

GLENN G. THATER

*VOLUME 3 OF THE  
HARBINGER OF DOOM SAGA*

KNIGHT  
ETERNAL

# **KNIGHT ETERNAL**

**GLENN G. THATER**

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KNIGHT ETERNAL

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# BOOKS BY GLENN G. THATER

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(A novelette set in the Harbinger of  
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## THE GATEWAY

(A novella length version of  
*Gateway to Niflheim*)

HARBINGER OF DOOM (3<sup>rd</sup>  
Edition)

(Combines *Gateway to Niflheim*  
and *The Fallen Angle* into a single  
volume)

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## **PREFACE**

The last few years were big for Thetian scholars. In 2006, Dr. Frank Smithwick of Brown University completed his long-awaited translation of the Fifth Scroll of Cumbria, long thought lost until donated to the Smithsonian in 2001 by a private collector. Professor Smithwick's painstaking translation of the twelve hundred year old documents revealed for the first time the lost tale of Angle Theta's relentless pursuit of Korrgonn following the Gateway

incident. A portion of that translation, which I've updated into modern prose for readers of fantasy literature, forms the core of this book.

In 2007, archeologists from the University of Chicago discovered a cache of inscribed stone tablets in a cave excavation in the mountains near Grenoble, France. Carbon dating of pigments used in the inscriptions indicates that the tablets were created sometime between 2,400 B.C. and 2,600 B.C., making them some of the oldest written records of Thetian lore thus far found in western Europe. A

crackerjack team of researchers from the University of Maryland at College Park, the University of Chicago, and Brown University, collaborated to translate the Grenoble Tablets in record time, their work revealing many previously unknown stories centered on members of The Shadow League. Two of these brief tales form the basis of the chapters herein entitled, “Born Killers” and “The Orb of Wisdom”.

These latest discoveries, coupled with other sources such as the Ningshao Jade Collection, the Olmec and Kish Tablets, the

Derveni Papyri, the Scrolls of Corsi and Burdur, and others, conclusively demonstrate that despite these stories being relatively unknown today, the Thetian tales were widely read and reproduced for thousands of years throughout the ancient world. Thus, the influence of Thetian literature on mythology, folklore, and cultural traditions across the globe should not be underestimated and warrants significantly more scholarship.

2008 saw the publication of my novelizations of *The Gateway* and *The Fallen Angle*, two tales that

have long lived in the core of Thetian canon, but which had never before been adapted into modern prose for the general public.

The hundreds of emails and messages I have received from readers of these tales have inspired me to continue to bring these fantastical stories to print. Some categorize these tales as mythology, others call them sword and sorcery or heroic fantasy, still others name them weird tales, but to me they are historical fiction, part of the rich but sadly little known literary legacy of the ancient world.

I hope that you enjoy this next

installment of the Harbinger of  
Doom saga, entitled, *Knight  
Eternal*. Happy reading.

Glenn G. Thater  
New York, USA

# KNIGHT ETERNAL

“Mine is a perilous road; those that  
walk  
it with me are seldom long for  
Valhalla”  
—Lord Angle Theta

## PROLOGUE

Ob flung the door open. “You can never tell anyone what I’m about to tell you, boy, or you and me both will get killed dead.”

Claradon, pale and drained, and generally unkempt, rolled his eyes



and stepped into Ob's chambers. The old gnome looked even worse than Claradon did, his arm heavily bandaged, his face battered and bruised.

“What now, Ob?” said Claradon. “I can't take any more.”

“There is much I've a mind to tell you, but I've got to lie down, my back is killing me.” Ob closed the door and made his way through the large, cluttered sitting room toward his bedchamber. Claradon followed, though his thoughts drifted to the events that had just ravaged his life.

A few days prior, fanatical cultists gathered in secret in the Vermion Forest near the fortress of Dor Eotrus in the Kingdom of Lomion. Wielding ancient, forbidden magics, they opened a dark portal to the outré realm of Nifleheim, the very hell of myth and legend, allowing demons and their masters, the Lords of Nifleheim, to enter Midgaard, the world of man.

Ignorant of the cultists' activities, Aradon Eotrus, Lord of the surrounding lands and vassal to King Selrach Tenzivel, led an elite force of knights, wizards, and

woodsmen into the Vermion to investigate reports of strange goings on. Amongst Aradon's veterans was the renowned Archwizard, Par Talbon of Montrose, the Master Ranger, Stern of Doriath, and Dor Eotrus's High Cleric, Brother Donnelin. For all their skills and courage, not a one returned.

In response, Brother Claradon Eotrus, eldest son of Aradon, gathered a troop of knights led by his mentor, Sir Gabriel Garn and his friend Ob the gnome. They were joined by an enigmatic foreign soldier called Lord Angle Theta. Together, they set out to learn

Aradon's fate.

Hidden within a magical fog, deep within the Vermion, the group discovered the gruesome, mutilated, nigh unrecognizable remains of Aradon Eotrus's party outside an ancient, otherworldly temple. Plagued by a frigid, choking mist and mind-rending din, Claradon and his comrades assaulted the Temple of Guymaog, but arrived too late to secure the portal between the worlds.

With the gateway opened, three Lords of Nifleheim and a horde of lesser fiends trespassed upon the world of man for the first time since

the very dawn of history. These monsters of Nifleheim had long filled man's tales of terror and plagued his nightmares, but had been only myth and legend. Now all that had changed. Monsters were real. Men's minds broke.

Bhaal of Nifleheim slew many brave knights before Angle Theta drove him back through the gateway with a magical lance—a relic of times long past. Mortach of Nifleheim bounded through the temple and escaped, later to join with the cultists that had opened the gateway. Sir Gabriel, greatest hero of the realm, died by the hand

of the Nifleheim Lord, Gallis Korrgonn, while saving Claradon's life. Worse still, Korrgonn's life force passed into and took control of Gabriel's body, and enabled his escape into the night.

To close the doorway to hell, Claradon located and destroyed the shard of darkness that held open the gateway, sealing it forever.

After the brutal battle, the few survivors returned to Dor Eotrus, and at the wizard Par Tanch's urging, concocted a tale of rampaging mountain trolls to explain the night's tragic losses. Tanch warned that no mention be

made of magic or sorcery and the like, as the government harshly suppresses the truth of such things, while the common folk believe them little more than children's tales and ancient legends.

That very evening, while the knights of House Eotrus began preparations to return to the Vermion to take up the trail of the remaining two Nifleheim Lords, Ob called Claradon to his chambers where he was recuperating from his injuries.

Ob's chambers boasted a hardwood floor, stained to a rich,

walnut hue, though much of it was covered by teetering piles of books of every size and description—the overflow from the brimming shelves that lined the walls.

Well-tended fireplaces in both sitting room and bedchamber heated the apartment. Warm and cozy, the rooms, as always, smelled vaguely of pipe smoke. Empty wine bottles of exotic vintage were proudly displayed atop the mantles and the wardrobe. The more recent bottles overflowed the trash bucket, awaiting their ultimate fate.

All the furniture in Ob's bedchamber was sized appropriately



for one of his stature, save for the bed, which was massive and high off the floor.

Ob stepped stiffly up a little four-step ladder and hopped onto the bed with a groan. He settled down on the thick mattress, wincing with every movement.

He reached out for his ale mug, but his hand met only empty air. “Darn.”

The finely crafted night table beside the bed was gnome-sized and far below Ob’s reach high atop the bed. “Would you mind, boy? Give the crank beside the table a few turns?”

“What?”

“The crank, down there,” said Ob, pointing down to a handle sticking out below the night table.

Claradon squatted down. Beneath the night table was a curious wood and metal contraption. Claradon turned the handle and the table rose smoothly up. Several more turns and the tabletop rose up to within Ob’s easy reach.

“I had Donnelin make it for me. Cost me a bottle of ‘64. Worth it though, or else I’d break my neck leaning down for the mug. That fellow was always handy.”

Ob paused, thinking.

"I will miss him. I will miss them all, dearly." Ob looked over to the large color portrait that hung on one wall. Aradon Eotrus stood in the center in full battle regalia; Gabriel, at his right hand, similarly clad; Ob at his left; then Brother Donnelin, Par Talbon, and Stern to either side, all wearing their finest, their features captured almost perfectly.

"The gaming table is still set," said Ob. "Just the way we left it. Me and Gabe were winning, but the others were giving us shot for shot. Now we'll never finish it. Not ever."

Ob grabbed a handkerchief from the night table and loudly blew his nose. Tears filled the old gnome's eyes.

"We were together a long time, that group. Every one of them was like a brother to me. Now I'm the only one left." Tears streamed down Ob's face. "They're all dead, all of them."

Claradon tried not to look at the portrait, tried to keep his composure.

"I should've been with them. Who knows, maybe I could've made some difference—or at least, I could've died with them. I should

have."

"We were with Sir Gabriel, at least," said Claradon.

Ob nodded. "It's good that you were beside him at the end; not good for a man to die alone."

They sat in silence for a time, grieving in their own way, until Claradon spoke again.

"We both need to get some rest. Your arm is badly hurt and my head still throbs; one ear hears almost nothing, the other rings without end."

"Aye, mine ring as well. A day or two will heal them, if Thor's luck is with us. As for my arm, thanks to

whatever witch's brew Mr. Fancy Pants slipped me, it seems I will heal unnatural quick-like. No doubt that tin can will be claiming he saved my life to all and everyone."

Ob lifted his ale mug and took several swallows. "There are some important things that you've a need to know. Things that maybe Aradon and Gabe should've told you long ago, but they did not, for reasons of their own. So now the telling falls to me."

Claradon grew paler, nodded, and leaned back into the cushioned armchair, jaw set, eyes staring straight ahead.

“When I first came to the Dor, long before I became Castellan, I worked as a scout for your father’s grandfather who was the young lord of the House at that time. In those days there was a knight who was a good friend to your great grandfather. He would come to visit and go hunting with him in the mountains and such. This knight was a great weapons master, and during his visits he would often train the knights of the House in the ways of battle. His name was Gabriel.”

“Quite a coincidence, but what importance does it have?”

“It’s not a coincidence at all, boy, and that’s the point of it. That Gabriel and our Gabriel were the same fellow. Gabe wasn’t no normal man. He was old. I’m over three hundred, but to him, I was a child.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. Men don’t live that long.”

“Some men do, it seems; if men they truly be.”

Claradon got up and paced. “I’ve heard stories of certain wizards, with their potions and such, that can extend life and maintain youth, but Gabriel was no wizard. He was a soldier—a knight, a hero.”



“I can’t explain it, boy. I just know it to be the truth. Back in the day, after some years went by, Gabe stopped coming around. He had gone traveling about the world, doing hero stuff and such, I expect. I didn’t see him again until one day, many a year later, when he showed up at the Dor.

“I was shocked when I laid eyes upon him. It had been decades but he looked as young as he did when I first came to the Dor.

“I was the only one that knew; the only one around long enough to remember.

“Gabe took me aside and told

me that I had to swear never to tell nobody about his secret. So I swore. You're the first and only person I've done talked to about this, save for your father, and he already knew. I'm only telling you now cause they're both gone and you've a right to know."

"Father knew all this?"

"Your grandfather told him. Seems all the lords of the House knew, far back into olden times. Family legend says Gabe was a good friend to the Eotrus for many generations, long afore I came here."

"Did you ask him how he lived

so long? Could he have had elven blood?"

"I asked him, but he wouldn't speak of it, save to say he was no elf. He said that there were others like him and that they would kill me dead if they found out that I knew about them. Gabe was never one to make idle threats or warnings, so I done believed him. You mustn't tell no one what I told you today, or they'll kill you and me both. You must keep especial quiet around Mr. Fancy Pants. I would bet my life that old Lord Angle Theta is one of them."

"Ob, from anyone other than

you, I don't think I would believe a word of this, but after what we went through last night—"

"I've never lied to you, Claradon —."

"I know that."

"I've never lied, but there have been some truths like what I just told you that I've had to hold back. There's more to it, boy. It'll be difficult for you to hear."

"More? Tell me. Tell me and let's be done with this."

Ob took a swig from his mug and then placed it on the night table. Claradon sat down on the edge of the armchair.

“One time, when Gabe returned to the Dor after a mission doing hero stuff, he brought with him a small child—a mere babe.”

“A baby?”

“A cute little bugger, as far as you volsungs go anyways. He entrusted it to the care of your father. Then Gabe picked up and left again for a time. Aradon kept the child, and he and his Lady, who had no children yet of their own, raised him as their very own son, but for some darned reason, he never told the boy that he wasn’t his natural father.”

Claradon’s face went white, his

hands icy cold.

“How many years ago?”

“Twenty five.”

Claradon’s eyes slowly closed. Ob tried to pass him the mug but Claradon brushed it away. They sat in silence for some minutes.

“So I’m not a true Eotrus.”

“Don’t ever be saying that, boy. You are as much an Eotrus as Aradon, Jude, or any of them. You are Aradon’s son in every way that is important. Nobody would dispute that, not even Gabe.”

“In the Vermion you said that I’m the lord of the land now. But am I? Or is Jude?”

“You are, Claradon. You are the Lord of the House now, answerable only to the King and the High Council, and don’t ever forget it. And if you’re smart, you will not tell Jude or anyone about this, ever. It can only bring trouble.”

A vacant stare dominated Claradon’s face.

“Was Gabriel my real father?”

“No, boy, he wasn’t. All I can say about it is that your natural parents died when you was a babe.”

Claradon reached for the mug.

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While in pursuit of Korrgonn and Mortach, Claradon received a summons from the High Council of Lomion, ordering him to travel to Lomion City to receive official appointment as the new Lord of Dor Eotrus. Claradon found the High Council fractured into rival groups, some members supporting the traditional government while others were loyal to The Shadow League, a mysterious group allied with the dark powers of Nifleheim.

Chancellor Barusa of House Alder accused Claradon of conspiring to murder Aradon and



claim Dor Eotrus for his own, before his time. To avoid losing the Dor to the Alders, Claradon challenged, and bested Barusa in single combat, thereby solidifying his claim to the Dor.

Aided by Harringgold, Archduke of Lomion, Claradon and his comrades tracked the Nifleheim lords to an old warehouse in the dread Southeast section of Lomion City. Disguised as cultists, they stumbled into a black mass attended by thousands and presided over by Ginalli, an Arkon and High Priest of The Shadow League.

Ginalli's sermon told the tale of

the Harbinger of Doom, the ancient fiend of myth and legend that had long ago led a rebellion against the cultists' "one true god," Azathoth. Thrown out of the heavens for his treachery, this monster was cursed for all time and reviled by all mankind no matter what name or guise he took. Korrgonn stepped from the shadows and boomed that this harbinger of doom walked Midgaard still, though untold centuries had passed, and that he was here, in Lomion.

"Where?" shouted the cultists.

Directly at Theta, Korrgonn pointed.

Panic ensued and Claradon and his group fled. Mortach of Nifleheim pursued them and cornered Theta and Ob. Ob escaped through a hole while Theta confronted Mortach. The gnome overheard all that passed between them. Theta admitted that in ancient days he had turned against Azathoth, but claimed that it was Azathoth and his followers that were evil, not he. Mortach claimed that Azathoth is good, and that the Nifleheim lords merely carry out his bidding as part of a larger, holy plan beyond Theta's grasp. The two agreed, their argument could end

only one way: the old way of the sword. And so, in a duel witnessed by none, and overheard only by Ob the gnome, Lord Angle Theta slew Mortach, Lord of Nifleheim.

This meant that Theta was the Bogeyman, The Prince of Lies, the veritable Harbinger of Doom of myth and legend. Since the betrayal of Azathoth took place ages ago, this also meant that Theta was old beyond comprehension. Ob's mind nearly fractured as the truth of this settled in. Theta swore Ob to secrecy.

The group rejoined and vowed to continue their quest to destroy

Korrgonn and the mad cultists that worshipped him.

Some weeks later...

# I

## THE MESSENGER

“To sate my thirst, I will drink  
*thy blood—the blood of kings.*”

A cloaked figure shambled through the Outer Dor, a vibrant town of some few thousands that encircled the stone fortress called Dor Eotrus. The people gave the shambler wide berth, suspicious of strangers in those dark times. Hunched beneath a black cloak that concealed its face, the wearer's aspect remained unknown as he approached the entry to the Dor

proper.

Several soldiers manned the guard post outside the entryway, passing the time with a game of dice. The tallest of the group, a gaunt veteran with a scar across his right cheek, stepped forward. He shivered from a sudden chill in the air.

“Halt, and state your business,” said Sir Marzdan, watch captain of the gate. With each breath, steam rose from Marzdan’s mouth, where there was none moments before. The shambler stopped before the captain, though he said nothing.

“Who are you?” said Marzdan

after some moments. “Speak.” Marzdan’s fingers tapped his sword hilt.

“Messenger,” moaned the cloak, though no steam followed from beneath its hood.

Marzdan eyed him with suspicion and wrinkled his nose when he caught the fetid stench that emanated from the messenger. It wasn’t the stink of a beggar, but something fouler, darker. The other guards took notice, put aside their game, and took up positions some feet behind their captain.

“What is your message?”

“Only for the Eotrus,” he said in



a slow, eerie voice that made Marzdan's neck hairs stand up.

"That will not get you in." Marzdan looked him up and down. "Who sent you here? Have you some token?"

"A token?" said the messenger. "Yes, a token I do have." The messenger slowly reached out his arm toward the watchman. The hand that emerged from beneath that threadbare cloak wore no human flesh. No skin, no muscle, no sinew concealed its naked gray bones. This was no mere messenger, but some creature out of nightmare.

Marzdan's eyes widened; his fingers locked around his sword hilt, though he didn't pull the blade free. "What—what are you?"

"Messenger," moaned the cloak once again.

Marzdan's face blanched, but he stood his ground and stared at the skeletal hand and the gleaming contents it held. A ring—a golden ring that bore the symbol of House Eotrus, the noble family that ruled the fortress and the surrounding lands.

"Make no move creature."

Marzdan moved closer and plucked the ring from the boney

hand, taking great care to touch only the ring.

“Wait here,” said the knight. “I’ll get word to the citadel.”

The messenger stood still as a statue, silent as the grave. Marzdan backed cautiously away, his hand never leaving his sword hilt.

“I’m going to get Jude,” Marzdan said quietly to his guardsmen. “You men stand fast. If that thing holds his ground, leave him be. Not a word to him, understand?”

“Not a word,” said Harsnip, a skinny blond soldier not yet eighteen—his eyes wide, voice

crackling with fear.

“If he tries to pass the gate, you’re to cut him down. Whatever it takes, you don’t let him pass. You’re to protect the Dor. Understood?”

“Aye,” said Baret, an older soldier with white hair. “We know our job, Captain. That bugger will not get by us, to be sure, but you be quick. Right quick.”

“Right quick,” said Harsnip.

“Aye, I will,” said Marzdan, a wary eye still on the messenger.

“That arm—it’s nothing but bones,” whispered Graham, a stout soldier with big ears.

“Nothing but bones,” said Harsnip.

“This is some sorcery, some foul magic,” said Graham.

“It’s foul magic, it is,” said Harsnip.

“There’s no such thing as magic, you fools,” said Baret. “A damn trick is all, to fool us.”

“A trick?” said Harsnip, a glimmer of a smile coming to his face. “Yeah, that’s all it is. Just a trick. Not magic.”

“To what end?” said Graham.

Baret scrunched up his face. “How would I know what’s his mind, the stinking bag of bones?”

That's for bigger men than the likes of us."

"Bigger men," said Harsnip, staring over his shoulder at the messenger. "Foul magic, I think. Not a trick at all."

"What's that, boy?" said Baret.

"Me grand-mum told me to steer clear of magic, she did. She told me the old stories were more truth than fancy. Steer right clear of anything magic, or it'll be the death of you, Harsnip, she said. And she done told me not to join up with the guard too. Any magic already hereabouts will be at the Dor, she said, and any magic what comes

around will head straight there, like a moth to a flame. She was right about that, it seems. She said the Dor would be the death of me, old grand-mum said. Said it just last week, right over Thursday's dinner, she did."

"Steady, lad," said Baret, placing a firm hand on the young man's shoulder. "Just a messenger it is, bones or not. Nothing much to fear, not yet, anyways."

"What if—"

"I'll look out for you lad, if it comes to it.

"Thanks. I'm counting on that."

"Just remember your training."

“Aye,” said Harsnip. “I will.”

A group of men exited the keep's central tower and walked toward the gate. Jude Eotrus, a dark-maned hulk of crooked nose and squared jaw led the way. With him, his youngest brother, Malcolm, long and lean; Sir Marzdan; and several other knights and soldiers.

The messenger still stood by the gate, unmoved.

Jude held the ring before the messenger, then stepped back, wrinkling his nose and coughing from the messenger's stench.



Marzdan stood protectively beside Jude, hand on sword hilt. The messenger, taller than most men, and as broad, more or less, came up only to Jude's jaw, and was barely half his breadth.

"What do you know about this ring?" said Jude from a safer distance, his breath steaming.

"It be the signet ring of House Eotrus, taken from thy father's hand the night he fell in the Vermion Forest, not one month ago."

"Who are you and how came you by it?"

"I be little more than dust. The

ring was entrusted to me so that you would know that the message I bear be true." The creature pulled a piece of dusty parchment from beneath its robes and handed it to Jude.

Jude unfolded the parchment. It read:

*Aradon Eotrus lives and will remain so if and only if you deliver twenty thousand silver stars unto our messenger tomorrow evening at Riker's Crossroads. Thence we will exchange the silver for the old Lord. No tricks or dead he'll truly be.*

Jude's eyes grew wide. "It says that father is alive and this creature's master has him."

"What?" Malcolm's face flashed brick red and drew into a snarl; his fists opening and closing at his sides.

"Are you the messenger that will make this exchange?" asked Jude.

"Perhaps, perhaps not; who can say?"

"How dare you hold my father for ransom, you stinking dog." Malcolm pulled his sword, and before Jude could grab his arm,

thrust the blade through the messenger's chest.

The messenger stumbled back and clutched at the sword with both skeletal hands.

Malcolm yanked the blade free.

No blood sprang from the creature's wound. No cry erupted from its throat; its torn cloak the only evidence that the blow had been struck.

Only gray dust marred the sheen of Malcolm's sword, but in no more than a moment, the fine steel blade turned to ash from tip to guard. Malcolm threw the hilt down as it too burned to ash before his

eyes.

The messenger threw back its head, its cowl still cloaking its face, and laughed. Louder and louder it laughed—so loud that the men cringed and crushed their hands against their ears. It was a horrid, cackling sound of such unnatural tenor and fearful intonation as could not be voiced by the throat of man, though, mercifully, it lasted but a few moments.

“Well struck. Well struck,” said the messenger. It shrugged off its cloak, revealing glowing, silver chains that criss-crossed about its body. From skull to foot it was little

more than bleached bones affixed together by some strange gray tissue. It had two large eyes of blood-red pupil and sickly yellow sclera, and hands that ended in boney claws.

The messenger flexed its arms and legs, and strained against the chains. "Thy blow has freed me from my binding." Another flex and several links shattered. The chain fell to the ground in a heap. "I can now pursue my own course."

The creature vaulted at Jude, claws flailing.

Lightning quick, Marzdan grabbed Jude and pulled him clear

—no small feat considering Jude's bulk.

The messenger veered and raked its claws across young Harsnip's chest; the boy's face froze in shock and horror. The blow met no resistance, as if the claws were insubstantial like those of some ghost out of a fireside tale.

Harsnip loosed a bloodcurdling scream. His face grew ashen; his skin wrinkled and shriveled. His hair grew instantly white and fell about his shoulders. For a moment, before he fell, his eyes locked accusingly on Baret's. Then Harsnip collapsed into a heap of dust, rotted

clothes, and rusted armor.

The soldiers yelled, and hacked at the messenger, but their blades passed through it, doing it no harm. Each blade that touched the thing burned to ash, and those men too slow to throw down the hilts burned to ashes with them. The creature struck again and again and more men went down and shriveled to ash. Its touch was death, no matter the victim's courage, strength, or skill.

Whistles blew and calls of alarm sounded about the keep. Jude led the men in a fast retreat to the central tower; the creature pursued



at its own shambling pace. Soon, the booming claxon of the bell tower warned all the Dor of danger and roused the garrison to arms.

“Bar the door, and stand well back,” shouted Jude after the last of the soldiers dashed through the portal.

The men crowded about the tower’s entry hall and on the winding stair to the upper chambers. They heard screams and war cries from without as guards from other parts of the keep descended upon the messenger and died for it.

“What is that thing?” said

Malcolm. “How do we fight it?”

“We wouldn’t have to fight it if you weren’t an idiot,” said Jude. “Some monster out of Nifleheim. It’s beyond our ken. I know not how to bring it down.”

The messenger stepped through the door, though the door did not open. It passed through the solid oak, banded and reinforced in honest steel and iron, as if it were but empty air. Startled, the men jumped back. Many went down in a heap as they stumbled over those behind. Several crossbow bolts flew, passed through the creature, and embedded themselves in the door

before they too burned to ash.

“To the chapel,” shouted Jude,  
“Run.”

Those on the stair turned heel and raced up the winding steps shouting the alarm as they went. Up and up they raced to the third floor, which housed the keep’s place of worship. What men were still with Jude dashed in, closed, and barred the big double doors.

“What do we do?” yelled Malcolm.

“Holy water,” said Marzdan.

The soldiers stood in a semi-circular line some ten feet from the

barred door. Each held a basin of holy water, or one of the chapel's holy symbols or relics.

“We’ve no priests to bless the weapons,” said Malcolm.

“Don’t worry, young master,” said Captain Marzdan. “They’ll work. They have to.”

Long seconds passed. A scream or two from without and below heralded the messenger’s approach. Then it passed through the barred door, again as if it wasn’t there. The room instantly grew frigid, the light from the sconces wavered and dimmed, and the air filled with the creature’s fetid stench.

“Begone, creature,” shouted Jude. “You can’t enter this holy place. Begone.”

“You be no priest,” said the messenger. “You hath no power over me.”

The men flung their holy water, dousing the spot where the messenger stood, though the water passed through it and the messenger paid it no heed. It moved forward, toward Jude.

Malcolm held a staff upon which was mounted an ancient, holy relic of Odin, father of the gods. He thrust it forward and pressed the end to the creature’s

forehead. This time, the weapon met resistance; the relic seared the messenger's skull and held fast.

The creature snarled and spasmed. It lashed out and grabbed the staff, howling in rage. Where its claws grasped the oak, the staff smoked and blackened and turned to ash. As a lit fuse, the destruction of the staff continued down its shaft. Eyes wide, Malcolm froze.

"Drop the staff," yelled Jude, his breath steaming.

Captain Marzdan dived into Malcolm and pushed him aside. Malcolm fell clear but Marzdan landed atop the decaying staff.

The captain's face froze in terror and he screamed—a lingering wail of agony and anger that no man there could forget for the rest of his days. Marzdan's hair went white, his skin paled and shriveled. In moments, the brave soldier was no more than an ashen heap with the shape of a man.

Malcolm writhed in agony and clutched at his left wrist; his left hand smoldered, flesh hung loose, white bone tasted the air.

“Yes,” hissed the messenger. It thrust back its arms and its head as if in ecstasy, and then by some power born of hell, the creature

grew—taller, thicker, darker. “Ah, the sweet blood of kings. I must have more.” Its eyes locked on Jude, boring into his very soul. It shambled forward, toward Jude, ignoring all else.

Jude backpedaled through the room, sword held at the defensive. The knights and guardsmen fired crossbow bolts at the thing and threw weapons at it from all sides, all to no avail.

“What do we do?” yelled one man.

“How do we bring it down?” called out Baret.

As he neared the very back of



the chapel, with little space left to run, Jude stopped and held his ground.

“What do you want?” he shouted. “Why do you plague us?” Jude’s eyes darted from the beast to his wounded brother. Baret and Graham pulled Malcolm up and dragged him from the room.

“To sate my thirst, I will drink thy blood—the blood of kings,” said the fiend, its eyes wild; foam dripped from its bony maw.

“To sate my hunger, I will burn thy body and devour thy soul.”

“Can’t we give you some mead and a chicken or two, perhaps a

goat, and call our business done?"

"No," said the messenger.

"Some fresh venison then?

Good gnomish ale to wash it down?

We've a keg from '58, brewed in Portland Vale."

The messenger lunged forward.

Jude stepped back and tripped over a chest that sat beside the chapel's lectern. The messenger's claws raked through the empty air where Jude had just stood. Jude landed on his rump, the stout, ironbound oaken chest before him, and knew at once what to do. He flung the lid open and sure and swift from within pulled a strange

glowing dagger of silver hue.

The messenger recoiled and sniffed the air. It locked its eyes on the glowing dagger and growled. It flexed its claws and they began to change, to grow. In moments, they passed six inches in length; darkened, black as pitch; and sharpened to a razor's edge.

In one motion, Jude leaped to his feet and flung the ensorcelled dagger with all his power. It struck the messenger mid-chest, exploded through its sternum, and lodged there. The creature emitted a devilish wail to whither the soul and slay the spirit: a howl of such

volume and pitch that near every man in the room dropped to his knees. It clutched at the dagger with both its taloned, skeletal hands, stumbled back a few steps, and collapsed to one knee.

“Curse you, Eotrus,” spat the beast. “And all thy line forevermore.”

Its eyes rolled back in its head. It fell backward, struck the marble floor, and exploded in a cloud of dust. The glowing dagger remained, embedded in a heap of foul black ash.

## II

# MAGES AND MONSTERS

“Don’t play by any rules, just  
survive,  
*That is all that matters.*”  
—Lord Angle Theta

Ornate figurines overran the tabletop. They were cast in the likenesses of soldiers, knights, elves, dwarves, wizards, lugron, and all manner of monsters, various and sundry—all beautifully painted and mounted on moveable hardwood bases inscribed with arcane

symbols and numbers that represented their attributes. Two compact carrying cases of leather and hardwood, homes for the game tokens, sat open at the end of the table. Their outsides scarred and battered from long travels, the cases were heavily padded within to protect their precious cargo.

Two armed men sat on each side of the table, while a fifth—a shiny mountain of steel and grit called Angle Theta—observed from off to the side. Theta kept an eye on the game's progress while he skimmed through a dog-eared leather rulesbook and studied

several unused pieces.

A tiny old man not much more than three-feet tall, of bulbous nose and big ears, shook his head and grinned. "A bad move, Magic Boy," he said to the fair-haired man that sat on the other side of the oaken table. "You should've moved your stinking Knight Champion while you had the chance. He's in range of my Mage and his back is unprotected. He's worm food."

"Excuse me, Ob," said Par Tanch, "but I saw your Mage and I have intentionally ignored him. If you had been paying as much attention to the game as to your

ale you would know that your Mage is too wounded to throw a spell, so he's no threat. I'm afraid you'll have to find another move."

Ob narrowed his eyes; an evil grin formed on his face. "You've forgotten, Magic Boy, my Mage has the Dagger of Shantii."

Tanch studied the table and his face paled.

Ob measured off the distance and moved the Mage directly behind the Knight Champion—a smug look on his face.

"That's a reckless move," said Tanch's teammate, Claradon, a large man, clad in a sharp gray shirt



emblazoned with the crest of House Eotrus. “Magic dagger or not, the Mage doesn’t have much chance of hitting the Knight, and less of finishing him off, even from behind.”

“And next turn, I’ll turn the Knight around and hack the Mage to pieces,” said Tanch.

“If I kill your stinking knight, your game is over, as quick as that. You won’t have enough points left to be a threat.” Ob took a deep drink of ale from his mug “Start sweating.” He picked up a pair of dice from the table—one of bone, one of metal. He placed them in an

ornately carved wooden cup, shook it, and tossed the dice on the tabletop.

A six came up on each die.

Ob smashed his hands together.

“Yes.”

“Arrgh!” went Tanch and Claradon as they jumped to their feet.

“What happened?” said Ob’s teammate, Dolan, a pale, gaunt man of pointy ears.

“Double Doom,” said Claradon. “An automatic hit and double damage.”

Ob jotted some numbers on a piece of parchment with a feather

quill. “By my count, your Champion is down, out, and dead as dead can be.” He handed the calculation over to Claradon. “Game over.”

Claradon looked over the numbers and shook his head in disgust.

Tanch leaned heavily on his wooden staff. “My back has been troubling me today; I’m just not at my best. Even so, it was a lucky shot.”

“Not luck, Magic Boy. It was guts. In Mages and Monsters, just as in real battle, them with guts win the day more often than not. If you want to play it safe, you’re hanging

with the wrong bunch." Ob looked over at Theta. "Ain't that right, Mr. Fancy Pants?"

Theta continued to peruse the rulesbook and didn't bother to look over. "Is your confidence in your courage, gnome, or in your dice?"

"Bah." Ob stood atop his chair and stretched as best he could to reach the Knight Champion figurine near the table's center. His fingers fell just short. Dolan jumped up and reeled the Knight in.

Claradon's eyes narrowed and he looked from Theta to Ob to the Double Doom dice that still sat on the table.

“I thought it was a good move, Mr. Ob,” said Dolan.

“Thanks, boy.”

Claradon reached to pick up Ob’s dice, but the gnome’s hand darted out and snatched them away.

“Those are my lucky dice, boy, get your own.”

Claradon narrowed his eyes.

“Let me see those dice.”

“What? Why?”

“The dice, Ob. Now.”

Ob put them in his pant pocket, a defiant look plastered to his face.

Tanch studied the exchange between his friends. “You cheated,” said the wizard. “Those dice were

loaded, weren't they?"

Ob looked taken aback.

"I thought it was just dumb luck, but you actually cheated."

"A wise man makes his own luck," said Theta. He closed the rulesbook and turned toward the others. "You didn't lose to Ob's luck; you lost to his skill, and to your own foolishness. You lost because you counted on him playing by the rules, and didn't check that he wasn't. That kind of mistake will get you killed out there. Don't make it again."

"But he cheated," said Claradon.

"His mage lives and your knight

is dead with a knife in his back. How it happened really doesn't matter."

"You condone this treachery?" said Tanch.

Theta laughed. "Not so much in a game, but for real, when it counts, out there on some battlefield, yes. In battle, you must do whatever it takes to survive. You must use whatever edge you have. Don't play fair, don't give your opponent a chance, don't play by any rules, just win, just survive, that's all that matters." Theta tossed the rulesbook to Claradon. "That's your lesson for the day. Don't forget it."

“How did you know?” said Claradon. “How did you know Ob cheated?”

Theta smiled but didn't respond.

“He knew because I'm an old warrior and old warriors play the odds or they don't live to get old. I played way against the odds with that move, so he knew I must've had an edge: a big one.”

“This game is too complicated for me,” said Dolan. “I prefer Spottle.”

A soldier clad in the livery of House Harringgold marched stiffly into the room. “Excuse me, Lord



Eotrus; gentlemen. Duke Harringgold requests your presence forthwith in his drawing room."

"Is there some trouble?" asked Claradon.

"I fear so, sir. Your brother, Sir Ector, is in with the Duke."

Claradon stood. His face paled. "He's supposed to be at home."

### III

## AMBUSH

“You want to be a hero, boy?  
*Live to write the history books.*”  
—Ob

Sir Jude Eotrus's massive destrier thundered forward at full gallop, adorned in steel barding and colorful caparison. Jude wore the traditional armor of the Knights of Tyr—a suit of steel plates tied to an undercoat and leggings of chain links. Armored gauntlets, greaves, and boots completed his protection. His steel helm hung from a saddle

loop, his black cape fluttered in the wind. To his left arm was affixed a heater shield emblazoned with the Eotrus coat-of-arms.

Fixated on exacting righteous vengeance on those that sent the messenger against his home and claimed to hold his father captive, Jude stared forward, jaw clenched, only mildly aware that Sergeant Balfin rode beside him. Four more armored knights and seven sturdy men-at-arms rode behind them, dirt and gravel flying from their horses' hooves.

From the corner of his eye, Jude saw something large fall from

a tree on the right side of the road.

“Pull up,” yelled Balfin.

*What?*

A heavy rope sprang up across their path.

*Zounds!*

No time to stop. No time to turn or jump. The rope caught Jude's steed high on its legs, shattering them, just as he wrenched his boots free of the stirrups. The horse crashed to a halt, flipped head over hooves, and slammed to the earth. Jude rocketed forward, spun over once in the air, and sailed some dozen feet before landing on his back. He slid several yards along the

dusty road, and aided by his momentum, gained his feet in an instant; the crash and howls of men and horses filled the air behind him.

*Ambush!*

Battered and disoriented, Jude drew his sword and assumed a defensive stance.

*Is this really happening? I should've been paying attention. Sir Gabriel would have my hide.*

Foreboding, armored figures emerged from the woods. Two men clad in blood-red armor with helms that covered their faces strode toward Jude with swords drawn.

Behind them stalked a very tall, broad man in black-enameled armor, a dragon crest of red adorned his breastplate. Grizzled and scarred, armor gouged and dented: a veteran killer. Jude heard the rattle of steel and war cries of battle behind him.

