, your visit will be with nothing."

"I... don't know."

"You owe me nothing little sister. Be VERY thankful that I understand that. But your entire degenerate race owes me everything!!"

“It’s not just the gîajìn you are hurting!! Are you under the impression that your stupid pawns are distinguishing between their subjects?”

There was a brief pause.

“I have seen to it that Mammon will give you anything you want. Take it if you wish, rejected it if you wish, I don’t care.”

His voice darkened almost beyond recognition.

“But if you are still in my sight by the time I empty this chalice, I will have you SKINNED, do you understand that?”

Chapter 16: A Refuge for the Weary

The path through Shôl took hours to traverse. It never changed too much, but each area was unique. The party encountered a large number of different life forms, some friendly, and some not, and the lady that had appeared to Snapdrágon showed up infrequently. Curiously, it was only ever he who saw her, and it took some time before it occurred to him to tell the others. Throughout the journey, Thäràc maintained a particular level of weakness, wherein he could move fine, but was hard pushed to fly or use most forms of magic. The easiest was frost, which, thankfully, showed itself to be very effective against most corporeal aggressors.

His trek as he knew it ended in a chamber several stories high, over twice as wide and over four times as long. The end opposite from where the party had emerged was just another turn around an unseen bend. The chamber was pretty much empty except for a large pile of what looked like very old rubble to their left, at about the centre of the path across. Thäràc thought nothing of it, and moved straight through. The whole party had just moved past the rubble when Snapdrágon stopped. While the others were still going, he turned and saw the lady. Up close, he could see a somewhat

aged face with blonde hair, and a sort of ceremonial garb, all hovering over the rubble. He had seen her before.

“People!” he said.

The others turned, and now all could plainly see the woman.

“Is that...?” began Thäràc.

“Yes,” said Snapdrágon.

Nothing happened at first, only two sides staring at each other. But then the room suddenly became filled with a sensation impossible to place or describe, even as to which of the five senses it was affecting. It lingered for about a minutes and then faded away. Then they all took a step back as the rubble suddenly started rising from the ground as though they were on strings. Not only rising up, they were also moving closer together, in some cases rolling over one another. It was not only rubble on the ground, but also up the wall that was moving. Then it all started coming together as though something had shattered and was now being reversed in time. During this, a hole could now be seen growing in the wall where the rubble was rising to the top. All this time the lady in the air never moved. The party watched with amazement as the shattered stones reassembled themselves into a bridge, leading into a passage. Opposite this passage the bridge descended into a set of stairs beginning not far from the centre of the room, forming an overall arch high enough for a giraffe to pass beneath. The lady began to recede into the passage.

“Follow her,” said Snapdrágon.

“What?” said Thäràc.

“Follow her!”

Then Snapdrágon went to the newly formed stairs.

“What are you doing?”

Thäràc went after his friend, who started picking up speed as he topped the staircase and proceeded across the bridge.

“Snapdrágon!” he yelled. He had a split second decision to make. He turned to the others.

“Well, come on!”

And so the three followed Snapdrágon as he followed the lady into the passage, of which she seemed to be the only light source. She then began to elevate upwards, revealing a set of stone stairs. As they proceeded to climb, they noticed something exceedingly strange. The passage they were climbing appeared to have borders in their vision. In the periphery the texture of the stone work ended and gave way to a completely different texture, a far darker one with no apparent craftsmanship at all. The stairs went on for some time, taking some energy out of Thäràc. There were a couple of breaks where the passage went straight for several yards before meeting more stairs. After the third break in the staircase they could see light, other than the woman. This became unmistakable daylight as they neared the end.

On reaching the top, the party found themselves standing outside, or rather in a small piece of outside surrounded by the texture of very dark rock. The periphery effect was now so clear. The stonework on which they stood appeared like a flat cutout from a book. They were standing on the end with nothing but darkness behind them. Before them, the path widened and went as far as the eye could see. Above it, a lush landscape with vivid detail and then a sky. Then the sky – a notably healthy, pre-Turning sort of sky – ended much as did the ground beneath them. It was as though the reality in which they tread were a great painting on a wall, only not flat and as real as any other path on which they could walk. Nor was it still, but its borders were shifting in shape like the surface of a pond as the water level retreated. Nor was the shape clear cut, but erratic, appearing in places like the edges

of spilt ink. Aside from this world which appeared to be 'spilling' before them, they were standing in a black void. At the very centre of the painting was the lady, whose movements actually seemed to be setting the borders. She was still retreating, and since the ground was also retreating behind them, following her was clearly the only option they had.

Many yards ahead of the stairs they had left was a flat wooden bridge over a river much like the moat of a castle. After crossing this, the road went on for about half an hour; more or less straight, before finally taking a bend to the right. At this point, the lady kept drifting in the same direction, forcing them to leave the path. It was also at about this time that some noticed that the border of this river of reality was expanding, as if competing with the darkness all around it. They went on for several more minutes before a stream came into view. Just as the road had curved away, the stream curved into their path, until they were traveling beside it. This path soon entered the woods. They reached a foot of a sharply rising slope. At the bottom, the stream, now just a creek, flowed out beneath a small arched bridge. Stepping over this, they continued to chase the lady up the rugged slope, avoiding the water and the moss. In the midst of this slope was a waterfall as high as a house. The lady disappeared into it. They looked through the curtain of water to find a passage. Beyond the curtain, the passage was once again illuminated by the woman herself; a rocky and sharply twisting corridor. It was here that the party was startled by the sudden disappearance of the darkness around them, as a new world emerged in its place. This was the one they knew: no trees, harsh atmosphere, and colorless sky. It was clear now that aside from the road before them, they had been traveling underground and had just reached the surface. Now it was their path that was dark, as they continued in a dimly lit tunnel. Soon enough, they emerged into an open

area. They appeared to be walking within one of two overlapping landscapes. A few feet below the ground they walked, was a no-man's-land of burned tree stumps. In the world before them, such was contrasted by many trees, while the beautiful afternoon sky before them contrasted with the hopeless veil that swatted out the sun beyond the living portrait. The grounds of each landscape were never on the same level, and the river of reality that still appeared to be spilling out, perhaps from the lady at the centre, rose and fell above the surface of the normal world as the two grounds curved independently of each other.

The portrait before them was now looming over like a great wall, such that they could only just make out the edges of their *other* surroundings when faced forward. Soon, their trail went up a mountain, gradually leaving the other world behind. The mountain was initially tree covered, but gradually became barren, and then rocky. The borders of the portrait were now behind them, so it was now more correct to view the other world as the portrait. This world seemed to be devouring it at the command of the woman they followed. Soon they found themselves under rock as well as on it. This was low at first but soon as tall as Treecastle. Before them, tremendous stone pillars were seen holding up a thick stonework roof not far below the roof of the cavity in the natural rock. The lady retreated between the pillars and up a set of stonework steps stretching vastly across the cavity. Beyond this, the front wall of a sort of grand palace was embedded into the natural rock. The lady disappeared into a tall open doorway at the centre, and so the party entered the building, not looking back as the last visible piece of the other world shrunk into nothing behind them.

Once inside, the woman was nowhere to be seen. They were in a grand chamber, with no company except for a man.

“Greetings!” he called out.

The two sides met in the middle of the room.

“Hello again, Snapdrágon.”

Thäràc was feeling sufficiently polite not to let out the astonishment this revealed acquaintance produced in him.

“Hello everybody, my name is Tec, please come with me.”

The man’s voice was gentle. He led them out of the chamber and into what seemed like a royal dining room. The four sat at one end of a table that stretched too far for even Gâbríel to count the chairs correctly. Tec did not sit, but paced about among them with his hands grasping each other behind his back.

“The beautiful lady you just met was Charon, the Gatekeeper. I suppose you are all at least a little confused as to where you are.”

He paused, as though to make sure nobody was falling behind. As he spoke, Thäràc was feeding on a piece of turkey and washing it down with the wine. He did not indulge in luxury, he thought, often enough. No one else, typically, ate at all.

“The road you just crossed, the place you now sit, and yourselves right now, are best thought of as simply invisible. This place and everything in it is interwoven with the normal world, and the only way it can be walked, is to actually see it. That is all that Charon does; she shows you.”

Another pause. So far, so good.

“The way that we see it is to look at its past. You see, this Temple once existed as normally as anything else. But war fell upon it, and it was eventually destroyed. But before it was, we froze it, so that as time moved on, as the land changed shape and the fallen stones sunk into the earth, it continued to exist, unseen by the naked eye.”

“So the bridge that reassembled before us...” said Mo`nera.

“Everything from that to this table was and is merely a vision of the world as it was when we froze the Temple. It is not real, but an illusion. Not quite true, of course. Some of these things are real; this lovely wine for example.”

“And how is it that you produce such illusion?”

Mo`nera seemed to relate to Tec’s manners curiously well; though at the same time, his other two heads seemed to be looking upon Tec with suspicion. They also, as with Mo`nera’s story-telling back in the Spiritual Plane, looked as though they were trying as hard as they could to follow the conversation. Exactly to what extent this was possible for them even Mo`nera could not know.

“Ah! Because we are mystics. We can do things that even magic cannot achieve. Our history defeats our memory, but we were once but slaves. This temple belonged to a great power. We were not even allowed inside. We had different religions you see, and ours was only just tolerated. We were their subjects, and they dealt with us as they wished. But then something wonderful happened. A great war fell upon the earth (this is not the same war when we froze the temple; that was much later) and the power left, and never came back. After some time, we realized that we were free, and we made this temple our own place of devotion, as well as our own home. It was after that, that our religion became our power. Specifically: the power to literally see the past. Any questions? No? Very well, I will let you all ponder it as Thäràc finishes his lunch.”

After a time he had finished, and the four were escorted through the temple, climbing stairs, navigating networks of corridors, and occasionally passing by people in elaborate dress. They even got to ride a mechanical transport device,

before winding up in the same circular library where Snapdrágon had rediscovered his childhood. Tec was now at the wheels.

“This machine,” he began, “is the one thing in existence capable of imitating our power. This library is actually not just part of that invisible world of our temple. It has survived intact and unchanged underground. What you are now looking at is not an illusion of history, but simply the room as it is in the present. Some of those books up there are little better than dust.”

He went for the biggest wheel, and turned it anticlockwise. Right then, that same feeling the group had experienced before the stairs reassembled in Shôl was back.

“We are now watching its history recede to wherever I wish. This wheel is for years. Millennia ago, we came up with a unique and ingenious way of preserving our literature. See this book-stand here? Every single page of every single book on every shelf you can see up there has been displayed on this stand. Even if the book itself no longer exists, you can still browse it, just by turning back the time image to the hour and day that book was displayed, and fine tuning to the pages you want. I am sure you can imagine it was tedious work. Watch the stand!”

Thäràc stared carefully at the book-stand.

“Should not be long now!” said Tec.

Another moment passed. Then he saw books. Many books. Each second hundreds of them must have been flashing by. Tec immediately slowed down the wheel. To the left of the books, Thäràc noticed what looked like a sort of dial giving away the position in the catalogue.

“The book I am going to show you is the very first one that was ever so displayed.”

The passing of the books slowed down to the point where he could catch the pages flipping over, and later notice the people on the opposite side of the stand who were turning them. Tec switched to a smaller wheel. Now, Thäràc could see instances of people on ladders changing books. Each book was left on the stand closed for much longer periods than the time taken to turn the pages, probably to ease navigation. Two smaller wheels later the dial was almost at the beginning, and each was up for a few seconds at a time. Then, at last, Tec slowed down as one final book occupied the stand. After the pages had turned from the end of the book to the beginning (during which time observers could see the gentleman who had turned the pages from the other side of the stand) Tec stopped.

“This was recorded first because of its place among books. It is the most sacred object in our entire culture: the ‘Shem Hāme`fö`ràsh’. It seems that there are many different ways of going beyond oneself in this world. For us, it is the very fabric of movement: the flow of time, or what is more accurately called ‘Eternity’. Our spirituality is based upon its beating on the lives of human beings, in what we call ‘History’. It was through this book that we found our enlightenment. It is no normal book by any standard, for it is, in fact, our only written account of the world before our own; the time before history as we know it. We can now see it for ourselves, but this book is revered as the window through which we first saw the sun, before learning to go outside and bath in its light.”

“I think I am getting this,” said Mo`nera, “to put it in logical language, the reading of this book triggered an insight into the nature of time in human life, allowing you to see it beyond the capacity of the five senses?”

“That is right.”

“And your spirituality is about embracing the continuum of passing things, even though you told us earlier that you are literally living in the past?”

Tec laughed.

“Right again! Some have actually been known to abandon the temple on precisely that objection. Not really necessary in my opinion but their efforts must be blessed. But understand, friendly demon, that we are not simply about *adoration*, as some have said. We do not just admire Eternity. We are dancers, and we dance in its Love.”

“Eternity’s *own* love?”

“Why yes! We generally use the word ‘love’ to describe those tragically finite instances of touch and response. Sometimes we give the word to friendship and brotherhood; sometimes to lust and passion, and sometimes to childbirth. We give it to fun, pleasure, preference, life, our conspecifics, our pets and our favorite music. We, in this temple, believe that all these things are but rays from the sun. Love is not an emotion, though it can grace us through it, it is a fundamental part of the entire cosmos, encompassing all, yet existing within. The word itself may not suit your taste, but you can see it nonetheless.”

“So Eternity is Love?” said Mo`nera.

Tec turned to Thäràc.

“Are his other heads as clever as this one?”

Mo`nera laughed; the other heads did not.

Chapter 17: Finished Business

Thäràc listened as the conversation between the mystic and the demon continued for about twenty minutes, during which time he began to question Tec's agenda. After all, he still had not told his guests exactly why he had invited them in the first place. But he had told them plenty about his culture, not to mention his religion. Sure, if these guys could bend images back through time they must have been onto something, but what exactly did that have to do with him? Eventually his question was answered.

"I could talk to you all day," said Tec to Mo`nera, "but we must be moving on. Thäràc, the reason I am showing you this is that I have a gift."

"A gift?" said Thäràc. This revelation did not entirely relieve his suspicion.

"I met your friend Snapdrágon some years ago. I shared some of our secrets with him. He had a Lyre; the same one I now see upon you. With our instruction, he rediscovered the mysteries of his culture and its music, and learned a new power. He could do things with that instrument that his predecessors could not. Do you know why we gave it to him? I am sure Gâbríel does."

This statement was complemented by a nod to her.

“Tec was the child that survived the massacre of the White Beasts,” said Gâbríel, “he kept his secret as I asked him, and was later adopted by the Mystics.”

“I gave Snapdrágon his blessing in honor of his deed: in slaying one of those beasts. Now I am honored to do the same for the one who slew the other ten.”

“Thank you,” said Thäràc, “but magic music is not what I need right now.”

“I know. And what is more, I know why you were traveling through Shôl. You are weak from an encounter, your power is near exhausted, and your mind is in pieces. Do you feel ready to face someone with more power than even the Guardian?”

“No,” said Thäràc, “I suppose not.”

“Then stay with us for some days; let me prepare you.”

Thäràc turned to Gâbríel, who nodded in approval.

“Ok,” he said, “I will.”

“Excellent!”

“If I may,” said Snapdrágon, interrupting the moment, “I have an example of love I would like to show you.”

He reached for the largest wheel.

“Yes I am done with that. Thank you for asking!” said Tec.

Of course, Snapdrágon seemed not to notice that remark. He began turning the wheel clockwise. Once again, the books flashed by. Soon they ceased. He spent about as much time turning as Tec had, while keeping an eye on a particular spot in the room. Then he caught a glimpse of something after which some corpses now lay in that spot. Thäràc had noticed when the wheel was first moved back, but only now did he give it thought. Suddenly Snapdrágon stopped the wheel. He

started turning the next smaller one anti-clockwise. He saw another flash, but the bodies were still there. Something had happened in this place, a long time ago, *after* the murders he was about to confess. So he slowly and carefully turned a smaller wheel clockwise. The party watched for a while before anything happened. Then, all of a sudden, a figure appeared out of some unseen place and moved more quickly than wind to the bookstand. It was Smoke. Thäràc jumped back about one yard and landed poorly on his feet with a soul sword in each hand. Realizing she was not real, he collected himself, and saw his weapons away.

“Chelis,” said Tec.

“You know of her?” said Thäràc, still a bit in shock.

“I have seen her; as she moved about in groups when she first discovered Shôl. And we did agree to let her use our library.”

“And that was how she found Effa,” said Gâbríel, “presumably before she came to the Guardian to offer her strength against him.”

“That is correct,” said Tec.

“And that is how she found me,” said Snapdrágon.

“What do you mean?” said Thäràc.

Snapdrágon went for a smaller wheel. Soon Smoke was not at the bookstand, but over by the corpses, examining them.

“Some of those people were my relatives,” he said, “Smoke must have recognized the ancestry more readily in their faces than in mine.”

“What on earth are you talking about?” said Mo`nera.

Snapdrágon showed them what he was originally planning to show, himself with the sword. He explained everything; extraordinary for a man who rarely truly explains anything.

It seemed plausible that it was indeed in this library that the River of Souls discovered a descendent of *theirs* that they, or she, would recognize a century later.

“She really does love you, doesn’t she?” said Thäràc in a quiet sort of way. Snapdrágon nodded.

“I would argue,” said Tec, “that Smoke’s love does not end with you, Snapdrágon. To appreciate that, I must inform you of a very sad reality. You must understand the truth about the dêvas and the gîajìn.”

“Well I know practically nothing, so just lay it out,” said Thäràc.

“Very well. After the Beast Wars, the dêvas became extremely wary of the gîajìn. The Vîje`lîz were simply not enough of a precaution. They went overseas, knowing they would find gîajìn. Their purpose was to assess the threat. They found kingdoms and empires so great it was a wonder they had not invaded Pán`gaia already. Furthermore, they found none of their own kind. The world outside the sacred continent was governed by gîajìn, and as they suspected, it was dominated by cruelty and stupidity. They knew it was only a matter of time before this sort of world would pour into Pán`gaia and destroy peace forever. They had a single solution to the threat: they started a war.”

Thäràc choked “you mean *the* war, the struggle between the nations?”

“Yes. It was surprisingly easy to earn the gîajìn’s trust. They were even welcomed as wisdom givers, and identified with the workings of gîajìn gods. From that vantage point, it took as little effort to turn the nations against each other. The result was what they wanted: the population of the overseas world was greatly depleted.”

“And the gîajìn never suspected us?” said Thäràc, starting to feel guilty.