*No time to look. Is this real? My head spins; get ready. Cut them down. Quick.* Jude backpedaled several steps to buy time to clear his head. *Behind me—something.*

Jude half turned and beheld a huge figure shaped like a man, but of brick-red skin, long fangs, pointed ears, and bald pate. An

unspeakable union of man and demon, its very life a blasphemy and an affront to all that's holy. Far taller and broader than Jude, the creature stalked toward Jude, brandishing a massive, two-handed sword, chipped and stained with the dried blood of its last victims.

*Dead gods, what's that? Can't fight that. Need help.*

The red creature laughed at Jude's look of alarm, and then spoke in a rich baritone voice. "You look surprised to see us, boy. Did you think to find us asleep beside the road, waiting for you to swoop in and kill us like you did our

messenger?”

*It speaks? What is it?*  
“Messenger? That thing was a monster, a demon.”

“It was only sent to deliver our ransom note, nothing more,” said Mort Zag, the red creature. “If it came to blows, the first was yours. You started this.”

“You took my father!”

“We offered you a deal,” said Ezerhauten, the dragon knight, in a deep gravely voice.

“A fair deal,” said Mort Zag. “Square and honest.”

“But you came with your troops to cut us down,” said Ezerhauten.



“You have no honor, boy, none at all. Lord Korrgonn foresaw it; he foresaw your treachery.”

“And now you’ll pay dearly,” said Mort Zag.

“Wait,” said Jude. “We can—”

“No,” said Ezerhauten. “The time for negotiation is past. We didn’t want it this way, but you’ve given us no choice. Take him.”

The two red-armored knights moved in.

“To victory and tomorrow,” said Jude through clenched teeth. He launched himself at the nearest of the two, barreled into him shoulder first before the man could bring up

his sword, and sent him flying.

*The other.*

Jude spun in time to parry an overhand strike from the second knight, and launch a brutal kick to his groin. The man stumbled back a step and doubled over, stunned.

*For father.*

Jude spun his sword in a tight arc, a move taught him by Sir Gabriel, and separated the red knight's head from his shoulders.

*Killed him. Can this be real?*

*Behind me.*

Jude turned and parried a blow from the first knight, now back on his feet. They exchanged several

more cuts and thrusts while screams and shouts of the nearby melee echoed in the background.

*He's good. Muscle him. Crush him down. Where's the dragon knight, and the red monster?*

Jude pummeled the knight, smashing down with his sword over and over, beating the man back, before executing a dwarven overhand strike. The red knight blocked the titanic blow, but the impact shattered his sword, leaving him nothing but the hilt.

*Got him.*

“For my father,” Jude spat. He spun around, chopped down with

all his might, and cleaved the man from shoulder to waist.

*Dead gods, I killed him. Two down. Where are my men?* Jude wrenched his sword free.

“The pup has sharp teeth,” said Mort Zag. “Your Sithians can’t match him.”

*Must be quick, can’t fight them both.*

Jude feigned a move toward Ezerhauten, then spun toward Mort Zag, pulling a dagger from his belt. He launched it underhand, just as he had practiced with Ob a thousand times. The dagger caught Mort Zag in the throat, the

monster's eyes wild with shock. He staggered back and clutched his neck as the wound spouted green ichor.

In a flash, a second dagger spun toward Ezerhauten. The knight brought up his sword and effortlessly knocked the blade aside.

*Zounds.*

"Time for a lesson, whelp," said Ezerhauten.

*I can take him, I can beat them all.*

The berserker's fury consumed Jude, body and soul; every ounce of his strength poured into each blow. He would crush his enemy. He

would utterly annihilate him. He would have his revenge.

Two great swords flashed and sparked. Jude's sword thundered against Ezerhauten's, but for each powerful blow he struck, Ezerhauten struck twice, slashing and slicing into Jude's armor.

Jude roared in anger. *I'm hurt. He's too fast, too good. Gods, help me.*

Ezerhauten moved with blazing speed, parrying or dodging blow after blow after blow.

*Toying with me. No chance. Hold out until Balfin can help.*

"To the north is Asgard,"

shouted Jude. Blood dripped from his mouth.

“Asgard cannot save you, boy,” said Ezerhauten. “Nor can Thetan.”

As Jude raised his sword for another slash, Mort Zag struck him across the shoulders from behind. Jude dropped to his knees, his strength gone. He was stunned, numb. His sword fell from his hands.

Mort Zag grabbed Jude, lifted him above his head, and threw him as if he were but an apple and not an armored man of well over three hundred pounds. Jude smashed into a thick oak some twenty feet

away. He dropped down unmoving at its base.

Jude opened his eyes. Everything hurt. He felt cold, so cold. Blood streamed down his cheek. He coughed and spat up blood, and coughed again. Then everything hurt more. His vision was blurred, his mind clouded; it was difficult to breathe. He felt as if he floated in a fog. Then he saw Sir Gabriel walking toward him—strangely, Ezerhauten and Mort Zag walked on either side.

“Help me,” Jude said. *I’m saved; it’s Sir Gabriel.*



Sir Gabriel squatted down before him. His eyes glowed a brilliant gold, an eerie grin on his face.

Jude's eyes widened in alarm as he realized who fronted him now; his body shuddered in fear, though he had no strength to move, no command of his muscles. "Korrgonn," he said. "Please—don't kill me." *Can't abandon my brothers.*

Jude's vision grew dark and he saw no more.

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“I told him not go,” said Ector. Claradon, Duke Harringgold, Angle Theta, Ob, and several others gathered around the young knight in Harringgold’s study.

“I told him it was a trap. We argued and finally he gave in and said he wouldn’t go himself. He said he would send a squadron of knights and men-at-arms under Balfin. Next thing I knew, Indigo burst into my chambers saying that Jude just rode off leading a dozen men. One dozen. Not even a half squadron. The idiot.”

“More muscle than brains is Jude,” said Ob, nodding.

“Indigo and I rode after them with what men we could assemble in a few minutes.

We found them a couple miles north of Riker’s Crossroads. They were ambushed. Twelve men dead, including Balfin, Mordekain, Mithras, and Desmond.”

Claradon and Ob shuddered and winced as he spoke each name. Each one a friend and comrade of long years.

Ector took a deep breath before continuing. “Not just dead. They were mutilated. Unspeakable things were done to them. Some even looked—gnawed upon.”

“Dead gods,” said Tanch.  
“Madness, sheer madness. What did we do to bring this on?”

“What of Jude?” said Ob quietly.

“He wasn’t there. They must’ve taken him.”

“Did you search the wood?” said Ob perking up. “Could he have run for it?”

“His horse was down, dead in the road. They’d pulled a rope up from the brush and tripped the lead horses. It looked like they fell at a gallop.”

“He would’ve been thrown,” said Ob.

“We found no trail leading into the woods. They took him.”

“How many of them did you find?” asked the Duke.

“Not a one. They either took their dead with them, or none were killed.”

“None killed?” spouted Ob. “Not likely. Twelve men of House Eotrus didn’t go lightly, I’ll tell you. Balfin is—was—an expert; Mordekain, a bruiser as strong as Jude, and Desmond was as tough as nails. Dropped twice their number at least, ambushed or not. They went down as heroes, and I will hear nothing different from nobody,

understand?" Ob smacked his fist into his other hand and cursed under his breath.

Ector stared down at his feet for a respectful while before continuing. "We came on to Lomion as fast as we could, chasing at their heels all the way. We got close enough to see them, but no closer."

"Who were they, and how many?" said Ob, still red-faced and bristling.

"Fifteen to twenty riders, plus a large coach that moves like the wind."

Claradon, Ob, and Theta exchanged glances.

“We followed them to the city, but lost them at the north gate. The guards let the brigands pass swiftly through, but held us there for many minutes. We were so close. It was all I could do to not cut the gatemen down.”

“Did it seem as if the guards delayed you on purpose?” said Harringgold. “To let the brigands get clear?”

“Maybe, but it’s hard to say. A Myrdonian Captain gave us a difficult time, asking why we were riding so hard and what we were about. He just wouldn’t listen to me or didn’t care, and made no move

to stop the coach despite my pleading.”

“Did you get the Captain’s name?” said the Duke.

Ector paused, thinking. “They called him Bartol.”

Harringgold nodded. “I thought as much. Captain Bartol is the third son of House Alder, younger brother to Chancellor Barusa.”

“Those stinking Alders are everywhere,” said Ob. “Everywhere there’s dirty dealings and backstabblings, that is. They’ve never been any good, not one of them.”

The Duke stood up. “My men



will find this coach.” He strode off to dispatch his agents, leaving Claradon and his comrades alone in the study.

“That stinking carriage again,” said Ob.

“It’s the Shadow League for certain,” said Claradon. “Why couldn’t it just be brigands—pay some ransom and get Jude back? Instead, we’ve got the same crazies that killed father, Sir Gabriel, and the others. And now they have Jude too.”

“We should’ve rooted them stinking cultists out years ago and been done with them,” said Ob.

“Why do they want Jude?” said Claradon. “To what end? Haven’t they done enough to our House?”

“We won’t know why until we catch them, boy,” said Ob. “And catch them we will.”

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“The carriage went through Southeast,” said Grim Fischer—a gnome, and one of the Duke’s agents. “Straight to the docks. They rolled it right up a gangway and onto a ship. Their outriders boarded too, along with their horses. They set sail as soon as they secured the

carriage and horses below deck."

"Which ship was it?" asked Harringgold.

"*The White Rose*," said Grim. "It's the fastest ship in Lomion."

"Of course it is," said Claradon sardonically.

"A smuggler, reaver, and all-around ship of ill repute," said Ob.

"True enough," said Grim, "and captained by one Rastinfan Rascelon."

"A no-good raper and murderer, I hear tell," said Ob.

"That and more, but no one's given evidence against him," said Grim.

“And apparently in the employ of the Shadow League,” said Claradon.

“More than that,” said Harringgold. “We’ve suspected for some time that Rascelon is one of the League’s Arkons—that’s what they call their highest leaders.”

“Did your men see Korrgonn?” asked Theta.

“He was there,” said Grim. “He got out of the carriage just after they drove it onto *The White Rose*. He sailed with the ship.”

“Are you certain?”

“Saw him myself.”

Theta turned toward the Duke.

“I need a ship.”

Harringgold didn't immediately answer.

“Will you give us a ship? We must track down Korrgonn. He must be stopped.”

“I know your feelings on this, Lord Theta. Arranging for a ship that has any hope of catching *The White Rose* may not be an easy task.”

“My Lords,” said Tanch. “Let's not be hasty here. We've agreed that Korrgonn is a threat—we all want him gone. Well—now he's gone, of his own volition. Let him go, I say. Master Fischer has said

*The White Rose* was heavily provisioned. That means a long journey, perhaps months or more, to who knows where. Just let him go, and keep watch for *The White Rose's* return. When it arrives—if it arrives—we can marshal our forces and be waiting for it with strength, on solid ground of our choosing. We will have the advantage. But on the river or at sea, any ship that we could send is vulnerable.”

“They have Jude, you idiot,” said Ob. “We’re not to abandon him.”

Tanch looked confused. “No—no—of course not,” said Tanch,

wiping his brow with his sleeve and looking for a chair. "I'm sorry. The stress of recent days has gotten to me. I didn't think—didn't know what I was saying. Of course, we must rescue Jude, of course, we must."

"Even if Jude wasn't with him," said Ob, "who's to say what evils Korrgonn will do downriver."

"Or what forces of his own he'll marshal," added Claradon.

"Remember, Lomion isn't just this city and our lands to the north," said Ob. "There are plenty of lands to the south too: Dor Malvegil, Roosa, Beringford, Dravilt, Dor

Linden, Dover, and more. Stinking Korrgonn could do no end of mischief at any of those places. We can't sit back and let that happen."

"We will send ravens to the Lords Malvegil and Mirtise warning them of the threat," said the Duke.

"*The Rose* was provisioned for a long journey," said Grim. "Three days ago it appeared in the harbor, though no one saw it approach. Rascelon loaded it with all manner of provisions until the moment it sailed. They hauled aboard enough water and foodstuffs to sail all the way to Tragoss Mor, probably farther, without resupplying.



“So where could they be headed?” asked Claradon.

“Maybe they’re going to Theta’s lands, way out wherever it is,” said Ob. “Perhaps old Korrgonn heard about your fancy wine cellar and wants to sample a vintage or two.”

“Enough,” said Theta. “I intend to follow that ship until I catch it, whether that be in ten leagues or at the very ends of the world. There will be no turning around, no letting him go. I will catch Korrgonn and kill him, and if it’s possible, rescue Claradon’s brother. Anyone that objects can stay here and hide under their beds. The rest

of us will see this done.” He turned toward the Duke. “You say that *The White Rose* is the fastest ship in Lomion; which one is the next fastest?”

Harringgold considered for a moment. “Any one of several Lomerian Cruisers—military ships. But I can’t get you one of those—each is commanded by a Myrdonian Knight Captain and they all report to Marshal Balfor and through him to the Chancellor. The next best choice would be *The Black Dragon*. She’s a smaller ship but she might be *The Rose*’s match in speed.”

“My Lord, *The Black Dragon* is

no more, at least in name,” said Grim. “Slaayde renamed her *The Black Falcon* not long ago. Third or fourth time he has changed the ship’s name and standard in the last few years, if I remember straight.”

“Ah, yes, he is known for that.” Harringgold turned back toward Theta. “*The Black Falcon* is a merchant ship captained by one Dylan Slaayde.”

“The problem is, Slaayde is set to sail to Minoc with a load of marble, or so I hear,” said Grim. “To make any good speed you would have to unload it before you set sail. That will take a day,

maybe two, and we would probably have to buy the cargo off him to boot."

"Are there other options?" asked Theta.

"None that I know of that's near as fast and what could be ready much sooner," said Grim.

"Then *The Black Falcon* it is," said Theta, staring down the Duke.

The Duke stared back for a goodly time before responding. "Very well, I will arrange this with Captain Slaayde. I'll also assign some of my guardsmen to your command—as I fear you will need them before your journey is done."

“Can Slaayde be trusted, my lord?” said Claradon.

“To a point,” said Harringgold. “He’s a scoundrel and a menace to free trade; but he’s no friend to the League.”

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“What am I supposed to do?” said Ector. He, Claradon and Ob huddled together in the corner of Harringgold’s den. “Father is gone. Sir Gabriel is dead. Brother Donnelin, Par Talbon, Stern, Marzdan, Balfin, Mithras, all dead, every one. Malcolm is badly hurt,

now Jude is taken, and you, Artol, and Tanch are all going who knows where. What am I supposed to do?"

Claradon looked stricken. He reached out and put a hand on his brother's shoulder.

"What would your father tell you to do, boy?" said Ob.

Ector shook his head slightly and sunk back into the leather chair. "He would tell me to do my duty."

"Which is what?"

"To uphold the family name and the family honor. To hold the Dor and protect it and our people against all enemies. To obey the

crown.”

“Right,” said Ob. “That is what you’re supposed to do, and that’s what you will do, boy. That’s what would make your father proud. Do you understand?”

Ector nodded and stared at the floor. Tears welled in his eyes, uncertain, and afraid.

“You’re not alone in this,” said Claradon. “Sarbek is acting Castellan. Next to Ob, he has the most experience of our any of our men. He will deal with the details.”

“And Indigo is a fine knight,” said Ob. “You keep him close, he will help you until we’re back.”

“And when will that be?” said Ector, tears streaming down his face.

“When we rescue Jude,” said Claradon.

“What if it’s too late?”

“It won’t be,” said Claradon.

“What if it is?”

“Then we will avenge him, boy,” said Ob, “and then we’ll come home. Either way, we’ll be back as soon as we can.”

“I hope that’s soon enough,” said Ector. “A couple of drunks and an angry sheepherder could take the Dor now.”

“Ector, please.”



“No, Claradon. A month ago we had more than fifty named men amongst us. No other Dor could match us man for man. And now it’s just me, Sarbek, Indigo, and a few squadrons of nobodies. We’re finished, Claradon. The Dor is finished. House Eotrus is finished.”

“We’re not at war, Ector,” said Claradon. “We’re not under siege.”

“It seems to me that we are.”

“Well we’re not. We will rebuild our forces in time. And I’ll ask Lord Harringgold if he can spare any more men to escort you back and help man the Dor.”

“That won’t bring father back.

Or any of them.”

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Tears streamed down Marissa Harringgold's face, her cheeks flushed red, her hands trembled. She was as beautiful as Claradon remembered—maybe more so. “If you hadn't made Jude go back to Dor Eotrus, he would be here now; but he's dead, and it's all your fault.”

“He's not dead,” said Lord Harringgold. “Brother Claradon will bring him back to you, daughter, never fear.”

Claradon's face was pale. He was in shock. He couldn't believe what he was seeing—what he was hearing. Jude and Marissa? Jude knew better than anyone how he felt about her. How could Jude do that to him? How could he betray him? Claradon clamped his eyes on the floor and did not move them, no matter how much he wanted to. He couldn't stand to look at her—he couldn't stomach it. He hoped that he would never have to look at her again. So he kept his eyes down. Beside him, Ector did the same.

Marissa marched up to Claradon.

“First you go off and become a monk, and now Jude is dead. Dead!” She turned and her eyes bored into Ector. “And you’re too young.” She stamped her foot. “I’ll be an old maid.”

She stormed from the room, wailing. “I hate you all.”

## IV

### BORN KILLERS

“I don’t expect you to duel the devil  
himself.

*For that we need born killers.”*

—Barusa of Alder

The Chancellor’s office in Tammanian Hall was hot, as it always was that time of year. No windows permitted in any light, air, or prying eyes. Stuffy and close, it smelled of sweat and moldy parchment.

Cartegian, son of King Tenzivel

and crown prince of the realm of Lomion, squatted on a chair and rocked back and forth, wild-eyed, unshaven, and unkempt. Chancellor Barusa of Alder passed him a document and an elderly scribe handed the Prince a fresh quill.

“And what is this one for?” said Cartegian. “Something good or something bad?”

“Something good, of course,” said Barusa. “Now sign it.”

“Let me read it first.” Cartegian snatched up the writ in a grubby hand, drool sliding down his whiskers and dripping onto the parchment. “Hmm. Another arrest

warrant, and this one for that traitorous Lord 'Blank Space to be filled in later'. Haven't we arrested old Lord Blankety Blank over a hundred times today?" he said, pointing to the pile of signed documents atop the corner of the desk. "Can we give the old boy no rest? We'll need bigger dungeons soon, oh yes, that we will."

"And just how many inbred blueblood braggarts are we arresting tomorrow, oh great defender of the realm, oh champion of justice? Just try to say that three times fast. Every one, perchance? Off with all their heads, will it be?"

“You need not concern yourself with the details of State, my Prince. Merely sign this last writ and you are free for the remainder of the day.”

“Chancellor—dear, beloved Chancellor, you’re such a poopyhead.”

The Chancellor rolled his eyes and clenched his fists. He winced from the effort, his right hand stiff, and his arm still in a sling from his duel with Claradon Eotrus. Barusa took a deep breath and spoke in as calm a voice as he was capable. “Sign it, or there will be no supper for you.”



A fiendish smile engulfed Cartegian's face. "I'll eat my cat; how would you like that?" The Prince turned and studied the feathered quill. He rubbed it on his arm, soiling his shirt. Drool spilled down his lip.

"It's the last one for the day, Cartegian. Sign it and you can go play with your cat or your troll or whatever."

Cartegian stared at the Chancellor, his eyes now focused, his voice now slow and steady. "If I sign it, Mr. Old Fart, can I go to the dungeons and play with someone, someone bad?"

“Who?”

“Whoever. Just so long as they scream.”

“Fine. Sign it and you can go to the dungeons.”

“Promise?”

“Yes. Sign it.”

The prince signed the scroll with an exaggerated flourish and then somersaulted forward on the table, scattering papers and knocking over inkwells. He landed on his feet before the table, and bowed to an imagined audience. The scribes dived in to save the parchment from the spilled ink.

“Enough,” said Barusa. “Get the

fool out of here.”

Cartegian turned to him and feigned shock at Barusa’s words. “Yes, send me to the dungeons. To the dungeons with the great hero of Lomion. Bring forth my lizard!”

Blain of Alder burst into the room and nearly crashed into Cartegian.

“What ho,” said the Prince. “The dashing brother of Mr. Farty Pants. Little Poop, himself.

Blain stepped around the Prince, ignoring him. “I have news.”

“You found me a flying monkey at last?” said the Prince.

The Chancellor studied Blain

for a moment, then put down the scroll he held and dismissed his aides who ushered Cartegian out with them. Only when the chamber was empty and door secured did Blain continue.

“Eotrus knows about his brother’s ambush, and he knows it was the League.”

“This was expected, but not so soon.”

“It’s worse. They know about Lord Korrgonn’s passage on *The White Rose*. Harringgold’s men are at Dylan Slaayde’s ship. They must plan on following *The Rose*.”

“Curse that Harringgold. Does

nothing pass him by?”

“He’s got many agents—Rangers, the Orphan’s Guild, and more.”

“We have agents too, brother, including on *The Black Falcon*.”

“But Fizdar is dead.”

Barusa shot him an angry look.

“But you know that, of course. You’ve got another man aboard?”

Barusa returned no reaction.

“Of course, you do. Do we move against Eotrus now?”

“Eotrus is nothing. He’s but a boy handy with a sword. He can be killed at any time; I have only to give the command. It’s the other

that's the concern."

"He's only one man, and he can't possibly be the fallen one. It's ridiculous. The wizards are mental."

Barusa slammed his fist to the tabletop. "He killed Lord Mortach! Mortach was more god than man and he killed him. He's the threat, a grave threat, and must be dealt with."

"We don't know it was him."

"Then who? You think Eotrus cut off Mortach's head? Or maybe his gnome lackey or his hedge wizard?"

"Who knows?"

"It was the Harbinger, you idiot."

The priests say he only looks like a man, but he's not. He's some ancient evil held over from the Dawn Age, some force of nature. A monster, a real monster, like in the old legends. The incarnation of all that's evil in the world. He must be stopped. We must stop him."

"You're losing it, brother," Blain said, shaking his head in disgust. "None of that can be true. It's crazy. Superstitious, fairy stories, that's all, told by old men desperate to hang on to power. But even if, somehow, you and the priests are right, then the farther he is from Lomion, the better. Let him go and

good riddance.”

“No! He needs killing and Eotrus along with him. Contact Captain Kleig at once. If Eotrus follows *The Rose*, we will follow Eotrus.”

Blain looked surprised. “You’re going?”

“Of course not. You are. And Bartol and Edwin too.”

“Edwin? Barusa, I heard *The Rose* fit up for a long haul. I have a family. I can’t just go off for who knows how long following these people. And my son too?”

“I need you to go. I need men that I can rely on for this. As for



Edwin, leave it up to him. He owes Eotrus for that scar. Let's offer your boy a chance at revenge. If he's man enough to take it, well, that will tell us something, won't it? In any case, you will be there to look after him."

"And what do I tell Esther?"

"How about the truth? You're off on House business of great import. She will understand or not, I really don't care. But you will go, either way."

"Fine, but if the Harbinger is as dangerous as you think, how are we to stop him? I'll cross swords with most any man, but I've no interest

in fighting ancient man-monsters or whatever he is.”

“Don’t pee yourself, brother. For all your skill, I don’t expect you to duel the devil himself. For that we need born killers.”

“Who could possibly—”

“The Duelist of Dyvers and the Knights of Kalathen”

Blain’s face brightened. “That’s an idea at that. DeBoors is supposed to be the best there is, and I hear he’s in the city.”

“He is.”

Blain paused for a moment. “You planned this? DeBoors isn’t in Lomion just by chance, is he?”

“Of course I planned it. I plan everything. Have Kleig ready his ship to sail by morning while I pay DeBoors a visit.”

Three cloaked men, faces concealed under hoods, made their way up the grand stair of the Roaring Lion Inn. DeBoors and his men had rooms on the second floor—some of the best accommodations in all of Lomion City, courtesy of the Chancellor, or rather, of House Alder’s treasury.

“Why do we need this mercenary, uncle?” said Edwin quietly. “I can deal with Eotrus, and

Uncle Bartol and my father can handle that foreign knight.”

“I admire your confidence,” said Barusa, “but I would rather not see my brothers and nephew dead.”

“It’s unseemly for us to be walking around in hiding, as if we’re criminals,” said Edwin.

“It would be more unseemly for the chancellor of the realm to be seen consorting with hired killers.”

Bartol put his hand on Edwin’s shoulder. “Keep your tongue in check while we’re in there. DeBoors isn’t a man to be fooled with.”

“Neither am I,” Edwin said.

Four armored men, Knights of

Kalathen, stood on guard in the second floor hall. These were no ordinary soldiers. They were large and solid, with chiseled features, the finest armor and weapons that coin could buy, and the dead eyes of cold-blooded killers. Bartol pulled back his hood and showed them the Chancellor's seal of office.

The knights soon ushered them through a set of ornate double doors into a grand suite. A large living area with rich couches and chairs and a large fireplace dominated the room. Four doors led to bedrooms.

Beside the fireplace stood a tall,

rangy, shirtless Pict of golden brown skin and ponytail. Around his waist, a sword belt; in his right hand, a spear, the haft resting on the floor. A worn bedroll lay open and disheveled at his feet; clearly, he had been lying on it before the three arrived. A man accustomed to a hard life outdoors sometimes had no interest in a soft bed.

The Chancellor and Edwin pulled back their hoods as the Pict studied them. The left side of Edwin's face was swollen and red, an ugly scar, not long old, extended from the corner of his lip to his left ear.

One of the bedroom doors opened. A chiseled hulk of gleam and gristle stood in the portal. He studied the room for some moments, then nodded to the Kalathens. Two left the room, the remaining stood guard by the door.

“I am DeBoors,” he said.

“I am Barusa,” said the Chancellor. He gestured toward each of his kinsmen, in turn. “My brother, Bartol, of the Myrdonians. My nephew, Edwin.”

DeBoors approached and shook hands with each. Barusa and DeBoors exchanged polite smiles. Bartol tightly gripped DeBoors’

hand to take his measure. At six foot four and two hundred eighty pounds of mostly muscle, Bartol stood eye to eye with DeBoors, but still looked small beside him. DeBoors was solid, and massive of arm, chest, and shoulder. His golden cuirass, articulated and fitted, made him all the more imposing. Edwin barely contained his disdain for the whole affair.

The men took seats on couch and chairs. A servant appeared, dispensing wine, brandy, and cigars from parts foreign. Barusa and DeBoors engaged in pleasant conversation about the weather,



DeBoors' journey from Dyvers, and other miscellany. All the while, Bartol said little and sat patiently. Edwin squirmed in his seat, having no interest in small talk and no use for mercenaries. The Pict stood silent, and near motionless, save for his eyes, which shifted from Barusa, to Bartol, to Edwin, and back again, no doubt imagining novel ways to kill and torture them each, such was his savage nature.

After a time, DeBoors placed his tumbler on the table. "On to business?"

The Chancellor nodded. "All that we say here tonight will remain

here.”

“Of course,” said DeBoors.

“I will have your word on that.”

“You just did.”

The Chancellor nodded.

“Within some hours, a ship called *The Black Falcon* will leave the harbor in pursuit of a vessel called *The White Rose*. Aboard *The Rose* are some that are friends of mine. Aboard *The Falcon* are some that are not. You will follow *The Falcon* aboard another ship called *The Grey Talon*. With you and your men will go Bartol, Edwin, my brother Blain, and a company of soldiers from my House. In addition, *The*

*Grey Talon* is well stocked of marines and fighting seamen.”

DeBoors nodded his understanding.

“Aboard *The Falcon* are two men that I would see dead.”

“News of your duel has reached me, Chancellor. The young Lord Eotrus is one of the two, I have no doubt. The mercenary that travels with him is the other.”

Barusa smiled a thin smile. “Indeed. I am glad to see that you are well informed.”

“It’s essential in my business.”

Barusa nodded. “When you are well away from Lomion City, at a

time of your choosing, you will do away with these two. I don't want them returning to Lomion City under any circumstances."

"What support do they have on *The Falcon*?"

"Eotrus has his House Wizard with him," said Bartol.

"Their true House Wizard fell in a skirmish alongside Aradon Eotrus in the Northlands," said Barusa. "By all accounts, his replacement is no more than a hedge wizard and a coward at that. But Eotrus does have troops with him, perhaps one, or even two squadrons of knights and men-at-arms. *The Falcon's*

crew may stand with them as well, but I doubt it.”

“I’ve heard tell of Dylan Slaayde and his reavers,” DeBoors said. “They can be dealt with, if need be.”

“Your price?” Barusa said.

“Your offer?” responded DeBoors.

“Twenty thousand silver stars,” said Barusa.

DeBoors’ face darkened. “A kingly price for the head of a merchant or a minor noble. A pittance for a Dor Lord well-guarded, and a river voyage to boot.”

They stared each other down

for some moments.

“Fifty thousand, and no more,” said Barusa, as he stood, the negotiation over. The others followed him up.

“Thirty thousand in advance, the rest on proof,” said DeBoors.

“Done,” said Barusa.

## V

### OLD SAINT PIP

*“Trust no wizards, my Lord, not  
one.”*

—Pipkorn to Angle Theta

The southern Lomerian docks stretched for over two miles. The western reaches nestled within the fringes of the High District and were filled with noblemen's yachts and pleasure vessels, elements of the royal fleet, church vessels, and ambassadorial galleons. The heart of the docks, populated with

merchant craft of all manner and type, burst with warehouses and fisheries and bustled with activity from pre-dawn to late eve. Those central docks served as home to the Lomerian Navy: cutters, longships, and cruisers, swift and strong.

The eastern reaches of the docks touched a seedy section of the city called The Heights for a short stretch and ended in Southeast, which was by far the foulest district in the fair city of Lomion. The walls betwixt the city proper and Southeast continued to the water's edge and well beyond. Long and tall stone jetties extended



more than three hundred feet into the harbor on each side of Southeast. Guard posts lived at the watersides, manned continuously with sturdy watchmen. Watch stations and barracks stood against the wall near the water's edge at the land sides of the jetties, and brimmed with watchmen—duty posts for the young and the out of favor.

*The Black Falcon* berthed in The Heights, not far from Southeast, no doubt due to its dubious reputation and alleged dirty dealings. To supplement its crew and Claradon's men, Lord

Harringgold assigned a squadron of soldiers of his house. Young men mostly, fresh-faced but well trained and disciplined. They wore the livery of House Harringgold on their tabards—a silver, gauntleted fist upraised that looked to be a mighty stone tower when viewed from certain angles. These men-at-arms were girded with swords and shields; several bore crossbows, and a number brought aboard wicked-looking pikes. They wore chainmail coats, leggings, coif, and steel half-helms. Commanding them was Lord Harringgold's nephew, Sir Seran Harringgold, a muscular, fair-

haired youth of ready smile and gleaming plate armor. Seran was a member of the Odion Knights, an aristocratic order both powerful and secretive.

Theta supervised the provisioning of the ship, which proceeded concurrently with the offloading of marble slabs from *The Falcon's* hold. He had the Duke's men acquire and bring aboard foodstuffs and drink, independent of those hauled aboard by Dylan Slaayde's crew. At Theta's direction, the Duke's men acquired various additional armaments and several trunks of a type designed to float,

even fully laden in rough seas. While the loading and unloading operations proceeded, Theta inspected every inch of the three-masted vessel—its extents, structure, and cargo.

Claradon's small retinue of soldiers stood watch on the pier during the loading process. They and Tanch made a game of counting how many people on the bustling dockyards skulked and loitered about, watching every move on and around *The Falcon*.

"That man on the corner—perhaps, one of the Alders?" said Tanch.

“A Black Hand,” said Artol. “He’s called Dirgo the Mark. A real killer.” Artol took a puff of the cigar that dangled from his mouth. “He’ll cut your eyes out and eat them raw, if you give him the chance.”

Tanch shuddered.

“I believe I see a Myrdonian knight in the high window across the way,” said Tanch. “See the insignia on his tabard? I’m quite sure I’m right, this time. And that stooped old woman by the barrels has a beard beneath her cowl. How disgusting.”

“So does your grandmother, but good eyes anyway, wizard,” said

Artol. "Did you notice that that lady of the evening down the corner has turned away three buyers in favor of watching us?"

"Oh! There's one of the Vizier's apprentices," said Tanch, "peaking from the doorway of the fishmonger's."

"If we had sold tickets," said Artol, "we could've bought this darn ship."

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Slaayde's crew was a company of seasoned sailors and hardened sell-swords from around the globe.

They held no love for the Duke's well-coifed and uniformed guardsmen or for the knights of Dor Eotrus, who looked down upon them as the scum of the earth, which in truth, rose more than a few above their station.

N'Paag, the newly hired first mate, a dark-hued man of the free city of Piper's Hold, stood on the forecastle and surveyed the loading and unloading work, but said little.

Slaayde's second mate and chief bullyboy was a near seven-foot-tall, black-bearded behemoth called Little Tug. Though expert at working the pulleys and small

gantries used to haul the slabs of marble out of the hold, Tug could lift near as much with his bare hands. His half-lugron blood accounted for his muscle and his girth, but not his height, since lugron typically stood inches shorter than the average man.

Affronts to nature and decency are the half-lugron, or so they say, since the coupling of human woman and lugron male almost always occurred without consent. Rarely was it that such a union bore fruit, and when it did, the pitiable result usually died in childhood, deformed and outcast. Despite his



rather ill-favored looks, Tug was one the lucky ones, as he had his share of wits, if just.

All the work and the ever-present bantering was performed under the watchful eye of the ship's quartermaster, the ill-named Bertha Smallbutt, who was near as wide as she was tall and no doubt trained the banshee in its screaming techniques. At one point, Ob found himself upended bodily and tossed over the rail into the water when he ran afoul of her during a disagreement about whose provisions were to go where.

In the final hour of loading, a

stooped man of hooded brown robes and crooked cane made his way across the pier to *The Falcon's* berth carrying a large, grimy sack over his shoulder.

“A bite of bread?” pleaded the man as he approached Theta who stood at the foot of the gangway. “A crumb, a crumb of cheese for a poor old man?”

“Greetings, Rascatlan,” said Theta. “Has your larder gone empty or your head?”

The old man let out a small growl of frustration and looked up at Theta. It was the wizard Pipkorn, Sorcerer Supreme of all Midgaard,

in disguise. He furtively looked around to see if anyone could overhear them. “I could never fool you, Lord Theta. I have come with council and what aid I can provide, if you will have it.”

“Gladly.”

Pipkorn stepped close and spoke quietly. “You know that Korrgonn is bent on opening another gateway. He won’t rest until it’s done. That is where he’s going, to find another place of power where the veil between Midgaard and Nifleheim is thin. Only there can the door be opened. Only there can his armies come

through.”

“I suspected as much.”

“He must not succeed or all will be lost. Everything. The whole world.”

“Don’t those fools helping him know?”

“Most of them are wizards. Ginalli has gathered dark wizards from across Midgaard to his cause. Worse, he has corrupted many who were never dark. When that gateway opens, magic will come storming back in the world, magic of a kind and a power not seen in an age. That’s what they want, that is what they lust for. Their power

will grow tenfold. They're blinded by this, they can't see past it. Dreams of such power can corrupt most anyone. Trust no wizards, my lord, not one."

"Even you?"

"Even me," said Pipkorn sadly.

"I don't trust anyone."

"That has its advantages, I suppose. If you will, my lord, gather young Eotrus, Par Tanch, your elf, your gnome, and young Harringgold, and let's speak in private. I have some trifles for you."

Not until they were secure within the Captain's Den, the door barred, did Pipkorn straighten and

pull back his hood, his voice returning to its normal pitch.

Sixtyish and balding gray, Pipkorn had a full gray moustache and a strange boil amidst his forehead. "I come with what aid I can offer for your quest," said Pipkorn. "And to wish you well on your journey. I appreciate its true import, even if your good benefactor the Duke does not. There's much to speak of, but not near enough time. You must be away as soon as you are supplied. I've brought you what tokens an old wizard has collected over his long years." Pipkorn opened his sack and

rummaged about. "One and all are precious to me, but if they're not put to good use now, then when?"

From within the sack he pulled a deerskin quiver filled with arrows of black stony heads and shafts of exotic wood fletched with green feathers. "For you," he said, handing the quiver to Dolan. "Made by the Vanyar Elves of legend. You will find that they fly truer and farther than any others. The tips are made of ranal, a metal with the look of obsidian, but hard as steel and near half again as light. They're imbued with some queer magic of the Vanyar; use them against the

minions of Nifleheim when common arrows fail you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Wizard, sir,” said Dolan, bowing low.

Pipkorn reached back into the tall sack and pulled out a short sword, gleaming silver and inscribed with runes. “For you, Sir Seran. This is a Dyvers blade, but no common one. This beauty was forged four hundred years ago by Lord Dyvers himself, one of his last and greatest works. Use it well.”

Pipkorn handed Seran the ancient blade. “Thank you, Master Pipkorn; I’m in your debt.”

“Yes of course, as is everyone.



And where is young Malvegil?"

"Glimador left for Dor Malvegil some days ago," said Claradon.

"Of course," said Pipkorn. Pipkorn pulled another stylish short sword from his sack. "Sir Seran, I trust that you'll not mind holding your blade's twin until Glimador rejoins this merry band?"