“Some of them did. But it never became *history*. The ‘perfect ones’ were hailed as the saviors of the world. And they still have not lost their trust. The dêvas mastered the art of what the gâjìn call ‘politics’, and they are perceived however they wish to be. They are benign of course. They have shifted the thinking of some almost to match their own, and at the very least, have been a saving influence on gâjìn affairs. Slavery is almost non-existent, and almost all cultures have seen away some of the more obstructive of their foolishness. But the dêvas are determined, at all costs, to keep the population from reaching dangerous levels. There are two ways they achieve this. Firstly, they manipulate reproduction by producing pre-marital taboos. Secondly, when these are insufficient, they create warfare to bring the numbers back down. Together, these sinister measures are the price of protecting Pán`gaia. Without them, the conquest of the gâjìn over the dêvas, chaos over order, madness over reason, and futility over happiness would be inevitable.”

“But why?” said Thäràc, now in a state of escalating shock.

“Because conquest is in their nature. They can be induced into a mentality of peace and respect, but never with permanency. It is not their beliefs that govern their behavior; it is their behavior that governs their beliefs. When they have an opportunity to take something for themselves, they will take it, with no regard for the needs of others, and dream up a justification. Their minds will become locked from the inside, curbing away any vision of the fact that they would be destroying true peace forever. The logical absurdity of destroying people with the power to genuinely enjoy themselves for the sake of creating just another gâjìn community for people to suffer in has no say over the forces that control them. That is evolution Thäràc, and that is the reality of the world.”

Thäràc thought back to the account of dêva-gâjìn relations, which Smoke had revealed near Mount Miolnï. How high was the authors praise, who looked down on those of his own race who doubted the dêvas' honesty.

"The gâjìn of Pán`gaia believe we started the Beast Wars. So it was true?"

"Not at all actually. Incidentally it was Effa, a dêva, who first unleashed what spilt into it. But the dêvas were still innocent of gâjìn nature before the persecution. It was not until after the war, that the few remaining gâjìn suspected, with no apparent reason, that the war was the dêvas' doing."

"How do we know they never suspected before?" asked Thäràc, feeling somewhat skeptical.

"We do not really know as strongly as we should like, as there is only so much to be learned by *seeing* rather *hearing* the past. But there is evidence. Perhaps the best reason to believe comes from those gâjìn who never saw the end of the war; those who were never there when the suspicions began."

Thäràc realised who Tec was referring to.

"The River of Souls?"

"Correct. And that brings me to my point. They were gâjìn. And it has been discovered that the Chelis took part in the affairs of gâjìn overseas. There is no proof of collaboration between her and the dêvas, but if we read the legends, it seems that she is more responsible for the maintenance of order there than anyone else. She has crafted their history in places like her own stage play. And her effects seem to be beneficent. Though it is true she has shown some remarkable spite, I have also seen great charity in her influence on the gâjìn. In other words, I have seen love."

Tec paused as if to let that point sink in.

“As for the evidence, her activities have worked only in the favor of the dêvas’ will, complementing and often vastly outdoing their efforts rather than countering them. What this seems to show is that she never held the dêvas responsible for the War that created her, and we can be exceedingly grateful for that. The River of Souls came to exist in a running from the world of war, and the blaming of the dêvas must have come at a time when it would pass them by. As far as Chelis is concerned, there is one person who can be held responsible, and that person is Mammon. Personally, I think she is right.”

Some distance from Thäràc and his company, back in the normal world; back in that chamber between the strange complex preceding Shôl, and the long underground water tunnel through which they had got there from the land outside the great shield, Mammon was dwelling in the place where he had first met the party. Walking around in circles, he seemed to be obsessively reflecting on his fight with Thäràc. It would have been a strange thing for an outsider to hear: a stream of ceaseless snickering chatter interrupted by random bouts of hysterical cackling laughter. It would have seemed as though his failure in the previous battle was of no tangible consequence to him, and that it meant nothing.

All seemed to be well and fun, until, for no immediately apparent reason, he tripped, falling flat on his face. Slowly and sluggishly he pushed himself onto his knees, and then proceeded to climb back onto his feet. He started walking again, but while he could lift his legs off the ground, he only did so with great difficulty, as though his feet had heavy rocks tied to them. They rapidly got heavier, until his last attempt to move a foot forward brought him back onto the ground. This time he fell on his hands rather than his face. He was beginning to get frustrated. Once again he started to

get up, but when he tried to lift his right hand off the ground, he did so with the same sort of difficulty, only now he could see the cause. It seemed to be tied to the floor by some sort of string; something pale and white; something ghostly. He gave that hand up and instinctively tried the other. The same thing happened. He began to panic and struggled to pull his hands free. He could not lift them further than a foot from the ground, and the strings were beginning to coil around his hands. He tried bringing a foot forward. This he managed to do, and pitted the strength of his leg against what he now saw as tentacles. He struggled his way to a standing position, only to find the same thing coiling around his foot, as those around his hands were already half way up his forearms. They started rising from the ground like serpents out of the water, while coiling up to his elbows. He tried his other leg, finding both ankles uselessly ensnared by the same snake-like shackles. Although the tentacles were now showing much slack, they were still exerting far greater strength than his. He could barely move, but continued to struggle. The tentacles accelerated in growth, and the bases shifted quickly toward the sides of the room, and then split into two each, now holding each of his arms in two different places. Those around his ankles had reached his knees, and connected to the ground, violently forcing him down into a kneeling position. The tentacles gripping his arms continued to multiply as they coiled right up to his shoulders. He soon found himself chained like a prisoner of war with arms shackled not only from the ground, but from tentacles stemming from the walls and ceiling, while a living blanket kept his knees fixed on the ground. It was at this point that he stopped struggling. Even one of these tentacles was too much to escape from. Now he was in a virtual forest of them, like a fly caught in a spider's web.

Then he saw her: the young girl with black hair emerging from behind a pillar, walking towards him, wielding a

grotesque sickle in each hand. She appeared at such a distance that he could not yet make out the grin on her face. She approached at such a pace that showed no intention of slowing down. Her final steps toward him were accompanied by a spiteful smile and a voice less like a teenager than a wolf with the scent of blood.

“LONG...”

Step, step.

“LIVE...”

Step, step, step.

“THE KING!!!!”

Overhead swing... Slash!

Chapter 18: A Greater Gift

On a Plateau in the high mountains, a man practiced his swordplay. His movements were slow and graceful; a style of practice wherein a single thrust could take as much time as a coin tossed off the plateau would take to reach the ground. The sun was such that his shadow never left his feet. When he realized this, he knew it was time to finish. Laying his sword beside himself, he kneeled on the ground for one minute, clearing his mind. He then got up and left.

On his way home, he passed by Tôbit's garden, which was not adjacent to the owner's house, but in a separate area. Playing in the garden, was his six year old son Thäràc. He approached his son.

"You know what I told you about Tôbit's mushrooms," he said.

"Yes, I know dad."

"What are you doing?"

"Look what I found."

Theran crouched down beside his son. The boy was holding a stick. Standing on the ground before it, was a

praying mantis. It appeared to be regarding the stick with some apprehension.

“It didn’t hurt you did it?”

“No.”

“So, you should not be toying with it.”

“Don’t worry dad, it won’t get away.”

“I see. So then, what next?”

“Dad?”

“Shall it live or shall it die?”

The boy thought about it for a moment. Then his eyes lit up. He thrust the stick into the creature as hard as he could, crushing its torso against the soil. Then he just stared at it.

“So why did you do that?”

“I don’t know. Is it going to be okay?”

“Ah... No, it is dying.”

“But it is still moving!”

“It won’t be for long.”

“Are you mad at me?”

“No, of course not! I think he is though.”

“Will it still be angry tomorrow?”

“It will not be here tomorrow Thäràc. You have made your choice and it is too late to change it. It is never coming back. Do you understand that Thäràc?”

The child seemed to be feeling some guilt.

“Should I apologize to it?”

“If you wish.”

“I’m sorry,” he said down to the insect.

“Your lunch should be ready now.”

“Okay,” said Thäràc, hopping to his feet. Without saying goodbye to his father or his victim he dropped the stick and went on his way home. Theran watched him running up. Then he bent down to the dying bug. Carefully and delicately he picked it up and laid it in the palm of his hand. He stood up and left the garden. Not too far away he found a nice little nook in the rock of mountain wall. Seeing no opening for a spider to crawl through he laid the praying mantis on its back in the nook, where it could spend whatever was left of its day in peace.

Shall it live or shall it die? Thäràc had had to make this decision over and over again throughout his life, often in a split second. He could never take the time think about the life he was taking away; neither as a hunter in search of food, nor as a fighter threatened with death himself. Now, and not for the first time, he was faced with the task of taking a life, only not merely a body, but a spirit. Not that *that* was a new thing for him either. That did not matter to him. What mattered was that he was focused in his task, which meant it could not be on any level motivated by hatred or fear. This is what the last four days had been all about. Tec was his master, and so naturally much of the time was given to instructing him in exceptionally strange things like finding love within the flow of time, being everything and nothing at once, and surrendering to something he referred to as ‘The One’. But, for the most part, he was required to clear his mind, and reflect on everything from that praying mantis – the first life he ever remembered taking – to Effa, the greatest destroyer of life that ever existed. What he did not know, was that while he did this, Tec had been spending most of his time with Gâbríel, who had more than a few things to say about what made Thäràc tick, or rather how to best reach him as a teacher.

Now, he was awaiting what would be his final instruction. He was sitting on the ground in one of the many meditation rooms. He was not alone, for standing on a step not too far in front of him, was, of all things, a praying mantis. This was not a gift, but apparently a ‘study-partner’. Behind him, the door opened and closed. A familiar voice then spoke.

“You remember Shôl very well don’t you?” said Tec.

“Yes.”

“You had to travel through that place to get here. It was infested with all sorts of things. Some of them were harmless; others were not. Back in our time, we were seen as harmless monks. We were known to others as those who would not bring harm upon an ant. But there were warriors among us. Many of them were fierce; some have washed the ground around them with human blood. Often they were called ‘hypocrites’, for their religion stressed the sanctity of all life. But they were still monks nonetheless. They acted out of necessity and purpose. They would offer their blood to mosquitoes in the absence of risk, but would burn a village to the ground if it were deemed necessary. Gîajìn fighters are not normally known for thinking about life. Some would pin an infant to her mother’s breast with a spear for no reason but sheer drive. Such people are stupid beyond description, no more capable of seeing reason than a rock. Yet, some monks will die to avoid eating meat, even if they have a family and the animal is known to be solitary. Such people are blind to logic. A true monk both puts compassion over instinct, and necessity over idealism. Do you understand?”

“Yes.”

“Now, it is not necessary under any circumstances to hate anything. Do not judge the creature that threatens you, for it is not evil. ‘Evil’ is an illusion, and another of the gîajìn’s evasive attempts to explain the damage they cause. Even Effa

himself is not evil; his interests are simply against yours. The difference is that your interest also stands for everything else's. He is a slave to his anger, but you are a servant of all sentient things. If you fear or despise your opponent, or even feel sorrow for him, you will lose focus, and that may well defeat you. You must not look at this as a matter of right and wrong. You simply have a task, and it must be done at all conceivable costs. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"You have never been a thoughtless killer or bully. You are slow to anger, and do not care for revenge. Now you will fight like the warrior-monks of old. Aware of everything within you and around you, and attached to nothing. Respecting all that moves, but destroying all that gets in your way, not with fury in your heart, but peace. Do you understand?"

"Yes."

"He is ready," said a third voice. It was Gâbríel.

"It is settled then. Thäràc, stand up and turn around."

He did so. Tec smiled.

"It is time. Before you go and do your duty, we will give you the gift you have been waiting for; that for which you have been preparing through your own efforts and our instruction: the truth. Come with me."

And so all disappeared from the meditation room except for Gâbríel. On the other side of the room was the praying mantis. Gâbríel jumped up into the air in a backward somersault and transformed into a raven. From that spot she swooped right over and clamped the insect in her beak, and proceeded to swallow it.

Thäràc was escorted to the roof of the temple. There was no telling what this 'truth' entailed, and what it had to do

with the ‘instruction’ he had been receiving. He was no longer with Tec, but a far more senior man who was ranked as a high priest. He was asked to stand at the very pinnacle of the highest dome.

“And now close your eyes,” said the priest.

Thäràc complied.

“Prepare yourself. What you are about to see may bother you. Now open your eyes.”

When Thäràc looked, he found himself standing before a radically different landscape. In fact, it appeared not to be land at all. It was a virtually formless plain without a hint of life. And somehow, it also looked as though it were not the space immediately before him, but rather something magnified through a lens. The only familiar object in sight was the sun, which was sitting high in the sky. It was still at first, but then began moving perceptibly from his right to his left, denoting that he was facing north. The sun set and it was night. Before he knew it, it was day again. Then night. The sun was accelerating. In time it appeared to be moving around the globe like a sling. It did not stop there. Soon it was moving so fast that the eye could not follow it. The world was flashing before him as a dozen days went by each second. It kept accelerating until day and night were no longer separate, and the world appeared in a strange light and color he could never describe.

Soon the land began to change in shape. Then he noticed it growing in fertility. Forests and rivers came and went as the mountains continued to shift in shape. The sky also changed, becoming clearer and more alive. Then tiny objects began to appear. They were huts. They never lasted, and some seemed to flash in and out of existence as fast as the sun. But the dots seemed to multiply and grow. Then they disappeared. Then different sorts of huts appeared for a

time. When they were gone, stone houses replaced them. Thäràc watched as one village or town went by after another. At the same time roads began to appear. One village, however, did not disappear. It merely grew and grew. And the houses changed in appearance. Waves of change seemed to sweep over them at times, like a blanket of paint being draped over. Then bigger buildings appeared; temples, palaces, arenas. These also changed but far more slowly. Then buildings began to appear whose purpose escaped him, appearing neither religious nor royal. Every once and awhile he noticed some sort of flash preceded by a sort of burning effect, occasionally knocking down a building, which, in turn, was usually promptly restored. The buildings continued to grow and multiply until their sizes became intimidating, and then they grew and multiplied some more. Some looked as though they would dwarf the giant temple on which he now stood. And they continued to grow as though they were trying to reach the sky. He began to marvel at the majesty. The city looked like nothing he had ever witnessed, or seen in a painting or sketch, or even heard of. Then, somehow, he was able to perceive the briefest instant of what looked like glowing rain. Then there was another flash, much brighter than all that had preceded it. Then the city was hidden behind a curtain of smoke. When the smoke was gone, so was the city. Thäràc watched in sudden horror as its remains gradually sunk into the ground, and were eventually consumed by the earth. For a long time he saw no buildings of any sort, nor any other sign of human existence. The land continued to shift and change, but no apparent life until finally, a new set of huts started to appear. The cycle of villages continued once again until the sky began to change.

He was not sure what was happening until the day began flashing as it separated itself from the night. Time was slowing down again. Soon he managed to spot the sun once again, as it spun over. Soon it was reduced again to the speed

of a sling. Soon it was really circling rather than spinning. Soon it slowed down to a crawl and finally stopped in the same place it had been when he was led up. Then something else happened. The land before him started receding, as though he were on a ship sailing away. Only that ship must have been faster than any known entity because the land disappeared with rapidly increasing speed. Then he saw nothing but forest blur beneath the horizon. This forest went by for a long time, soon passing so rapidly it could not be identified as a forest at all. Then it slowed once again, and kept slowing until it came, ultimately, to a halt. The land was now exactly as it had been before he was asked to close his eyes.

“You know what that flash was, don’t you?” said a familiar voice coming from behind him. It was Tec.

“I think I do but I don’t want to believe it,” said Thäràc, “the Steel Cleavers.”

“Yes. That was the outcome of humankind’s final attempt at taking the Pa`räjí for themselves. That city was one of hundreds, dotted around the world. Most people no longer even lived on the ground. They had tried to take the Pa`räjí before, and that same generation tried again as spirits; demon’s like your friend Mo`nera. Now, with the resources they had developed, a new generation of humans decided it was time to give it another try, together, as a united race. That was the end of their world. Those humans that survived were scattered, and civilization became extinct. But that is not the end of the story. It was a time when progress went back to naught. The human race lived on as it had in the beginning. They were the products of nature; related by blood as they were to their animal friends; the ‘Lion Men’ as they would later be so scornfully called. But then, one population existed in complete isolation from the rest, and continued so for a very long time; long enough for them to

change. They developed a radically different form in the most fundamental aspect of life: their breeding. They developed seasonal breeding behavior, mating only in the spring. This made population numbers far more manageable. It also had a stabilizing effect on society, allowing a clear-headedness never seen before, and promoting peace and prosperity.”

“Is that how the dêvas came about?”

“Not quite. They are not dêvas yet. But yes, they are the beginning of your race.”

“*My* race? You are a gîajìn?”

Tec chuckled.

“Of course I am. We all are, but we are also mystics, and the line between the races matters little. But it is ironic. Both sides claim to have walked the earth first, but as it happens, it was the gîajìn who were right. So that was the beginning of the dêvas’ coming into being, here on earth. The rest of the change happened in the world of spirits. You have been told the miracle of the Deiàds?”

“I have.”

“They played a role. It has been reasoned that the only way spirits are able to reach the Ethereal Plane is because of them. When that world crossed its nature with ours, it had the effect of giving spirits the capacity to return the favor, and find their way back to where that nature from. We call it providence but the dêvas think it was an accident. Perhaps it was; but either way, the light of the Ethereal Plane that touches us seems to want to go back. And this means that certain individuals shall go with it. And since every soul must receive its touch, every soul that survives for long enough is destined to one day shed the last of its shadows and take the blessed water of the Deiàds back to its ocean. But notice how I said individuals?”

“Yes.”

“Countless souls have achieved that throughout time. It is normal and natural. But none had done it together; always as individuals. Those people who lived in such peace by a whim of evolution, their spirits were allowed what had never been and may never be again: ascension, not just of individuals, but of the entire race! They became as one, and together they discovered the true essence of what we call reason. And as an ascendant community they became gifted with the power to whatever they so wished. They could simply cross over to the Ethereal Plane like anyone else, but decided instead, in the infinite compassion of their reason, to return to the earth. They did this in two ways. Many of them simply returned as spirits. These we now call the *cuôlva*. The others did something far more interesting. They chose to return to their living race back in their land, and reincarnate, permanently binding their qualities into the blood and seed of their people, forever transforming a part of humankind with the gift of true reason. That, Thäràc, is what you are. I am merely a product of nature blessed by insight. You are a product of providence. Effa is a product of providence poisoned by nature. And now, it is time to do your duty, and annihilate him. Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“Right now?”

“Yes.”

“Then go!”

At that moment Charon appeared. This time there was no portal immediately. Charon was high in the air. After a moment's hesitation, Thäràc left the ground as a human, and pursued the Gatekeeper as Gerra, flying more strongly than he ever had, leaving his master and everyone else behind. As he descended he began to see a dark spot in the distance.

This expanded, and soon he saw the bleak world of the present. This slowly began to consume the world he was flying in, until they appeared as equal halves. But he always remained in the past world, however small it then became. Soon he reached the land there, and continued without landing down a tunnel, different to the one he had first climbed. He could see none of this, as all he could see was the present world, which soon went underground. Then suddenly he found himself landing in a massive underground chamber. Charon was gone. He lit the candle.