"I would be honored," said Seran.

"No doubt, no doubt," said Pipkorn.

Next, Pipkorn pulled a short-hafted battle-axe from the sack, and handed it to Ob. "For you, sir." The axe had a dull silver color to its

head, and a stout oaken haft carved with curious runes.

“Mighty pretty axe there, Pip,” said Ob, as he grasped the handle. “It almost looks like it were made of—”

“Mithril?” said Pipkorn. “Indeed it is. I know of no other like it.”

“An axe of mithril? Even in legend I’ve only heard of one.”

“Yes, only one,” said Pipkorn, a wry smile on his face. “And this is she. The axe of Bigby the Bold, late Prince of the great gnomish city of Shandelon, and last of his line.”

Ob’s eyes near popped from his head. “It cannot be. How could you

ever come across this?”

“One of many tales for which we have no time, I fear. Suffice that it will serve you well, as it served the gnomish lords and kings of Shandelon for a thousand years and more.”

Pipkorn patted himself down searching for something. “Ah, here it is.” From a pocket, he pulled a bronze ring. “For you, Tanch Trinagal of the Blue Tower, son of Sinch” said Pipkorn as he handed over the ring. “You hold in your hand the fabled Ring of the Magi, one of twenty born in the forge of the Wizard Talidousen, Sorcerer

Supreme during the reign of King Zeltlin II, more than seven thousand years ago. The skills that ensorcelled it and its brothers are long lost to the world and likely as not, will not be found again. Keep it close, and keep it secret, for there is many a mage and hedge wizard that would gladly kill to possess one of these.”

Tanch stared at it in wonder. “Legend tells that these rings can amplify a wizard’s power, increasing the strength and duration of his magics.”

“It does that and more, as you’ll come to know in time.”

“Now, young Lord Eotrus, for you, I have something truly special.” He reached under his cloak and pulled out a gold chain hung round his neck. He lifted it off over his head. From the chain hung a bejeweled amulet of fiery red and gold stones, set in a seven-sided gold base. The center stone was red with streaks of yellow, having the appearance of a great cat’s eye, and giving off a soft glow. “Brother Claradon Eotrus, Lord of Dor Eotrus, son of Aradon, and first of your name, I present to you the fabled Amulet of Escandell. Its stones were forged in the heart of a falling

star that fell to Midgaard in the second age of our world, the Age of Heroes. Lord Escandell, first wizard of the Tower of the Arcane found the fallen star, plucked these very stones from its maw, and weaved them into the golden base with eldritch spells and mighty words of power from bygone days. When worn around your neck, no enemy can take you unawares and no beast can surprise you. Wear it beneath your outer garments, close to your heart forevermore and fail you it will not. Even now it glows a bit—as there is danger here, but it's not immediate, so the glow is soft

and dim. As the glow and heat increases, so does your peril.”

“There are no words, Master Pipkorn, for such generosity. I am in your debt, sir. I thank you,” he said, bowing before the archmage.

Pipkorn turned toward Theta. “I have not forgotten you, my Lord. For the Great Dragon I have this.” Pipkorn reached into his robe and pulled out a leather sheath housing a bejeweled dagger. The handle was long, and black and silver, perhaps metal or even stone.

“That looks like Gabe’s dagger, Dargus Dal, though even fancier,” said Ob. “One of those old

Asgardian blades.”

“A good eye, sir,” said Pipkorn. “An Asgardian blade it is, but no common one—if any of them could be called common.” Pipkorn pulled it from its worn leather sheath.

“Lord Theta, I present to you—“  
“Wotan Dal,” said Theta as Pipkorn handed it to him handle first. Theta held the blade up before his eyes and studied it.

“Yes,” said Pipkorn, smiling. “Wotan Dal, which means “god’s blade” in the old tongue. This my friends was the blade of Lord Odin himself, the all-father, ruler of the gods, king of the mighty Aesir.



Forged before time itself in the first age of our world, in the days of myth and legend. Its blade cannot be dulled and no armor can turn it.”

Theta beamed as he gazed at the blade and its ornate handle. “This is a wonder I never thought to see again.”

“Bet that’s worth a pretty penny,” said Ob as he looked back and forth between it and his new axe.

“It’s worth the good half of the king’s treasury,” said Tanch.

“More,” said Theta. “A king’s cache of gold can be replaced, this cannot.” Theta placed Wotan Dal in

a sheath at his belt, replacing the blade that was there. "Thank you, wizard. Truly. I will make good use of it."

"I know, my Lord. That's why it is rightly yours, and no other's."

"I have one more gift, this one made by my own hand." He pulled a small wooden box from a deep pocket and held it out to Claradon. "I call this, the Ghost Ship box. Open its lid while on deck and a duplicate of your vessel, crew and all, will appear out of nowhere and sit the water some hundred yards from your vessel, in whichever direction you point the open lid.

Angle the lid higher to the sky and the ship will appear farther out, angle it down closer to the water, and the ship will appear closer. Make no mistake, this is no parlor trick. This duplicate will not only look as your ship, but will make the same noises and have the same scent. If the ghost ship is hit with catapult, ballistae, or fire it will take damage, its men will go down, and if the damage is bad enough, the ship will sink, ending the illusion. Use it wisely. It carries within it enough mystical energy to hold its illusion no more than one hour—whether that be in one use only,

two half hours, or ten uses of six minutes or any other combination. One hour only. Do not forget."

"Thank you, Master Pipkorn," said Claradon. "We will use your gifts wisely."

Pipkorn nodded. "Men, I must also tell you that your enemies on this quest aren't just those sailing with Korrgonn on *The White Rose*; there will be some just as deadly behind as well. Someone, though I know not who, has hired The Black Hand to slay you. I don't know if their target is Lord Theta or Lord Eotrus or both, but the Hand will follow you, however far you go. And

that's not the worst of it. The Alders bear you a weighty grudge, Claradon, because you bested Barusa in that duel. They've hired mercenaries to see to you. There's talk of Kaledon of the Gray Waste—a Pict and foul sword master of mystical power. Beware him, he is a deadly foe. Worse still, the winds say that the Duelist of Dyvers was given a warrant on your life as well. With him come the Knights of Kalathen, as formidable a group of tin cans as any."

"Just kill us now," said Tanch. "The Duelist of Dyvers. The Knights of Kalathen. The Black Hand. The

Shadow League. Cultists, and Nifleheim Lords too. How many of these madmen can we withstand? My back just can't take this stress," he said groaning and wincing as he slowly sunk down to his seat. "It's all too much, too much," he said, holding his brow. "It's the end of the world. The end times are here."

"Whatever happens, Claradon, do not face the duelist in battle," said Pipkorn. "Mark these words well. Heed them better than you have ever heeded any words before. The duelist is a foe you cannot match. If he stands in your path, forget your pride, forget your

good name, forget your honor, forget your friends, and forget anything else that would give you pause and just flee. Just run, boy, and keep running until you're well away and then run a good ways more and pray you've lost him. Flee and live to fight another day. Don't forget these words or the duelist will be the death of you." Pipkorn turned toward Theta. "I believe you knew the duelist, my lord, in days gone by. His name is Milton DeBoors."

Theta furrowed his brow. "That's a name I haven't heard in long years. The man I knew was a

soldier, a leader of men, not a hired killer.”

“Times change, and so do men. But you know that, my Lord, better than any. Let not these mercenaries stop you or distract you from your goal. You must succeed in your mission. You must kill Gallis Korrgonn, whatever the cost. You must not allow him to open another gateway.”

“Another gateway?” said Claradon.

“That can’t be his mind,” said Tanch.

“Make no mistake, my friends,” said Pipkorn, “That is Korrgonn’s



goal, I'm certain of it." Pipkorn looked over at Theta. "You agree, my Lord?"

"That is his plan, there can be little doubt," said Theta.

"So all Midgaard is still at risk?" said Ob.

"That's the danger," said Pipkorn. "That's why your mission is so important. That's why you must not fail."

"Master Pipkorn," said Claradon. "If this is true, then why are the Shadow Leaguers aiding Korrgonn? There are powerful wizards and learned men among their number. It can't all just be religious zealotry.

Do they truly want to destroy the world? It doesn't make sense."

"Why do you think powerful wizards would help Korrgonn?" asked Pipkorn.

"They're nuts, plain and simple," said Ob. "Crazed religious wackos."

"They must think they stand to gain somehow," said Claradon.

"And what gain do wizards seek?" said Pipkorn.

"They want mystical power above all things. Somehow, they must believe that they will acquire it by opening another gateway. They must think that they'll be

spared in the madness that follows, or else they plan to close the gateway after something or someone comes through, before the world can be overrun.”

Pipkorn smiled a thin smile. “Good theories, Lord Eotrus. No matter what their reasons though, they must be stopped. That task falls to you. The fate of us all depends on your success.”

“Now, my friends, I must be gone before too many eyes fall upon me. More spies are watching this ship than an old man can count. I’ll be lucky to make it back to that hovel in Southeast unaccosted.”

Pipkorn walked to the door and unlatched it, and then turned back. He looked at each man in the room. “There’s a storm coming to Lomion, my friends. If your journey is long, you may find that on your return, the Lomion you knew is no longer. Be swift, but most importantly, be successful.”

Pipkorn put up his cowl, stooped over, and opened the door.

“Farewell,” he said, closing the portal behind him.

Furnished in dark wood, the Captain’s Den held a big cherrywood table and chairs, a

mariner's globe, fine leather couches, shelves of books, maps, and more. Theta's floatable trunks were stacked in one corner. A spacious back room held all manner of foodstuffs, provisions, gear, and a water closet. A second room housed a dozen stacked bunks.

"We'll make our base here," said Theta. "It's defensible and more comfortable than we could ask for on a ship."

"The rooms below deck assigned to you and Claradon are spacious, Lord Theta," said Tanch. "Wouldn't they serve better?"

"If it were our ship, perhaps

they would, but it's not. Better that we stay together in a secure location."

"Captain Slaayde will never agree," said Claradon.

The Den's door swung open, Captain Slaayde in its breach. He looked about at each of them. Tall and barrel built, Slaayde's hair, a straight golden blond, his age perhaps forty, eyes blue and shifty. Clad in a white doublet, loose fitting blue pantaloons, a black bandoleer, black belt, black gloves and boots, all patent leather and shiny, and girded with a cutlass and dagger of wide cage guards, he looked every

bit the swashbuckler of his reputation. “Good afternoon, gentlemen,” said Slaayde quietly, a nervous smile across his round face. Have you lost your way? This is a private chamber. Your cabins are below deck.”

“And goodly cabins they be, Captain old boy,” said Ob. “The thing is, them’s just for sleeping. This here place is better suited to meeting and plotting and drinking and such, as you well know. Since we do a good deal of all that, we’ve pitched our tent here and here we’ll stay,” he said, puffing out his little chest.

“Sir, this is my office and personal store. You—”

“Now it’s ours, laddie” said Ob. “And that’s the end of that.”

Slaayde’s smile widened on his mouth, but not his eyes. Still quietly he said, “Harringgold bought you passage; he didn’t buy my ship. I’ll not have this.”

“Captain Slaayde, sir,” said Tanch. “We meant no offense, none at all, but Lord Eotrus required a room to meet with his staff and Lord Theta. We didn’t think you would object to a member of the Council of Lords and a visiting dignitary,” indicating Theta,



“making use of your fine chamber during this voyage.”

“Well sir, I do.”

“And well you should, of course, of course. I’m sure some appropriate additional compensation can be arranged with Lord Harringgold for your trouble and inconvenience. We must make this right.”

“Hmm, well—perhaps. We can discuss it.”

“Of course, this whole business is entirely my fault,” said Tanch. “I bear full responsibility and stand properly and appropriately chastised.”

“Harringgold’s men didn’t tell me where we’re headed?” Slaayde paused, waiting for some response. “He left that to you men. So? To where do we sail?”

“Just set sail downriver, laddie,” said Ob. “Give her as much speed as you can muster, and shout if you see any ships ahead. We’ve business with *The White Rose*.”

“A fast ship, and a dangerous one,” said Slaayde. “Cutthroats and scalawags crew her, and her Captain’s reputation is more foul than fair. Harringgold should’ve told me of this. There’s a different price.”

“You will be paid—well paid, laddie,” said Ob.

At this, Theta stood and walked toward Slaayde who took a cautious step back, now just outside the threshold. Staring the Captain direct in the eye, Theta, expressionless, closed the door in Slaayde’s face. A few moments later, Slaayde could be heard walking across the deck, cursing.

“Well that’s that,” said Ob. “Theta, what do you make of the good captain? That fellow in the temple said he was Slaayde’s first mate and made no secret of it.”

“I haven’t seen enough yet to

take his measure. It may be he knew naught of his mate's dealing with the League."

"We should've told the Duke about this," said Claradon.

"We needed a fast and sturdy ship with an experienced crew to catch *The White Rose*," said Theta. "Harringgold and Fischer made clear that *The Falcon* suited those needs best and with *The Falcon* comes Slaayde. If Harringgold suspected Slaayde might be aligned with the League he wouldn't have arranged our passage and we would be burdened with a lesser ship."

"And what if he is a Leaguer?"

said Ob.

“Then he will soon be dead,” said Theta.

“And what if he knows that we suspect him because of that Fizdar character?” said Tanch. “He could be laying a trap for us right now or planning to slit our throats in our sleep. Oh my, this is all too much. Too much.”

“No one knows Slaayde’s man spoke to us in the temple—and if he’s dead, as likely he is, no one need ever know, so don’t speak of it again. We’ll tread carefully around Slaayde.”

“Too bad the bad guys don’t all

wear black or red so that we could tell them apart,” said Dolan.

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With the ship ready to sail, Ob gathered all the men on the main deck, and Claradon, now clad in his priestly vestments, led them in a traditional prayer. Less than sixteen hours after meeting with Lord Harringgold in his chambers in Dor Lomion, *The Black Falcon* was off, sailing from its berth in Lomion Harbor into the heart of the Hudsar River. From the bridge deck, Claradon watched the grand skyline

of Lomion, capital city of the Kingdom of Lomion recede into the distance. Atop the tall deck, he gazed on many of the great buildings of Lomion and wondered if he would ever see them again.

Claradon admired the stalwart fortress of Dor Lomion, with its tall, gray, stone walls and high tower, home of House Harringgold. He wondered at the majestic, multi-spired, and multi-hued Tower of the Arcane, central seat of wizardom in all Midgaard and far and away the tallest edifice in the city. He could just glimpse the Royal Palace of the Tenzivels and its neighbor

Tammanian Hall, bastion of government, home of the High Council and the Council of Lords. The massive Auditorium, center of spectacles, entertainment, and the arts stood in the western reaches of Lomion. The Odinhom, grandest of all the temples, churches, and cathedrals, and central house of worship of Lord Odin, the all-father, the king of the gods, was located amidst the High Quarter not far from the Auditorium. The peaks of these and many other buildings both common and high all slowly vanished from sight as the ship exited the harbor and plied its way



down the river proper.

## VI

### DOR MALVEGIL

“They’re really good, just  
misunderstood.”

—Torbin Malvegil

*The Black Falcon* glided into a berth in the deep cove that served as Dor Malvegil’s port. Scores of buildings, stone and shingle, wood and nail, clustered around the cove, nestled between the water’s edge and the base of a sheer cliff, a massive flat-topped crag that rose high above the river and the surrounding woodlands. Atop the

rocky promontory, the grand old fortress of stone, ruled by House Malvegil for the previous three hundred years, boasted commanding views in all directions.

Several merchant ships of various sizes lay in port loading and unloading cargos, both pedestrian and exotic, though of *The White Rose* there was no sign. As *The Falcon* tied off to a well-kept pier, the harbormaster approached.

“Ahoy there, *Black Falcon*,” said the harbormaster, a burly graybeard.

“Ahoy yourself,” said Slaayde as crewmen lowered the gangway.

“I’ll brook no troubles from you and yours this time, Slaayde. I warned you the last, and I will not warn you again.”

“Dear Hogart, you wound me with your words,” said Slaayde sardonically. “I who love thee like a son.”

“If you were my son, I would have sold you to the gnomes.” Hogart’s face reddened when he spied Ob scowling at him from the rail.

“We shouldn’t linger here,” said Theta to Claradon. “Ask after *The White Rose* and let’s be on our

way.”

“I have to pay my respects to my uncle,” said Claradon. “He’s the lord of this fortress, and a good man, but he would take offense if I passed here without calling on him. Besides, Glimador should be here long since, and we could use his help on this voyage.”

“We shouldn’t stay the night,” said Theta. “Every moment we delay, Korrgonn gets farther away.”

Tanch stared up at the fortress, which loomed high above the harbor. “Oh my, it seems a frightful walk up to the castle. It must be two, perhaps three hundred feet up

the rock face.”

“Three hundred fifty I’d mark it,” said Ob.

“The road must be terribly steep.”

“There’s no road, laddie. Far too steep for one. That’s why the Malvegil’s built here—it’s almost impossible to assault. To get up, you have to take a hoist or climb the stairs,” said Ob, pointing to a wide stair built into the rock face.

The stair was steep but looked solid and safe, equipped with a sturdy wood outer railing and toe boards. The stair switched back multiple times as it scaled the cliff’s

face.

“There’s a second stair around the other side.”

“Oh my, look at that,” said Tanch. “What a climb. My back cannot abide that. No, no, I’m afraid that I would never make it. My apologies Brother Claradon, but I’ll have to await your return here on the ship.”

“No need,” said Claradon. “We’ll take the hoist.”

“Hoist? What are we, bales of hay?”

“Around the bend a ways there’s a series of big hoists that are used to haul up supplies and

people," said Ob. "A good deal easier and a fair bit quicker than the stairs."

The largest of the hoists comfortably held nearly a score of armored men. Theta, Claradon, Ob, Tanch, Dolan, Artol, Slaayde, Seran, and the other knights of Dor Eotrus: Sirs Paldor, Kelbor, Ganton 'the Bull', and Trelman loaded onto the large cabin, all dressed in their finest. Duke Harringgold's soldiers, save Seran, remained with the ship, as did the balance of Claradon's men and Slaayde's crew.

The hoist's rectangular cabin



was almost eight feet tall and built of heavy planks and timbers. A dozen thick ropes with looped ends hung one to two feet down from the ceiling beams. The hoist operator stepped in last. He swung closed the cabin door, or rather, the half-door, since it was but three feet tall. “Grab the ropes and hold on,” he said.

Claradon gripped one of the looped ropes; several of the others followed suit. Ob looked up at the rope above him, far beyond his reach, and grabbed Claradon’s sword belt instead.

The operator tugged on a chain,

which rang a loud bell mounted atop the hoist cabin. Seconds later, the cabin lurched, sending the men reeling to one side.

“Ha! I told you to hold on.”

After it moved a ways, the cabin steadied, swinging just a bit to the side as it ascended. Some of the men stared at their feet, some closed their eyes, and the rest stared bug-eyed out the door. The operator ignored the view outside, choosing instead to stare at his passengers, an amused expression on his face.

When the hoist reached the top, the group unloaded onto a wide

stone terrace outside the massive outer walls of the fortress. An elaborate array of ropes and pulleys, levers and great geared wheels powered by teams of oxen pulled some hoists up and lowered others down, all supervised by more than a dozen men clad in the livery of House Malvegil.

A large staging area, currently brimming with sparring troops, dominated most of the terrace. Squadrons of soldiers dueled with wooden swords and blunted spears, weapons masters barking orders and taunts all the while. A massive barn for the oxen and horses was

situated off in one corner.

The walls of the fortress hugged the edge of the cliff around its whole perimeter, save for the hoist terrace, the Dor's loading dock. Here, the walls rose up some sixty feet. Crenellated battlements loomed over the terrace, its defenders ready to lay waste to any enemy that somehow reached the crag's summit.

Majestic towers and turrets climbed to lofty heights here and there about the fortress. The flags of Lomion and House Malvegil flew atop the walls and towers, fluttering proudly in the wind.

The group was greeted by the Dor's Castellan, one Hubert Gravemare, an elderly man of lanky build and crackly voice, supported by a group of frazzled servants. Claradon explained that they couldn't stay long, and Gravemare countered that Lord Malvegil would insist they remain for a meal at the least. He escorted them to the great hall to await his lord.

Dor Malvegil's great hall was arrayed with rows of oaken trestle tables and benches, polished and spotless, together large enough to feast several hundred at a time. The floor was constructed of large stone

tiles, well-cleaned and in good repair. Huge carved wood trusses supported the roof some forty feet above, spanning from one side of the hall to the other, creating a wide space free of columns or piers.

The Lord's Table sat at the head on a raised platform two steps higher than the rest of the hall. On Gravemare's orders servants scurried about it, setting plates and silverware and goblets. There would be no more debating about dinner.

Glimador Malvegil marched into the hall dressed in a blue silken shirt and black breaches, a sword belt strapped around his waist. He

warmly greeted his comrades but went speechless when Seran presented him with the shining Dyvers sword from Pipkorn. Moments later, Lord Malvegil and his Lady, Landolyn, arrived.

Torbin Malvegil was a tall, burly man of bushy black beard, booming voice, and pearl white teeth. He entered the hall wearing his ancestral armor, all-polished to a blazing sheen, though at that moment he was all but invisible, for every man's eyes locked on his lady. Her rare curves marked her of half-elven blood at least. Like most of her ancestry, she was narrow of

waist, extra wide of hip and much more than very large of chest. Few human women ever had such proportions, but unlike a pureblood elf, her allure was natural, not enhanced by whatever strange magic surrounded the elves. Her face was at once beautiful and haunting, with sharp, almost ageless features, black eyes, and silver hair, straight and silky that fell to below her waist.

“Claradon! Welcome, my dear nephew,” said Lord Malvegil as he approached the group. “Too long have these halls not seen your face.” At his arm, Landolyn smiled



politely.

Ob gave Claradon a bit of a push on the back, and he stepped forward, hand outstretched. "Greetings, Uncle Torbin. Good to see you, it's been far too long."

They clasped forearms. Malvegil leaned in and spoke quietly now, squeezing Claradon's forearm and shoulder. "I'm so sorry, dear boy. Your father was a fine man, and my good friend of long years. I can't believe that he and Gabriel are gone."

"Nor can I."

"There's much that we must discuss," said Malvegil.

“Ob,” boomed Malvegil as he looked past Claradon. “You stinking gnome bastard. Come here,” he said, arms outstretched.

“Lord Ob to you, you stinking scum,” Ob said. Ob hopped up on a chair and they embraced like brothers, smacking each other warmly on the back. Lady Landolyn looked mortified at the whole exchange.

“Do my eyes deceive me?” said Malvegil as he looked to Artol who stood nearby smiling. “Artol the Destroyer, The Hammer of Lomion, the Scourge of the North!”

“Those names are old and worn,

Torbin, I'm due for a new one."

"You will have to earn it, just as the others." The two men firmly embraced; the requisite three manly pats on the back each.

"But I've forgotten my manners," said Malvegil. "This vision of loveliness," grasping his lady by the arm, "for those who haven't had the pleasure, is my consort, the Lady Landolyn."

"Welcome, gentlemen," she said, bowing her head politely, though her voice was less than welcoming.

When the greetings and introductions were completed,

Gravemere offered to lead the group on a tour of Dor Malvegil's sights while dinner was being prepared. He boasted of Dor Malvegil's extensive library, well-appointed gallery, and the impressive views from the eastern terrace.

Theta gave Claradon a withering stare that commanded him to speak up. Instead, he suddenly took great interest in Lord Malvegil's shoes.

"Lord Malvegil," said Theta. "We're on a mission of great urgency. No doubt, we would all enjoy the hospitality of your fine

house, but we must be off this night. Much is at stake."

Malvegil studied Theta, looking him up and down. "I will speak of this with Lord Eotrus, in private. In the meantime, you men may enjoy the hospitality of House Malvegil." Malvegil grasped Claradon by the arm and led him from the hall, the public discussion over. Ob followed on their heels.

"Who is he?" said Malvegil, as he, Ob, and Claradon climbed the castle stairs.

Claradon hesitated. "Well—

"He is trouble, is what he is,"

said Ob. "He's a foreigner what calls himself Angle Theta—Lord Angle Theta, actually. Some folks call him by other names."

"Never heard of him. Some upstart, no doubt, who doesn't yet know his place. I can't place his accent. Where is he from?"

"Some place far to the west, or so he says," said Ob. "All very mysterious, if you ask me."

"Uncle, Lord Harringgold sent a raven—"

"I've had no ravens from Dor Lomion in weeks," said Malvegil. "If he sent one, that proves the system is compromised, as I've long

suspected. What was the message?"

"Jude was kidnapped."

Malvegil stopped dead on the stairs. "What?"

"Ambushed on the north road," said Ob. "A dozen men with him found dead, including some of our best."

"Jude was taken captive," said Claradon.

"Captive! On Eotrus lands? Who did this?"

"The stinking Leaguers," said Ob. "Heard of them, I trust?"

Malvegil growled, his jaw set, but said nothing more until they

reached the third floor. “Ransom?”

“They haven’t asked for any, and it doesn’t look like they’re going to,” said Claradon. “That’s why we’re here. Those who took Jude are aboard a ship called *The White Rose*. They would’ve passed here within the last day or so. As far as we know, Jude is alive and on board.”

“Darn raven,” said Malvegil. “If it had arrived, I could’ve stopped them. Jude would be free now and them that took him, in irons.”

Malvegil led them toward his private den. “To attack a squad of soldiers like that—the League is



moving faster than I anticipated.” Malvegil grabbed a passing servant and commanded him to fetch the Harbormaster and his aides at once, though when they arrived, they reported only that *The Rose* had been seen the previous day, but did not put to port.

Malvegil settled into a wide leather chair in the Lord’s Den, a grave look on his face. Claradon and Ob sat across from him. Servants poured the men wine, but fled the room at a gesture from Malvegil.

“We can do no more for Jude than what you’ve planned. Track that ship, bring it to heel, and get

Jude back one way or another. I will aid you in any way I can. I would give you another ship or two, but nothing I have is fast enough to keep up with you. Anything else I have that you need is yours."

"Thank you," said Claradon.

"No need to thank me, boy—we're family; I can do no less. Your father was more than my sister's husband, he was my best friend for all my life. From when Aradon and I were small children our families visited each other, for a week or more, several times each year. Those were some of the best times in my life, which is why we

continued the tradition after you kids were born. I will always regret that we didn't keep up those trips over the last few years, but with Eleanor gone, and you boys always off in training—it just wasn't the same. I can't believe that it has been two years since I've seen your father, and now, never again. There just never seems enough time."

"Aye," said Ob. "Never enough."

"Our family visits were some of the best times of my life as well," said Claradon. "I know Glimador feels the same, and so do my brothers."

"I'm glad of that," said Malvegil.

“We did that much right, at least. We could talk for hours of the happy times, and we should, but tonight, we’ve graver matters to discuss. I’ve heard Glimador’s tale about your father. Mountain trolls, my ass. You swore him to secrecy, I’m sure, though he won’t even admit that much. Tell me what really happened to Aradon and the others.”

“The stinking Shadow League happened,” said Ob.

Malvegil winced at the remark, and then took a gulp of wine. “Are you telling me that the League killed them?”

“In a manner of speaking,” said Claradon.

Malvegil closed his eyes. “There’s no stopping it then. This puts Lomion on the road to ruin. It can only end one way.” Malvegil downed the rest of his wine. “Now tell me everything. Leave nothing out.”

Claradon and Ob related the events of the Vermion, a dark tale of death, demon lords, and mad cultists. Malvegil listened intently and asked many questions.

“A hard story to swallow whole or in pieces,” said Malvegil. “You did well not to tell this tale to the

Council. It could only have made things worse, and they would certainly never accept the truth of it."

"If I wasn't there, I wouldn't believe it," said Ob, "but I was."

"I've seen many strange things in my days," said Malvegil, "and more often than not, Gabriel was around when I saw them. He seemed to attract the weird or mayhaps it attracted him. I've never seen a demon though, and never even believed in them. Fairy tales and ghost stories for the fireside, nothing more, I'd say."

Malvegil stared at the fireplace

for a moment, considering his words before continuing. “I wasn’t with you that night, but I accept your story as honest told however wild it sounds.” Malvegil refilled his goblet from a glass decanter. “They died heroes, Aradon, Gabriel, Talbon, Stern, Donnelin, and the rest, defending our kingdom. Few better ways for old soldiers to pass, I suppose.”

“I’d prefer old age,” said Ob.

“You passed old age a hundred years ago.”

“Of course, he moves slow. I’ve left him behind, and he can’t catch me,” Ob said chuckling.

“Did Korrgonn sail with *The White Rose*?” said Malvegil.

“He did,” said Claradon.

Malvegil nodded. “You’ll want to leave at once. I would feel the same if I were you, but still, I strongly advise you to remain here the night. The Dead Fens, as Ob knows too well, lie just to the south of Malvegil lands. It’s an evil place and always has been. A fog that never lifts makes passage perilous even in full daylight. But of late, things have grown fouler—fouler than they’ve been in twenty-five years,” he said, with a glance to Ob. “Dark shapes are seen by passing



ships. Strange sounds are heard even in the day.”

“Over the last year, several small boats have gone missing never to be found. In recent months, guardsmen and sailors have disappeared without sound or trace from the decks of even the largest vessels. If you leave tonight, you will find yourselves in the heart of the fens before dawn. That is somewhere you don’t want to be. Get a good night’s rest here, in comfortable beds and safe surroundings, leave in the morning, and with any luck at all you’ll be past the fens hours before dark.”

Claradon stared into his goblet.

“Aye, it might be best,” said Ob,  
“all things considered.”

“Sound advice,” said Claradon.

“It’s settled then,” said Malvegil, “and that’s good, for we’ve much more to discuss. Glimador tells me you gave Barusa quite a thrashing.”

“You should’ve seen it,” said Ob. “He had Mr. High-and-Mighty on his knees.”

Malvegil broke into a wide smile. “Well, you are your father’s son, I’ll give you that.”

Claradon’s face reddened and he looked down.

“I’m sorry,” said Malvegil. “The pain is still fresh, I know. It will lessen in time, but it will always be with you.” Malvegil took a drink from his goblet. “Find strength and what comfort you can in the good memories of your father, of which I know you have many.”

“After that duel, you’re lucky to have gotten out of Lomion City alive. The Shadow League has a warrant out on your life, I’m certain.”

“Religious nuts, every one,” said Ob. “They’ve bought off half the High Council, maybe more.”

“Religion isn’t their aim or their

purpose, old friend; it's merely their tool. This is about revolution—a revolution from within.”

“The League wants to take over—to seize power over Lomion City and the whole of the kingdom, and rule it as they will. Their religious trappings are nothing more than that, a way to delude the commoners and the fools and mask their true goals. Our way of life is being destroyed before our eyes. The monarchy has already fallen, the republic, which has wielded the real power for the last thousand years, is near collapse. Once the Vizier or the Chancellor or some

other gains enough power to take control of all the League's forces, they will kill the Tenzivels and the Harringgoldes, they'll dissolve the High Council and the Council of Lords, and Lomion City will be lost. From there, they'll move on Kern, Dover, Sarnack, Dyvers, and all the Dors. Nowhere will be safe for us. Not here, not anywhere."

Malvegil stood and began to pace as he spoke. "They have agents everywhere; they've been infiltrating for years, right under our noses. They've been recruiting our own citizens into the cults and brainwashing them in the temples,

making them hate their own land, their own government, their own way of life. They even have spies in my own House, so mind your words when we're not in private. While we've been focused on threats from without, they've been slowly eating away at us from within."

"Can't we raise the Council of Lords into action?" said Claradon. "The combined might of the Lords must still far outstrip whatever forces are loyal to the League."

"I tried to do just that when I was in Lomion three months ago. All I got was a dagger in my back."

"What?" said Ob.

“They tried to kill you?” said Claradon.

“They did, but luckily, I had on a vest of chain beneath my shirt for just such an occasion. When I had him, the assassin cut his own throat rather than be taken. That one was in it for religion, as are many of the League’s agents and soldiers. It makes it easier for the League’s leaders to control their troops, for religious zealotry can take hold of a man and make him do things beyond his imagining.”

“Glenfinnen went into hiding after the attempt on my life. Baron Morfin wasn’t so lucky. They killed

him and his son. A murder-suicide declared the good Chancellor. Hogwash and horsefeathers. They think us fools enough to believe that?"

"So what do we do? How do we stand against them?" said Claradon.

Malvegil halted, narrowed his eyes, and stared directly at Claradon. "We go to war. Either that, or they will destroy us."

"You're not talking war," said Ob. "You're talking civil war. Not all the scum are foreigners; many are our own, like the Alders, Marshal Balfor, and Guildmaster Slyman."

"Many of the noble houses have



allied with them, more than perhaps we know,” said Malvegil. “Many in the Tower of the Arcane have gone over, and they’ve infiltrated the Heralds Guild too. The heralds praise the cults and curse the King. Only the Chancellor can save us, sing the Heralds, only the Vizier, shout the mages.”

“Why would the wizards and the heralds support them?” said Claradon.

“Who knows what madness has beguiled those fools. But history teaches us that when a society grows old enough, and secure enough, some of its citezins get

bored and learn to hate their country. It's some sickness of the mind that all too many seem susceptible to. They see evil only in their own, though not in themselves, and grow blind to all evil from without. They go so far as to blame their own people or their own government for the evils of foreign tyrants and the crimes of common brigands, and even for bad weather. 'We made them that way', they say. 'They're really good, just misunderstood'. It's an old pattern, my friends. It has happened before and it will happen again."

Malvegil topped off his glass

and offered the bottle to Ob, who took it eagerly. “A defect in the brain. Perhaps some worm picked up from undercooked pork drills its way in and eats them between the ears. I don’t know, men. But the mages and the heralds are with them, and they’re against us. That’s the way it is.”

“When they finally understand what the League is really about, they will want to stop them,” said Claradon. “These people are Lomerians—patriots—whatever our disagreements with them.”

“You’re right, those of good intent will come around, but by

then it will be too late. Some will continue to side with the League, even then, to save themselves."

"It'll be a bloody mess," said Ob.

"And if it's bad enough, it will leave us vulnerable to attacks from without. Our foreign enemies will gather at the gates." Malvegil paused, letting that sink in for a moment. "We need Dor Eotrus to stand with us, and we need House Eotrus to be strong."

"Uncle," said Claradon. "You must know that you have my full support, but I'm not sure how much we can do."

"Our forces are broken," said

Ob. "Most of our best fell with Aradon and Gabriel and Jude. We don't have enough men to deploy to the field—not for any major battle; maybe not enough even to even hold the Dor, if we're hard pressed."

"Grim news, worse than I thought. Dor Eotrus must stand. The trade route between Lomion and Kern must remain secure."

"You said we need Dor Eotrus to stand with us?" said Claradon. "Which 'us' are you talking about? Who are our allies? House Harringgold, of course. Who else can we count on?"

"A fair question for any Dor

Lord to ask,” said Malvegil, “but I’ll not tell you, not when you’re about to go off after some of the League’s leaders. If you’re captured, under duress you might give us away. I can’t chance that. All things considered, it’s better that you don’t know, not now, anyway. Must you go on this mission, Claradon?”

Claradon hesitated some moments before responding. “Maybe that’s why they took Jude; to torture him for information.”

Malvegil and Ob exchanged worried glances.

“Hold on, boy,” said Ob. “There could be many reasons they want

him. Maybe they will ransom him back after all, and that'll be the end of it. In any case, best not to dwell on it."

"Could be they're torturing him even now, to find out what he knows. But he doesn't know anything, does he?"

Ob shook his head.

"So then they'll kill him," said Claradon. "Theta was right, we can't linger here. We need to sail at the crack of dawn, before then, even."

"I know that you want to save Jude yourself," said Malvegil, "but sometimes a leader needs to make difficult choices, to serve the

greater good. You and Ob should go back and take command of your Dor. I can spare a squadron of men to help you. Let Theta and the others go after Korrgonn and Jude. It doesn't need to be you, Claradon."

"Torbin," said Ob, "we can't lose sight that what's happening is bigger than us, bigger than Lomion even. These Leaguers called up some kind of beasties from another world and they will do it again. It don't matter what those things really were, or where they really came from—all that matters is that they mean to kill us dead, and



they're more than capable of it. Had we been a day later, who knows how many of them would've come through. Then we'd be swimming in blood. Korrgonn and the men with him are the ones what know how to open these gateways. They need to be stopped. They need to be dead. That's why we have to go. That's why we can't leave it to anybody else. Stinking Harringgold only half believed us."

"If I didn't know you for so long, I'd not believe you at all," said Malvegil. "But I agree, these men need stopping. Let's put them down."

\*\*\*

Gravemare assigned Ob to a fancy room—large with big furniture, four-poster bed, a couch, and coffee table, all in dark wood, tapestries and paintings on the walls, even a private water closet and bath with running water, clean and tiled.

Ob was glad that Theta didn't make an issue of staying the night when Claradon announced the decision at dinner. That would've made Claradon look weak and would've ruined a good meal too.

Maybe Mr. Know-it-All is finally learning who's the boss.

Ob washed his face in a marble basin. He'd have a bath later, if he didn't get too drunk, since this might be his last chance in a goodly while. At the moment, though, he felt stuffed to bursting with roast meats and boiled vegetables, honeyed beer and hot wassail. Malvegil's chef had served up a meal worthy of the best eateries in Lomion City. Despite his indulgence, Ob managed two thick slices of wastelbread and made off with a plate of cookies.

After dessert, Torbin invited the

group to join him later in his den for some drinking, cigars, and storytelling.

“I hope Slaayde doesn’t show up,” muttered Ob as he looked himself over in the mirror before leaving his room. “I don’t trust that bugger. At least Torbin has a couple of guards shadowing him.”

Theta’s room was just down the hall and Ob decided to pick him up on the way. Ob figured that Theta would enjoy the tale of the Dead Fens. Torbin was sure to tell that one, what with Ob and Artol both there, Gabe’s passing, and the group heading past the Fens on the

morrow. He wasn't certain that Claradon was ready to hear that tale. How many shocks could the boy take?

As Ob exited his room, he saw Lady Landolyn step through the doorway into Theta's room. The door closed behind her.

"What's this?" Ob whispered. Ob padded silently down the hallway as quickly as he could and pressed his ear to the door.

"You are the Thetan of old?" said Lady Landolyn sharply.

That name again, Thetan, just as Mortach had called him. If Theta made any reply, Ob didn't hear it.

“I am of the House of Adonael,” said the Lady.

After a short pause she continued. “Your fell deeds are not forgotten by my House, or by many others.” With each word, her voice grew louder and more shrill. “You led us astray and for this we have suffered much. Your crimes are beyond compare and beyond forgiveness.”

Slap!

“Zounds!” muttered Ob, though he couldn’t tell if she slapped him or if he caught her hand in his.

“You know not of what you speak,” said Theta in a slow,

measured, and cold voice. "The anger you harbor is misplaced."

"I think not, traitor. It's well placed as will be the dagger that pierces your black heart if you dare to remain here past this night or ever return again. Do not soil this good house with your lies and your schemes. I warn you, should any harm befall my Glimador on this quest of yours, I will hunt you to the ends of Midgaard and slay you myself."

She moved for the door and Ob dashed for cover. He skulked behind a tapestry until she left the hall and was well down the stair

before he dared move.

*After that, Ob thought, I need to get stinking drunk. Theta has enemies everywhere and they all name him traitor and liar. What are we doing with this man amongst us?*

\*\*\*

A light haze of smoke wafted about the Lord's Den, illumed by lanterns of stained glass and polished mica that cast a pleasant amber hue. Cherrywood beams and planks supported and coffered the ceiling some twelve feet above the granite-tiled floor. Exquisitely



detailed maps of various sizes and styles adorned the spaces between and above the ornate mahogany bookshelves of wood and glass doors that lined the walls.

The gathered men reclined near the fireplace on leather chairs and couches, rich and dark in color and almost silky soft to the touch. The whole group was there. They smoked cigars from Dyvers and Portland Vale and sipped a fine Kernian brandy called Amber as Torbin Malvegil boomed his tales of past glories. Servants stood as statues in this corner and that, ever ready to fill any tumbler gone dry or

to light the next cigar.

“First there were reports of strange sounds and stranger sights on the river,” said Malvegil. “But then, men began disappearing from ships, mostly the small ones, some the larger. Whole ships started going missing too—a couple of small fishing vessels, and then a merchant ship, a caravel called *The Barking Beagle*, out of Minoc, I believe—

*It was The Bellowing Banshee out of Kern*, recalled Ob, though he kept his thoughts to himself.

“...went missing with all hands save the first mate.”

*The cook*

“...who floated downriver clinging for his life to a broken board.”

*In a dinghy.*

“He was found two days later, about twenty leagues downriver, slashed and torn as if by ragged blades or claws. But that wasn’t the worst of it. His mind was shattered. He was utterly mad and couldn’t even tell his tale. His wounds had festered and he died the next day. So afraid of disease were they, they doused him with oil while he still lived and set him aflame the moment he breathed his last.

*"The Beagle* was carrying more than just trinkets and tea—three members of a noble house were aboard: a Lady fair of Lomion, her young Lord, and their infant son. Their fate, unknown.

"Of course, I couldn't abide such crimes just beyond my borders, so I called upon and gathered my most intrepid comrades. A wrecking crew we were, the bravest, the strongest, and the best darn fighters in all of Lomion. The best of the best we were. In those days, far and wide they called us, The Sons of Lomion."

*Only you call us that in your*

*stories, my friend.*

“So we set out to the Fens to see what there was to see,” said Ob, no longer able to hold back. “Not to be doing any crazy hero stuff, but just to size up the issue, so we could set a plan to make things right.”

“Exactly,” said Malvegil. “Sir Gabriel Garn was me, so was Ob, and The Hammer of Lomion—you know him as Artol. This all happened over twenty years ago, I should say. Artol here,” pointing to the big warrior, “was just as tall in those days, but a far sight thinner, and so young he could barely grow

a wisp of a beard. Ob was Ob and Gabe was Gabe, those two never did seem to change. Of course with Ob—he's a gnome and they're known to be long-lived. With Gabe it was a bit of a mystery. Came from some old bloodline, I expect, and looked half his years, if that. Anyways, our ship put to anchor off the Dead Fens, near the west bank of the Hudsar—a mere ten leagues south of where we sit. We launched in a longboat and rowed across to the east bank and up a tributary into the Fens. By turns, we rowed and levered our way with long poles deeper into that accursed swamp."

Malvegil stood and looked at each man in turn, his expression serious.

*Here it comes, the part he's got down word for word. Let's see what he's added since the last.*

“The whole of the Dead Fens stretched out before us. A vast landscape of wanton degradation. A morass so putrid, so miasmic as to cloud the mind and rend the soul. It has been avoided for countless generations by all who know its reputation. In that time, it has taken only those lost wanderers who knew not whence they strayed, and a few would-be adventurers

chasing fairy gold or glory. But the Dead Fens is no mere swamp or bog or marsh. There is a presence to that place. A palpable persona to it—an ancient evil from a bygone age.”

*That last line is new. Can't argue with it, though.*

“Those that enter or even skirt its borders are besought with all manner of misfortunes, great and small. From accidents, to illness, from rotting food to rancid water, where hours before there was freshness. That place is decay, ancient and unforgiving. A slimy putrescence, a decrepit miasma



likened to the grave. Such are the Dead Fens.”

*Gets better with each telling. He should write it down, preserve it for posterity.*

Gravemare stormed into the room. “My Lord, there’s trouble on our guests’ ship.”

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The ship was in chaos; men ran to and fro. Captain Slaayde and his officers shouted orders to bring all pumps to the forward hold. Two burly sailors dragged a third man, limp, lifeless, and drenched in water

from below deck. Seran Harringgold followed on their heels.

“What happened?” asked Claradon as he and Ob walked toward Seran.

“I caught this one drilling a hole in the hull,” said Seran as he pointed to the drenched man on the deck. Seran bent down and turned the man onto his back. A dagger was buried in his chest. “I cornered him and when he saw there was no escape, he stabbed himself. What kind of man would do that?”

“Is the stinking bugger one of Slaayde’s crew?” asked Ob.

“I’ve seen him aboard,” said

Seran.

Ob bent down and examined the corpse.

“How bad is the damage to the ship?” asked Claradon.

“There’s lots of water down there. He must’ve drilled at least a couple of holes before I discovered him.”

“He’s a Leaguer,” said Ob after exposing a tattoo on the dead man’s shoulder. “He’s got the mark of Mortach.”

Hours later, long after they had planned to leave, Slaayde’s crew had finished patching the holes in the hull and pumping the water from

the hold. Much of the ship's supplies were ruined.

"You now face the same problem that you did yesterday," said Malvegil. "You will not make it past the Fens before dark. Can I convince you to remain another night?"

"I appreciate your concern, Uncle, but we can remain here no longer," said Claradon. "Too much depends on our speed."

Glimador and a dozen Malvegil soldiers carrying bows marched up to the two Dor Lords as they stood on the pier.

"These are some of my most

skilled bowman,” said Malvegil. “Please accept their service on your quest, nephew.”

“I’ll make good use of them, Uncle. Thank you.”

“May Odin’s favor shine on you, my boy. Come back safe and Jude with you.”

Lord Malvegil and his Lady watched *The Black Falcon* depart from the eastern terrace.

“I forbade Glim to go,” said Landolyn, tears welling in her eyes; eyes not accustomed to tears.

Malvegil spun toward her, jaw clenched. “What? You forbade him?”

You had no business doing that. We agreed that it was his decision to make.”

“You agreed, husband. I just gave up arguing.”

“You shouldn’t have interfered.”

“Interfered? He’s my only son—our only son. The only one we’ll ever have, and I will not lose him to some madman’s quest.”

“Glimador’s not a boy anymore; he’s a man—a fine strong man. More than that, he’s a knight, and pledged to serve the Eotrus. Where his Lord goes, he goes. Duty and honor, Landolyn; it’s what makes a man a man.”

“This mission and that man will be the death of him, I know it.”

“What? Don’t say that. Claradon loves Glimador like a brother.”

“Not Claradon. Theta!”

“The foreigner?”

“Torbin, you’re an old fool.”

Malvegil stood there for a time, looking at her, open-mouthed and disbelieving. Then he turned back toward the river and watched *The Black Falcon* sail away to meet its fate.

“Ten years ago—no—five, and I would’ve went with them. Claradon is too young to lead them in this.

Landolyn shook her head.

“Dead gods, you’re blind.”

“What? What’s come over you?”

“Your nephew leads nothing. He follows.”

Malvegil’s shocked expression followed her as she stormed off.



## VII

### EINHERIAR

“To sate my hunger, I will burn thy  
body and devour thy soul.”

—Einheriar

Theta stood alone at the rail of the sturdy vessel, gazing into the darkness from whence they came, while *The Black Falcon* sailed down the grand Hudsar River. A storm was gathering and it grew dark early. Soon, a mist formed, cloaking the surface of the water.

Claradon stepped up to the rail beside Theta. “Dor Malvegil is the

farthest south I've ever been before today."

Theta made no reply; he didn't even acknowledge his presence.

"It's a big world, I suppose it's time that I see more of it. I just wish the reasons were better." Claradon breathed deep the clean, crisp air of the river lands and listened to the flow of the water about the ship. "I would've marked you a man to stand at the prow looking at what lies ahead, rather than looking back."

"We're being followed and not by friendly sail."

"What?" Claradon raised his

brows. “A ship? The lookout reports nothing.”

“I see better than most.”

“He’s atop the mast; he has a far better view.”

“Perhaps he has his own agenda or perhaps the captain chooses to keep secrets. Or maybe he just doesn’t see very well.”

Claradon looked hard into the growing darkness. “I can’t see anything but the mist.”

“It comes into view every hour or so. It flies a black sail. A large ship.”

“*The Raven* out of Southeast flies a black sail and a red and black

flag,” said Ob as he skulked out of the shadows. “So does *The Grey Talon*, and both their reputations are as black as their sails. It could be one of them two ships, or else it could be a ship from Dyver’s—a bunch of them fly the black. There is also an order of Church Knights, don’t remember which one, what flies black sail too.”

“Should we advise the captain to speed up?” said Claradon. “Maybe we can lose her. We’ve enough trouble ahead of us; we don’t more from behind.”

“If we were out to sea, I would try it,” said Ob, “but on the river, it’s

futile. Close as she is, if she's a fast ship and has a mind to, she'll catch us. Besides, the way this fog is thickening, if we speed up, we'd risk running aground. We can't chance that. If this ship gets disabled, we'll never catch *The Rose*."

"We must keep our guard up and meet those that trail us at a time of our choosing," said Theta.

"The Fens, dead ahead," called the lookout from the crow's nest.

Ob turned toward the east. "I only see dark waters and mist. Stinking mist."

In mere moments, the air grew chill and strangely pungent. A light

rain began to fall. Flashes of lightning appeared in the sky followed by angry peals of thunder.

“What’s that smell?” said Claradon.

Ob wrinkled his prodigious nose, and rubbed his right forearm with his left hand, as if it were sore. “I’ve been down this river more than a few times and there is always a stink from the Fens, rotting plants and such, but this is different. It’s too strong and came on too sudden. Something is not right.”

Captain Slaayde stood at the forward end of the bridge deck

beside his first mate. N'Paag's hands gripped the ship's wheel like vises; sweat dripped down his cheeks. "Captain, we should drop anchor before we run aground. I can barely see; the current may run us into the rocks."

Slaayde peered into the mist for some moments. "No, stay on course as best you can. I have a bad feeling about this storm and this stench. You've heard the stories about the Fens. I will not have *The Falcon* be her next victim. We keep moving."

Slaayde yelled up at the lookout, ordering him to help keep the ship well away from the banks

and clear of any rocks.

Pain flared in Ob's arm—centered around the scar from the wound he suffered in the Vermion Forest. He clutched at it and winced.

The river went silent, the air went still but for the rain that continued to fall.

Theta drew his sword, spun around, and scanned all about them.

“What is it?” said Claradon, moving his hand to his sword hilt.

“Your amulet,” said Ob, fumbling to pull his axe from his



belt. "It's glowing. There's danger afoot."

The air grew more chill. Steam rose from Ob's breath.

Strange bubbling and plopping sounds came from the water. Ob leaned between the rail posts and looked straight down. "That's not good."

"What?" said Claradon.

"The river," said Ob, wide-eyed. "It's boiling, and it's red. Red like blood." Ob bounced up and turned back toward the deck. "Did you hear that?"

Theta raised his hand for silence. No one moved or spoke for

some moments. “Something is happening,” he said, his hand now gripping the ankh that hung about his neck.

A horrid scream erupted from somewhere down on the main deck, lost in the mist. It lasted but a moment before it abruptly cut off. Men yelled in the darkness, their words muffled. Then came another scream.

Claradon dashed toward the ladder that led down to the main deck, Ob at his heels.

“Claradon,” boomed Theta. He stopped in his tracks.

“Don’t move until we know

what's happening. Gnome—keep a lookout behind us and to the sky, we know not yet what we face.”

“To the sky? Look for what? Pigeons? There's nothing to see but mist.”

“Just look and listen,” said Theta. Theta moved to the head of the ladder and peered below into the mist that clung to the deck.

A crewman ran toward the bridge deck, shouting. “Captain, some thing came out of the mist. We can't stop it.”

“What thing?” yelled Slaayde as he moved up beside Theta. “What is it?”

The crewman scrambled up the ladder. Theta stepped aside and the sailor collapsed to the deck, panting. “I couldn’t see it clearly, Captain. Some kind of creature. A monster.”

“What?” said Slaayde. “Are you drunk?”

More crewmen and soldiers came into sight, racing across the main deck. A strange luminescent figure stalked their heels. Shaped much as a man, but it was shimmering, translucent, and indistinct. The creature moved at a slow walk, with knees deeply bent, plodding as if it bore a great weight.

A scent of brimstone and burning wood polluted the air at its approach. Steam sputtered and rose from its feet with each step it took, as if the water on the wet deck boiled away at its very touch.

Men poured onto the main deck from the lower levels, weapons at the ready. They surrounded the creature but gave it wide berth, reluctant to attack the unnatural thing.

“Stand aside,” said Slaayde, pushing past Theta. Slaayde leaped from the top of the ladder and plunged to the main deck. He landed lightly on his feet despite his

bulk. N'Paag remained at the wheel.

Slaayde pushed past the crewmen and soldiers, charged forward, and swung his sword—a two-handed overhand strike, aimed for the monster's neck. The vicious blow passed clear through the creature, but met no resistance, no impact at all.

Overbalanced, Slaayde stumbled to his knees directly before the thing.

The creature's claws raked down.

The captain ducked, evading the blow that would have killed him instantly. The creature's claws no

more than brushed across the blonde hair atop Slaayde's head. Such was the thing's unholy power that this merest touch did damage enough. Slaayde's head rolled to the side; his limbs went limp, his eyes closed.

The creature stepped forward to finish him off. A massive figure appeared behind Slaayde, grabbed him about the collar, and flung him clear just as the creature's claws raked down again. "Take it down," shouted Tug.

A crewman swung down from the mast on a rope and crashed feet first into the creature from behind

while Tug dragged Slaayde clear of the battle. Just as Slaayde's sword, the man sailed clear through the thing, as if it were completely insubstantial, some mere apparition or shadow of what once was. The crewman howled when he passed through the thing and let go the rope. When he hit the deck, his body exploded into a cloud of dust and rotted clothing.

Men rushed in to strike the creature, but each blade passed through it, just as ineffective as the last. The creature lashed out and struck one man and then another. Both exploded into heaps of dust at



the hellspawn's touch, their screams echoing through the souls of all aboard.

“Devil's work,” yelled one man.

“Demon,” cried another.

The creature moved ever forward, toward the bridge. Men scattered and fled before it, falling over one another to get out of its path. Glimador appeared with his bowmen. They sent a flight of arrows at the thing. Each hit its mark, but just as all the other weapons, they passed through, doing the creature no harm. An unlucky seaman across the deck fell with an arrow in his arm, another

took one in his belly.

“Torches,” yelled Ob through the bridge deck’s rail. “Burn the stinking thing.”

Several men grabbed burning brands from sconces at the ship’s rails and moved toward the creature.

“Shouldn’t we do something?” said Claradon to Theta.

“Not until we know how to slay it. Let’s see how the torches fare.”

The glow of Claradon’s amulet brightened sharply. Claradon started, grabbed at the amulet’s chain and pulled it away from his chest. He winced in pain, for the

amulet had grown fiery hot and electric to the touch, even as a blast of icy cold air washed over him, and the rain turned instantly to sleet and hail.

Beside him, Theta spun around and raised his sword just in time to block the blow of another creature that had appeared behind them. Like the one below, it was luminescent, translucent and blurry, more spectre than man. The creature's clawed hand thundered into Theta's falchion, but did not pass through. The impact slammed Theta into the rail. A loud popping sound rang out as the rail cracked

and splintered and nearly gave way.

The creature held fast Theta's falchion in a grip stronger than any mortal's. The tips of the thing's deadly claws were just inches from his flesh; only the ancient sword and Theta's muscle held it at bay. But since Theta dared not touch the thing except with the sword, he had no leverage and could not push it back.

Nature turned to chaos. The rain became frost and ice in Theta's hair, mustache, and on his cloak. Brimstone burned his nose and the air grew thin and frigid, and sapped his strength. Theta's face contorted

as he strained to push the creature back, but then, where the creature's claws enveloped it, his sword's blade began to warp and melt and threatened to collapse.

Claradon stepped behind the creature. Two-handed, he slammed the ancestral sword of House Eotrus into the creature's back with all his might. The blade passed through it, meeting no resistance, and sliced into Theta's chest. Sparks erupted as the sword's tip cleaved through Theta's cloak and into his breastplate.

"Zounds!" said Claradon. He stepped back, shock, confusion, and

fear filled his face.

Unfazed by Claradon's blow, Theta rolled against the rail and sidestepped, desperate to evade the thing's deadly touch, even as his sword folded over in ruin and dropped from his grasp. The ship's rail iced over, gave way, and slammed into several men when it collapsed to the deck below.

"What do we do, Theta?" shouted Ob.

Theta never took his eyes from the creature. "Stay clear, you fools."

"I will have thy soul, traitor," spat the creature in a deep gravelly voice. "Ye wilt not escape this time."

Theta backpedaled. The creature pursued him and raked the air with its claws.

“You fight on the wrong side, Einheriar,” said Theta. “You’ve lost your way.”

The creature paused for a moment. “I be on god’s side, as always, deceiver. I be sworn to destroy all evil and destroy ye I will.”

The creature bounded forward and was on Theta in an instant, but he had bought just enough time to slide the Asgardian daggers from his belt sheaths. A thin smile formed on Theta’s face, and his

steely eyes remained locked on the creature's torso.

The Einheriar launched a hail of murderous blows that belied its plodding footwork. Theta dodged or parried each thunderous strike with one of his long daggers; his iron-like arms shuddered with each impact; ice flew off the blades, shattered off Theta's arms, and refroze just as quickly. Theta feinted to one side, then sidestepped in the other. Now partially behind the creature, he plunged Dargus Dal into its lower back. With a sound of rending metal, the Asgardian blade sank



deep, deep into where a man's kidney would be.

The Einheriar howled—a high-pitched, piercing wail that no mortal's throat could emit. So loud was it, it brought Ob, Claradon, and N'Paag to their knees, though Theta seemed unaffected. The creature spun toward Theta, bile oozing from its lips. It convulsed, and a blast of flaming green ichor erupted from its mouth and sprayed across the deck. Theta dodged, and turned his face away, but some of the vile spray lashed across his torso, shoulder, and back, and set his cloak afire, despite the ice that

clung to it. Where the ichor struck the deck, it hissed and sputtered, turned the water and ice to billowing, hissing steam, and seared the deck planks. Wisps of fire caught here and there on the deck, though the rain held them in check.

Theta barely pulled off the flaming cloak before the creature was at him again, ignoring its wound, from which flowed a thick green slime that was its lifeblood. It lashed its claws at Theta's face. He ducked below the strike and dived into a roll that brought him up behind the creature. Theta thrust Wotan Dal to the hilt in the left side

of the creature's back, the blow so powerful it lifted the Einheriar from the deck. It wailed in agony as Theta held it suspended in the air.

"Aargh! You will never be safe, Thetan," it said, fiery ichor dribbling from its mouth. "My brothers will slay thee. They will send thy black soul to hell at last."

Holding the creature aloft, Theta grabbed Dargus Dal's hilt and pitched the Einheriar over the rail into the fog. The thing wailed anew all the way to the water.

"Not today," said Theta.

Theta had dislodged both daggers but dropped them to the

deck as the acidic ichor reached his gauntlets. The polished steel smoked and began to melt on contact with the vile fluid. Everything the creature's blood or ichor had touched, smoked, crackled, and burned.

Theta strode directly at Claradon, stepping carefully due to the ice and the warped and melted decking. Claradon's eyes widened in fear at his approach, though he did not move, in truth, he could not. He half expected Theta to kill him then and there for his errant slash. Ob stood frozen, bug-eyed, by his side.

“Your Asgardian dagger,

quickly, give it to me.”

Claradon pulled Worfin Dal from its sheath and handed it to Theta, his hand trembling.

Theta moved to the ladder, dagger in hand, and looked down onto the scene below.

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Dolan pulled a small object from his pocket and flung it at the Einheriar on the main deck. The object hit the wood decking and exploded in a blinding flash of light. The creature let loose an anguished wail that pierced the hearts of every

man on board as the bright light washed over it. The flash of Dolan's magic quickly dimmed but didn't go out. Bathed in the bright light the creature took on an altogether different aspect.

Its form was still strangely blurred, but much more distinct than in the darkened mist. The light revealed the Einheriar's true shape—that of a man, a warrior, though corrupted and distorted. Grayish white in color from head to toe, save for its eyes which glowed a bright gold, its features chiseled and stony. It wore armor of chain and leather. Strapped to its hands were

strange gauntlets, each with four wicked claw-like blades. It raised an arm to shield its eyes from the light but seemed disoriented and halted its advance.

Men moved in with torches on all sides. The Einheriar careened from side to side avoiding the fiery light. The light revealed that the deck planks along the Einheriar's trail were smoking and warped as if melted by its very touch. Even now, steam and smoke rose from the wood about the thing's feet, which seemed to be sinking into the deck, hampering its movement.

“By the Shards of Pythagorus,

gek paipcm ficcg," emoted Tanch. Nine balls of blue flame erupted in succession from Tanch's outstretched hand and sped toward the Einheriar. One, then a second, and then a third struck it in the back and exploded—each shredded its armor and tore gory chunks from its body.

Dolan stepped forward and fired one of Pipkorn's Vanyar arrows into the Einheriar's shoulder. It did not pass through, but sunk into the warrior's shoulder just as any arrow should, and sent green ichor streaming down its torso. Tanch's other missiles hit the



Einheriar and blasted it to its knees. Dolan stepped closer, his jaw set, and put three more arrows into the thing in rapid succession. The third entered the Einheriar's forehead at point blank range. It slumped to the side, and then dropped to the deck, unmoving. The Einheriar's body collapsed and dissolved into a putrid ooze. In moments it was naught but a bubbly, smoking stain upon the deck.

Theta peered down from the bridge deck, dagger in hand.

The battle over, the deck was quiet again for a few moments.

“Wizardry,” yelled N’Paag from

the wheel, pointing down at Tanch. “And why did his arrows work,” pointing at Dolan, “and not the others?”

“Foul magic,” shouted a crewman.

“Devil’s work,” shouted another.

The crewmen backed away from Tanch and Dolan both. Accusing and fearful stares accosted them from all sides. Even the soldiers of Malvegil, Lomion, and Eotrus, looked shocked and stared.

“You all know I’m a wizard of the Tower of the Arcane,” said Tanch. “Did you fools think tower

mage have no power? Did you think all we could do was card tricks?”

“We’ll suffer no dark magic on this ship,” shouted N’Paag.

Ob moved behind N’Paag, a dagger ready for use.

“Should I have stood by and let them kill you, one by one?” shouted Tanch, his voice filled with anger. “Fools.”

“Put them off,” yelled one sailor.

“Let’s throw them over the side,” barked Little Tug. “Let the Fens have them.”

“They just saved your behinds

with their magic," said Bertha Smallbutt, who knelt beside her wounded captain. "Show some gratitude, not stupidity."

"Maybe so, but they waited until men were dead and the captain was grievous hurt," said N'Paag.

Ob placed the tip of his dagger against N'Paag's back. "Not another word or you're dead," he said quietly.

"No good comes from magic," said Little Tug. He grabbed Dolan about the collar, lifted him effortlessly into the air with but one arm, and strode toward the rail.

Artol's iron grip locked on Tug's shoulder and spun all five hundred pounds of him around. "Perhaps you'd like to try that with me," he spat, meeting the giant's sneer, eye to eye.

Bertha rose from Slaayde's side. "The Captain says, leave them be. Any man that don't, will answer to him and to me."

There was some grumbling and cursing, but soon the men began to disperse.

"Another time, tin can," said Tug, dropping Dolan to the deck. Dolan landed lightly on his feet and looked not the least bit flustered.

“Any time, Little Bug,” said Artol with a big, fake smile.

“Keep your mouth shut from now on,” said Ob to N’Paag. “You’ll live longer.” Ob stepped back and put his dagger away. He turned to Theta and Claradon. “Too bad Slaayde stopped it so soon. Would’ve been interesting to see Artol tangle with that giant.”

“Why didn’t Dolan try to break free?” said Claradon. “He just hung there, limp.”

“The boy was scared senseless,” said Ob. “Nothing more than that.”

“No,” said Theta. “He was

deciding whether and when to kill the giant. He just hadn't made up his mind yet."

"Right," said Ob, with a nervous laugh. He took a swig from his flask before speaking again. "I wanted to help with the creature, you know, but I didn't expect me axe could touch it."

"You could've helped by watching our backs like I told you, gnome. If you had, it wouldn't have gotten behind me."

Ob paled. "You're right. I never even saw where it came from. A rookie mistake and I'm no rookie."

"Next time, do as I say."

Ob bristled and puffed out his chest. "Alright, Mr. Fancy Pants, I admitted I screwed up. But you're not the one in command here. Claradon is in charge of this mission, not you, and don't be forgetting it. It's his orders I follow, not yours, you stinking tin can." The gnome didn't wait for any response. He stormed down the ladder to the main deck, cursing under his breath.

Theta sat down on the deck, his feet over the edge, still holding Worfin Dal in his left hand. He took several deep breaths, and pulled ice from his mustache with his right



hand. The ice in his hair was melting. Water dripped down his face, which was pale.

“Ob’s a good man,” said Claradon. “I appreciate your tolerating his words. I need him with us in this.”

Theta nodded, looking down at the main deck. “Even an old dog barks to defend its master,” said Theta. “That’s its nature. To kick it, and expect it to stop, does as much good as kicking the wind.”

Claradon chuckled and sat down beside Theta.

“Impressive work against that creature,” said Claradon. “I

wouldn't have believed a man your size, in full plate, could move that fast. It never even touched you."

"That was the point. One touch from those things turns a man to dust, as we've just seen. I've no interest in that. It reminds me of stone trolls—they can dissolve a man's bones. Terrible way to die."

"Stone trolls? Are such things real?"

"Most of the creatures of myth and legend are real, or at least, were real. Not many left. Magic is leaving the world, it wanes more every year, and that's a good thing."

“Are you saying that as magic leaves the world, the creatures die out?”

“The other way around,” said Theta. “If I were to ask an average man in Lomion City about magic, about wizards, what would he tell me?”

“He would say that it’s not real, just trickery, sleight of hand and such for entertainment’s sake. Just old superstitions, kept alive to keep children in line or just out of ignorance. Nothing more to it than that, he’d say.”

“Yet every fortress and city in Lomion has at least one real wizard,

isn't that what you told me? Each one can cast spells and perform magics, though all in secret, except for extreme cases like with Tanch today."

"What you're telling me is that just because I haven't seen monsters, trolls, dragons, and such in my life, doesn't mean they don't exist."

Theta nodded. "There is more to the world than you know. On this trip, I expect you will see more of the weird than you ever dreamed existed."

"I already have. By the way, I'm sorry about that blow; I should

never have struck it. I'm just glad your armor held. I don't know what I was thinking. I saw the other weapons pass through; I should've known mine would do the same. I guess I did know, but just didn't think."

"You went on instinct, not thought. That sometimes serves a man well when fighting other men, but not against magic or creatures such as these. With them, you must use your brain, more than your sword, or you'll not last long."

"As for the armor, don't worry about it." Theta pulled his tabard open where it was slashed through,

and showed Claradon the shining steel breastplate beneath. “Not a scratch from your sword. The flaming splatter from whatever it coughed up did some damage, though,” he said, pointing to some burns and gouges scattered along the breastplate and shoulder piece. “You owe me a new tabard.”

“I will gladly buy you one of the best in Lomion.”

“Your sword didn’t fare as well as my armor.”

Claradon looked to the tip of his blade. The edge was chipped and bent, as if he had slammed it into a stone wall.

Theta took a closer look. “Don’t worry, it’s still serviceable, and not beyond repair.”

Claradon stared at the sword in surprise and then looked again at Theta’s breastplate. “How can this be?”

“Some steels are stronger than others, simple as that.”

They sat quietly for a time, watching the men on the deck below.

“That’s your edge isn’t it?” said Claradon. “Back during the miniatures game in Dor Lomion, you told us to use every edge that we had in battle. Your weapons and

your armor, they are your edge, aren't they?"

"You're learning, boy," said Theta. "Better arms do give a warrior an edge, and it's often enough to keep him alive, if his courage holds. Training, knowledge, magic, loyalty, and especially luck—all these can give you an edge too. And you can never have too many edges, this battle proved that. We owe a debt to Pipkorn, for his arrows, and for Wotan Dal. The battle would have gone harder without them."

"But you would have found a way to bring those creatures down,



even without them, wouldn't you?"

"There's always a way, Eotrus, if a man has the will, and the courage, and never gives up."

"Another lesson, Lord Theta?" said Claradon.

"Another lesson, Lord Eotrus."

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Theta pulled Wotan Dal and Dargus Dal from a bucket of water, inspected them each in turn, dried and buffed them with a cloth before replacing them in their sheaths.

Ob and Dolan descended from the bridge deck and approached

Theta. Dolan held Theta's gauntlets and Ob carried his ruined falchion.

"I cleaned them up as best I could," said Dolan. He handed the gauntlets to Theta who inspected them. The metal was slightly warped and gouged where the Einheriar's ichor had touched them, but both were intact and serviceable.

Ob offered Theta the falchion. "This one is done for."

Theta reached out and took hold of the blade. He held it up and studied the surface, melted, twisted, and bent almost completely in half. The fine engravings that covered

both sides of the blade from hilt to tip, geometric symbols and a strange script, were ruined over much of the sword's length.

“A shame,” said Ob. “A fine blade it was. How do you figure your sword and daggers stopped the creature's blows where every other blade did not? Are they magiced up or something?”

“They're made of a special alloy, similar to the arrows that Pipkorn gave to Dolan. The sword didn't have enough of the right materials, so it was damaged where the daggers were not.”

“You had that sword a long

time, didn't you?" said Ob.

"A very long time."

"Are you gonna keep it, for remembrance?"

"Dolan and I will repair it. We need only find a forge with the right tools and material and we can restore it."

Ob looked skeptical. "You'd need as much skill with a hammer as you have with the blade to fix that ruin."

"We can do it," said Dolan.

"What of the engravings?"

"If we had enough time," said Dolan. "Fix them, we could."

"What did it say?" said Ob. "The

writings on the sword.”

“That’s a story for another time.” Theta looked over at the remains of the Einheriar some feet away.

Dolan squatted down and fished through the ashy remains. His arrowheads survived, but the creature’s ichor had dissolved the shafts.

“What were these things?” said Dolan.

“Your boss named them,” said Ob. “Something familiar. What did you call them?”

“They were Einheriar.”

“I know that name from the old

legends,” said Ob. “Aren’t they Odin’s chosen warriors? Those ones what will stand with him at the end of days.”

“That battle has long come and gone,” said Theta.

“What? Anyway, they’re supposed to be the good guys,” said Ob. “Heroes, every one.”

“Once they were. Then Azathoth corrupted them.”

“Where did they come from? The Fens? You think there’s an army of them in there?”

“If there were an army of them, Lomion would be in dire trouble. No, those two were brought from

Nifleheim, of that I'm certain. Conjured up by some fool wizard, probably the same ones that opened the gateway in your forest."

"If that's right," said Ob, "that means they know we're following, and they left those creatures to slow us down or stop us dead. Which they would only bother doing if—"

"They were afraid of us," said Dolan.

"Not us, boy," said Ob. "They're afraid of Theta."

Done examining the remains, Theta stood and surveyed the deck. Guards stood all about the rail.

Others patrolled up and down the deck. The scent of brimstone nearly gone, the ice melted. If not for the warped and scarred floorboards, the deck looked almost normal.

“How many dead?” said Theta.

“Five of Slaayde’s crew got turned to dust and one of the Seran’s men too,” said Ob. “Two others of Slaayde’s are missing.”

“How many injured?” said Theta.

“By the creatures, only Slaayde himself. Every man what was touched was dusted, except Slaayde. He’s a sight—his hair all turned white, root to tip, and his



strength is sapped. His mates stand vigil, though they say he will live. Besides him, one of the crewmen was gutshot with an arrow; he will not live a day. A few others were hurt when the railing came down on them, but not serious."

"Luck was with us then," said Theta. "It could've been much worse."

Artol climbed down the ladder from the bridge deck and joined the others. "No trace of dust up there."

Theta nodded. "That means Slaayde's missing men are not missing. They turned into the Einheriar."

“What? How could that be?”  
said Ob.

“Perhaps they wore the guise of men only, and last night revealed their true nature. Or perhaps they were taken over somehow. The one that called the alarm and ran up the ladder past us. His was the dust Artol searched for. As I suspected, there was none. He became that Einheriar. That’s how it got behind us.”

“That makes four of Slaayde’s crew that was Leaguers or worse,”  
said Ob.

“How many more?” said Theta.  
“We can’t have traitors waiting to

strike us down at every turn."

"Maybe they're all Leaguers," said Dolan.

"They're not," said Artol. "At least three of the crew died fighting the monsters. These were brave men. Had their weapons worked against them, the whole crew would've been at them. Not many seamen would do that, especially not with soldiers and knights aboard. Most would hide behind us, but not these, they're made of sturdy stuff."

"I agree," said Ob. "They might be scum, but they've got heart and they're not Leaguers—at least not

most of them."

"But some were," said Theta. "And some more may be. We need to root them out. I want no daggers in my back."

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Par Tanch Trinagal turned fitfully in his sleep. His hands stung from the sorcery he had called upon in the recent battle; recurrent nightmares burned his brain. Nightmares of one hellish night deep in the Vermion Forest when he and his comrades faced outré horrors from beyond the world of

man.

Through a deep, bone-chilling fog, Tanch saw a demon of nightmare come alive, a thing more reptilian than animal. A thing that had no place or right to exist on Midgaard. A creature that should be naught but myth and legend. The thing pounced on Ob, already wounded and bleeding.

Tanch called up words of power known only to true wizards, “By the Shards of Pythagorus, gek paipcm ficcg.” Spheres of blue fire erupted from Tanch’s fingers and sped toward the demon. On impact they detonated, blasted huge chunks

from it, and killed it where it stood. Several knights moved protectively around Ob.

Tanch turned and saw the big foreign knight, Lord Angle Theta, surrounded by many fiends akin to but different from the one he had just felled. The fiends stopped for a moment and looks of fear etched their inhuman faces. One even fell to its knees.

Tanch had been plagued by this dream on many a night. Each time, one and then another of the fiends opened their mouths as if to speak, but through the din of battle, Tanch could not hope to hear their words,

if words they were at all.

But this night, unlike all the others, the dream was different. This time, the sounds of the battle grew dim and his vision narrowed upon the scene before him. This time, he heard the demons' words.