Chapter 19: The Lurker in the Dark

In the lighting of the candle trail, the roof above was just visible, but not visible enough to tell exactly how far away it really was. The candle trail seemed to end about half a mile away, and beyond it there was no way of telling how much further the place stretched. Consequently, the landscape had a real outdoors look about it; rugged ground bestowed with plants and grass as well as the occasional small tree; a night-time scene. Also it was cold. He could not see where the trail ended, but he could see that it did go much further than a hill over which it crawled. Preparing himself, he followed the trail until he reached the hill. It was a steep hill, and while Thäràc could easily have gone around it, he figured it would be a good spot to look out from. When he reached the top he finally saw where the trail ended. Somewhere between thirty and forty yards away was what looked like a waterhole. This was not actually where the trail ended per se; rather it led straight into the water. Ever so cautiously, Thäràc made his way towards the waterhole. The closer he got the more he had to watch himself mentally. When he came within a few yards distance he stopped. The waterhole was not particularly large, but it was no pond. He looked carefully into the water but could see nothing. The trail entered the

water pretty much at the shore. He stepped forward, carefully searching the waters as he went. His feet were hardly a yard from the water when he called out.

“Effa?!”

There was no answer. Keeping his gaze fixed on the murky water he stepped right up to the edge. When he looked into the water from this angle he found it was so clouded that he could hardly see beyond what looked like a few feet below the surface.

“Effa?!!”

Still no answer. If Effa was down there somewhere and could hear him he was not coming out. Thäràc did not want to do this. He braced himself, and with the Soul Sword clutched tightly in one hand, the candle still in the other, he launched himself headfirst into the water. Even through Gerra's eyes the water was too murky to see far beyond arms length. The trail went down. The edge of the waterhole was so steep that it was basically a wall. Thäràc followed the trail down for several yards until it went forward. He paused. Briefly he looked about him. Nothing but the mist that clouded everything in the water.

“Effa?”

After a moment of eerie silence, Thäràc sensed movement in the exact direction of the ghostly trail. He stared straight ahead into the obscurity and waited. Then he spoke.

“Show yourself.”

The response was a very mature sounding, but broken voice that half dissipated into the water.

“You can put out the candle now,” he said “there is not much point now is there?”

“Yes there is,” said Thäràc, thinking it was the only thing protecting him from a stealth attack, “no more hiding now.”

“Yes.”

As Effa said that Thäràc could just make out a dark silhouette in the mist. As it slowly approached it appeared to be in the shape of some sort of fish. It was about his height, but the fins stretched far out. Thäràc began to shudder as a terrifying image began to emerge from the obscurity; as he could make out with greater and greater clarity the details of a face wrapped onto a fat fish with long tattered fins; a face of horror. It was the colour of a full moon. It was positively monstrous, but still disturbingly human. The eyes seemed to pierce straight into his soul; the mouth was a forest of razor sharp looking teeth, some of which almost reached up to his eyes, and it appeared to be stuck in a frightening smile; though it was clear in every feature that Effa himself was terrified. This made him all the more frightening to look at. It was not just fear that twisted Effa's expression, but toxic hatred. This was the face of which the sight of the Army of Black and Flame pouring from the sky was but a shadow. It spoke in the same broken voice as before.

“What can I do for you?”

“What are you?” said Thäràc.

“My father's pride.”

“What?”

“My brother's scorn; my mother's religion; my family's culture and that delightful thing we mistakenly call ‘gîajìn thinking’.”

“And what is it that you want?”

“To deny them existence. They are not worthy of it; they do not deserve it. And now I have the means.”

“You really hate the gîajìn so much that you will destroy everything, including yourself, just to destroy them?”

“I am afraid so.”

“I hated them when they killed my wife, until I discovered it was you!”

“No, it wasn’t.”

“You sent them to destroy my home!!”

“No, I DIDN’T!! I had no intention of sending them out at all. I failed to take the necessary precautions, and they escaped my control. Everybody thinks that whole thing was some sort of herald. It was nothing but a stupid accident. I did not resurrect them so they could satisfy their disgusting instincts; they had a purpose. That is why I sent Bëträda. It took no less than her to turn those stupid pigs to some constructive use. She was my mercy!”

“Alright then, apology accepted.”

“I never apologized.”

“I don't care. I have nothing further to gain from this.”

“And you are here to carry out my death sentence.”

“I wish things were different.”

“So do I!”

The instant Effa said that he started changing. His shape started bending grotesquely, while the water about them started to feel strange. Suddenly, Effa became surrounded by some sort of very visible electric current. That was when Thäràc decided to get out of there. Without any effort, he launched himself out of the waterhole and landed on his feet, facing it. Whatever was going on in there was not settling down. Yet it only lasted a second longer, for it only took that time since Thäràc's feet hit the ground before Effa sprung out of the water straight toward him, as though he were shot out of a cannon. On reflex, Thäràc leapt into the air, as a blur shot past where he had stood with a horrid and completely inhuman shriek, cutting the air with a lethal blade. Thäràc landed to face his enemy. Effa had taken a different shape: a

crooked half-humanoid monster with a torso the size of a well fed pig. He had the same face that he did before, but his head was only twice the size of a human's. His large many fingered hands were clasped near either end of an extremely vicious looking weapon: a double scythe; a long staff with a heavy looking curved blade coming out of each end at a right angle, pointing in opposite directions, forming something like a 'Z' shape. It appeared that Effa had spotted something in his foe. Thäràc also noticed a change.

"You did not come here alone," said Effa with a vengeful edge to his voice. The next word was something between a snarl and a scream.

"GERRAAA!!!!"

As if in response to the address, the spirit warrior emerged from Thäràc's body and stood beside him, his great sword in hand.

"It is over Effa," he said, "you have failed, now accept your fate."

"No," Effa snarled, "I'm not going anywhere until I have left a real legacy!"

With those words, Effa launched himself into a frenzy of slashes that had both his opponents on edge fending themselves against the most lethal of blows. Gerra was quick to get to the other side of him, very good at keeping his enemy between himself and the ally. Though he was outnumbered by two of the greatest swordsman in the world, Effa moved so fast that his opponents were the ones on the defensive. Effa performed just about every feat imaginable with his awkward looking weapon. He spun in semicircles sending both blades toward one target, before fending off the other with the opposite blade; he fended both off – one with each blade – before launching into a vertical spin that sent them both flying back; he could hold the scythe before him

and swung it like a two handed axe without cutting himself in half with the other blade; he swung both ways, as a blade and as a razor sharp hook; he flipped the blades over to throw off his enemies' counter attacks; he fended with both the edge of the blade and the flat. Effa was a master with a weapon that would easily slice anyone but an expert in two, and he used it so well that his sword-master opponents often could not even decipher the blur of scythe-blades, and had to rely on abnormally high reflexes to escape instant death. Whatever the two threw at Effa, he had an answer for. But what seemed like an unwinnable fight ended abruptly when Gerra succeeded in getting around Effa's defense, and cut off one of the blades at its post. This left a temporary opening in Effa's defences, and Thäràc was the one who made the best use of it, dealing a sharp blow.

The fight stopped. Effa fell to the ground. He let go of his weapon. He lay there on the ground as Gerra returned to his host, who was ready to deliver the coup de grace. Thäràc's hesitancy was not a matter of doubt. In fact he was about to deliver the final blow when all of a sudden electricity rapidly consumed the defeated spirit just as it had in the waterhole. Thäràc decided not to wait. He raised the Soul Sword high in the air, and was about to come down when he was hit by a potent shockwave that sent him flying. He hit the ground several yards away. As he struggled to his feet, Thäràc noticed that Effa, once again, was changing shape. He could do nothing but stand there and watch as his enemy curled up into a ball and expanded like a sickly foam, as Thäràc made his way back to his feet. Once Effa's size had become notably greater, he stood up slowly. Once upright, Effa was about four times Thäràc's height. The transformation was still not complete. Waves of electric energy still coursed over and through him. He began to darken, yet at the same time, a strange looking light orange fire started to consume him. He began to quiver as strange matter both emanated from him,

and was absorbed into him at the same time. Thäràc knew what was happening: Effa was materializing; transforming into a corporeal being. He had no idea what the consequence would be. He did know that he was not in a position to interfere. He just watched helplessly as the transformation continued. He was not sure, but it seemed almost to be complete as the fire became white, and the matter entering and leaving him was almost too fast to tell which was which.

That was when a short figure who seemed to come out of nowhere launched herself straight into Effa's horrific torso and knocked him completely off his feet as though he were as light as a plank. As she immediately lifted him straight over her head Thäràc realised, to his astonishment, that it was Smoke. Little sooner did she have him in the air than she slammed him onto the ground so hard that Thäràc felt it as well. She did not stop there. She grabbed his head and then started repeatedly slamming him onto the ground from one side of her to the other over her head. In the time it would have taken for him to climb to his feet after the first throw, he was hammered heavily into the ground eight times. Then he was swung around like a morning star and hurled into a thick pillar. As he started to lift himself up his attention was drawn to the figure of Chelis as she strode up grinning vengefully. Effa snarled.

“You!”

Before he could elaborate on that the River of Souls grabbed him again, and then proceeded to toss him about the place like a toy, slamming him onto any surface in sight and doing it again before he had any hope of recovery, until Chelis threw him much further than usual. Instead of trying to get himself up, which would end badly even if he succeeded, he continued the transformation from his prone position. He appeared to pick up right where he left off, and it was a measure of incredible carelessness on Chelis' part

that she chose, of all her options, to charge at him. He just had enough time to stand as she leapt once again into his torso. Just as she did, there was a loud bang, and Smoke went straight through Effa's chest and landed on the ground behind him. It was done. Effa was no longer a spirit; nor did he have one. Smoke was now powerless over him. But Thäràc was not, and Effa turned back to him.