"No," cried one fiend. "It be the ancient enemy, the traitor. The Harbinger of Doom."

A second demon dropped to its knees. "Spare us Lord and we shall serve thee, forevermore."

Theta's sword slashed by faster than Tanch's eyes could follow, and cut the fiends to shreds.

Tanch awoke with a start,

nightshirt soaked, head pounding. The demon's words, "Harbinger of Doom. Harbinger of Doom," echoed in his head. The morning sun shone in through the porthole and anchored the wizard back to reality.

They knew him. They knew him. They feared him. They named him Lord and traitor. What could that mean? Dead gods, was that naught but a nightmare, or something more?

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Theta, Claradon, and Ob stood in Slaayde's private chambers, at



the foot of his sickbed. Tug and two burly seamen stood guard by the door. Slaayde was sitting up, though he looked half dead. His cheeks were sunken and of ghostly pallor, his hair white, his eyes dim and unfocused.

Claradon had spent several minutes explaining that the missing crewmen turned into the Nifleheim warriors and that other crewmen could be suspect. Slaayde remained unconvinced. Raised voices caused a number of crewmen to gather in the hallway outside, to listen.

“Slaayde,” said Theta, speaking for the first time since entering the

room, “I need you to order your men to assemble for questioning.”

Slaayde pulled himself up straighter. “My men,” said Slaayde in an even tone, but loud enough for his men in the hallway to hear, “fought bravely.” He paused to catch his breath before continuing. “Not a man amongst the crew of *The Falcon* was ever in league with those Fen creatures. *The Black Falcon* has the bravest and best crew that sails these ways, and let no man say any different. If any do, I will cut their damn heads off myself. I will not have my crew’s loyalties questioned by my

passengers or any other.”

Nods and grunts of agreement came from the lurking crewmen.

“Laddie, one of your men was right behind me and Theta, and then he turned into that thing what Theta fought and killed on the bridge.”

“Did you see this transformation? Did you see it happen with your own eyes?”

Ob narrowed his eyes.

“Did you see it, Eotrus? Or you?” he said, looking to Theta.

“No,” said Claradon.

Theta didn’t respond or react in any way save to stare at Slaayde.

“I say that those two Fen creatures swam to *The Falcon* from the bog and climbed up the side onto my deck. One skulked up behind my man while he was distracted by the battle below and killed him, turning him to dust, and then came for you.”

“There’s no dust up there,” said Ob.

“So? It scattered in the breeze or in the battle or was knocked overboard, or washed away by the rain. That’s what happened and I will hear no more of it. My men—one and all—are loyal and true to me and to Lomion. We will speak

no more of this. And we will see no more of those creatures—they're things of the Fens and travel not beyond its borders. We've left them well behind."

Claradon made to protest further, but Ob grabbed his arm. "Let's drop it, boy," he said quietly.

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"I don't understand what went on in there," said Claradon as he sat on the couch in the Captain's Den. "Is Slaayde an idiot? Even if he doesn't believe his missing men transformed into the Einheriar, he must see the value in questioning

the crew. If there are other spies or traitors aboard, next time we may not get off so easy. We need to route them out.”

Ob lounged back in a big leather chair, ale mug in hand. “Old White Hair knows all that as good as we do. Slaayde is hurt bad and that makes him afraid. Afraid his men will turn on him, and that he’ll lose his pretty little ship. That’s why he won’t back us, least not until he’s up and about and can stand up for himself.”

“So to not take a chance on jeopardizing his command, he’s willing to risk his ship and all our

lives?”

“Yep, that’s about the size of it. Most men would do the same. I suppose he figures the odds of another turncoat or doppelganger is small, so he’ll take his chances.”

“So what do we do?” said Claradon, looking toward Theta. The big knight sat silently in another leather chair, an inscrutable expression on his face.

“What do you think we should do, boy?” said Ob.

Claradon looked uncertain, and paused, thinking. “I think we should take a friendly and unannounced tour of the ship.

Inspect for damage, shake some hands, see how everyone i's holding up after that battle, and all the while I'll keep the Amulet of Escandell close, looking for any sign that it reacts when I pass any crewman. If I get a hit, we will know who to watch."

"A good plan, Lord Eotrus," said Ob.

Claradon smiled. "Thank you, Castellan."

"Careful to whom you extend your hand, Eotrus," said Theta, "or it might not come back."

"What do you mean?" said Claradon.



“Have you forgotten that last night, half the crew, led by the First Mate, wanted to throw Dolan and the wizard in the river? If they had, things wouldn’t have ended there, and they knew it. Leaguers or not, we’ve enemies amongst us and we need to be wary.”

“The big guy has got a point,” said Ob. “That First Mate, Na-poo-poo, or whatever his name is, needs close watching.”

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“Ob and I talked to each man in the crew,” said Claradon as he

leaned against the ship's rail. Theta stood beside him. "You were right. It seems a lot of them don't care for us. The amulet went warm around any number of them. I was starting to think that they're all Leaguers."

"They're afraid of you—of us," said Theta. "That's what you were picking up. Or—maybe they are all Leaguers."

Claradon perked up. "You're kidding, right?"

"Let's just watch our steps," said Theta. "I suggest you go nowhere alone on this ship. Keep at least one of your own knights at your side at all times."



## VIII

### DOVER

“A man makes his own fate.”  
—Angle Theta

South of the Fens, the river returned to its normal aspect, its waters wide, deep, and greenish blue. A place of quiet and calm, jumping fish, buzzing dragonflies, healthy breezes, and clear cool water. For some time, *The Black Falcon* made its way south, untroubled, with as much speed as Slaayde's crew could muster, oar, sail, and rudder.

They sailed past the Dalassian Hills, named for the dwarven clan that abided deep within its rolling, rocky expanse. Then came a land of green fields and light woodland dotted with sleepy villages of white roofs, sturdy walls, and stone palisades, scattered along the western riverbank. The eastern bank remained bleak and barren, as if the Fens' fell influence extended even there. They passed the idyllic Linden Forest, and the gray fortress of Dor Linden, ruled by House Mirtise.

Along the way, the crew implemented repairs as best they

could, on the move and with limited supplies. Sturdy pine deck-boards hauled up from the hold replaced those damaged by the Einheriar. The crew cobbled together a serviceable temporary rail up on the bridge deck for safety, and they reinforced the repairs below the waterline where the saboteur had drilled his holes.

After some days, Slaayde appeared on deck, looking weak and leaning on a cane. He grew stronger though each day; the color returned to his cheeks and the spark to his step, but his hair remained ghost white, root to end, until the end of

his days.

During the journey south, *The Falcon* passed a number of ships headed upriver, and asked each of *The White Rose*. Always a day behind were they, sometimes two. They could gain nothing on their quarry.

Farther south, they passed the Tornwood, a vast, foreboding woodland that ruled both banks of the Hudsar for untold miles. Trees tall and old, the Tornwood long rumored to house a secret elven enclave—though no man in living memory had seen its sights.

The City of Dover lived at a fork in the river that marked the southeastern border of the Kingdom of Lomion. The Hudsar's main course continued due south for many days to the City of Tragoss Mor on the shores of the Azure Sea. The smaller eastern fork became the Emerald River and flowed southeast to Minoc-by-the-Sea, also on the Azure, but many miles east of Tragoss Mor.

Dover, home to untold thousands, was the largest city in the kingdom south of Lomion City,



and was located on the Hudsar's western bank. Its place at the borderlands of Lomion and the wilds beyond created its militant aspect. Walls sixty feet tall surrounded the inner city and a second wall of forty feet in height encircled the outer. Guard towers dotted the wall.

Dover kept a standing army of size to defend the border. A fleet of vessels, merchant and military, filled its port. Most of the knightly orders kept Chapterhouses here, and some held great power and influence.

The fortress of Dor Valadon

stood on a small island that separated the two great rivers. Massive walls of stone, forty feet tall, and many feet thick, joined stone towers of twice that height, and ruled the river's fork. Men-at-arms and knights stalked the battlements.

Connecting Dor Valadon and Dover was one of the great wonders of the known world—a bridge, a stone arch, massive and strong, rose high above the river, and spanned clear across the Hudsar at its narrowest point. The masts of even the tallest ships could pass easily under the magnificent arch, even in

high tide. Ages ago, the Dalassian dwarves, renowned masons and craftsman, were engaged by the King of Lomion to construct the bridge. Legend says seven hundred dwarves labored night and day for seven years to build the wondrous structure, which stood defiantly against wind and storm, time and troubles, down through the long years.

The Village of Yord on the river's eastern bank, opposite Dover, surrounded by a tall stone palisade, stood at the headwaters of the Emerald River. Private homes and longhouses of carved logs,

skillfully crafted, dominated Yord, a sleepy town separated from the bustle of Dover by the river which was its lifeblood. A ferry system carried passengers and goods between Yord, Dor Valadon, and Dover proper.

*The Black Falcon* put to port at Dover's longest and tallest pier, for Slaayde needed to procure timber and repair materials for the ship, and Theta wanted to visit a smithy to affect repairs to his sword.

As soon as *The Falcon's* gangway was down, Theta, Dolan, Artol, Tanch, and Ob disembarked. Uncharacteristically, Theta wore no

armor save his cuirass, though his sword belt held his scimitar, and he carried his shield over his shoulder. Dolan, also unarmored, carried Theta's ruined falchion. Artol, however, was armed and armored to the teeth. The harbormaster gave them directions to what he claimed was the best smithy in town.

A burly young man pounded at a sword while a youth worked the bellows. They stopped their work as the five approached and exchanged greetings.

"We've a sword that's broke," said Dolan.

An older man, lean, lined, and solid muscle emerged from within the smithy. He looked the group up and down.

“Come in on a ship?”

“Aye,” said Dolan. “*The Black Falcon* out of Lomion.”

“Not a ship known for carrying passengers.”

“We’re—”

“It’s a fast ship and we had no time to waste,” said Theta. “We need the use of your forge to repair a sword.”

“Nobody uses my forge but me and my sons. Let’s see this sword of yours.”

Dolan placed the blade on a table and unwrapped it.

“Dead gods, what a ruin.” He picked the blade up and studied it. “Thor’s hammer, this is like no steel I’ve ever seen.” His sons looked on, gawking. The smith slowly passed his calloused fingers over the symbols etched along the blade. “Not even the dwarves could make this. Where did you find her?”

“It’s been in my family for generations.”

“A shame. I’ve never seen damage like this before. Does this steel have a low melting point? Was it in a fire?”

Theta looked pointedly at Dolan, who removed a money purse from his belt and counted out ten silver stars. "We need your forge, Mr. Smith. We've no time for talk."

"I'm as good as any smith south of Lomion City, save for the dwarves, but I couldn't do this blade justice. In a few days maybe I could make it serviceable, but I would never be able to fully restore it."

"We'll fix it ourselves," said Dolan. He handed the smith the coins, and then walked to the forge and put on a pair of heavy gloves.

"Do you know what you're



doing?”

“Just watch.” Dolan took out the arrowheads that he had recovered from the remains of the Einheriar and placed them beside the forge.

“You’re gonna add their metal to your sword?” said Ob quietly to Theta. “Smart move.”

“They’re almost pure ranal. They will make the sword invulnerable to the touch of Nifleheim.” Theta unlatched his cuirass, laid it and his shield beside the forge, and prepared to assist Dolan in his labors.

“How long will this take?” said

Ob. "Every minute we're here, Korrgonn gets farther away. If we're to save Jude—"

"There's no use catching them if we don't have the right tools to deal with them when we do. I need this sword. We'll be swift. Dolan is a master at this."

"I don't know half what you do, boss," said Dolan.

"Fine, forge away," said Ob. "Tanch and I are gonna poke around for a bit. No sense all of us watching you two sweat."

The two watched for some minutes as men, women, even families with children, filed into a

large stone building.

“The sign of Bhaal lies over the doorway,” said Tanch. “And there are other marks of Nifleheim there, and there,” he said, pointing. “It’s a temple. A temple to the Nifleheim lords, right here in the open.”

“In Dover?” said Ob. “That can’t be. This is a civilized city. A good place—always has been. We need to go in and see what’s what.”

“I just hope we can get out again,” said Tanch.

They crossed the street and entered along with several others. The entry chamber held racks of hooded robes of red and black to be

donned by worshippers before entering. Tanch and Ob hastily garbed themselves, Ob drawing from the children's section, and then proceeded in. Beyond was a large worship room lined with benches, all facing an expansive podium featuring an immense stone altar. Well behind the altar sat a group of robed men, mostly young, a few wizened and old.

The service about to start, guards noisily closed and barred the chamber's mammoth double doors. Other guards positioned about the room made a show of slamming and barring every other exit as well,

one after another in practiced pattern. No one was leaving this room until the service was over, that much was clear.

Ob turned to the wrinkled old woman of blue hair and huge hat that sat to his right. "What do I do," he said, pleadingly, almost in desperation, "if I have to pee?"

The woman smiled and nodded, clearly having no idea what Ob had said.

An elderly priest stepped up behind the altar, and faced the congregation. He gripped a bejeweled staff of iron and wood, long and stately. The staff glowed

when he thanked the faithful for their devotion and led them in prayers and blessings praising Bhaal and other Nifleheim lords, whom he called Holy Arkons and the blessed Lords of Light.

The formal ritual complete, the priest launched into a fiery sermon, railing against the rich, and denouncing the government. He spoke of the crown's oppression of the common people, the corruption of the nobles, and their foul conspiracies to suppress the truth and keep good people down. He appealed to the congregation's sense of worth and entitlement.

They all deserved the same success, the same wealth, the same opportunity as others. Too long had they been denied their god-given rights and privileges by those who thought themselves their betters. He urged them to stand together not as one people, but as one family, united against the forces of evil and oppression. Only then would they achieve all that they deserved, only then would their worldly happiness be assured, and only then would their honored place be reserved in paradise. The people nodded and shouted their agreement, applauding briefly here

and there.

Ob and Tanch tensed when the priest produced a large chalice from behind the altar and gazed out over the gathered faithful. Hands went up amongst the congregation and the priest pointed to one man, seated near the front. Balding and middle-aged, the man kissed his wife and child before he stood up and walked to the altar, a long, wicked dagger gripped in his hand.

“Oh, boy,” said Ob. “I had hoped not to see this again.”

Other priests crept up behind him and held him fast about the shoulders. The high priest blessed



the man, declaring that his sacrifice proved his devotion to the lord and assured his passage to Vaeden, the blessed afterlife. The man passed the priest the dagger and willingly held out his hand, wrist up. Swift and sure, the priest sliced the man's wrist, though he exhibited no pain and did not call out. One of the priests held the man's arm still while the high priest poured a decanter of wine over the wound and into the awaiting chalice.

When the decanter was empty, the high priest selected a second man from the audience, and repeated the ritual, though this

time, the dagger sliced across the man's neck. It soon became clear that this was naught but ceremony, the men were not harmed at all, and no true blood was spilled. Only wine filled the chalices passed to the faithful, each devotee, young or old, man, woman, or child, all obliged to drink.

Both Ob and Tanch pretended to take a sip, though neither did. Soon the service ended, the great doors opened, and everyone left in peace.

Ob and Tanch wandered out in a daze. They didn't speak until they were well away from the crowd.

“The prayers, the sermon, it was all so similar,” said Ob. “Except the sacrifices were just an act, the blood just wine.”

“Without the bloodshed,” said Tanch, “their ritual was not the vile thing I remembered. Not to say I agree with their lessons, but some of them at least made sense. I can see why people attend, why they’re drawn in.” Tanch hesitated before continuing. “You did see the blood, real blood in the ceremony in Southeast, right?”

“I saw it,” said Ob, though he seemed less certain than he should.

The crew hauled aboard bundles of wood planks, buckets of nails, cords of rope, casks of local spring water, baskets of fresh bread, and crates of salted meats and hard cheeses in workmanlike manner.

Slaayde completed his dealings with a rotund merchant of pointy beard, colorful garb, and pasty face, trading him a goodly number of boxes marked linens, tobacco, and gnome mead for a number of unmarked crates of dubious origin and unspoken contents. Soon after their transaction was complete, Theta and the others returned. Theta and Dolan were grimy and

sweaty, and Theta's falchion was back in its sheath at this waist. His breastplate looked shiny and renewed, as did his shield.

"We've asked after *The Rose* as best we could," said Claradon, "but no one can say which way she headed. There's just too much traffic here. No one pays attention to what ships pass, and the harbormaster has no record. We need to decide which way to go—continue down the Hudsar or take the Emerald?"

"Are there any other rivers or tributaries that *The Rose* could take, off either river?" asked Theta.

“None what could handle a ship near her size,” said Ob. “But they have dinghies aboard. There’s a score or more small rivers and streams that flow into the Hudsar and the Emerald that you could send a dinghy up, and there’s a thousand places you could make shore at.”

“So how do we decide?” said Claradon.

“We know they were well-stocked at Lomion City for a long voyage,” said Theta. “How long to Tragoss from here, and to Minoc?”

“Both are a week to ten days away, depending on the current and

the wind,” said the gnome.

“What welcome would they receive in each port?” said Theta.

“Tragoss is ruled by monks who worship Thoth. They’re religious wackos, a lot like the Leaguers, but I don’t think they would abide them. Like as not, they and the League would be at each other.”

“And Minoc?”

“A large trading city, ruled by a merchant’s guild. One of the best of the independent cities. Korrgonn would get no welcome there.”

“But in a free city, he could hide,” said Claradon.

“Hiding is not his plan,” said

Theta.

Claradon looked to Theta, shaking his head. "If he's got no reason we know of to go to Tragoss or Minoc, he could be just passing through on his way to anywhere. We might as well flip a coin."

"Leave it to fate, then," said Ob, a pensive look on his face.

"What do you think, Lord Theta?" said Claradon.

"A man makes his own fate."

Ob pulled a silver star from his pocket. "Kings for Tragoss, castles for Minoc. Choose."

Claradon considered for a moment. "Kings," he said.



Ob tossed the coin high into the air and let it fall to the deck. “Kings.”

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South of Dover abided the Craggs, a long expanse of enormous jutting rocks that comprised the river's western bank. The river's relentless flow had carved the Craggs from the very stone of the earth, leaving naught but a tall stony palisade. Curiously, no similar formation existed on the opposite shore. Instead, the Mistwood—a vast, dark forest, nigh impassable

and exuding a palpable dread, ruled the eastern bank.

Several hours after sunset, as *The Black Falcon* sailed through the narrowest portion of the river in the Craggs region, the men spotted a score or more figures, male and female, amidst the lowest of the stony palisades, not much higher than the mast of the ship. Each stood on some rocky promontory or narrow precipice; locations where none but eagles were wont to go. Illumed only by moonlight, silent, still, and tall they looked down on the ship, their faces cloaked in shadow and mystery.

Theta, Claradon, and Ob stood on the Bridge Deck, and watched the figures watch them. As the stern of the ship passed them, one raised his arm as if in greeting or salute and then bowed low toward the men on the deck.

“Some friend of yours, Theta?” said Ob. “Another pal from the old days?”

“I know them not,” said Theta.

“They’re no friends of ours,” said Claradon, pointing to his amulet, glowing brightly.

“Since they’ve no bows, unless they can fly, they’re of little matter,” said Ob.

The figure who bowed lofted some small object toward them; a powerful and accurate throw. It landed on the deck.

Ob dashed over to examine it. The others kept their attention on the figures on the cliff. "It's got a rune on it, embedded in a circle and a square."

"Bring it here," said Theta. He studied it closely after they were well past the strange figures. "Azrael," said Theta, turning back toward the figures, now lost in the night. Theta gripped his Ankh in his right hand. "We shall meet them again."



## IX

### TRAGOSS MOR

“They have to spread our wealth  
around to the poor.  
That gives them power. That’s what  
this here is all about.”

“Theta, any sign of our  
shadow?” said Ob.

“It follows us still, though it has  
fallen farther back.”

“All the way from Lomion to the  
shore of the Azure Sea and not a  
sign of *The White Rose*,” said  
Claradon, his hand on the ship’s

rail. "We must've hailed three score ships this past week and not one could say if they had seen her."

"That don't mean nothing," said Ob. "The Hudsar is wide and busy down this way, so captains rarely pay heed to what ships they pass."

"We should've taken the eastern fork to the Emerald River. I've failed my brother. We'll never find him now."

"We trusted to fate, and we will soon know if that was sound or sorry. Either way, we will catch up to them. Don't you worry, boy. We'll get Jude back."

Tanch stepped up to the others,

a wet cloth held over his mouth, his face pale and drawn. “What is that atrocious smell? It’s been getting worse all day.”

“It’s Tragoss Mor, Magic Boy. It’s the city you’re smelling.”

“But we haven’t even entered the harbor yet.”

“Open sewers and such,” said Ob. “You get used to it after a while. Just keep breathing through your nose, not your mouth. Smells worse, but less chance of disease, I’m told.”

“Open Sewers? Disease? Someone, please put me out of my misery. What kind of a place is this



anyway?”

“It’s an old port city,” said Ob. “Most sea trade between Lomion and parts foreign passes through here. It’s bigger even than Lomion City, but the buildings are smaller. Mostly one or two stories, some are three; few are more than that. Nice cobblestone streets, as long as you watch your footing. Here’s the harbor now.”

Tanch turned to look. “Dead gods, it’s huge.”

“Biggest in the civilized world,” said Ob. “More than one hundred piers, and berths for a thousand or more ships this size, and several

times that many small ones. There's no other port like it."

"How will we ever find Sir Jude in all this?" said Tanch. "*The White Rose* could be anywhere."

Captain Slaayde climbed the ladder to the Bridge Deck, accompanied by Tug. "I plan to pull into a slip in the center of the harbor," he said, his usual wide grin on his face. "I assume you've no objection to that."

"Why not pull off to the very end?" said Tanch. "Wouldn't there be less chance we'd be spotted by the wrong sort?"

"And more chance *The Grey*

*Talon* would come aside and risk boarding us. I want my ship in plain sight; there will be no safer place.”

“Why would this *Grey Talon* accost us?” said Tanch.

“She’s been shadowing us all the way from Lomion City. I’ve no argument with her captain or her owners, but I believe you people do. I will not risk my ship unnecessarily.”

“Who commands *The Talon*?” said Claradon.

“Captain Kleig is her master, but he’s a lap dog of House Alder, which, I assume is why they’ve been following. They want your

head, Eotrus, for what you did to the Chancellor."

Claradon paled and looked as if he had just been slapped across the face.

"How many men does she carry?" said Theta.

"Her crew is half again larger than mine. I expect the Alders have loaded her up with their house guard, maybe even some Myrdonians. Probably one or more of the Alders will be leading them. I've no interest or plan to take her on, so don't go getting any ideas." Slaayde turned toward Tanch who was about to speak. "Harringgold's

coin does me no good if I'm dead." Slaayde put a hand to his whited hair. "This trip has already cost me more than his gold is worth."

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Dozens of seamen and longshoremen loaded cargo off a ship docked across the wide pier from where *The Falcon* had just tied off. *The Falcon's* crew secured the gangway and Slaayde immediately disembarked with his bodyguards to converse with Borman, the Harbormaster, a burly man of weathered face and bushy

brow. They joked and traded quips for a time, as old friends. Ob and Tanch joined them on the pier.

“What mischief brings you here this time?” said Borman.

“The usual mischief,” said Slaayde.

Borman smiled and looked as if he didn’t expect any more of a response than that, and he got none.

“Harbormaster,” said Ob. “*The White Rose*, out of Lomion, came down ahead of us. Where is she berthed?”

Borman looked down at Ob, furrowed his brow, and turned back

to Slaayde. “His kind aren’t welcome in Tragoss any longer.”

Ob’s face darkened. He made to move toward Borman, but Par Tanch grabbed him by the collar and pushed him to the side. The stone at the apex of Tanch’s staff glowed blue as he thumped the shaft on the pier’s deck. “My servant asked after *The White Rose*.”

Borman’s eyes widened at the staff’s glow, and he looked nervously about as if to see if any were looking. “I haven’t seen her, your wizardship, sir,” he said quickly.

“I owe her boatswain a gold crown from a game of Spottle gone bad, and promised I would settle up with him here in Tragoss. Have you heard no word of *The Rose*?”

“I couldn’t say. I couldn’t say. Many ships come and go through here. If they brook no trouble, I pay them little heed.” He glanced over his shoulder again. “The Thothians tolerate no magic, your wizardship, no magic at all. Keep your staff dark hereabouts or you will find yourself in the deep stuff. They will be here in a moment.”

Borman’s deeply lined face took on a serious expression and he then



spoke loudly and boldly. "The port fee is four silver stars per day, up from three last year. As is custom, you pay now for today and for tomorrow, or just for today if you plan to leave before sunset. And cause no trouble in Tragoss Mor, or the swift arm of justice will smite you."

He winked at Slaayde, turned, and walked swiftly away, leaving his aide to collect the fees. He halted after a few paces to bow to four strange men that approached.

Four Thothian monks, shirtless, bald of pate, beardless, but heavily mustached as was their custom,

walked up to the group, ignoring Borman as they passed. Each wore baggy pantaloons adorned only with a wide sword belt.

“Welcome to Tragoss Mor, gentlemen,” said one of the monks. “I am Finch, Prior of almighty Thoth, may he watch over us always. How fares *The Black Falcon*?”

“She fares well,” said Slaayde.

“You are her captain?”

“Dylan Slaayde, at your service.”

“Good, very good,” said the monk with a smile. “What is your business in Tragoss Mor?”

“To purchase some fine wares

and supplies for my ship.”

“Good, very good,” said Prior Finch, the same smile etched on his face. “You will find many treasures in Tragoss and we welcome your business.” The smile then dropped from his face. “I trust you’re aware that the slave markets are long since closed.” He paused, waiting for a response.

“And good riddance to them,” said Slaayde.

“Good,” said the monk. “Then you also know that no spirits are allowed here—not of grapes, wheat, honey, or any other. You will find no bars here, nor brothels.

Seek not these things in Tragoss Mor and bring them not with you and your stay will be pleasant."

"We'll be on our best behavior," said Slaayde with a smile.

"See that you are. Good day to you." As Prior Finch began to turn away, one of his fellows placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Prior," he said, pointing at Ob, "they have an imp."

Prior Finch's eyes widened. He stepped up before Ob. "What have we here, Captain? Surely not a passenger?"

Before Slaayde could respond, Tanch spoke up. "The gnome is but

a common laborer, bound to the ship's service for the rest of his days."

Prior Finch's smile returned, and he visibly relaxed. "Good, very good. We are a civilized people, its kind are not free to roam our fair city. See that it stays on your ship or travels only with an escort."

Ob's face went beet red. He clenched both fists tightly and bit his tongue to stay it.

"Your imp is not properly trained, Captain." Prior Finch's hand darted out and slapped Ob, hard across the face, knocking his head to the side.

Ob slowly turned his face back toward the Prior, expressionless, his eyes locked on the monk's, boring through him. The monk's hand went up to strike Ob again.

"Stop!" said Tanch, placing his fist against the monk's chest to stay him. Prior Finch looked down at Tanch's hand in disgust and then met him eye to eye.

"He's no use to us if he's damaged," said Tanch.

"Discipline, not damage," said the monk. "Captain, your ship would be the better for it." He pushed Tanch's arm aside and backed away. "Your crew will show

the proper respect to all Thothians and citizens, Captain, or you will be held accountable.”

“I’m sure that they’ll behave,” said Slaayde, with his widest grin. “Good day to you.”

Ob took a long drink from his rather large goblet. “I’m gonna kill that one,” said Ob, his face still red from the monk’s blow and perhaps the ale.

“A slap is not worth killing over,” said Tanch, a serious look on his face. “Perhaps, a bit of torture, though.”

All looked at Tanch in shock.

He smiled and the Captain's Den briefly filled with laughter. Even Ob chuckled. The tension gone from the room, the men settled into their seats.

"The harbormaster lied," said Theta.

"He's hiding something," said Ob.

"Do you think *The Rose* is here?" said Claradon.

"Here, and gone most likely," said Ob.

"I agree, but we must check and find out what we can."

Theta directed Seran to take six men and walk the eastern docks to



look for *The Rose*. Artol was to do the same at southern docks. Theta warned both to steer clear of the monks.

“It may be that Korrgonn and dear Sir Jude have disembarked and the ship has moved on without them,” said Tanch.

“Unlikely,” said Ob. “If they were letting off Korrgonn here, they would’ve stayed in port for at least a couple of days to rest and resupply. With the time we made, they couldn’t be much more than a day, at most two, ahead of us.”

“Slaayde,” said Theta. “Resupply as fast as you can. Assume a long

journey and fill your hold accordingly.”

Slaayde looked surprised. “What? We’ve come all the way to the sea. How much farther are we to go? And who is to pay for this?” said Slaayde.

“You are,” said Theta.

“I’m sure that Duke Harringgold will reimburse all your expenses,” said Tanch. “And reward you generously for your service.”

Slaayde didn’t look entirely convinced.

After a few hours, Artol and Seran returned and the group gathered again in the Captain’s Den.

On deck, Slaayde's crew hauled aboard and stowed kegs of fresh water, dried fruit, and all manner of supplies.

"Gather round you scum," said Artol, displaying his characteristic toothy grin, "for our mission was a success." The big soldier casually twirled a long knife in his right hand, a thick cigar smoked in his left. Seran stood at attention, his armor shining even in the poor light of the cabin.

"My pal here Mr. Spit-and-Polish," resting his hand on Seran's shoulder, "despite his pretty face and wily ways, came up empty on

the eastern docks. You might say that he's an incompetent fool not worth the gruel we feed him, but I prefer to think *The White Rose* docked to the south, so the scum of the east side knew nothing to tell."

Seran paled and looked mortified. The others who knew Artol far better than Seran looked amused.

"So what did you find?" said Ob.

"Three men I plied with a bit of silver and a bit more persuasion, if you get my meaning, told the same tale. *The Rose* sailed at dawn yesterday, stocked for a long haul, many weeks or more. To where,

none of three knew.”

“Perhaps more silver would loosen their tongues?” said Claradon.

Artol smiled a wicked, toothy smile. “Trust me, they told me all they knew.” The long knife spun between his fingers.

“Who were the men you questioned?” said Theta.

“A petty merchant and two common sailors. Each was from parts foreign, and set to sail today or tomorrow.”

“The locals?”

“Had nothing to say, despite my gentle urgings. I could be more

persuasive, but then things would get messy. That wouldn't be neighborly, and probably just a waste of time. Someone off *The Rose* made threats and spread some coin to keep their passage secret; that much is clear. Of course, there's no quicker way to gather attention than to pay people to say they didn't see you, which is the only reason those three even heard of *The Rose*. It's doubtful they told anyone where they were going, so we can bash as many heads as we want and we'll get nowhere. That's how I see it anyway."

Artol turned to Theta. "Thanks

for the warning about the monks. They're everywhere and the people are scared snotless by them. We had to dodge them more than once. I thought slavers and pirates ran this city, not monks?"

"They did until a few years ago," said Ob. "Then the Thothians took over. They wiped out the slave trade and the corsairs but what they put in place is even worse. Look at them wrong and they'll stone you, I hear. Insult their religion or whatever and they will kill you dead on the street, and go after your family too. Hell, that stinking monk hit me just for being

a gnome. What's that about? Same kind of nuts like the Shadow Leaguers. Who knows, maybe they're even in with them.

"Had I known all that, I would have been a bit more subtle," said Artol, his expression and tone now serious. He sheathed his knife.

"Sorry," said Ob. "Sometimes I forget not everyone is as up on these things as me."

"Just what we need," said Tanch. "Now you've drawn attention to us. More crazies will be after us. I just can't take this, it's all too much." Tanch walked stiffly over to a couch and laid down,



wincing, as if his back plagued him.

“Did you ask if any men from *The Rose* stayed behind here?” said Theta.

“They didn’t know,” said Artol.

Theta turned to Ob. “To what ports and what direction could they have been headed?”

“Minoc,” said Ob. “Though it’s less than a week’s journey northeast along the coast. But if they wanted to go there, they should’ve taken the Emerald River, which leads straight there.” Ob walked over to the mariner’s globe, spun it to the right angle, and pointed to each place he named.

"Boreundin is farther to the north; farther still is Vinland. Along the coast to the southwest is Piper's Hold, then comes Thoros-Gar, and other towns and cities beyond that. South, the lands stretch endlessly as far as any have gone, far beyond any semblance of civilization. There are islands too, far to the south off the coast. Bardin's Rock, Treeskull, Tekla, Radu-Mal, Tardin-Gar, Revit, and many, many more."

"They could be headed anywhere," said Claradon. "We have to find out what direction they went at least. If not, we'll never catch them. I will not abandon my

brother to those maniacs.”

Ob looked over at Theta. “Any ideas?”

“We’ve only one ship and not enough men to split our force. Given that, we must find someone who saw the ship leave. We must discover what direction they went.”

“Or take our chances by choosing east or south,” said Ob. “Another coin toss?”

“If we choose wrong, all could be lost,” said Theta. “We must find another way.”

Par Tanch sat up on the couch. “There’s a seer,” he said. “Azura the Seer, she’s called. Trained in the

Tower of the Arcane and gifted with far sight and prescience. She may be able to point the way for us.”

“I put little stock in so-called seers,” said Theta.

“Her powers are real enough, my lord,” said Tanch, “or the tower wouldn’t have passed her through.”

“Hogwash and horsefeathers,” said Ob. “They’re nothing but charlatans and mummers.”

“Let’s try it,” said Claradon. “If she knows nothing, we will have lost little but a bit of time.”

“Where do we find her?” said Theta.

Tanch shook his head. “I’ve

heard her tower resides in the western district, but I don't know where."

"Western district, you say? Near the Raging Giant Inn, there's a tall tower. Could be that's it."

"Perhaps," said Tanch, nodding.

"Let's try it," said Claradon.

"Why don't we just ask someone for directions?" said Dolan.

"You start asking folks and the entire city will know within the hour," said Ob, "unless the harbormaster has already told them. We don't need any more attention."

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“Slaayde—keep your men close, no shore leave,” said Theta. “We may need to leave with speed on our return.”

Slaayde smiled a wide smile with his mouth but not his eyes. “Bertha and her men are still out collecting supplies.”

“Have them back before we return.” Theta turned to Seran and Glimador who stood nearby. “Keep a watchful eye for *The Grey Talon*. She could be here any time. Keep our men on the ship. See that

Slaayde's men don't stray either. Post a strong guard on deck. Be ready for trouble."

"What trouble are you expecting?" said Slaayde.

"The troubling kind. Just keep your men close."

The group set off and made their way down the long pier past Tragoss trawlers and heavy Minoc merchantmen, a trireme out of Kern and exotic sailing vessels from the southern islands. At the pier's end, a broad avenue stood before them, stretching as far as one could see in each direction along the

water's edge, filled with wagons and carts, seamen and citizens, in transit in all directions. Though the way was wide, the group could walk no more than two abreast due to the throngs of dockworkers and teamsters. Claradon and Theta walked side by side at the vanguard of the group, Ob and Tanch behind them, and then Dolan and Artol.

Despite the crowds, nearly half the storefronts they passed were closed—abandoned and boarded up. Many lots were piled high with debris, stone and brick, wood and tile, the remnants of demolished buildings, long past their time.



“Last I was here,” said Ob, “Tragoss had more brothels than bricks and more pubs than peddlers. Next to trading or slaving, those have always been their biggest businesses. All these abandoned storefronts were pubs. There on the corner was a place called The Great Mug. They’d been in business a couple centuries at least and sold more than a hundred kinds of beer from across Midgaard. Best tavern south of Lomion City. I will miss it. Stinking Thothians.”

“What of the buildings torn down?” said Claradon.

“Gambling halls and brothels

mostly. Guess even the buildings offended the monks. Reminds me of one time when me, McDuff, and Red Tybor were down here and—”

“Not now, gnome,” said Theta over his shoulder.

Ob replied only to Theta’s back with a crude gesture.

Despite the changes, the streets still burst with inns and eateries, tackle and bait shops, food stands and fruit carts, and souvenir shops beyond count.

Sprawling warehouses of stone and brick and wood also thrived here, some of good repute, others ramshackle and abandoned—husks

of past glories and finer days. Nearly all the buildings, save for the warehouses, were two stories, mostly built of tan-colored brick and mortar. They had flat roofs and wood-railed parapets. The citizenry were far more varied. There were tall Lomerians, dusky sailors from Minoc, short, yellow-skinned men from Tragoss Gar, colorful traders from Piper's Hold, and many more.

The women all wore long gloves extending from fingertip to elbow on both hands. The gloves, some in cloth, others in leather, varied in color, style, and pattern, and were universally worn by all women,

even young girls. “In the inner city, the local women only wear white or black gloves,” said Ob. “Last I was here, foreigners didn’t need to wear the gloves at all. Guess that has changed.”

“Need to?” said Claradon.

“The Thothians consider it improper for women to go out without gloves. “If you do, they will stone you.”

“To death? For not wearing gloves?”

“Yup. And they call us northerners barbarians. They say ungloved women are unclean whores, or some such nonsense.”

Everywhere were the Thothian monks, in groups of two or four and sometimes more. Stationed here and there and everywhere, watching every move, marking every word and glance. Besides the monks, and some of the merchants, few Tragoss Morians moved about the harbor district. It was a land of sightseers and seamen, tourists, traders, and foreign laborers.

It took almost an hour for the group to make their way on foot to the thirty-foot-tall wall that separated the Harbor District from the Western District. Iron portcullises barred passage from

the wide gravel-filled avenues of the Harbor to the narrow cobblestoned lanes of the West. A guard post stood behind the iron, manned by a group of city watchmen.

“The Harbor District is all most visitors see,” said Ob. “Once we pass this checkpoint, you will see the real Tragoss Mor. She’s a beauty, except for the sewers. I expect we will have to pay to get through.”

Ob stepped up to the gate and banged on it with his axe handle. “Open up.”

Two uniformed guards stepped out of their shelter and approached

the gate. One was middle-aged and tall, with bright eyes. The second was average height, lanky, and vacant.

“Who seeks to enter the Western District?” said the first guard.

“We do, bucko. Open up.”

The guard looked down at Ob and wrinkled his nose. He looked up at the others. “Is this imp yours?”

“My servant,” said Tanch. “Kindly pass us through.”

“Your names and business?”

“I’m—Par Sinch of Kern,” said Tanch. “I am on a pilgrimage to

visit the great shrines of the Thothians. These others are but my servants and bodyguards.”

The captain looked surprised, even taken aback. He looked around, as if to see if anyone was listening before he spoke. “Did you say, Par Sinch?”

Now Tanch looked surprised. “Yes,” he said, uncertainly.

The captain studied the group for several moments. “If I didn’t know better, I might mistake you for a wizard of the Tower of the Arcane and these bodyguards for church knights. But since any fool knows that months ago the



Thothians issued an edict ordering the arrest of wizards and church knights on sight, you must, of course, be joking.”

The second guard nodded knowingly, but gripped the hilt of his sword.

“Well said, sir,” said Tanch without missing a beat. “A joke, it was. A bad one at that. I trust you will forgive me my foolishness. I am but a simple spice merchant seeking new markets for my wares. I hoped that if people thought me a wizard, I would garner more respect and more customers. I had no idea that magic users had come to

disfavor in this fine land. What a fool you must think me."

The captain looked relieved. "Don't let it trouble you. A man must feed his family after all. Note well that the guardsmen of the 4th Gate," he said, looking at his comrade, "could not be fooled by your charade. We knew at once that you were a fraud."

The lanky guardsman nodded. "That's right, you can't fool us. We're no dummies," he said, and then hacked up a wad of phlegm and spit most of it on the ground by the gate, the balance dribbled down his beard.

“The toll for foreigners to pass this gate is one silver piece or ten bronze rings,” said the guard captain. “I trust you will be heading straight to the spice market on Brick Street.”

“Where else?” Tanch turned to Dolan. “Pay the good Captain.”

Dolan pulled out a Lomerian silver star from his pocket and handed it to the guard through the bars.

Theta stepped forward. “Where on Brick Street might we find the best spice dealer?”

The captain smiled and nodded ever so slightly. “There are many

spice dealers there and I know little of them.” He glanced at his comrade who was busy stomping an ant. “I heard once though of a good one on the ground floor of the building just past the red awning about midblock. But I could be mistaken.”

The captain turned to his comrade. “Open the gate. Let them pass.” As the guard pulled out the keys for the gate, the captain stepped closer to Tanch and lowered his voice. “Keep your staff quiet in Tragoss, Par. The Thothians do arrest wizards on sight. Go carefully.”

Tanch nodded. “Thanks.”

The group filed through and proceeded down the narrow alley. At its end, it seemed as if they had entered a different city entirely. Here, the sprawling warehouses and wide lanes gave way to narrow alleys winding betwixt one and two-story brick or stone residential buildings, some more hovel than home.

Beggars lined the streets. They extended cups or bowls as the men passed, entreating them for spare coin or scraps of food, though they kept themselves at arm's length from the armed men. Each side of the street held gutters that served

as open sewers that flowed with filth and foulness. Rats, some small, some as large as cats scurried fearless along the gutters and swarmed over the occasional corpse, fallen and forgotten amongst the muck. Along each street, some men and women lay unmoving. They seemed dead, save for when a passing rodent took a nip at them—then they would curse and stir and sometimes strike out. The people ignored these sorry creatures. Only that they stepped around them, told they even saw them at all.

“Dead gods, what has become

of this place?" said Ob through the cloth he held to his face to keep down the stench. "When I've been here before, much of the inner city was poor, but nothing like this. I heard that the Thothians promised that if the people followed their god and obeyed their edicts there would be an end to poverty. They said they would restore dignity to the downtrodden and fairness for all." Ob stumbled over a body fallen in the street, and barely kept his feet. "They seem to have mucked that up a bit."

"They've destroyed these people, and their culture," said

Claradon.

“The price of stupidity,” said Theta.

Tanch looked down in horror at the bodies and the beggars they passed. “Is it a plague? What ails these people?”

“Hopelessness and despair,” said Ob. “And with that came smoking of strange plants and eating foul powders of foreign make. That much had started when I was last here.”

“No one seems to care,” said Claradon. “They just walk past the fallen.”

“Can the authorities do



nothing?" said Tanch.

"They are doing something," said Ob. "They're letting them die. Some say the Thothians are the source of these poisons. That they brought them in to keep the people docile."

"Will we pass Brick Street on the way to the tower?" said Theta.

"I don't know," said Ob. "You think there is more than spice merchants there?"

Theta nodded. "Dolan, buy some fruit, and ask that merchant."

Dolan was back in a few moments with small bag of apples. "Six blocks north, and two or three

east.”

“Not on our way,” said Ob.

“The tower first, and then Brick Street,” said Theta.

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People crowded along the low stone wall that surrounded a well-appointed house of brick and stone, watching a group of monks drag an elderly man from the house. Other monks and guardsmen threw his paintings, books, and other belongings from the windows.

“You’ve no right, no right,” shouted the man. “I’ve done

nothing.”

“Nothing?” said a monk. He grabbed the man and pushed him to his knees. “Yes, fool, you have done nothing. There are people starving in the streets and yet you live in a rich house. Do you care nothing for your fellow citizens?”

The man stared up at him, confused.

“You’re a greedy, evil, pathetic blasphemer,” said the monk, slapping the man across the face after each accusation. He grabbed the man by the hair and pulled back his head, forcing the old man to look at him. “What portion of your

income do you give to the church, to the poor? Speak quick and true, or I will cut your evil head off.”

Tears streamed down the man’s face. “I pay my taxes, and I pay the tithe of Thoth. You can check, I always pay.”

“A pittance,” said the monk.

“What more do you want from me?”

“It’s not what I want, fool. It’s what justice demands. You give no more than the minimum and begrudge even that. By what right do you live in this decadent place when others sleep in the gutter? You think you’re better than

everyone, don't you, you bastard?"

"I've earned everything I own. I've worked fifty years, selling silks and linens, an honest living. I've hurt no one my whole life. You've no right to do this."

The monk grabbed the man by the chin and punched him in the face, breaking his nose. Blood poured down the deeply lined face, eyes filled with tears.

"You've earned nothing, blasphemer. You've hoarded wealth, stealing from those more deserving. No longer. Now we will take back all that you've stolen. You will pay your fair share at last,

merchant.

The monk kicked the man in the ribs, a sickening crunching sound. Other monks joined in, kicking and stomping. "Kill the evil bastard," they spat. "Praise Thoth," they yelled. "Praise Thoth."

"Look," shouted the monk at the gathered crowd. "Behold Thoth's justice, citizens. All those like this evildoer will pay. All the enemies of god will be brought to justice and they will pay with their blood."

Some in the crowd looked shocked and disgusted. Others cheered each blow, each kick, each

whimper.

The monks gathered the old man's books and artwork into large piles on the lawn and set them ablaze.

Other monks dragged several people out of the merchant's house. By their dress, servants all. They lined them up against the manor's wall.

The lead monk plucked a pretty young girl from the line. "What does that old bastard do to you?"

The girl looked confused; tears ran down her face. She cringed away, terror in her eyes.

"Are you his whore? Tell us,

what does he do with you?”

“Nothing,” she said. “Nothing. He’s a good man. I’m just a maid. I clean, I just clean.”

The monk slapped her hard in the face. “A good man? Good men don’t hoard wealth and insult the one true god. There is nothing good about him. That you defend him proves your guilt too. You are a whore and a witch and will suffer Thoth’s justice.”

“No, please, I’ve done nothing.” The girl sank to the ground, overcome with fear, pulling at the monk’s leg like a pleading child. He kicked her away.



Soldiers with bows assembled in front of the servants. The monks moved aside.

“Do Thoth’s bidding,” commanded the lead monk.

The soldiers raised their bows. The servants pleaded for their lives. The soldiers fired. All but two of the servants fell, pierced, dying. Two ran, one shot in the arm, the other unscathed. Before they reached the stone wall, a second volley of arrows cut them down. The monks cheered and roared, jumping up and down, praising Thoth and celebrating. Many of the townsfolk joined in the cheering, even the

children.

Claradon, Theta, and the group turned onto the street that passed before the manor.

“Trouble,” said Ob, gesturing toward the crowd and the fire beyond. “A different street?” he said, turning toward Theta.

“Let’s see what this is about.”

They entered the crowd, now numbering some two hundred citizens.

“What happened here?” said Ob to a young man, bald of head, dressed as a tinker.

The man turned and looked carefully over Ob and Claradon

beside him before responding. “The monks killed old Portman and all his people, the entire household.”

“What was his crime?”

The man turned back toward the fiery scene. “He was rich.”

“They kill you for being rich now?” said Ob.

“Course he wasn’t richer than any other smart merchant what worked his whole life. Suppose they will get us all eventually, they have to. Without our coin, they wouldn’t have enough to give away to the poor and still keep their own palaces and temples and such. Suppose, I’ll be next, they’ll be

coming for me and mine. They need to. They have to spread our wealth around to the poor. That gives them power. That's what this here is about. They don't much care for gnomes either, so you better get while you can."

## X

### THE ORB OF WISDOM

“From dust they came, and to dust  
they returned.”

—The Keeper

Par Sevare grabbed Frem Sorlons’s massive shoulder. “Hold up, they’ve stopped.”

“Not again.” Frem spun around sending embers from his torch flying; frustration filled his face. Frem paid the embers no heed as they washed over his steel plate armor, but Par Sevare dodged to the side and pressed tight against the

tunnel's stony wall to avoid being burned.

"Watch it with the torch," Sevare said, his cheek puffed out from his ever-present wad of chewing tobacco. "I'm no tin-can. That stuff will burn through my clothes."

"Sorry," said Frem as he gazed over the heads of the mage and the two Sithian Knights behind to see what Lord Korrgonn was up to.

Some yards back, the son of Azathoth stood at a three-way intersection. Father Ginalli, High Priest of Azathoth, stood beside him, lantern in hand, though the

dark of the tunnel hardly fled before it.

Korrgonn held Sir Gabriel's wooden ankh, studying it, a look of deep concentration on his face. The ancient token was charred along its lower half, gouged in several spots across its face, and chipped at one corner. A ragged crack ran through the loop at its top, threatening to break the relic asunder.

"The boss is playing with that weird thingy again," said Frem. "If he keeps stopping, we'll never get anywhere."

"That thingy is an ancient holy symbol," said Severe. "That's what

is guiding him, helping him choose the right path for us to take, so that we can find what we're looking for."

"The main path is straight ahead and we're on it. He's gonna make us go down one of those small holes, isn't he? I don't like small places, and this tunnel is already too small for me. What does he need guidance for, anyway? Ain't he supposed to be the lord's son? Doesn't he have powers? Isn't he supposed to know stuff?"

"That's the most you've said in one stretch since I've known you," said Severe.



“I’ve been saving up.”

Sevare stroked his goatee and spit some tobacco juice onto the tunnel floor. “I guess he needs a little help.”

“How can it do that, it don’t talk?” said Frem. “It’s just a piece of carved wood—just an old piece of junk.”

“Looks can be deceiving. That ankh has got a magic to it, an old magic.”

“I didn’t even believe in magic until I threw in with you lot. Older than what?”

Sevare considered for a moment. “Older than anything that

I can think of.”

“Older than Azathoth?”

“Can’t be that old, since he created most everything. But it’s older than Lomion, and probably even older than these darn tunnels.” Severe looked about the tunnel, which varied in height and width, from here to there. Six feet wide at its narrowest, it widened out to ten feet in most places, as much as fifteen in some. The ceiling above was no less than seven feet high, most places ten or more, and in some spots it was lost in the darkness far above. The tunnel’s walls, floor and ceiling were of

stone and earth, damp and dreary, dark as pitch, the air heavy and stagnant, silent and cold. Side passages led off, now and again, some narrow and short, others as large as the main tunnel, and each had a feeling of age, of antiquity. If not for their lanterns and torches, they would be hopelessly lost.

“Maybe if he got a new one, it would work better.”

“Maybe so,” said Severe, grinning, his teeth stained from tobacco juice.

“How much farther do you think? We’ve walked for an hour at least.”

“Can’t be too far now, we’re very deep. I didn’t think anything went this deep.”

Korrgonn looked up and lifted the ankh’s cord over his head. He held it in his hand and passed it over a nondescript section of the tunnel’s stony wall. That section of the wall began to glow with an eerie light. Just as quickly, it faded away—not just the glow, but the wall as well. A rectangular opening loomed before Korrgonn, where a moment before there was a solid wall. Behind the opening, a hidden passage. “That way,” said Korrgonn, pointing down the narrow tunnel.

“Guess it works after all,” said Frem. “He’s sending us down a stinking rabbit hole.”

“Quiet,” said Severe.

Frem, Par Severe, and their knights walked back to the others. A fake smile filled Frem’s face as he approached Korrgonn, but the Nifleheim Lord didn’t bother to look at the huge warrior as he passed.

They proceeded into the small tunnel, Frem again at the van, a rock of mass and muscle to blaze their trail. This tunnel was narrower and lower than the main course. The ceiling dipped below

seven feet, and the top of Frem's helmet scraped it here and there, sending sparks flying. He had to hold his torch in front and low, grumbling under his breath all the while, since his shoulders, widened by his thick plate armor, were near as wide as the tunnel and jostled against the walls again and again as the tunnel curved and meandered in the dark.

Behind Frem's pointmen went four burly lugron, then Korrgonn and Ginalli. Behind them were four of the Shadow League's arch-mages, Par Hablock, Par Brackta, Par Morsmun, and Par Ot. After them

went the better part of a squadron of Sithian Knights, then Lord Ezerhauten and Mort Zag. Another group of lugron guarded the rear.

While the main tunnel was an uneven natural passage with a gradual slope, this one was hewn through the living rock in bygone days. What arms wielded the picks and shovels that birthed her, no man could say.

The tunnel, slick with water and slime, descended steeply—a difficult passage even for the sure of foot. Mort Zag had the most trouble navigating the narrow tunnel. Where Frem could at least walk

upright, Mort Zag had to proceed stooped over nearly the whole way. Every now and then, he cursed and spat when his head bumped the ceiling, or when he had to twist and turn to squeeze through some narrow portion of the tunnel. At one point, he took a hammer to a stony outcropping and smashed it away in order to squeeze past.

Deep, deep beneath the bowels of Midgaard were they now. Three cities of man stood there. The current city, Tragoss Mor, ancient itself, built atop the remnants of an older city whose name was seldom remembered. That city was



constructed atop the ruins of an ancient metropolis, long lost to the passing eons. The stony tunnel took them far below even the deepest pit of that antediluvian city.

At last, upon a door of stone they came. Carved from the living rock, its seams smooth and crisp, its handle metal, but free of rust, scale, or stain. The passage widened near the door and the ceiling rose to a stately height.

The pointmen turned to Korrgonn for direction. "Open it," he commanded.

The two Sithians, large men both, pulled and pushed, and

strained against the portal, but it would not yield. Frem shouldered one knight aside and took a turn. His massive hand clamped down on the handle and he pulled with all his power. His arms bulged and strained, veins pulsed at his corded neck, his face reddened and dripped with sweat. But the door would not yield, not at all, not even the slightest movement.

“I’d have better luck pushing on a mountain,” said Frem as he turned back to the others.

Par Severe examined the cold stone of the door. “No magic binds it,” he said. “Barred from the far

side, I would say.”

“Break it down,” Korrgonn said.

“Pass me up a hammer, biggest one we got,” said Frem. “Swords are no good on stone.”

“Kick it down,” yelled Mort Zag from the rear.

Frem looked from the door to his boot and back again, and then moved carefully into a good kicking position. He blasted the door with his armored boot, a blow what could snap a man’s spine in half, but the door did not yield. It shuddered ever so slightly, but barely a scuff marred its surface to mark the blow. Frem kicked again,

and again, a half dozen strikes, all to no effect. “Dead gods, it’s too thick. I need a sledge.”

Mort Zag pushed forward from the rear, grunting; a mockery of a smile on his demonic face. “Step aside,” he said as he barreled through. The others parted to let him pass. Had not the passage widened near the door, he could never have squeezed his bulk past them.

As huge as Frem was, past four hundred pounds and far beyond six foot, Mort Zag dwarfed him in both height and bulk. The red-skinned giant waved Frem aside and

slammed his bare foot into the door at mid-height; it shook and shuddered but held fast. Again he kicked, harder this time. A cracking sound rang out. Two more times he kicked before the stone, which proved some eight inches thick, broke clear through, the upper half crashing to the tunnel floor.

“Ha! What do you think of that, puny man?” said Mort Zag, slapping Frem across the back.

Frem narrowed his eyes and only offered Mort Zag an icy stare.

“Well done,” said Ginalli. “Sevare—check it out.”

Frem and Sevare squeezed past

the debris. Behind the door, a landing of polished granite overlooked granite steps that descended into darkness.

"Looks clear," said Frem quietly to Severe. "The big red fellow called me puny. He said it like an insult. What does it mean?"

"It means small," said Severe.

Frem looked down at his own bulk and then looked back at the others, big men most, but all much smaller than he, save for Mort Zag. "I don't get that. What is he anyway?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he's not a volsung,"

said Frem. "He's not any kind of human. Not an elf or anything. I've heard folks whispering dark stuff about him."

"What've you heard?"

"Some folk say he's a demon; a creature from the bad places. I don't like to hear such talk."

"Frem, buddy, he's just a giant from the deep mountains—like in the old stories."

"He's big enough, I suppose, but he's red. How do you explain that?"

Sevare paused, thinking. "Remember the time that farmer in Sarnack mashed up that basket of

carrots to pulp and you drank it?”

“Sure. Wasn’t bad at all, but the palms of my hands went all orange. Stayed that way a week or more.”

“Exactly. Same with Mort Zag. That guy eats bushels of red apples and tomatoes. Turns his skin all red. No more mystery to it than that.”

“Hmm. Never thought of that. I reckon I’m a simpleskin like Ezerhauten says.”

“Simpleton,” said Severe.

“That’s what I said. What does that mean, exactly?”

“Dumber than a rock.”

“Thought so. I can’t disagree



with him, but neither he nor I are happy about what them others did to those men on the road. Killing your enemies is one thing, but cutting them up and taking away bits, that's not right, not right at all. I don't understand why Korrgonn stood for it."

"So that is what's been bothering you," said Severe. "Frem, it's not what you think. It was a ritual cleansing. You know about those, right?"

"A what cleaning? What does that mean?"

"Zounds, Frem, no wonder you've been wound so tight these

last days. You must've thought we had gone crazy, and I guess I couldn't blame you for it."

"Those Eotrus men were in with Thetan, the evil one, so they were evil too. Men like that have black souls, filled with hate. When such men die, their souls are damned and tormented for all time. But if the evil is washed away, then they can enter the afterlife, and find the lord's forgiveness in Vaeden. That is why Father Ginalli had those rituals performed. He was saving those men's souls. It was an act of mercy."

Frem visibly relaxed. "You

should've told me about of that before. I didn't know what was going on."

"Sorry, big guy. I thought you knew what was happening. You okay now?"

Frem nodded. "It's a relief to know that I am on the right side—with the good guys, I mean."

"I wouldn't be anywhere else," said Severe.

"What do you see?" called out Ginalli.

"A stair," said Frem. "Leading down."

Four lugron hefted the heavy debris aside, clearing the path for

the main group.

Down they went in single file; a slow and treacherous descent, the steps uneven, steep and slippery, and all was pitch black save for the meager light from their torches. The air was cold there; their breath rose as mist about them.

To one side was a comforting stony wall, on the other, a black abyss of unknown depths, with no parapet or guardrail for protection. One misstep, one slip, and that would be the end. A hundred nerve-racking steps down brought them to a wide landing, a place of relative safety. They paused for a few

minutes to rest and calm their nerves before continuing down, as most of them had nearly fallen more than once.

Frem first heard them when they had descended another hundred steps. Booted feet, climbing the stairs, coming up toward them. Many, many booted feet, distant, but drawing closer.

“Oh, boy,” said Frem as he steadied himself against the rock face. The stair was not nearly wide enough for two men to fight side by side. “Not the best spot for a battle.”

“We should move back up to the landing,” said Ezerhauten. “We

can't fight on this stair."

Korrgonn stood considering for a time, then ordered the men up to the landing. In their rush to ascend, one of the lugron lost his footing and slid over the edge, wailing as he fell into the dark. Those nearest to him tried to grab him, but weren't quick enough. Most of the men peered down into the darkness, though in truth they couldn't see him at all. The rest turned away. Seconds went by, until finally, his screams faded out with the distance. They never heard him hit the bottom, if any bottom there was.

The men arrayed themselves across the landing, and made their plans how to switch out the lead man when he tired or became wounded. Frem stood the watch at the head of the stair.

The sounds grew louder and louder as the minutes went by.

“There must be hundreds,” said Severe.

“If they have bowmen, we won’t be able to hold them off,” said Frem.

Ezerhauten turned to Korrgonn. “We can’t fight an entire army, my Lord, and it sounds like that is what’s coming. We can’t retreat up

the stair, the going is too slow, and if any come down on us from above —”

“The Orb is below,” said Korrgonn. “Without it, we can’t restore the Lord to Midgaard. There is no turning back, not now, not ever.”

Then began a mad howling. The cries of hundreds, perhaps thousands of wildmen, screaming war cries to whatever unknown gods they worshipped.

Almost as one, nearly all the lugron dashed toward the stair going up, their courage broken. Mort Zag stepped over and barred



their path. “Get back in line,” he said. “Or you will follow your friend over the side.”

They paused a moment, but in the end, chose to resume their places.

“We should be able to see them,” said Severe. “It sounds like they’re right on us.”

“Throw down a torch,” said Ezerhauten.

Someone did. It landed some twenty feet down the stairs, but revealed nothing. They waited, and still nothing, only the sounds of booted feet and manic war cries.

Severe spoke some arcane

words, sharp and loud, painful to hear and the sounds of the approaching warriors abruptly stopped.

“An illusion,” said Ginalli. “A trick to deter us, to make us flee.”

“Let’s head back down,” said Korrgonn. “We’ve lost enough time.”

Two hundred steps down, three hundred, four hundred, a landing and a switchback after each hundred. Five hundred steps and still the stair had no end. Just beyond the fifth landing, another man lost his footing and plunged silently into the darkness. The

group paused for a few moments in respect, then continued down. Down and down they went, and somewhere, very deep, they lost count of the steps.

Eventually they reached the bottom, dripping with sweat and breathing heavily from the stress of the harrowing descent, though the air was chill and their pace had been slow and cautious.

At the base of the stair, their torchlight revealed a wide hall of marble tile, polished smooth. The tile continued some three or four feet up the walls. Above that, a gruesome row of stone carvings, the

heads and arms of demons and monsters, fiendish and foreboding, loomed out from the walls with eyes that glowed red in the fluttering torchlight. Above the gargoyles, the stone walls were inlaid with murals and pictograms, some colorful, others faded, but all of ancient times. Azathoth in all his magnificent glory was featured in many, beside him his Arkons, tall and powerful, but the faces of many were defaced and vandalized; their names forevermore stricken from the toll of history.

“I smell blood,” said Mort Zag.

Ezerhauten held a torch low to

the marble floor beside the base of the stair. A narrow, empty passage led back into the darkness, parallel to the stair. In the distance, they could see what remained of the two fallen lugron splattered across the flooring—a gruesome sight even for hardened men to see.

“The tiles are smashed and gouged, here, and here, and there,” Ezerhauten said pointing. “They were not the first to fall here. Many preceded them down, but I see no other corpses, no bones, no equipment. Nothing.”

With no danger in sight, most of the men collapsed to the floor,

taking however brief an opportunity to catch their breath.

“Someone or some thing must have carried away the fallen,” said Ginalli. “There are more than just old wards at work here. Be on your guard.”

Mort Zag looked up and down the hall and back again, tensed, ready to spring.

“You sense something?” said Ezerhauten.

“A feeling,” said Mort Zag. “Something is not right. Be ready.”

“I sense something as well,” said Korrgonn. “There is magic at work here. Old magic.”

Ezerhauten spied something—some flicker of movement, some shadow of something along the walls, above the men's heads, where they reclined against the passageway's walls.

“Well, this is the perfect place for an ambush,” said Frem. “After that climb down, who has got the energy to fight?”

Ezerhauten's eyes widened in alarm. “Up,” he shouted. “Get away from the walls! Up!”

Even as the words flew from his lips, the walls came alive with movement. Stony, demonic arms silently flailed out, grabbing men's

heads and squeezing, crushing, with strength beyond imagining. Gargoyles stretched out and down, emerging from the very walls. Stony fangs, inches long, bit down and bore into the skulls of lugron, knight, and wizard.

The hall descended into chaos. Screams rose up on all sides. Geysers of blood erupted as men's heads exploded within the gargoyles' stony grips. Swords blunted and shattered against stone heads and stone arms. Torches went flying and others went out; spells were thrown, weapons crashed, men roared, and swore,



and died.

“We have to go,” shouted Severe.

Korrgonn’s sword crashed through a stone arm that tore at his cloak.

“My lord, we must fly,” said Ginalli as he pulled on Korrgonn’s arm.

“Frem, grab him,” shouted Severe.

Then they were running—running through black halls, slick and desolate, wondering if the gargoyles would or could pursue, wondering if there was any way out.

A pit opened up before them;

men fell in and screamed, impaled on sharp spikes a dozen feet down. Whirling blades flew from the walls; spears shot down from the ceiling; more men screamed in the dark.

They came upon a stone door, held fast. They stopped and turned, weapons held at the ready. Not even a third of their number remained. Korrgonn, Ginalli, Frem, Sevare, Hablock, and Brackta were there, along with a handful of lugron; that was all.

Sevare looked around at how few were left. "Bloody hell," he said. "We're in the deep stuff."

“Are you hurt, my lord?” said Ginalli to Korrgonn.

“I don’t run from my enemies,” said Korrgonn, his golden eyes afire with rage. “I don’t leave my men behind. We should’ve kept fighting.”

“We couldn’t even see,” said Severe.

“Swords are no good against stone,” said Frem.

“We had to get you out of there, my lord,” said Ginalli.”

“This is a madhouse,” said Hablock, sinking to his knees.

“A tomb,” said Severe. “It’s a tomb of horrors.”

“Get some torches lit,” said

Korrgonn. "You men," he said to Frem and Severe, "see to that door. You others," pointing to the lugron, "form a line across the passage."

A few minutes later, they heard the drum of footsteps marching in the darkness behind, drawing closer.

"Get that door opened," said Ginalli. "Now."

"Frem pounded and pounded on the door, but the stone would not yield.

"I've one more trick," said Severe. He knelt before the door and spoke some words of magic. After but a moment, a clicking

sound came from the door, then it swung open of its own accord. Beyond, silence and darkness.

“We’re through,” said Frem. “It’s open.”

“Do we flee or do we stand?” said Ginalli.

“We stand,” said Korrgonn, as he drew his blade. “Wizards, ready your magic.”

The footsteps grew louder. In a moment, Ezerhauten came into view holding a torch aloft. With him, nearly a dozen Sithian Knights, several wounded. Behind them loomed Mort Zag carrying the stone head of a gargoyle in one of

his massive hands.

“They won’t be following,” said Ezerhauten. “But we had best find another way out. That was a gauntlet I would rather not pass again.”

“Morsmun? Ot?”

“Both dead, and a dozen more with them.”

The survivors greeted each other: some smiled and shook hands with their comrades; others stood alone in silence.

“We passed several passages along the way,” said Ezerhauten. “Which way do we go? Through this door or back to some side passage?”

Korrgonn studied his ankh for a time. "Through the door," he said.

The group made their way down the wide hall, slowly, carefully, expecting something else unpleasant to happen. A thin layer of gray dust coated the floor there, only noticeable for its contrast with the sheen of the marble floor just passed. As they proceeded, the layer of gray grew thicker and thicker, their steps kicking it into the air, forming a irritating haze about them.

Upon another door they came, this one of marble cladding and gold rungs. A dead end; no farther

could they go until the door was opened.

Before the group could examine the door, a voice called out from the darkness. "Who are you?" The deep sound reverberated through the hall, its direction and source unclear and unseen.

"Who are you?" said the voice again, louder.

All eyes looked to Korrgonn. "Find him."

The men spread out and thrust torches into every niche and corner of the darkened hall, high and low, but found no one.

"Who are you?" said the voice



again, louder still, much louder. It seemed to come from everywhere and from nowhere. The whole hall shook; chips of stone fell from the ceiling; gray dust rose about them.

“We must respond,” said Ginalli to Korrgonn. “Or they’ll bring the whole cavern down on us.”

Korrgonn nodded.

“I am Ginalli, high priest of Azathoth,” he shouted. “Who are you?”

“I am the Keeper,” said the voice. “Why are you here, Ginalli of Azathoth?”

“We seek the great Orb of Wisdom.”

“Of course you do,” said the Keeper, this time softly, wearily, as if he had heard the same answer untold times. “And why do you seek the Orb?”

“So that the glory of his almighty majesty might be restored to the world.”

There was a pause of some moments before the Keeper spoke again. “The Orb alone will not accomplish this, however strong your faith. Have you another token?”

“We do.”

“What token is that?”

Ginalli looked again to

Korrgonn who nodded his permission. "We have the blood of kings."

There was a long pause.

"Most that came here sought treasures. All were disappointed. Some few sought the great Orb. Fewer still spoke of the blood of kings. From dust they came, to dust they returned. You may enter, disciples of Azathoth, but be warned, if your words be not true and you be not blessed of the one true god, if you be not his holy minions, the fires of Archeron will take you and deliver your immortal souls into everlasting torment. Go

not forward unless this peril you can face.”

Korrgonn signaled to open the door. It took the combined strength of Frem and two Sithians to pull the massive door open. Beyond, the passageway was lit, wall sconces afire, oil burning, its scent and smoke in the air. The passage continued for a goodly ways, and then curved out of sight.

“Form up, men,” said Ginalli.

“Wait,” said Severe. “We don’t know what this Keeper has in store. We can’t risk you and Lord Korrgonn in this—you’re too important. Someone needs to scout ahead.”

“Wise words,” said Korrgonn.

“Who will go?” said Ginalli. He looked about to the group. Some looked away, others took great interest in their feet or their fingernails. Mort Zag stood there grinning.

“I will go,” said Par Hablock.

“That Keeper fellow sounds dangerous, Hablock,” said Frem. “Maybe you shouldn’t go in there alone.”

“I’m an arch-mage of the 6th Circle, fool, not an overstuffed half-wit.” Hablock turned back toward Korrgonn and Ginalli. “I will go cloaked in every protective spell

known to wizardom. Whatever traps the Keeper has laid will do me no harm."

"Cast your charms, but take two lugron and two knights," said Korrgonn.

Ezerhauten rolled his eyes at the mention of the Sithians, no doubt concerned that two more of the crack troops that he personally trained would be lost.

Hablock stepped away from the others, and spoke some strange wizard words and tossed a handful of sparkling powder over his head. The powder ignited, and cloaked Hablock in an eerie, translucent,

blue light. He waved his hands about and spoke more words, ancient words, forbidden words of power, and a golden helm appeared about his head. More gestures and strange incantations turned his skin and eyes silver.

“The Shield of Fenrir,” said Severe. “The Helm of Hogar, and Steelskin. Rare magics all, and good choices.”

“I’m surprised that you recognize spells of my Tower so easily,” said Hablock.

“My studies of the art are more varied than most. I can place the Baneshield on you, if you wish.”

“And I can give you the Cloak of Azathoth and the Lord’s Blessing,” said Ginalli.

“I will place The Cloak of Life on you,” said Par Brackta.

“I will take them all and gladly.

Sevare approached Hablock and put his hands on Hablock’s chest. Sevare’s sorcery was altogether different than Hablock’s. He spoke his magic in a bizarre guttural tongue that sounded more reptilian than human. In moments, it was done, though Hablock appeared no different for it.

Brackta stepped up and murmured before Hablock; her



words too soft to be heard. "Done," she said after only a moment.

"You men," Ginalli said, pointing to two of the lugron and two Sithians, "Stand beside Par Hablock." They did. Ginalli spoke his own words of power, sharp and crisp, followed by a short prayer to Azathoth, holy symbol in hand. "Done."

Hablock stepped up to the portal. The lugron with him shuffled their feet and breathed heavily, nervous from the course of events. Hablock stepped through the doorway, the knights and lugron following. They crept slowly,

cautiously, down the passage, weapons bared and battle ready. Just as they moved out of sight, around the bend in the passage, the massive door began to close behind them of its own accord. Frem tried to halt it, but could not. Mort Zag appeared and grabbed the door, but even his might and Frem's combined could neither halt, nor even slow its inexorable progress. They let go at last and the door ground to a close, its grating sound echoing through the chamber, a sound of finality, a sound that said, this door will not open again.

“Last we’ve seen of them,” said

Frem.

Some minutes passed before they heard a faint crackling sound from beyond the doors. Then movement, as the door slowly opened with nary a sound. A strong burning odor washed through the chamber and wisps of smoke trailed in.

“Not good,” said Ginalli.

“Hablock,” yelled Severe. No response. “Hablock!”

They waited, but no sign appeared of Hablock or his men.

“Keeper,” shouted Ginalli. “What has happened? Keeper!”

No response.

“Do we go in or go back?” said Ezerhauten.

“There is no going back,” said Korrgonn. “We must retrieve the Orb or die in the attempt.”

Everyone froze and stared at Korrgonn.

Korrgonn studied his followers’ faces. They were fearful and uncertain. His expression softened.

“Men, without the Orb, we can’t open the gateway. The Lord is counting on us. We’re the only ones that can do this. So I must go on, whatever the danger. I will understand if you can’t stand with me in this. I will meet you back at

the ship, and nothing more will be said of this."

"I'm with you," said Ginalli.

"And I," said Mort Zag.

"And I," said Brackta.

One by one, the others affirmed their resolve. Ezerhauten spoke last, but stood with the rest.

"Look for something to wedge the door open," said Ezerhauten. "We may need to make a quick retreat; we've no wish to find it closed fast behind us."

"There is nothing to wedge it with," said Severe. "Bare marble and dust."

"Knock the marble from the

walls?" said Ezerhauten.

"Marble tile won't hold that portal if it wants to close," said Severe. "It will crush them to powder. Any weapon wedged in will snap."

"Forget it," said Ginalli. "Onward, together, without fear. The mantle of Azathoth is upon us; no harm can come to us."

"Tell that to Hablock," said Frem.

Ginalli's assertion notwithstanding, the wizards cast their wards on themselves and the others. The whole group passed through the door and proceeded

down the hall, the lugron and Sithians at the fore. Just as they anticipated, as soon as the last of them were through, the portal began to close. Mort Zag tried to hold it for a moment, but it pushed him back, sliding his bare feet across the dusty stone.

“I knew we should’ve taken more men,” said Ezerhauten. “Can never have too many men.”

“Too many makes the food run out faster,” said Frem.

“No problems there,” said Mort Zag. “Just eat the extra men.”

Frem looked at the red giant in disgust and disbelief. Mort Zag

roared with laughter.

After a ways, the hallway opened into a large chamber, circular, but with walls of strange slopes and angles, its ceiling lost in the darkness above. The floor was mounded with gray dust, two feet deep or more along the walls. An odd vibration filled the air and it was bitter cold, a cold to chill a goodly man to the bone.

At the center of the chamber, six stone steps led up to a circular dais. Atop the dais sat a sphere, six inches in diameter and black as midnight—the Orb of Wisdom itself, fabled vessel of power from



times ancient and long forgotten. On the floor beside the dais, a blackened, smoking heap. Bits of cloth, blackened flesh and bones, and legs all but turned to ash. This was all that remained of Hablock.

“Zounds! Hablock!” spat Severe. “What did this? Where is that stinking Keeper?” He spun around, gazing at the bizarre chamber, searching for sign or spoor of the Keeper. The chamber’s walls crept up and out and in at weird unnatural angles. You couldn’t even look at the walls for long without growing dizzy and lightheaded. Not a place meant for men, not even

men such as these.

“Where are my knights?” said Ezerhauten through clenched teeth.

“Not good,” said Ginalli, gazing down at the remains. “Not good at all.”