As he came at him in great steps, shreds of strange energy were being drawn into his hands from nowhere. When enough accumulated Effa shaped it into a mace, much like that of the Soldiers of Black and Flame. Thäràc fired up the Sword of Cain and propelled himself straight into a violent clash. Thäràc was almost instantly knocked hard to the ground. It was a hard blow indeed, and as he struggled to get up, he caught sight of Effa and noticed another mass of energy accumulating in Effa's hands only this time in the form of a sphere. To Thäràc's dread it looked like it was ready to turn him into dust. But then he noticed something else.

Smoke was running toward the line of fire. When she got there she had just enough time to turn and face Effa before the missile was released. At that instant, Thäràc was overwhelmed by an intense flash of light. When it passed he climbed to his feet. That was when he saw Smoke. In a very peculiar reaction, the impact seemed to have sent her several stories off the ground, yet she was not in the middle of a fall, but was gradually rising toward the ceiling with her front-side pointing upward and forward as though she was lying on a slope; that being said, she was still far closer to the ground. She seemed to have been paralysed by the impact, though she was clearly conscious. She was gasping and quivering as bits of electricity flashed about her. Thäràc and Effa were both watching in amazement but nothing prepared them for what happened next. When Smoke's ascent came to

a halt, it looked as though she were about to come back down peacefully, but all of a sudden she jolted her face upward and filled the chamber with the deafening screams of what sounded like a hundred people. Though male voices were present, they were mostly drowned out by the sound of women shrieking in agony, blending together to produce an unimaginably horrific noise that echoed off every surface and filled Thäràc's head.

At this time, a great distance from Smoke and her two observers, a man stood facing her from some unknown alcove far away in the space near the wall of the chamber. As if in response to the screams, he raised his hand, and from each of his finger tips a spark was released. They drifted with reasonable pace toward the tortured figure. Soon enough they reached her, and when they did they seemed to grab her by the shoulders and gently tug her away from where she was. That was when the screaming stopped. Thäràc and Effa watched in astonishment as she drifted back toward the man at the same pace as the sparks had before they grabbed her. When the two were finally in reach the man grasped her by the wrists and slowly brought her down to her feet before him. When she looked up she gasped and lost all her pride. For the first time she really did resemble a little girl as tears welled up in her eyes.

“Balda!” she choked.

They would have talked if their attention was not snatched by the thunderous thump that shook the room. They turned and watched as Effa stood before Thäràc with his mace held right above the ground in front of him with both hands. Then he yelled.

“This has gone on for long enough!!!”

With that, he raised the mace till his hands were up to his face, and then he slammed it down into the ground creating

a shock that knocked Thäràc off his stance, and shattered the ceiling. Thäràc climbed back to his feet and shielded himself just in time for the shower of earth that came plummeting down everywhere in the collapsing chamber. In the midst of the destruction Thäràc stood like an unmoveable statue, fending off the giant bits of rock that once made up the ceiling, simply waiting for it to stop. By the time it did, he was nowhere to be seen. There was complete silence for a moment, and then the figure of Gerra shot out of the rubble like a crocodile out of a river. He looked around himself and realised that the roof of the chamber had only been a dozen or so yards from the surface of Me`ridía. He was now standing in the midst of a great bowl littered with rubble. Though he was now outside, it was still quite dark; the collapsed roof had revealed an early but shadowy evening sky. There was a brief silence before the sound of shifting rubble came from a large mountain of broken earth in the general area where Effa had been standing. It was moving. Pieces of rock began rolling off the mountain as it rose, revealing Effa's back, which was now the *size* of a mountain. The rising did not stop, and soon Effa's terrible face was looming over him much bigger than before. He continued to rise until his arms were free; he continued to rise until he was standing over sixty stories high; about where the roof was. Now he looked different. While before he was semi-humanoid, now he had assumed a far more dragon-like appearance, though he still held the mace, in his left hand. When Effa cupped his right hand toward the sky and the clouds started to darken, Thäràc realised that he had already wasted too much time.

Out of the rubble pit he shot up, the body of Gerra at its most majestic, till he reached the height of Effa's face, just in time for the storm to begin. It was also then that the Army of Black and Flame began pouring into the bowl from all around the rim like a flood. He only had to fly a little higher

before he could see that the entire surrounding land was swarming with Effa's minions, as though he had personally summoned them. Thäràc fired up his sword, as Effa held his hand palm up beside but just higher than his head. His fingertips quickly began to glow white before suddenly they were struck by lightning, which then travelled straight to the mace. The effect was that the mace seemed to become lightning itself. Then he took a swing at Thäràc, who just managed to dodge, and taking the opportunity, he dove straight into his enemy's face with his sword overflowing with Setharòn, and slashed his cheek. He let off a scream that would have been heard at Érias. He stumbled back and took another swing in rage. Thäràc dropped altitude as he sheathed his sword and equipped his bow. If he survived the fight, he would forever wonder how on earth he was ever able to do that so fast. He was almost ready to fire when Effa came at him again, forcing him to dodge a few swings before he managed to launch a Setharòn erupting arrow into his chest, with a lesser effect. Then Effa raised his hand and sent another lightning bolt into his mace. It was deafening to be sure, but lightning was not only striking Effa's hand. It was actually hitting the land frequently, but seemed to be attracted to that area with Effa at the core. By then the great bowl beneath him was infested with Effa's legion, though not in dense numbers. Yet the bowl was still filling, and becoming less and less inhabitable, while Effa's lightning mace was gradually becoming stronger.

Thäràc knew that the longer the fight lasted the harder it would be. Before Effa could take another swing Thäràc fired a pair of fire arrows straight into his enemy's face. Just as he stumbled back once again Thäràc let off a third. But this time Effa recoiled so quickly that he swatted the arrow away with his mace and followed through with a swing that hit Thäràc dead on, and battered him to the far side of the bowl. He was immediately swamped with its inhabitants, and he was so

badly weakened that he had to struggle to get to his feet, fighting off the fiends in the process. But even when he made it, he was so occupied in fighting them off that he was unable to leave the ground. Every time he tried to he was struck by a mace or a torch, and had to turn his attention back to them. But he could still see what was happening on the other side. Effa no longer had the mace. He had his hands together, and was creating a ball of energy just like the one he had hurled at Smoke. Only this time it was much bigger, and it was being continually struck by lightning. The lightning seemed to be rapidly consuming the sphere until it comprised nothing else. As Thäràc watched this, the number of his foes exploded because every one of them was moving in his direction.

It looked like Effa's weapon was ready to be launched when Thäràc swung his sword in a circle, sending out a wave of fire that completely wiped out every corporal being within a dozen yards, and took off at a tremendous speed into the air a little higher than Effa's head. And as Effa pulled his hands toward his chest, preparing to fire, Thäràc dove down straight to the sphere of lightning so fast that Effa could not release it in time, and drove his sword into it right to the hilt. Effa let off an enormous scream as he struggled desperately to separate his hands and shake off his enemy while stumbling about in agony and confusion. Thäràc held onto the sword in an iron clasp, his eyes tightly shut, as he was tossed about in every direction by the monster trying to throw him off. Thäràc was almost overwhelmed by the sensation of an immense amount of energy coursing through his whole body, though it did not hurt. This went on until finally Effa managed to break his hands apart. At that moment the Sword of Cain shattered like glass, and Thäràc was sent back in a violent wave of invisible force. Now, as though he had acted in the complete absence of his attention, Thäràc was wielding an energy weapon of his own: a war

hammer the size of a battleaxe. Effa himself was also thrown off balance by the shock. When he recovered he equipped his mace and swung at his changed opponent, but he was stopped in his tracks by Thäràc's new weapon. Then he took another swing. This time Thäràc dropped beneath it, and retaliated by shooting into Effa's face with his hammer. Once again Effa screamed and stumbled backward. The hammer was dramatically more effective than the Sword of Cain. For a while the two just kept throwing blows at each other, and dodging them. It was Thäràc who never received another blow; whenever he failed to completely miss an attack he simply blocked it with his huge hammer. Thäràc, on the other hand, was able to get hits in, for Effa had little defence against them. Every time Thäràc struck his head, which was the primary target, he screamed in pain and became more and more reckless, until Thäràc no longer bothered to retreat. Instead he hammered away repeatedly at Effa's face until it was practically unrecognisable. Then he raised his hammer into the air high over his head, and just then, five completely separate bolts of lightning came down simultaneously from five different places in the sky, straight into Thäràc's hammer, which then became lightning itself in the same manner as Effa's mace. Then he slammed it straight onto his forehead, smashing it in.

Effa flew backward and fell hard onto the ground right near the edge of the bowl, crushing hundreds of his minions. The lightning had sent a very visible shock wave that coursed over and through him as he lay on the ground. Then his body began to collapse in on itself, and rapidly shrink until he was hidden somewhere among the thousands of fiendish soldiers that now flooded the great bowl beneath him. They were still flooding in, only now in greater density. Thäràc ascended above the spilling rim. The Soldiers of Black and Flame were everywhere, but somehow he knew what to do. Ever since his clash with the lightning ball that shattered his sword he

never quite felt the same. He still felt the power coursing through him; the same power that Effa had possessed. Suddenly he let himself fall. As he dropped to the earth he shaped his hammer into a spear; though a strange one with a hilt just like a sword. He folded his wings to pick up speed, and held the spear before him pointing it straight down. Then, as he landed in the centre of the great bowl, he drove his spear straight into the ground, creating a colossal wave of energy that swept outward from the point of impact and completely wiped out everything in its path, body and soul. The wave continued beyond the rim and obliterated the rest of the Army of Black and Flame that remained on the outside before it dissipated into nothing. When Thäràc's spear disappeared in his hands, he collapsed onto the ground knowing that the legion of death was gone forever.