“We should go back,” said Frem as he began backing up the way they had come. “This place is death.”

“The door is closed,” said Ezerhauten. “There is no going back.”

The Keeper’s voice filled the chamber once again. “Your wizard was not beloved of Azathoth. He burns now in the everlasting

flames.”

“Skunk you, you rat turd,” spat Severe. “Show yourself.” He spat out a spray of tobacco juice onto the steps of the dais.

“What of the others?” yelled Frem. “What did you do to them?”

“From dust they came, and to dust they returned,” said the Keeper.

Severe looked down at the thick gray dust that covered the floor. He squatted and sifted his hand through it, brushed something solid and plucked it from the dust. Charred and battered, but clearly a finger bone. The wizard threw it

down in disgust. "Dear lord."

Ginalli grasped Korrgonn's arm.  
"The dust—"

"Is men," said Korrgonn.  
"Burned to ash."

"Hundreds must have died  
here."

Korrgonn squatted down and  
sifted through a handful of dust.  
"Thousands."

The group looked about and  
found fragments of a piece of armor  
here, a melted or charred weapon  
there.

"He burned them," said Severe.  
"Burned them all to ash."

"What do we do?" said Ginalli.

“We stop wasting time,” said Korrgonn. “I will get the Orb; woe to the Keeper if he tries to stop me.”

“Wait, my Lord,” said Ginalli. “The Orb we used in the Temple of Guymaog in the Vermion—it was enclosed in a sphere of Asgardian glass, suspended at its center by ancient sorceries, the glass itself protected by untold charms and incantations. We ever touched naught but the glass. This Orb is bare.” Ginalli pointed to the Orb atop the dais. “Without the glass, its touch is death.”

Korrgonn considered for a

moment. “Anyone have any ancient Asgardian glass spheres on them? If you do, just pass them forward.” He paused, to give the men ample time to respond. “None at all?” He looked around at the others who stood there blank-faced. “Very well then. Anyone have anything else that protects from magical death orbs? No?” He turned back to Ginalli, smiling. “If you’ve no more advice, priest, I suggest you step back.”

Ginalli backed quickly away. As he neared the cold wall of the foreboding chamber, he tripped on a mound of ash and went down. The

fine ash gave way beneath him, sprayed over his face, and more than a bit found his open mouth. He spit and hacked it out and brushed the foul stuff from his face and hair.

As Korrgonn strode boldly up the steps, two of the lugron yowled and started to flee the hall. The others all took cautious steps backward, save for Mort Zag, who stood rooted, his customary grin plastered to his face. Atop the dais, Korrgonn reached out and grasped the Orb in his bare hand.

As Korrgonn's hand touched the Orb, sparks erupted from its

depths. A monstrous bolt of lightning came down from on-high and struck the Orb, enveloping Korrgonn in burning electricity. Bolts of crackling lightning flew around Korrgonn in all directions. Bathed in the mystical light, Korrgonn's aspect shimmered and morphed. He wore the form of Sir Gabriel no longer. Now before the Arkons of the Shadow League stood the son of Azathoth in his true form, his inmost self revealed before his god and his followers. There stood a man of wondrous golden hue, form and face beautiful and perfect and noble, a being of



the heavens, of paradise, divine. He glowed with strength, wisdom, and mercy, yet was terrible and awesome to behold.

At once, each man dropped to his knees, awe-struck by Korrgonn's true aspect. "Kneel before the son of Azathoth," sputtered Ginalli, still coughing from the dust that clogged his throat, though each of his companions was already prostrated. Even Mort Zag dropped to one knee and respectfully bowed his head.

The sparks about Korrgonn grew and suddenly arced outward; golden-hued bolts slammed into each man in the chamber and

reached out even to those few that had fled. The men were flung backward; some were even lifted into the air, suspended by the fiery bolts. Scorching tongues of lightning crashed around them. One man's pants caught fire, another's sleeve ignited, several men's hair smoked.

As quick as it came, the lightning fled, the smoke dissipated. Korrgonn inhabited the body of Gabriel Garn once again, and stood atop the dais, Orb in hand, wisps of smoke rising from his hand and from his clothes. The others picked themselves from the floor, some

battered and bruised, and stood gaping, or patting themselves down or pulling off various garments that smoked and hissed. All of them were covered in the fine gray ash.

“Rise, my friends,” said Korrgonn. “Rise.”

They did.

Some moments later, a burning outline of a door appeared in the chamber’s wall, where moments before there had been naught but smooth stone. The glow faded, but an ornate wood door remained.

The door opened and out stepped a wizened old man. He was an elf, ancient, wrinkled, frail, and

stooped. He wore an ancient suit of chain mail, stained and tarnished, and far too large for his shriveled frame. A broadsword hung from a sheath at his waist. Trailing behind him was a young elf, similarly clad, hand on his sword hilt. The venerable elf struggled under the weight of his gear, and shuffled forward in tiny flat-footed, old-man steps. His hair was long, and stringy, sparse and whited; his nose, long; ears even longer and pointed as elven ears are wont to be.

Ezerhauten drew his blade and started to move forward, but Ginalli waved him off.

The old elf spoke in a strong clear voice that belied his ancient aspect. “My lord,” he said, bowing low before Korrgonn, and dropping to one knee with great effort. The young elf did the same, though he kept his eyes up, cautiously surveying Korrgonn and company. “I am the Keeper,” said the old elf, “and this is my apprentice. I have awaited your coming these ten thousand years, all that time holding safe this Orb of divine wisdom and holy power, my own long years extended by every magic known and unknown, embraced and forbidden, just as were the line

of Keepers before me, back unto the very dawn of the second age of Midgaard.”

His eyes bright, and blue, the elf smiled with pride. “Apprentice and I have kept out the Thothian upstarts. Before them, we kept out the slavers and the pirate lords. I fought back the Thaulusians, the Marikites, and the Scurds before them, and the Hejirs and the Kalumeers and Throng-Baz who came earlier. Mercenaries, soldiers of fortune, knight errants, mages and arch-mages beyond count, and monks of this order and that have tried to enter here. Sometimes, one

lone man would come, most times a handful or a dozen or a score there would be. Sometimes a hundred screaming barbarians would burst down my doors. And more than once they came in the thousands, howling, murderous, gibbering hordes of primitives. All were felled by my art and my hand or by the Lord's holy fire, when all else failed."

"Not one thief that entered here ever left. Not one, though many tried. Many tried. All so that this day, upon your arrival, the Orb would be here still, and safe, and could pass rightfully to you—you

who can hold it in hand and withstand the holy fire. Unfortunately, like all the others, your wizard could not withstand it. The holy fire consumed him and those with him. Had I known who you were, I would have warned him off. I beg your forgiveness."

"You have it," said Korrgonn.

The Keeper looked over at the remains of Hablock. "Usually, almost nothing is left. Never so much as this. He was a powerful wizard. But unlike you he was not meant to hold the Orb. Please, my lord, give me your name."

"Korrgonn."



The old elf beamed. “A goodly name; a name of power from the old tongue.”

“Give me your name, Keeper,” said Korrgonn, “so that I can have it and your long service duly honored in the scrolls of the faithful.”

“Whatever name I had, my lord, I have long since forgotten. I am just the Keeper now, it is who I am, and all that I will be until I pass back into the dust.”

“And your apprentice, what name does he go by?”

“Apprentice is the only name for him that I can recall, but my memory is not what it once was.”

“I am Stev Keevis Arkguardt, son of Stev Terzan of the Emerald Forest,” said the young elf.

“Stev is the elven title for an arch-mage,” whispered Severe in Frem’s ear.

“You are young for a Stev,” said Ginalli.

“Those of the blood are older than we look to you Volsungs.”

“Of the blood?” whispered Frem.

“That’s how elves refer to themselves,” said Severe.

“My lord, tell me truly now whether or not you serve the great lord, the one true god, Azathoth.”

“I do.”

“Only one of the flesh of Azathoth could grasp the Orb in his bare hand and survive the heavenly fire. How did you this?”

“I am Azathoth’s son.”

The elf’s grin widened still. “The son of the lord, himself? I see in your eyes and in your heart that it be true; indeed, it must be true. Your glorious coming was foretold in the ancient scrolls of Cumbria. I know them well, I do. You are he of golden eye and lordly bearing of which Cumbria speaks, though she was rather vague on the timing of your arrival. Glory be to Azathoth

that I have lived to see this day.”

“Pardon my directness, but I must ask you now, will you use the Orb as it was meant to be used? Will you use it to open the holy portal to the paradise of Nifleheim? Will you beseech the lord to travel back to Midgaard with all his divine hosts, so that we might worship before him as in olden days?”

“That is my plan.”

“You swear this?”

“I do.”

The old elf studied Korrgonn carefully, staring deep into his golden eyes. Then he smiled and nodded his head. “The Orb can only

be used at one of the Lord's ancient temples, those consecrated in bygone days by the Lord's holy Arkons. Your journey will be long and grievous hard no matter to which temple you head. The minions of evil will haunt your every step, and seek to stop you with all their infernal power. Are you prepared to face these trials?"

"I am, and I will."

"Then the Orb is rightfully yours and yours alone. Use it well and wisely, my lord. My labors are now complete. It's strange, but I never thought to speak those words; I never thought this day would truly

come—for Apprentice maybe, or one of those that follow him, but not for me.”

“You have done well, Keeper,” said Korrgonn. “Your long and loyal service is at an end; you may rest now and when your time comes, take your rightful place in Nifleheim where you will be rewarded beyond imagining for your faith and loyalty.”

“Thank you,” he said, tears welling in his ancient eyes. “I imagine you are anxious to be off, my lord, but can I offer you and yours a meal and wine before you depart? The tunnels are long and

the stairs are steep; rest here a brief while, if you will.”

“We will,” said Korrgonn, “but only for a short while.”

The Keeper led the group beyond the hidden door and into a wondrous cavern. The high ceilings were covered with glowing lichen that lit the place half as bright as day. The Keeper proudly showed them his vast laboratory, filled with table after table cluttered with glass jars of all shapes and sizes, each filled with smoking and bubbling elixirs. There was row upon row of crystal vials filled with powders and strange colored liquids. All manner

of wizard wares haunted the place, though all were labeled in some ancient elven script unknown to any of Korrgonn's party.

The Keeper led them to his trophy room. There were displayed the remnants of many of the ill-fated thieves the Keeper spoke of. There were racks of weapons, spears and swords, axe and hammer, some ancient and archaic, others far newer. Displays of dented armor, shattered helms, and mangled shields were scattered about the hall. Here and there, a full-bodied skeleton hung from hooks, and there and there a great



display of skulls, all carefully arranged, displayed not in a gory manner, but more like a macabre museum exhibit.

The cavern included a well-appointed library where Korrgonn and the wizards lingered, leafing through musty old tomes called the books of Dyzan, Eibon, Iod, and Thesselak, before joining the others for a meal of fresh vegetables grown in the cavern under the strange lichen light, and clean, pure water extracted from a well.

After their repast, the Keeper showed them a true wonder. At the far end of the cavern, the Keeper

had a magnificent little stone quarry and workshop. But the wonder was not the beautiful marble and veined granite that was quarried there and cut into stone tiles and stone doors for the cavern complex, it was the stone mason himself. Besides the Keeper and his apprentice, the mason was the only creature that lived within the cavern complex, if lived could be applied to him at all.

“This is Mason,” said the Keeper. “A creation of mine in my younger days.” Mason looked to be living stone, shaped like a very tall, very broad man, down to the eyes,

nose, and mouth, though he had no skin or hair—only hard, cold, gray stone.

“A golem of stone,” said Korrgonn.

“Indeed, my lord,” said the Keeper. “I learned the craft to make him from some old book, but I’ve forgotten which.”

“Impressive,” said Ginalli. “A lost art. I’ve only heard of such creatures in legend. Until now, I thought them no more than fancy.”

“As you see, he is real enough. I made him several thousand years back, I think,” said the Keeper. “Mason keeps up the place,

repairing anything that needs repairing, replacing the tiles and doors when they're broken, and cleaning up the messes that need cleaning." Even now, Mason labored over a stone slab, measuring and cutting it to the size of a door, no doubt to replace the one the group had earlier broken down. "And he's handy in a fight too; his hammer is deadly, as have found more than a few intruders."

"No need, no need, Mason," said the Keeper. "Your labors are done, as are mine." Mason looked up; his stony features took on a look of surprise. "No sense

replacing any doors now, as there is nothing left to guard. The lord's son has come for the holy Orb and has it now. We're quite through here, quite through." Mason put down his tools and looked confused, lost.

"Through?" he said in a deep gravelly voice.

"It talks?" said Severe.

"Of course," said the Keeper, "any amateur wizard can make a mute golem, but one that talks, that is a rare thing that requires a bit of skill."

"Now, Apprentice, gather your things, including the choice books from the library, for you will not be

returning here. I have one last task for you.”

Stev Keevis looked surprised. “What task, Keeper?”

“You shall journey with Lord Korrgonn and aid him in opening the holy portal. Mason shall go with you.” He turned to Korrgonn. “With your permission, of course, my lord.”

“We will accept their help gladly,” said Korrgonn.

Keevis dashed off and the group made their way back to the strange chamber that had housed the Orb, a slow trek due to the snail-paced shuffling of the Keeper. By the time

they stood before the dais in the orb chamber, Keevis rejoined them carrying a large pack over his shoulder, another in hand, and wearing a traveling cloak. Mason now wore a thick hooded cloak that concealed his true nature, and a large pack was slung over his shoulder, a huge hammer hung from his belt.

“Well, now, Apprentice, Mason, step up here so I need not shout,” though every word of the Keeper was something of a shout. “No wizard has ever had as accomplished an apprentice as you, my boy. I am proud of you, both as

a wizard and as an elf.”

“Mason, you old blockhead, you’ve been loyal and tireless, and not much trouble at all. I thank you for all your toils these many years.”

“I expect that you both will serve Lord Korrgonn as you have served me. When your quest is completed, so too will be your obligation and you may pursue your own course thereafter. Have you the tomes of spells? The tokens and the potions?”

“Yes, Keeper,” said Keevis.

“Good. Fare thee well, and remember all that I have taught you.”



“That I will, Keeper,” said Keevis, his voice crackling with sorrow.

“And I,” said Mason.

The Keeper and Keevis shook hands and embraced. Even Mason extended his stony hand and shook the Keeper’s hand, though the old elf winced from the golem’s strength.

The Keeper turned back to Korrgonn. “One last boon, my lord, before you depart. My time on Midgaard is at an end at last. Touch me upon my shoulder, so that I might feel your divine essence before I leave this life.”

Korrgonn                      nodded                      his  
agreement.

The Keeper closed his eyes. “From dust I came, and to dust I return,” he said as Korrgonn placed a hand on his shoulder. A peacefulness came over the Keeper’s old face, a look of contentment and relief, and then before the eyes of all, the Keeper’s flesh turned to gray and dissolved to dust from the head down, all in the merest of moments. A heap of old clothes and rusty armor was all that remained. A breeze came up out of nowhere and blew the Keeper’s ashes up and away, though

the piles of ash about the floor  
remained untouched.

## XI

### AZURA THE SEER

“Beware him. He’s the Prince of  
Lies.

He will be the death of us all.”

—Azura the Seer

At some sixty feet in height and more twenty-five feet in diameter, Azura’s rough-hewn stone tower dwarfed its neighbors. Painted a bright blue, it stood at the center of a cobblestone square ringed by low stone walls. A gardener tended the flowers that adorned the square’s carved stone planters while a

servant swept the pavement clean. Two guards flanked the tower's door.

“Good afternoon, gentlemen,” said one guard at the group's approach. “How may I help you?”

“Good day,” said Tanch. “We come seeking an audience with Mistress Azura.

The guard looked the group over.

“All of you?”

“These are but my bodyguards and servants. Pay them no heed.”

“Of course, sir. May I please have your name and occupation?”

“I am Sinch, the spice

merchant. I trust you've heard of me."

"Of course, sir, and welcome. Please remain here a moment and I will see if the seer is available to meet with you."

The second guard remained outside. He looked uncomfortable as he sized up the large men that stood with Tanch. He kept a nervous hand on the hilt of his sword, but looked ready to run at the first sign of trouble. In a few minutes, the first guard returned.

"Merchant Sinch, the seer will see you now. I regret, the rules of the house permit no more than four

visitors at a time, regardless of their station. The remainder of your party must remain in the courtyard.”

“Very well,” said Tanch. “You and you, remain here,” pointing to Dolan and Artol. “And don’t make a nuisance of yourselves.”

The guard showed Tanch and the others through the outer door and into an entry hall that served as both cloakroom and guard post. The second guard joined them, and closed and barred the outer door. An inner door now opened, revealing a dimly lit chamber of incense, tapestries and hanging

beads.

Azura sat at a wood table facing the group as they entered. Youthful, shapely and striking, her auburn hair fell thick and wavy about her shoulders. Beside her stood a barbarian of the southern islands, shirtless but adorned with tattoos across his barrel chest and bulging arms. A giant—taller than Theta, dark of skin, bald of pate, and past four hundred pounds.

Azura's hands rested on the table before her. A large sphere of blue crystal sat in a carved wooden holder on the table before her. A flickering candle beside it caused



light to dance within the crystal, creating strange shapes and an eerie glow. Nearby, a deck of tarot cards, careworn but ornate. Tapestries adorned all the walls and silks draped the ceiling. Candles burned here and there, but the room was intentionally dim.

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*A wizard, a gnome, and soldiers, finely clothed—just as Rimel said. They can pay.*

“Greetings, Mistress Azura,” said Tanch as he reverently bowed. Tanch raised his staff up and

thumped it down lightly on the wood floor. "Forgive my small deception to your guard. As you no doubt can discern, I am no spice merchant."

"Indeed, you are not, Par—"

Tanch smiled. "I am Par Sinch Malaban of The Blue Tower. My retainers," gesturing toward the others, "are a sordid lot of little consequence."

"And two more of your men remain in the courtyard."

Tanch nodded.

"So many bodyguards, Par Sinch. You must have many enemies." *And much coin to pay all*

*these.*

“Alas, bodyguards are a necessity in these dark times,” said Tanch. “A wizard’s welcome is all too thin in some lands, Tragoss among them.”

“Too true, Par Sinch. It’s my good fortune that the Thothians don’t look down on seers as they do on wizards. Nonetheless, as you see, I keep my own bodyguards as well, both seen and unseen.” She paused, letting the last words sink in. “Please now, sit and be comfortable.”

Tanch took a seat at the table. The others remained standing.

“You honor me with this audience. I regret that I had not the opportunity to forewarn you of my visit.”

“No regrets are necessary. Wizards in good standing with the Tower of the Arcane are always welcome guests to my tower, if not to my city.”

Tanch smiled and bowed his head slightly. “Thank you, Mistress.”

*A true smile? Is he one of Pipkorn's or the Vizier's or some other's?*

“I understand that the Tower has undergone much upheaval in

recent months.”

“Indeed.”

*I can't read him. Where are his loyalties?*

Azura peered into the depths of her crystal ball for a few moments. “You’ve journeyed to parts foreign to escape those that would mean you harm.”

Tanch smiled. “I support what is best for the Order, as is my duty.”

*He won't reveal himself. Try another approach.*

Azura passed her hands over the crystal sphere and gazed into it. She looked up.

“You’ve come seeking my

wisdom, my knowledge. You seek the answer to a question of grave import.”

*He smiles, unimpressed. He's no fool.*

“Your knowledge, wisdom, and mastery of the art of divination are known far and wide and much admired even within the Tower of the Arcane.”

“Known, perhaps,” said Azura. “Admired, no, not at all. But I thank you for your flattery.”

*The older soldier is studying the room. Dead gods, he looks dangerous. Why are they here? Do they mean me harm? Could even*

*Gorb protect me against them?*

“Tell me now, Par Sinch of the Blue Tower, what knowledge do you seek?”

“We search for a ship,” said Tanch.

“Hmm,” she nodded. *I can work with that.*

Each time, before making a pronouncement Azura caressed the crystal sphere and gazed into it. She looked back up before she spoke so that she could see her guests’ reactions.

“A sailing vessel, out of Lomion,” said Azura.

“Yes.”

“And why do you seek her?”

“There is a man on board that is a traitor to the Order. We’re tasked with bringing him to justice.”

*Enforcers or bounty hunters. But whose? Pipkorn’s or the League’s, or someone else’s?* “I see,” said Azura. *These men are dangerous.* “What name does this man go by?”

“Par Otto, of the Red Tower.”

*I don’t know that name. A lie?*

“When did this ship reach Tragoss Mor?”

“Within the last two days or so.”

Azura gazed deeply into the crystal ball, caressing it over and



over. *The White Rose—it must be. They're in with Pipkorn or Harringgold—enemies of the League. Good thing that I paid for that information about The Rose. Always someone willing to pay for secrets. Must be sure.*

“The ship this man sailed on is no longer in Tragoss Mor,” said Azura.

*Still can't read the wizard. The young bodyguard nodded, I think.*

She looked back at the sphere for a moment, and then back at Tanch.

“The man you seek is still aboard her, and no one can tell you

where she has sailed.” *The gnome looks surprised. I’m right. I have them.* Azura made a show of gazing close and long into the sphere. *Now for the hook.*

“The ship you seek is called *The White Rose*.”

Tanch raised his eyebrows, despite himself.

*I was right!*

“Impressive.”

“And you seek knowledge of where this *White Rose* is sailing?”

Tanch nodded. “Yes.”

*They’re mine. How much should I ask for?* “I believe that my powers can divine this information

for you—but the task is difficult and draining. I'm afraid that the cost must be high.”

Tanch furrowed his brow.

*He will pay.*

Azura returned her gaze to the crystal. *If I ask for too much, what will they do? Try to kill me? That would be foolish, that would gain them nothing but a battle with my guards. Gorb is at my side, so strong—and Dirkben and Rimel. But Dirkben is a useless coward. Both warriors and the gnome are casing the room. Are they thieves? Assassins? I must tread carefully.*

“Five hundred silver stars is my

price.” *Fifty times what I paid for the information.*

*No reaction from Sinch. He’s holding back.*

“A high price indeed for such a small piece of information,” said Tanch. “A piece of information that would put the Order in your debt.”

*I must lower the price to appease him.* “The divination is difficult. I know nothing of the ship or its crew, save what little the crystal’s mists have only now revealed to me. It will take much power and concentration and I will need to expend valuable herbs and powders. For the Order though, I

will do this thing for four hundred silver, no less.”

Tanch glanced over at Claradon for a moment.

*What was that? Is he a young lordling and the true master here? Does it matter, so long as they pay?*

Sinch nodded. *He approves.*

Tanch pulled out a leathern purse from his belt. It jingled with the sounds of coins. He opened it.

“Keep your money, wizard,” said Theta.

*What’s this?*

“This one is a mummer. She’ll take your money and send us on a wild goose chase. Best we be on

our way.”

*What game is this?*

Tanch squirmed in his seat and looked mortified. He turned and glared at Theta. “I hope that my guard has not offended you, my lady. He’s naught but an uncouth barbarian that knows not his station. I assure you that I do not agree with his insulting remarks, and I will see that he regrets them.”

*I still have him.*

“He does, however, bring to mind some concerns.”

*Oh, smigits, where’s he going with this?* “And what concerns are those?”

“You will pardon me, Mistress, for saying so, but we haven’t chanced to meet before today. In truth, I know not if you are truly the famed seer, Azura, or some imposter who has taken her tower and her trappings. As we both agreed, these are dark times and things are not always as they seem.”

*Lies. They know who I am, they just don’t believe in my power.*

“I knew of your *White Rose*.”

“You did indeed, my Lady, and that was most insightful, but mayhaps, just a guess.”

*Fine. Then proof I’ll give you.*

“Perhaps you require a small demonstration of my skills?”

“That would be most appreciated, my lady, and would go a long way toward providing me the comfort I need to expend the monies you’ve requested.”

*Stinking wizard.* “For this, my price goes back to five hundred silver stars.”

“Of course, my lady,” said Tanch. “If you can convince me you speak true.”

“I will do a reading of one of you.” She looked them each up and down. “You, doubter,” she said, pointing to Theta. “I will tell you



things only you would know, then you will know my power. Agreed, Par Sinch?"

Tanch looked back at Theta who offered no reaction. "Agreed."

Theta stepped forward. "Do your reading, woman, though I warn you—if your powers be true, you may not like what you see."

*Is he a raper and a killer? I've seen such things before and don't fear them. Little shocks or surprises me anymore.* "Take a seat and hold out your hands."

Theta sat down, but paused before extending his hands. He grasped the cord of his ankh and

lifted it off, over his head. He turned toward Claradon. "Hold this for me until we're done." Theta handed Claradon the ankh and extended his hands toward Azura, palms up.

*I must get this right.*

Azura grasped Theta's hands and shuddered. Her head snapped back, eyes opened wide, though they saw nothing of the now. Her eyes rolled back in her head, only the whites exposed.

A maelstrom of images, sounds, and emotions unlike any reading before flailed Azura's mind, trampled her thoughts and

shattered her defenses. She saw nothing through the blur and heard nothing but the din. She felt everything and nothing, lost in a vortex of madness.

She struggled to manage the torrent, to control the flow before it destroyed her. If she didn't master it in moments all sanity would be lost, and all that which made Azura an individual would be gone, forever, reducing her to a gibbering, drooling, mindless thing.

Azura exerted all her discipline and all her will and regained some semblance of control. Gradually, the images slowed and cleared; the

cacophony ebbed; the world came into focus. Azura became her subject, seeing through his eyes, hearing with his ears, and feeling his feelings. Not of the now, but of the past, long past. All her will bent on maintaining control and keeping the maelstrom that ever threatened her in check.

She looked out Theta's eyes and a feeling of power washed over her. A sense of incredible strength, and vast, unmatched knowledge. A feeling of durability, vitality, and near limitless energy. A feeling of age, a sense of eternity.

She, no Theta, stood atop a

smoking snowcapped mountain, then in a boat on a roiling sea, in a desert, on a field of ice, in a forest glen—but somehow, this was all the same place, all the very same spot on Midgaard—as if the world changed, but Theta remained. As if he had walked Midgaard forever through all its epochs and geological upheavals. As if he were always here, immortal, everlasting.

The images shifted and churned, faster and faster again. Azura set her will against them and pulled them into check once more. She saw a woman that she loved grow old, sicken, and die almost

within the blink of an eye, and her heart broke. All the people in all the lands began to age rapidly, so rapidly, and they grew sick, and weak, and died. They all died. But Theta remained; everlasting, ever strong, a warrior, a knight eternal.

Guilt beyond imagining assaulted her; a sorrow beyond all sorrows rended her soul, and a loneliness without end engulfed her. Worst of all, the helplessness and the anger it stirred within her. An anger that ever threatened to erupt. A simmering need for vengeance. Nothing she could do could stop the suffering and the

dying. Nothing.

The images and sounds blurred and shifted again. A terrible sight came into focus. She stood now before a large portal, an unnatural gateway through which sprang and leaped and flew the very monsters of nightmare. There came dragons, black, red, winged and serpentine. Basilisks and bogart, demons and devils, hags and harpies, giants and djinn, minotaur and manticore, ghost, ghoul, and goblin, wight and warg, and countless more. All the monsters of legend, myth, and nightmare raced through that portal from Abaddon as she looked on.

The scene clouded again, and a chorus of voices began to chant. Most voices were strangers, but some were familiar, some were those of friends. Traitor, traitor, traitor they chanted. Slayer they marked him. Rebel, widowmaker, bogeyman, devil, prince of lies they called him. Great Dragon they named him. Harbinger of Doom they boomed. Harbinger of doom, harbinger of doom, harbinger of doom they chanted over and over and over again. That title of infamy echoed in her mind, no his, without end and through all time. Azura felt herself falling, falling into a



bottomless abyss with no hope, no help, no friends.

Then before her, He stood. Azathoth. The ancient god himself, bathed in holy light. His arms outstretched to the sides, palms up, tears streaming down his kind and careworn face, the white of his beard lost in like-colored robes. He looked pained, wounded, suffering.

“Why?” said Azathoth, his voice unsteady. “Why hath thee betrayed me, my son? Why doth thou forsake me? You who I loved more than all others, how can thee turn to darkness, to evil?”

“Take my hand, Thetan. Take

my hand and repent. Repent and all will be forgiven. All will be as it was.”

Theta’s hands came into view. But they were not bare. They held a sword.

Azathoth looked shocked, but then he seemed to grow and darken. His face became hard and terrible. “You have chosen the dark road, Thetan. Now your name will go down in infamy through all the ages. So must it be. Now feel my wrath and despair.”

Theta bounded toward the god, so fast, faster than any man could move. But Azathoth was faster. His

hand shot out and from it exploded a stream of blinding yellow fire that engulfed Theta.

Azura felt herself falling and screaming. An indescribable pain that threatened to tear her very soul from her body.

Azura's face stung. She opened her eyes and Gorb stood over her. She was lying on the floor. Did he slap me? Such things helped end the spell when things went bad.

The wizard knelt before her. He offered her something—a cup of water? She couldn't focus enough to be sure, and pushed his hand away. Her vision was blurred; her

ears rang; and her thoughts raced, unfocused. Memory stormed back to her. *Harbinger of Doom!* She started and arced up into a sitting position. She began shaking uncontrollably.

*It's him. Dead gods, it's him. The Harbinger of Doom. The lord of evil. Make them go away.*

"Get out!" screamed Azura. "They've gone to Jutenheim. *The White Rose* has sailed to Jutenheim. Now get out. Get out."

The soldiers turned and left. The wizard bent down beside her. "I'm sorry, dear Lady, we did not mean you harm."

Azura grabbed him by the collar and pulled him close. She could feel Gorb beside her, tensed, ready to strike at her command. "He's the prince of lies, wizard."

Tanch looked confused. "What?"

"He's not what he seems. He's the bogeyman of legend. The Harbinger of Doom—it's him, your man, it's truly him."

Tanch stood up, a look of horror on his face.

"He will be the death of you, wizard. Beware him. He will be the death of us all. Go now, go. Never return here. Get out! Get out!"

Gorb stood, menacingly. Tanch fled the tower, Ob beside him.

After they were gone, Gorb lifted Azura into her chair. Her vision cleared, though a strange ringing still filled her head.

*Gorb looks frightened. I've never seen him frightened before. The way he's staring at me; how odd. Dirkben and Rimel have the same look. Why?*

Azura looked up and saw her reflection in the tall mirror across the room. Her long auburn locks now ran gray from root to end. She put her hands to head and grabbed at her hair in disbelief. *My hair, my*

*face!*

“No!” Azura screamed. “No, no, no!”

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The group walked quickly through Azura’s courtyard.

“What happened?” asked Artol. “We heard a woman’s scream. Another minute and that door would’ve been splinters.”

“The seer went bonkers and booted us,” said Ob.

Tanch came up beside Theta as they made their way onto the street. His face was flushed and his voice

harsh. "What did you do to her?"

"Nothing," said Theta.

"Tell that to her hair," said Ob.

He turned to Artol. "It went white before our eyes. Mr. Fancy Pant's doing. Maybe we should introduce her to Slaayde."

Artol looked shocked. "What?"

"Nothing?" said Tanch. "It didn't look like nothing to me. She is a wizard of the Order, not an enemy. What did you do? I demand to know."

Theta ignored him, never slowing his pace.

"Answer me," said Tanch.

"Your back seems better today,"



said Theta. “Put your teeth together and it may stay that way.”

“Enough,” said Claradon. “We can discuss this back at the ship. We got what we came for and that’s what’s important.”

## XII

### FREEDOM SQUARE

“Can I do any less?”

—Angle Theta

“Some commotion up ahead in Freedom Square,” said Ob. “That’s where the main slave market was.”

“Freedom Square?” said Dolan. “Why call it that if slaves were sold there?”

“Don’t know,” said Ob. “Never made no sense to me.”

“Because evil oft denies its nature and pretends to be good,” said Theta.

Tanch looked to Theta, searching his face.

“They never even called it slavery. They named it workhood or some such. Who did they think they were fooling?” said Ob.

“None but themselves,” said Claradon.

“No,” said Theta. “They fooled many, for many are fools.”

Ob turned to Claradon. “Shall we see what’s what? Just a few blocks out of our way.”

“Alright,” said Claradon. “But let’s be quick.”

The avenue opened up into a large square where many streets

intersected. A noisy crowd was gathered. Men were up on the large, raised, wood platform upon which untold slaves had been exhibited and sold. For generations, the pirate lords of Tragoss Mor raided villages and cities and islands up and down the coast for hundreds, even thousands of miles, taking what booty they could and capturing people for slaves. They brought them all there, for sale in Freedom Square to the highest bidder. Any land that had no trade treaty with Tragoss and that paid no tribute to them lived in fear of their attacks.

That day, dozens of Thothian

monks stood on and around the slave platform. One spoke into a speaking-trumpet soon after the group entered the square.

“Come forward, citizens,” said the monk. “We have rare goods for auction today.” He gestured to his fellows and they opened the rear door of a large covered wagon beside the platform. The monks pulled out several people, their heads covered in hoods; their hands tied before them. Two were adults, a short male with a slight build, and a curvaceous female; the rest, mere children, little more than babes. The monks dragged the prisoners

up onto the slave platform and lined them up for all to see.

Murmurings spread through the crowd.

“What’s this?” shouted one man. “The freedom market was closed.”

“Workhood is no more,” shouted another.

“No,” shouted several more citizens. Soon the whole crowd took up the chant, “No. No. No.”

The lead monk, one Del Koth, a tall, thick man of bushy beard and yellowed teeth, motioned the people to silence.

“Don’t be alarmed, good

citizens,” said Del Koth. “The freedom market is closed and will remain so. No man will ever be sold here again.” He paused, took the measure of the crowd, and let them settle.

“But these creatures,” gesturing toward the prisoners, “are not men.” He turned to his fellows. “Remove their hoods.”

The monks ripped the hoods from the two taller prisoners. Each had a strange greenish tinge to their skin and large, distinctive, pointy ears.

“Elves,” shouted the crowd.

“Yes, citizens,” shouted Del

Koth. "Elves, wicked, wicked elves." He smiled in triumph. "The very servants of evil."

"Wood elves," said Ob quietly. "Half-blood at best; probably three-fourth's volsung."

The monks pulled the hoods from the children, though children they were not. Each had a beard, a bulbous nose, and large ears. Adults all. Some were middle aged, some older—far from children despite their diminutive heights.

Ob's mouth dropped open in shock, then his expression turned into a snarl and his hand went to his axe.



“Imps,” yelled the crowd.

“Yes, citizens, imps. Greedy, evil, imps.” He surveyed the crowd; his smile grew.

Theta grabbed Ob’s arm. “Stay your hand. There are too many of them.”

Tanch looked in alarm at Ob and Dolan, their features all too resembled the prisoners. “We must be off.”

“Far too long have we suffered these sub-human creatures amongst us,” boomed Del Koth. “Imps hoard their wealth and share with none. Too long have they cheated us, and plotted and

schemed against us. Too long have they held what should belong to us, what is rightfully ours. Too long have they acted as if they are our betters. They're not. They're little more than animals. They are creatures of evil and darkness and dirt. Enemies of our dear lord, Thoath, source of all good and light. We will suffer them in our midst no longer. No longer. No longer," he boomed, his fist upraised.

"No longer," came a shout from the crowd. Then another and another and still more. "They're all no good," shouted one woman.

"Kill the scum," shouted one

man.

“And these,” boomed the monk, pointing to the elves. “These fell creatures of legend still skulk in the dark woodlands and the sinister places where no goodly man would ever tread. You have all heard the stories of their fell deeds. They steal our children in the night or leave them dead in their cribs. They murder innocent travelers who have lost their way. We will suffer these atrocities no longer. No longer, I say. Now they will serve us. Now they will do our bidding.”

Scattered cheers went up through the crowd from many parts

of the square. Others booed and shouted, “No,” but the monk’s supporters outnumbered and outshouted his critics and he smiled his yellow smile.

“Who will bid ten silver stars for this imp?” said Del Koth, pointing to the smallest in the line.

“I will,” shouted someone.”

“No,” yelled several others.

“Stop this madness,” shouted a tall, red-cloaked man near the slave platform. “Workhood is outlawed. Do not do this.”

Theta and the group waded through the crowd toward the nearest side street leading in the

general direction of the harbor. Dolan pulled his collar up to hide his ears as best he could. Ob, jaw clenched in anger, tried to stay hidden between his comrades.

“Imp,” shouted a man that they passed. He grabbed at Ob. “Imp!”

“He’s my servant, you fool,” said Tanch. “Unhand him or my men will cut you down.”

Artol shoved the man aside. He went down cursing.

The scene in the square rapidly turned into a riot as those that supported the monks and those against yelled and cursed each

other. Soon after the group turned down an alley, they heard a clash of blades from the square. A melee had broken out. Many had joined in.

Theta stopped in his tracks at the fore of the group. Ob drew his axe and turned about. Artol grabbed Ob, to hold him back.

“We can’t leave them to be sold like cattle,” said Ob, “or slaughtered where they stand.”

“We’ve no time for this,” said Tanch. “It’s not our fight. We have a mission. We’ve got to get back to the ship or we’ll never catch *The Rose*, and Sir Jude will be lost.”