Chapter 20: Wishes and Regrets

For some reason, Thäràc came to in a very sudden, reflexive fashion, as though being startled out of his sleep. He was still in the great bowl of earth, which now looked burned out. In the distance he could see Smoke with Balda. Much closer to the place where Thäràc stood, was what must have been Effa. He was prone and motionless. Thäràc made his way over. Smoke and Balda were doing likewise. He must have been about twenty yards away when a dragon landed right before him. Riding it was a woman he did not recognize; behind her was Harrow.

“Thäràc!” he yelled out as the woman dismounted. She did not seem interested in either of them. She was interested in Effa. While the others met, she stepped up to her brother, who was just beginning to climb onto his hands. He spoke in a voice of shattered glass.

“How did I survive that?”

“So was my will!!” the woman half-yelled.

Effa’s head slowly turned in her direction.

“Mira?”

Thäràc and Harrow joined her and watched as Effa struggled. At about the same time Gâbríel swooped in as well. They all remained silent. Effa seemed to be having more and more difficulty moving. He was on his hands and knees trying to push himself up to arms' height. The others could hear some sort of cracking sound. It was as though he was turning to solid glass, becoming harder and harder as he moved. He had almost managed to straighten his arms when he seemed to freeze on the spot. Then what seemed like an outer layer of opaque glass shattered loudly, as Effa jerked violently onto his back. To Thäràc, he looked like something between what he had been right after the waterhole and what he had been when he became gigantic, only his body seemed to be in some sort of flux, as though he were a rock heating up. Mìra seemed to have no sympathy.

“Do you have no regrets?” she asked solemnly.

Effa did not answer, but tried instead to struggle his way up. He rolled onto his side easy enough, but began freezing again as he climbed back onto his knees. This time he managed to push himself all the way to an upright kneeling pose. It was in that position that he became stuck again, before breaking free of his strange shackles. This time, his outer layer did not shatter, but merely broke apart mainly into two halves which collapsed on either side, cracking loudly as they hit the ground. Effa seemed to be shedding some sort of set of skins. They were undoubtedly corporeal.

It was then that Smoke and Balda caught up with the group, and joined Effa's audience. Harrow was not a little surprised to see her, though he remained silent for the time being. Everybody was silent except for Mìra.

“Do you still think *we* owe *you*?!”

Putting one foot on the ground, Effa succeeded in pushing himself into a stance. Then he started screaming, either in

anger or in pain, and clawed about violently as if trying to fight something that was not there. Once again, his movements were progressively hampered, and was in a falling back orientation when he became paralyzed for the third time. It took a little longer, now, before he broke free. This time he fell backwards from his cast, leaving a perfect image of his nightmare face and most of his front side standing on the spot. He rolled over on the ground in agitation. Then he got hold of himself, and made it back onto his knees. He was already beginning to freeze, but this time it was slower, and he did not need to stop at the knees. He put a foot to the ground, and struggled to push himself up. He was now only a few feet from his sister, who watched with bitter restraint as he managed to get back on both feet. By then he could barely move. He was looking her defiantly in the face as he straightened out, ending up in crooked stance, like an old hag. As the skin hardened, Mïra yelled out.

“Look what you have done to the world!! Does it STILL OWE YOU?!!!”

Crack! He fell through the front torso of his latest image, which remained in its place and almost completely whole, but with the front from the eyes down hanging open and swinging in the wind. Effa himself was back on the ground on his face.

Mïra turned and walked away with Harrow. Smoke, with Balda, followed them.

“Hey, wait up!” she said.

Harrow turned and gave a half smile.

“I thought you were gone! How on earth did you escape from the Chelis?”

Thäràc and Gàbrìel were the last remaining with Effa.

“He is powerless,” said Thäràc, “he will never hurt anything ever again. We are finished here.”

And with that, the two left. Harrow and Mīra were happy to give Smoke and Balda a lift, and so the four departed on Mīra's dragon, while Thāràc and Gâbríel took off in different directions in their typical winged forms. Only Effa was left remaining in the despairing place.

Several minutes had passed. Effa was now standing. The continuous hardening and shedding of his surface seemed to be mitigating, and his general state improving. The skins were no longer breaking off, but rather passing straight through him as material objects ought to when meeting places with a spirit. He had moved just a little from the spot of his confrontation with Mīra. It was then that he noticed a person approaching in the distance. He did not feel threatened. When the man drew close he noticed something strange about him. It was very clear that he was a ghost, but that was not it. Rather, it was probably his gaze that made him stand out.

"Where on earth did you come from?" said Effa. He still sounded like broken glass, but was perfectly intelligible. The man, Snapdrágon, stopped before him. It took some time for him to speak.

"Why do you do what you do?" he asked absently.

Effa sneered at him.

"Stop wasting my time!"

Then he turned his back on him and started walking away, hoping he would get the message. He began to think he had when his voice suddenly ambushed him from behind.

"I know it hurts."

Effa stopped. He turned around slowly.

"Do you?"

Snapdrágon began circling around him.

“I can see it all over you,” he said.

Effa did not turn to face him. He was content having him behind, not having to look at him, even when he suddenly felt his hand on his head. He was very close. Effa could hear his broken monotonous voice not far from his ear.

“I can feel it.”

“Feel what?!”

“The hatred, the malice, the guilt, it torments you every day. I pity you.”

“What are you...”

At that moment his words were cut short by a sudden and agonizing blow to the torso. He screamed but nothing came out, as though he had lost his voice. He screamed silently as he felt the fatal thrust of a dagger deep into his chest.

“Sh sh sh sh sh!” Snapdrágon hushed compassionately as he assisted Effa to the ground still holding the dagger, tears on his cheeks.

The last thing Effa heard as he lay on the ground was his killer whispering “It’s okay, it’s okay.”

Snapdrágon, now on his knees, took back his dagger, bent down, and kissed Effa on the scalp. Then he sat up, and spoke in the same sorrowful and weak, but calm voice as before.

“Everything is okay.”

Chapter 21: Standing Still

It did not take a great deal of time for Gâbríel to reach the Guardian with the news. In a feat that stunned all witnesses he moved Treecastle out of exile and back into Pán`gaia. Although many expected to see the Forest of Me`ridía spring miraculously out of the ground, the land remained barren. The truth was that the forest was reborn, but only as any forest would be: in the seeds, planted by accident or design, that would soon show their fruit, though even now were home to the Pa`räjí. The world was alive once again (for the third time in fact). But it was never going to return to the way it was. A new moon had begun to travel across the sky, while the remains of the old one continued their course. The blood-fire had vanished after the Second Coming. Much other damage had been done. Homes; entire villages had been scourged. Many had died. Everyone had been traumatized. It was a time of misplacement. The great threat to their existence and livelihood had ended, but what had begun? It was not the happiest of times for anyone, and it would take generations for the world, at least in Pán`gaia, to return to its proper order. Only the cuôlva, whose spiritual state had reversed completely, seemed to living the same way they had in the past. The Vije`liz had perished, and it was a

good question whether or not the dêvas, under the different circumstances, would repeat the decision to begin such a class of person. But the Army of Blood, and the Army of Black and Flame were gone forever. The mystics that aided Thäràc would not be heard from again for a very long time. The Music Makers and their culture survived, but their magic seemed to disappear. Tôbit remained with them until he died. The mages of the north and their culture survived, and so did their magic. The part that Zhôcô had played in the salvation of the world was written well into history and into legend.

Now that everything was over, it seemed as though that supernatural element to the world was no longer present; again at least in Pán`gaia. There was no quest, no war, no ghostly enemy, no more angelic intervention, no more combat magic, and no more Setharòn. But there were still some anomalies of nature remaining. One of these was the two that remained of the Army of Blood: Harrow and the legendary Princess Mïra. Once Effa was gone the great veil of occupation had been lifted, and they were left with nothing to face but the question ‘what now?’ The answer was simple. Neither of them had been resurrected with the intention that they should last for a very long time. Both accepted the sheer rightness of this fact, as by nature they never should have been raised at all. They would return to death whence they had come within a few years, and they did not resent this, but honored it. However, one of them was not without great sorrow. Mïra never let go of what Effa had done to her and her life, and her bitterness went with her into her second grave. But another grief was felt when Gâbrïel, with the sort of generosity she could afford during peacetime, took the liberty of solemnly informing her of Bë`träda’s death. This was met with tears indeed. But Gâbrïel was sure to give the greatest of attention to the manner of her passing; not only accepting her embarrassing defeat at the hands of the

Vìje`lìz, and submitting to death, but doing so in a gesture of homage; handing over her legendary life as a prize to the honor of those who had done the impossible. Mìra's heart was warmed in learning that Bě`träda's death was so majestic as to be worthy of praise by the allies of life, and Gâbríel gave her pledge that she would see it was written even in the smallest of history books.

Something remained in the world for a short time that was far more unnatural than a pair of walking corpses, and that was the River of Souls. When Balda found Smoke it was as a parent finding a lost child after years in the wild. Nothing happened straight away, except that the two disappeared, never to be seen again on earth. They went to Ge`henna, the actual location of the Chelis, and it was there that the miracle of redemption took place over as much time as it took for the guilt to erode away. The curse ended with each individual loosening from the cesspool one by one, and back into to the stream that runs from the living world to that of spirits. Balda joined them in that world, and lived with them as with a family. This meant that Balda was here to stay, which meant he had to say goodbye to the Music Makers, and also meant that Mo`nera was gone for good. It was the strangest thing that Smoke herself, that phantom that shared her soul with theirs, never disappeared. Her personality had remained, but no longer with the pain-twisted darkness of recent years, nor the hyper-self of her days with the Pa`räjí, but something else. She was free to do whatever she pleased without misery, and her choice, in the end, was to find Snapdrágon. He had wondered back into the Spiritual Plane shortly after a very significant act of 'who knows what?', and found nothing of purpose or direction. When the two met, he agreed, once again, to go with her, and they remained together for as long as they both existed.

Thäràc never resettled into his former town-life, but returned to his hunting. He adapted pretty well to the contamination that Mammon had cursed him with, and maintained with great success the soundness of mind he had learned from Tec. And, of course, he still had Gerra. There was no forest left on Pán`gaia, so he went oversees, keeping to himself everything he knew of that world. He lived out the rest of his life in peace and contentment, while his mother lived out hers in the place of his upbringing, while his father continued his career as a mercenary in the Spiritual Plane, and while Cära, in a far more serene place in that world, patiently awaited Thäràc's arrival.

Appendix: Pronunciation

Although many of the names of characters and the like in this novel have been taken from various cultural sources such as Norse Mythology, all of them, with a small handful of exceptions, conform to a single system of spelling. This system is designed to accommodate *any* English word or any utterance conforming to English pronunciation (e.g. we don't normally trill our r's, as many European speakers do). It is phonetic, representing each sound unambiguously according to diacritic marks and a few straightforward principles. It is based mainly on Latin and the basic logic of phonetics. I personally believe it achieves an optimal balance of elegance, simplicity and intuitiveness, with many names retaining common spelling, with or without diacritics (and others, inevitably, becoming unrecognisable). Although I created it especially for this novel, I believe it stands as a useful and versatile system in its own right.

In the following guide, the convention I use to give examples of sounds is to bracket the letters that represent those sounds when necessary. Don't be confused by the fact that the 'o' sound in *rose* is dependent on the 'e'. In these cases just pretend that the word sounds the same without that letter.

Stress

The stressed syllable is that part of a word emphasised by pronouncing it with a higher pitch or volume than the others. Every word is always stressed at the *first* syllable unless marked with a grave accent (`) apostrophe *before* the stressed syllable, as in be`lieve, in`tended, be`come, refe`ree and accommo`dation.

Vowels.

Weak Forms.

Many of the vowels in the words we use are pronounced as dull, undistinguished ‘uh’ sounds, characterised by lack of any tone or differentiation e.g. *buck(e)t*, *teach(er)*, *foundati(o)n*, *dis(a)ppear*, *antic(i)pate*, *Dani(e)l* and *s(u)rround*. Note that there is no distinguishable difference in the sounds of any of the bracketed vowels, even between ‘i’ and ‘u’. These sounds are referred to as ‘Weak Forms’. Any *unmarked* vowel (other than a semi-vowel; explained later) in an unstressed syllable is pronounced in weak form. Thus:

a,e,i,o,u (unstressed) as in *jack(e)t*, *exterm(i)nati(o)n*, *just(i)ce*.

Short Forms.

Short forms are those most basic sounds associated with the five vowels, as the ‘a’ in cat. A vowel is pronounced in short form if it is stressed and unmarked *or* if it is unstressed and marked with a ‘grave accent’ (`). Thus:

a (stressed) or	à (unstressed)	as in <i>bat</i> , <i>hang</i> , <i>hat</i> .
e (stressed) or	è (unstressed)	as in <i>bet</i> , <i>step</i> , <i>dead</i> .
i (stressed) or	ì (unstressed)	as in <i>bit</i> , <i>him</i> , <i>stick</i> .

o (stressed) or	ò (unstressed)	as in <i>pot, rock, stop</i> .
u (stressed) or	ù (unstressed)	as in <i>put, pull, stood</i> .

Long Forms.

Long forms differ from short forms essentially in length i.e. they take about twice as long to say. Vowels marked with the acute accent (´) are pronounced as long forms:

á	as in <i>sad, bad, dr(a)gon</i> .
é	as in <i>bear, stare, lair</i> .
í	as in <i>heat, P(e)ter, eel</i> .
ó	as in <i>port, draw, all</i> .
ú	as in <i>soon, flute, stool</i> .

Other Vowel Sounds

ã	as in <i>but, one, h(u)mble</i> .
ä	as in <i>heart, far, f(a)ther</i> .
ë	as in <i>hurt, learn, m(er)cy</i> .
ï	as in <i>peer, here, beard</i> .

Diphthongs.

Diphthongs are combinations of vowel sounds. They can be divided into two groups: those involving semi-vowels and those not.

Semi-Vowels.

Semi-vowels are those sounds usually represented in English by ‘y’ and ‘w’. The ‘y’ in *you* is a shortened ‘ee’ sound like that in *n(ee)d*. Likewise, the ‘w’ in *wet* is an ‘u’ sound as in *p(u)t*. Classical Latin used the letters ‘i’ and ‘u’, and I believe this

primitive convention deserves more recognition. Thus, whenever *unmarked* and placed before a vowel of any sort (including a weak form):

- i as in *(y)es, Dan(i)el, can(y)on*.
- u as in *(w)itch, q(u)est, stair(w)ay*.

Other Diphthongs.

The English names of the letters ‘a’ ‘i’ and ‘o’, as opposed to the sounds they make, happen to be the most common diphthongs. These letters thus make convenient symbols for those sounds, when marked with circumflex (^):

- â as in *pain, play, consecr(a)te*.
- ê as in the French ‘é’.
- î as in *mind, light, clarif(y)*.
- ô as in *boat, crow, whole*.

Note ê, which is not used in modern English. It sounds like â, except that the sound breaks down to ‘e-i’, not ‘a-i’.

The remaining diphthongs used in modern English, as well as an alternative spelling for ‘â’ are presented below. Note the acute accent (´) above the ‘u’ in ‘úa/úe’, it is crucial.

- ai as in *rain, range, feign*.
- au as in *how, stout, loud*.
- oi as in *boy, coil, depl(oy)*.
- úa/úe as in *tour, skewer, pure*.

Consonants.

- c as in *(c)ool, hi(k)e, re(q)uire*.
- g as in *(g)et, (gh)ost, ha(gg)is*.

ñ	as in <i>si(ng)</i> , <i>ha(ng)er</i> , <i>lu(ng)</i> .
ch	as in <i>(ch)icken</i> , <i>ca(tch)</i> , <i>(ch)aste</i> .
j	as in <i>(j)oke</i> , <i>pa(g)e</i> , <i>e(dg)e</i> .
sh	as in <i>(sh)ow</i> , <i>ma(sh)</i> , <i>pa(ss)ion</i> .
zh	as in <i>plea(s)ure</i> , <i>bei(g)e</i> , <i>A(s)ia</i> .
t	as in <i>(t)ap</i> , <i>wha(t)</i> , <i>ki(tt)en</i> .
d	as in <i>(d)agger</i> , <i>ha(d)</i> , <i>a(dd)iction</i> .
s	as in <i>(s)illy</i> , <i>ki(ss)</i> , <i>(c)ell</i> .
z	as in <i>(z)ip</i> , <i>ha(s)</i> , <i>di(zz)y</i> .
th	as in <i>(th)ing</i> , <i>ba(th)</i> , <i>(th)ousand</i> .
dh	as in <i>(th)ese</i> , <i>ba(th)e</i> , <i>al(th)ough</i> .
n	as in <i>(n)ow</i> , <i>he(n)ce</i> , <i>sig(n)</i> .
p	as in <i>(p)rince</i> , <i>ho(p)ing</i> , <i>stum(p)</i> .
b	as in <i>(b)ack</i> , <i>em(b)lem</i> , <i>sta(b)</i> .
f	as in <i>(f)ire</i> , <i>sta(ff)</i> , <i>co(ff)ee</i> .
v	as in <i>(v)ast</i> , <i>ha(v)e</i> , <i>o(f)</i> .
m	as in <i>(m)y</i> , <i>(m)other</i> , <i>(m)ouse</i> .
h	as in <i>(h)ow</i> , <i>a(h)a</i> , <i>(h)istory</i> .
r	as in <i>(r)at</i> , <i>ee(r)ie</i> , <i>(r)hino</i> .
l	as in <i>(l)ove</i> , <i>hi(ll)</i> , <i>he(ll)o</i> .

Some General Points

Although the systematics above aim to capture and make explicit the rules of phonetics, they cannot account for the subtle exceptions that exist. My system has to assume some intuitive conventions we may not be aware of. I note two here, but there are surely many more. First, the sounds ‘t’ and ‘d’ are never pronounced before ‘r’. In these cases they produce the sounds *(ch)ess* and *(j)ack* respectively. Second, the letter ‘l’ tends to have a pronounced effect on vowel sounds placed before it. Most notable is the ‘o’ sound in *so*. Add an ‘l’ to the end of it and we get the sound of the word *soul*. Examples are given for some vowel sounds above.

Note also that double consonants sound exactly the same as single ones. Sometimes pairs of consonants such as 'th' must be separated for words like pothead. This is done with the hyphen (-).