The sound of steel clashing in the square and the twang and whoosh of arrows filled the air.

“There are men fighting to free them,” said Ob, his face reddened. “Can we do any less? Can we?”

Claradon looked to Theta. “What do we do?”

Theta’s eyes were closed, his expression grim.

“Lord Theta,” said Claradon. “What should we do?”

Theta spoke slowly, seemingly to himself. “Can I do any less?” He spun back toward the others. He drew his falchion and pulled his shield from his shoulder.

“Theta, there are too many monks, you said so yourself, and more will surely come,” said Tanch. “Only a fool would interfere in this. What’re you going to do?”

“I’m declaring war on the Thothians.” He strode down the alley. Dolan, bow in hand, followed on his heels.

“I love this guy,” said Artol grinning. He pulled his massive warhammer from its shoulder sheath and followed Theta. “Whoo-ha!”

“A madman,” mumbled Tanch. “He will be the death of us all.”

Theta strode from the alley into



Freedom Square—Dolan, Artol, and the others followed. The square was in chaos. People ran in all directions. Screams filled the air. A small group of men battled the Thothians at the foot of the slave platform. Scattered melees flared elsewhere about the square.

Theta and Artol marched directly toward the heart of the fighting and shoved aside any that got in their way. Several disheveled citizens with swords or daggers fled the battle, some bleeding and battered. Many of the Thothians had bows. They stood atop the slave platform and indiscriminately fired

down into the crowd.

As Theta neared the slave deck, an arrow crashed into the center of his chest. It bounced off his breastplate leaving neither scratch nor dent; two more shafts deflected off his shield, the steel too strong, too thick for such weapons to pose a threat. Theta didn't seem to notice the impacts; he didn't pause for a moment. He didn't even flinch. Artol held his shield high and ducked and dodged as the shafts flew by him, but his luck held, and not a one struck home.

Numerous citizens and more than a dozen Thothians were down

or dead. A red-cloaked man hacked at the monks with a broadsword, several dead and dying at his feet. A handful of skilled swordsmen battled at his side, coordinated, a trained unit.

Theta and Artol bounded up onto the deck. Theta swung his falchion; Artol, his hammer. Two monks died from those swings, one cleaved in half, one's head smashed to pulp. Then two more fell—one thunderous blow took each. The remaining monks scattered before them. Dolan's arrows slammed into four monks in rapid succession, each pierced through the forehead,

neck, or chest.

“Kill the workhooders,” yelled Del Koth. “Kill them all,” he boomed.

A volley of arrows streaked toward the two elven prisoners. The male interposed himself in front of his companion and collapsed with three arrows in his chest.

Tanch charged the Thothians at ground level, aiding the red-cloaked warrior and his men, while Claradon and Ob leaped up and scrambled onto the slave platform. Wild-eyed, Ob charged straight for Del Koth, axe bared and gleaming. Claradon ran toward the monks

that menaced the fallen elves.

An arrow deflected off Ob's axe-blade as he approached Del Koth. He ignored the arrow and raised his ancient weapon over his head, his face contorted in fury. Del Koth brought up his scimitar to block the blow that thundered down on him with all the gnome's strength. The mithril axe sheared through the monk's iron blade, and cleaved through his chest with a sickening crunch of bones. Ob landed atop him; a spray of blood lashed his face.

Del Koth's big hands closed

around Ob's throat and squeezed. Despite his mortal wound, Del Koth's grip was iron, as was his resolve to take his slayer with him to the other side. Ob tried to pry Del Koth's hands from his throat, but the big monk was too strong, too desperate. Ob grabbed Del Koth about his neck and choked him back, but Del Koth's neck was all corded muscle, more likely that Ob could choke a tree.

“My wife,” said Del Koth, coughing blood, now half delirious, his eyes glazing over. “My children. Dear lord, give me strength for my children. Save me.”

Ob's face turned to blue; his head swam, but he could feel Del Koth's grip loosen, blood loss sapping his great strength. Moments more and Del Koth's hands grew limp, his breathing shallow, and then he moved no more. Ob didn't loosen his grip for a while more, just to be sure. Then he rolled over, gasping and coughing, covered in Del Koth's blood, and tried to catch his breath.

Two monks charged toward the fallen elves. "Pull him off," yelled a fat monk.

His companion grabbed the

male elf by the collar and dragged his corpse off the female. Still bound and gagged, she lay helpless, whimpering, eyes darting from side to side, searching, almost pleading for some route of escape.

One monk raised his sword, an evil leer on his face.

The elf's leg sprang out with speed and power—a vicious kick to the monk's knee that popped it out of its socket. The monk howled, collapsed, and toppled from the platform.

Claradon's sword slammed into the second monk, tearing through his chest. The monk dropped to his



knees, clutching at his wound, trying in vain to stem the flow of blood. He looked up pleadingly, his eyes begging for mercy. Claradon lowered his sword and the monk lunged, dagger in hand, pulled from parts unknown. Claradon caught the man's wrist in his right hand and swung his sword. The blow took the monk's arm off, just below the elbow. A moment later, Claradon's sword slammed into the back of the monk's neck, severing his head.

The slave deck was clear. The corpses of more than a dozen

monks lay broken and bloody about the wood decking. Even more lay dead amongst the crowd, most piled about Red Cloak and his swordsmen. Those monks that still lived, and were able, fled the square.

Two of the gnome captives lay dead on the platform. Ob and Red Cloak's swordsmen got the survivors to their feet and cut their bonds.

The female elf stood up, a dagger clutched between her bound hands, all fear gone from her oval face, which was exotic, stunning.

Her eyes darted around, but there were no more monks to fight.

Frozen, Claradon stared at her. “Let me cut your bonds,” he said, after some moments. Her eyes met his and lingered. She held out her hands. Claradon cut her free using the dagger she had found. “Come with us.”

“Gladly,” she said with an accent that Claradon couldn’t place. Claradon held out his hand. She stared at it for a moment, surprised, even taken aback, then her expression softened and she put her hand in his.

“Let’s move,” shouted Red

Cloak. "The Thothians will be here in force in minutes. We must fly."

"Who are you people?" said Tanch.

"Who are you?" said Red Cloak.  
Neither answered.

Whistles sounded in the distance. The monks had roused the city guard.

The group fled the square at a run. The gnomes, elders amongst them, and weak as they were from their ordeal, had trouble keeping up. Ob stayed beside them, and soon shouted to Artol and Red Cloak's men to carry some of the weakest, which they did.

They sped through deserted alleys and quiet streets for some minutes before reaching a populated street that opened into a square, similar but smaller than the one they had just fled. Here, there were no captives, just carts of fruits, vegetables, pies, and sundries.

“Hide your weapons, and act natural,” said Red Cloak. “Be calm.” They crossed the busy square in three groups to garner less attention. The shoppers and shopkeepers chattered and speculated about what calamity the whistles harbored, but no one paid the group any heed.

They turned down Brick Street, a busy lane of well-appointed storefronts and filled with the pungent scent of spices of all varieties. Red Cloak led them halfway down the street, just passed a spice store with a large yellow awning. There, they descended a few stone steps to a cellar door.

Red Cloak knocked.

A small wood panel swung in and a man peered out. Satisfied with what he saw, he opened the door, and the group filed in.

They found themselves in a storeroom piled with sacks, crates, and barrels of salt, spices, and

foodstuffs. Several men dressed in nondescript workman clothing stood about, tensed, swords in their hands. More men with swords came from the rear.

Ignoring them, Red Cloak proceeded toward the back of the room. "Follow me," he said over his shoulder. A door led to a huge warehouse filled with crates and barrels, far larger than the small storefront above. This basement extended under and well past the buildings to either side and behind. Red Cloak led them to a door on the far side of the warehouse, hidden behind a row of large crates.

The group filed into a sparsely furnished room with two wood tables and benches, and more crates and barrels. About ten of Red Cloak's men, all armed, and several armored in chain or plate, filed in behind them.

Red Cloak stood before them. He was tall, rangy, and broad shouldered but thin of face and waist. An old scar zigzagged down his right cheek, marring an otherwise handsome, if weathered face. A man of forty-five, perhaps older, with a bearing that commanded respect, and was accustomed to receiving it. "I am du



Maris. Who are you?"

One of the gnomes stepped forward, still winded and sweating from the run, though Artol had carried him most of the way. Old and stooped, his glasses had but one lens, his shirt torn, his lip bloody. "I am Snor Slipnet of the Clan Rumbottle out of the Good Hills. Those with me are my kinsmen." He bowed low before du Maris. "I thank you and your men for rescuing me and mine, except for Bindel and Brodle who were shot dead by those scum. Good lads were they. We are in your debt."

"You're welcome, Master

Slipnet,” said du Maris.

“If I may ask, why did you risk yourselves to help us?”

Du Maris straightened and lifted his chin. “Because all people have the right to live free, and should be judged by their actions, not the shape of their ears or the shade of their skin. Simple concepts, but beyond the Thothians.”

“Tell me,” said du Maris, “Why did you come to Tragoss?”

“We sailed on a caravel out of Kern,” said Slipnet, “foolishly seeking adventure, though I’m afraid we found far more than we

bargained for. At my age I should've known better," said the gnome, staring at his feet. "I hesitate to ask, but—"

"We'll get you passage on a ship up the Hudsar. It may take a few days, but we will see you safely on your way home."

"I can't thank you enough. My clan will remember your service to us, du Maris of Tragoss Mor."

Du Maris ordered rooms prepared for the gnomes. Slipnet and Ob shook hands and wished each other well before one of the guardsmen escorted the Rumbottles out.

Looking to Theta, du Maris said, “And who are you?”

Ob firmly pushed Claradon on the back.

Claradon began to speak. “I am —”

“I am called Sinch,” said Tanch stepping forward. “A spice merchant out of Lomion, and these hulking brutes are my bodyguards.”

“A spice merchant?” said du Maris. “It’s not many a spice merchant that would risk his life to take on a couple score Thothian monks.” Du Maris eyed some crates piled nearby him. He opened one, rummaged about for a moment and

then pulled out a small cloth bag. He tossed it to Tanch. "Open it."

Tanch did so, and pulled forth a handful of something that looked like small dried berries.

"Name them," said du Maris.

Tanch studied the berries. He knew them not.

"Any spice merchant out of Lomion City would know," said du Maris," a hand on his sword hilt.

"Show us your armor," said Claradon, as he removed his traveling cloak, revealing his gleaming plate and chain armor beneath. "Come now, you don't think us so deaf not to have heard

your armor clanking as we ran through the streets.”

Du Maris stared at the crest etched on Claradon’s breastplate. “You’re from Dor Eotrus?”

“We are.”

Du Maris removed his cloak, revealing armor similar to Claradon’s. His men did the same.

“Church knights,” said Ob.

“Sundarians,” replied Claradon, the elf woman by his side, her face sad, but proud.

Du Maris nodded. “I am Sir Hithron du Maris, of the Sundarians, as you have surmised.”

Claradon put a hand to Tanch’s

shoulder and moved past him. “I know your family. A du Maris sits on the Council of Lords of Lomion.”

“My uncle,” said du Maris.

“I am Brother Claradon Eotrus, Lord of Dor Eotrus, and Caradonian Knight. These others are with me, save for this young woman whom we rescued in the square.”

Du Maris studied Claradon. “A Dor Lord in Tragoss? That’s a rare thing. Show me your signet and your shield.”

Claradon held out his right hand. A golden ring with the Eotrus family crest dominated his ring finger.

Du Maris approached, studied the ring for a time, and nodded.

Claradon pulled up his right sleeve to reveal a silver bracer embossed with an image of a small shield within which was inscribed the insignia of the order of Caradonian Knights.

Du Maris studied it, and then pulled a golden chain from beneath his tunic. From it hung a golden medallion in the shape of a small shield inscribed with runes. He displayed it before Claradon.

“I’m honored to meet you, Lord Eotrus.”

“And I, you, Sir Hithron.”



They shook hands.

“I’m from Dor Caladrill originally, so I know well the Eotrus name. Your noble family has safeguarded Lomion’s northern border with honor and courage for many generations. Be at ease, you and yours are welcome here. Tell me please, what business brings you to Tragoss Mor?”

Claradon stared at du Maris for some moments before responding. “We’re following a ship called *The White Rose*. She is a day out of port at least. My brother is aboard, a prisoner.”

“Who holds him?”

“The Shadow League, we believe.”

Du Maris nodded. “Long have black rumors swirled about that name.”

“What is this place?” said Claradon, looking about the Spartan room. “A safehouse?”

“More than that. To outsiders, it’s but the warehouse of a middling merchant. In truth, it’s a Sundarian Chapterhouse, the southernmost chapterhouse in all Midgaard, and rather secret, of course. I am its preceptor.”

Du Maris’s voice took on a grave tone. “Were you not who you

are, or someone else I could trust, you would not leave this place now that you know what and where it is.”

Claradon nodded. “I understand your caution; I’ve heard the Thothians arrest Churchmen on sight.”

“That they do. Your men can be trusted, of course?” said du Maris, with a hint of a smile.

“Have no fear there. I expect the Thothians would enjoy arresting us as much as you.”

“I doubt that,” said du Maris. “We’ve many enemies here, amongst the monks, if not the

common folk.

Du Maris looked to the elf. “Young lady, what are you called?”

“I am Kayla. Kayla Kazeran.”

“And how did you come to be a prisoner of the monks?”

“They attacked our ship. My brother and I were sailing down the Hudsar from the Linden Forest to sell our silks at Dover. A longship commanded by some monks attacked us.” She looked down at the floor; tears welled in her eyes.

“The monks attack ships, now?” said Ob.

“They said we had no right on the river—that it’s for volsungs only.

They demanded we pay them a toll—a hundred pieces of silver. The captain wouldn't pay and they put an arrow through his chest. Before we could pull away, they swarmed aboard, killing everyone without cause or mercy. Now only I am left."

"They've done much the same at least twice in the last month," said du Maris. "They grow bolder now that they've fully taken over Tragoss. My condolences for your losses, Miss. You've been through a terrible ordeal, but it's over now. You're safe here and we will see you safely home. The Linden isn't

far from the Good Hills. You can travel with Slipnet and his clansmen. I will send some of my men along to assure that have no more trouble."

"Thanks, but no. There is nothing in Lindenwood for me to return to now."

"You can't remain in Tragoss Mor. As an elf, it's just not safe."

"I'm only one-sixth elf, or so the Lindonaire often remind me."

"That matters little to the monks. If you've any elven looks, they mark you an elf and that's that."

"Believe me, I've no wish to be

in this accursed city one moment more than I have to. These monks are the worst of men. Their kind is why my people live apart from you volsungs."

"Then what do you propose to do?" said Claradon.

She considered for a moment and turned to Claradon. "I know how to sail a bit, and to hunt with a bow, and I can wield a sword as good as most men. I will join your crew, if you'll have me."

Claradon's eyebrows rose. "I—well—I don't know—but—maybe—"

"That means, yes, in dumbass," said Ob. "About time there was a

woman on this adventure.”

“What about Bertha Smallbutt?” said Dolan.

“She doesn’t count,” said Ob.

“Why not?”

“Just because.”

“Getting you back to your ship won’t be so easy,” said du Maris. “At the first sounding of the whistles, the watchmen will have closed the gates between the Harbor District and the inner city. Passing the gates is no small task. Solid iron, fifteen feet high, with a dozen guards defending it, and more but a whistle away.”



“So if we hadn’t stopped in the square to help free the captives, our butts would’ve been trapped on this side anyhow?” said Ob.

“More than likely, yes,” said du Maris.

“So, how do we get through?”

Du Maris and his knights led the group through a narrow tunnel, dark and dank, deep beneath the streets of Tragoss Mor, torches held high to light their way. The tunnels went on and on.

“What are these tunnels?” said Claradon. “This is no basement or sewer.”

“Tragoss Mor is an ancient place,” said du Maris. “City upon city has been built on this ground, one atop the other. These tunnels are from olden days. They lead to most parts of the city. I can’t take you all the way to the docks, as that branch of the tunnel has collapsed, but I will get you close.”

“How did you find them?” said Claradon.

“We built them.”

“The Sundarians?”

“Yes. My order has served here for long years. We use these passages to travel unseen. The citadel that the Thothians defile and

call their temple was once our stronghold. Now we hide behind spice sacks, but the landscape will change again with the passing years. It always does. We will outlast them.”

After a time, they came upon a side passage, barred off and posted with a sign that read, “No entry—beware the beast.”

“What is that about, du Maris?” said Ob, after tipping his flask.

“There is a creature somewhere down that way. A demon. Something left over from the old world. No man goes that way and lives.”

“Old friend of yours, Theta?”  
said Ob.

Theta ignored him.

“Guess we’ll have to come back,  
eventually,” said Dolan.

They traveled a goodly distance,  
and then turned down a side  
passage that ended at a rusty metal  
ladder bolted to the stone wall. Du  
Maris proceeded up and lifted a  
large flat stone banded with iron  
that covered the opening atop the  
tunnel. The group ascended and  
found themselves in a musty  
basement, unused and unkempt.

“I can take you no farther,” said  
the Sundarian. “Above is an old

warehouse, now abandoned. The western docks are about ten blocks due south.”

## XIII

### NOT LONG FOR VALHALLA

“Don’t forget these words or  
the Duelist will be the death of  
you.”

—Pipkorn

“Lord Theta, Mr. Seran is coming,” said Dolan. “Up ahead.”

“Dolan, you’ve got the eyes of a hawk,” said Artol squinting.

Seran and two of his men approached, still several blocks away. They looked from side to side, searching, as they made their way down the avenue, which was only

lightly crowded with pedestrians, carts, and the ever present street hawkers cajoling passersby into entering the shops that lined both sides of the street.

“There must be trouble,” said Ob. “Everyone was supposed to stay with the ship.”

Seran looked relieved when he caught sight of the group some moments later and dashed the rest of the way toward them, waving them toward the mouth of a narrow alley that put them out of sight of most prying eyes along the avenue.

“Lord Eotrus, Glimador sent us to find you. *The Grey Talon* berthed

not two piers away from *The Falcon*. Her marines are crawling the docks, bristling for a fight. Somehow they know you're not aboard and they've sent patrols to scour the city for you."

"Is the ship secure?" said Theta.

"For now," said Seran. "But they aim to move on us, I'm sure. There are a lot of them and they have Kalathen Knights with them—more than a few."

"Dolan, see if anyone followed Seran," said Theta. Dolan pulled down the cap that covered his ears a bit farther, nodded, and slipped away, silent as a panther.



“Some followed,” said Seran. “We lost them in the crowd back in the dock ward. We thought it worth the risk to warn you.”

“You did well,” said Claradon.

“It’s the Alders behind this,” said Ob. “Let’s cut the buggers down. Darn it boy, you should’ve killed that old fart Barusa when you had the chance.”

“His kinsmen would still be after us,” said Claradon.

“Without stinking Barusa they would be lost. We’re in the deep stuff, now. They’ll be at least twice our number, perhaps more.”

“Three or four times our

number, I would say, from those I've seen," said Seran.

"And we can't count on Slaayde's crew to stand with us," said Artol.

"We've no time to linger here," said Theta. "We push through to *The Falcon*, fighting our way if we have to and put straight to sail."

"Agreed," said Claradon.

"And if we run into the Kalathens?" said Ob.

"We power through," said Theta.

The group marched down the avenue toward the docks. They had not gone two blocks before they

were spotted by a *Talon* patrol that blew their whistles, calling to their brethren. The group sped toward the docks at a run, citizens scattering in a panic as the armored men barreled through.

A dozen men clad in chain mail armor and black cloaks stepped out from the shadows and barred their path. A tall man in silvered armor stood at the fore.

“A Myrdonian,” said Ob. “The Chancellor’s men.”

Claradon turned to Kayla as he drew his sword. “Stay back from the fighting and keep your head

covered.”

“Fine,” said she sharply from beneath her cowl, though she drew a short sword that du Maris had given her.

The two groups moved together. Theta, Artol, Seran, and Claradon leaped out in front. Theta’s sword flashed by quicker than the eye could follow. Artol’s huge hammer smashed through the air, two, perhaps, three times. Six men were down, including the Myrdonian, as quick as that. The others scattered, running for their lives. Neither Claradon nor Seran even had time to strike a blow.

What citizens were about screamed and scattered.

The group continued at a run toward the docks.

“They’re on the roofs,” said Ob. “Tracking us.”

“I see them,” said Theta.

“They’re signaling ahead, they will be waiting for us.”

Two blocks later, in sight of the ship, they came upon another group of men that stood in a line across the street, blocking any path to *The Falcon*. Eight men in heavy armor; swords, axes, and shields in hand. The corpses of several Thothian monks lined the street. But for

these dead and the men from *The Talon*, the street was deserted. The group pulled up, and readied their weapons.

“Kalathens,” said Ob. “The big Myrdonian out in front is one of Barusa’s brothers. Bartol or Blain, I think.”

“Looks like they had a dispute with the Thothians,” said Artol.

“Four more knights behind us,” said Dolan, bow in hand, an arrow nocked.

“Hold your ground for a parley,” said Bartol. At the sound of Bartol’s voice, a group of soldiers streamed out of the buildings on either side—

two dozen at least, several Myrdonian Knights amongst them. The soldiers wore the livery of House Alder. A number of them held crossbows, which they leveled toward the group.

“I am Bartol, Knight Captain of the Myrdonians, here on order of the Lomerian High Council. Make no foolish moves, men, as you can see, you’re far outnumbered. There is no need for a battle here.”

Bartol held up a piece of parchment. “This is a warrant, signed by the crown, lawful and true, for the arrest of Claradon Eotrus and the foreign mercenary

that accompanies him. They are accused of complicity in the death of Aradon Eotrus, lawful and true Lord of Dor Eotrus.”

“Lies,” yelled Ob.

“That is for the High Magisters to determine. I have been ordered to bring them back to face these charges and a trial, fair and equitable. If they’re innocent, they will go free. They will be well treated, you have my word. Those that wish may even return with us, provided you turn over your weapons. The rest of you are free to go.”

“Eat dung,” yelled Ob.



Bartol winced at the remark, no doubt bristling at having to take such insults from a gnome. “Listen to the imp, men, and you will all end up dead or in irons. We know your reputations and your skills, but you’re outnumbered four to one, that gives you no chance. This writ is legal and true. There is no honor in standing against it. If you do, you stand against your country and your king. Eotrus and his man will answer to these charges one way or another. There is no need for any of us to die today.”

“Go home, Alder, and take your stinking paper with you,” said Artol.

Frustration filled Bartol's face. "Last chance, men. Turn over the upstart or die where you stand."

The crossbowmen each took a step forward, bows leveled.

Claradon didn't know what to do. His instincts told him to fight, but what if the warrant was valid? What if it was signed by the king? Even now, the army could be marching on Dor Eotrus, to confiscate his lands. What of Ector and Malcolm? Would they be arrested? Would they be killed? He may never be able to return home without risking being arrested on

sight. But it couldn't be true. The Alders are schemers and liars; this was nothing more than a trick to get his men to turn against him.

He had to fight. Four to one odds were poor in the best of times, and today they faced a dozen Knights of Kalathen, some of the best trained blademasters in all Midgaard. The very mention of their order was enough to put most men to flight. Not to forget the Alder crossbowmen. At this range, armor would be scant protection. What to do?

Without a word, Theta strode forward, shield held high in his

right hand, falchion in his left.

“Stop him,” commanded Bartol.

Crossbows fired at Theta from the front and from both sides. Theta never slowed nor made any attempt to dodge. He merely shifted his shield to intercept what bolts he could. The heavy steel tipped projectiles made a loud pinging sound as they bounced off Theta's shield. Two bolts struck his plate armor but each ricocheted harmlessly away.

The remainder of the crossbowmen fired; their bolts equally ineffective.

“Charge!” yelled Ob.

And they did.

“Dead gods, this is the end,” said Tanch.

Claradon ran forward yelling a war cry to Odin, his sword and shield at the ready. Kayla ran beside him. Men raced at him from all sides. Battle engaged all around. Before he reached the line of Kalathens, Alder men intercepted him from his right flank.

A sword crashed into his shield, numbing his arm for an instant. He struck back blindly and felt his sword strike a man's armor and bite into his flesh. He pulled his blade free, and blood splattered his face

and tabard. He heard the man scream, but never did see his face.

An older man with a scarred face came at him, a sergeant in House Alder's guard by his uniform. Half Claradon's size was he, but wiry and quick as a cobra with his sword. Claradon fought on instinct, his sword slashing and stabbing, employing all the maneuvers that Sir Gabriel and Ob had drilled into him hour after hour in Dor Eotrus' battle square. Scar-face lunged in close with a thrust. Claradon dodged the blow and pummeled the man's face with his shield. Scar-face staggered back, his face crushed, his

ruin of a nose spouting blood. Claradon didn't know where Kayla was, but he had to look out for her, to keep her safe.

Claradon saw Ob fighting not far away, his mithril axe chopped and slashed and then shattered his opponent's sword. Then he saw Kayla. She lunged in beside Ob and stabbed the man he was fighting through the gut. Apparently, she needed no protection.

Claradon saw Tanch club a man with his staff. The man's skull shattered with the impact; bits of blood and chunks of brain went flying.

The battle had taken Claradon into the mouth of an alley, just off the main avenue. Two soldiers of House Alder appeared before him, swords blazing, the wild in their eyes. They pressed him hard, coordinating their strikes. If not for his large shield, Claradon would have had no chance to parry the hail of blows. A lucky slash nicked one man's neck and he dropped back. Claradon took advantage of the momentary reprieve and hacked at the remaining man with all his strength. He beat the man back, raining overhand blows down at his head. When the man lifted his



guard too high, Claradon's sword bit deep into his chest. The man grabbed at the sword, his eyes wide with disbelief as his lifeblood spurted out. Claradon kicked him in the chest and wrenched his sword free just as the second man lunged in again.

Ob crashed into number two, knocking him to the ground. As Ob moved to finish him, Claradon spun, sensing something behind him.

There stood death, gaunt, wild, and merciless. Kaledon of the Gray Waste, spear in hand, the battle lust of the barbarian burning in his

black eyes.

Claradon had heard his name uttered in fear and fireside stories since he was small boy, though this man looked less than ten years his elder. The ponytail, the tattooed chest, bare and unarmored, there could be no doubt this was he. The Wild Pict they called him—a bounty hunter and professional killer. Here not to settle some score like the Alders or serve some political agenda, but simply for coin. Here to kill him for money.

Claradon took no comfort in the thought that sometimes a man's reputation is far greater than his

prowess, for Pipkorn's warning echoed in his mind. Beware Kaledon—a foul sword master of mystical power.

There were no taunts or boasts, no bows or salutes. No nods of respect, no looks of regret at what now must be done. Nothing but death flared in Kaledon's eyes as he sprang like a tiger, leaping high into the air, his spear bound for Claradon's throat.

Claradon caught the blow on his shield and punched with it, hoping to break the shaft or even to smash Kaledon himself, but he hit only air. The Pict's thrust barely

glanced the shield—a feint with no power behind it. Claradon felt something crash into the side of his helm. Then he was falling.

Claradon opened his eyes. He was on the ground. The battle sounds were strangely muffled. He looked up and saw Kaledon stalking toward him, spear held in both hands. Two more steps and he would drive the tip through Claradon's throat or a joint in his plate armor, and that would be the end.

Claradon yelled, “Odin,” and Kaledon screamed some crazed, Pictish war cry as the barbarian

raised his spear high for the deathblow. Claradon's mouth moved to form words almost of its own accord. Ancient words, words lost to all but adepts of the Caradonian Knights, words forbidden to be spoken except in dire-most need. Claradon spoke them quick, a few short words, that was all. A bolt of numinous energy, sparkling blue, sprang out from Claradon's hand and blasted into Kaledon. The Pict was flung through the air and slammed into the stout wall of a building many yards away.

Claradon's head was swimming.

His helm was gone. Blood streamed down the side of his face. More blood came from his nose; he tasted it in his mouth, gagged and spit.

The battle still raged throughout the avenue. At any moment, another enemy could enter the alley and he would be done for unless he got to his feet and cleared his head. He had to get up.

Claradon grabbed his sword and pulled himself up. He felt dizzy for a moment, but then it passed, though his head pounded. He backed up against the wall of the alley.

He saw Artol swinging his hammer and trading blows with a tall knight.

Four soldiers pressed Seran; their swords clanged against his stout armor as he desperately tried to beat them back.

Across the alley, a barrel and some crates fell over. Rising behind them was the Pict.

His chest was charred black and smoking, but still he stood, the same madness in his eyes. His spear was gone, but he drew a sword from his belt. He vaulted effortlessly over a waist-high pile of debris and advanced, seemingly

unhampered and unfazed by the ugly wound to his chest.

Adrenaline pumped through Claradon; his heart pounded. I will finish this. I will not be defeated. The two warriors charged at each other, the young knight, full of honor and ideals, and the brute, savage and wild, cagey and relentless, unyielding as the sea.

Their swords clashed together: a thunderous blow that would have shattered lesser blades and numbed the arms of lesser men.

Then came the swordplay. Claradon's measured strokes were conventional, skillful, powerful, yet



full of finesse. An expert was he, working sword and shield together as two halves of the same weapon, artfully wielding his shield as much for attack as for defense.

The Pict's way was altogether different. For him, swordplay had no styles or maneuvers to master; the sword was an extension of his arm, a part of his very being. He wielded it fluidly yet wildly, without thought or plan, attacking and reacting, all with the preternatural instincts of the barbarian, the primitive. His thrusts were cobra strikes; his slashes, lightning; his cuts, the swipe of a bear's claws. So

fast was the Pict, that Claradon, for all his skill, could parry at best two of each three strokes. Ten seconds into their melee, Claradon would have been dead three times over, if not for his steel plate and shield. These and his art were his edge and he would use them unto the last.

The Pict's sword chopped off a third of Claradon's shield, nearly taking part his hand with it. His stabs and thrusts had bit into Claradon's armor at several joints, cutting his chainmail. Claradon felt blood flowing from several wounds, though none seemed bad. He couldn't match the Pict in speed or

strength or skill and his armor was failing him.

Claradon roared and hacked and as the Pict dodged back, he gained just enough time to voice more words of power—his one chance to survive.

His words spoken, a bolt of translucent blue flame launched from the tip of his sword and arced into the Pict's chest. The Pict's whole body vibrated; all his muscles seemed to lock up for a moment, and then he staggered backward; the smell of burning flesh filled the air. Claradon plowed forward and slashed the Pict across the chest,

biting deep into his flesh.

The Pict roared in pain and returned Claradon's strike as he fell, horribly wounded. The warblade slashed across Claradon's breastplate, cleaving through at the center. Claradon stumbled backward. Blood seeped through his armor soaking his tabard. How bad the wound was, Claradon could not yet tell. Dead gods, he thought, has he killed me?

Claradon felt afire as his amulet brightened and seared his chest.

"Eotrus!" boomed a powerful voice.

Claradon turned, dazed, his

shield down, his sword hanging loose from its wrist strap.

But an arm's length away stood Milton DeBoors, the duelist of Dyvers.

Claradon saw the thrust, but had no time or strength to move. He watched the blade enter near the center of his chest, precisely where the Pict had shredded his breastplate.

Everything now moved in slow motion.

The sword sank halfway to the hilt, stopping only when it exited Claradon's back and slammed into the inside face of the plate armor

protecting his rear.

Claradon stared down at the sword in disbelief, his mouth hanging open. Strangely, it didn't hurt, not until DeBoors slid the blade out again—then, there was nothing but the pain.

“Valhalla,” he said.

Then Claradon Eotrus fell.

# GLOSSARY

## PLACES

### The Realms

**Asgard:** legendary home of the gods

**Lomion:** a great kingdom of Midgaard

**Midgaard:** the world of man

**Nifleheim:** the realm of the Lords of Nifleheim. The very hell of myth and legend.

**Vaeden:** paradise, lost

## Places Within The Kingdom Of Lomion

**Dor Eotrus:** fortress and lands ruled by House Eotrus, north of Lomion City

**Dor Linden:** fortress in the Linden Forest, ruled by House Mirtise

**Dor Lomion:** fortress within Lomion City, ruled by House Harringgold

**Dor Malvegil:** fortress and lands ruled by House Malvegil, southeast of Lomion City on the west bank of the Grand Hudsar River

**Dor Valadon:** fortress outside Dover



**Dover:** large city at Lomion's southeastern border

**Dyvers:** Lomerian city known for its quality metalworking

**Lomion City** (aka Lomion): capital city of the Kingdom of Lomion

**Riker's Crossroads:** village at the southern border of Eotrus lands

**Tammanian Hall:** high seat of government in Lomion; home of the High Council and the Council of Lords

**Temple of Guymaog:** where the gateway was opened in the Vermion Forest

**Tower of the Arcane:** high seat of

wizardom; in Lomion City

**Vermion Forest:** foreboding wood west of Dor Eotrus

## **Parts Foreign**

**Dead Fens, The:** mix of fen, bog, and swampland on the east bank of the Hudsar River, south of Dor Malvegil

**Grand Hudsar River:** South of Lomion City it marks the eastern border of the kingdom

**Emerald River:** large river that branches off from the Hudsar at Dover

**Minoc-by-the-Sea:** coastal city

**Tragoss Mor:** large city far to the

south of Lomion, at the mouth of  
the Hudsar River, where it meets  
the Azure Sea

# PEOPLE

High Council of Lomion

**Selrach Rothtonn Tenzilvel III:**

His Royal Majesty: King of Lomion

**Aramere, Lady:** Councilor for the  
City of Dyvers

**Balfor, Field Marshal:**

Commander of the Lomerian army

**Barusa of Alder, Lord:**

Chancellor of Lomion

**Cartagian Tenzilvel, Prince:**

Selrach's son, insane

**Dahlia, Lady:** Councilor for the  
City of Kern

**Glenfinnen, Lord:** Councilor for

the City of Dover

**Harper Harringgold, Lord:**

Archduke of Lomion City

**Jhensezil, Lord:** Preceptor of the  
Odion Knights

**Morfin, Baron:** (reportedly dead)

**Slyman, Councilor:** Master of  
Guilds

**Tobin Carthigast, Bishop:**

Representative of the Churchmen

**Vizier, The (Rabrack**

**Philistine):** Representative of the  
Tower of the Arcane

House Alder (Pronounced All-der)

**Bartol Alder:** younger brother of  
Barusa, Myrdonian Knight

**Barusa Alder, Lord:** Chancellor of Lomion, eldest son of the House

**Blain Alder:** younger brother of Barusa

**Edwin Alder:** son of Blain

### House Eotrus

The Eotrus rule the fortress of Dor Eotrus, the Outer Dor (a town outside the fortress walls) and the surrounding lands for many leagues.

**Aradon Eotrus, Lord:**

(pronounced Eee-oh-tro`-sss) – Patriarch of the House (presumed dead)

**Claradon Eotrus, Brother:**

(Clara-don) Eldest son of Aradon,  
Caradonian Knight

**Ector Eotrus, Sir:** Third son of  
Aradon

**Eleanor Eotrus:** wife of Aradon

**Gabriel Garn, Sir:** House  
Weapons Master (presumed dead,  
body taken over by Korrgonn)

**Jude Eotrus, Sir:** Second son of  
Aradon

**Knights & Soldiers of the  
House:** Artol ‘The Destroyer’, Sir  
Paldor, Sir Glimador Malvegil, Sir  
Indigo, Sir Kelbor, Sir Ganton ‘the  
bull’, Sir Trelman, Sir Marzdan, Sir  
Sarbek, Harsnip, Baret, Graham,  
Sergeant Balfin

**Malcolm Eotrus:** Fourth son of Aradon

**Ob A. Faz III:** (Ahb A. Fahzz)  
Castellan and Master Scout of Dor Eotrus, a gnome

**Tanch Trinagal, Par:** (Trin-ah-ghaal) of the Blue Tower; Son of Sinch; House Wizard for the Eotrus

House Harringgold

**Harper Harringgold, Lord:**  
Arch-Duke of Lomion City;  
Patriarch of the House; Lord of Dor Lomion

**Grim Fischer:** agent of Harper, a gnome

**Marissa Harringgold:** daughter



of Harper

**Seran Harringgold, Sir:** nephew  
of Harper

House Malvegil

**Torbin Malvegil, Lord:** Patriarch  
of the House; Lord of Dor Malvegil.

**Landolyn, Lady:** of House  
Adonael; Torbin's consort. Half-  
elfen.

**Glimador Malvegil, Sir:** first son  
and heir of Torbin, working under  
the service of House Eotrus.

**Gravemare, Hubert:** Castellan  
**Hogart:** harbormaster

The Lords of Nifleheim

**Azathoth:** god worshipped by the Nifleheim Lords and The Shadow League

**Arioch; Bhaal; Hecate**

**Korrgonn, Lord Gallis:** son of Azathoth

**Mortach:** (aka Mikel) – killed by Angle Theta

The Crew Of *The Black Falcon*

**Slaayde, Dylan:** Captain of *The Black Falcon*

**Bertha Smallbutt:** ship's quartermaster

**Fizdar Firstbar 'the corsair':** former first mate, presumed dead

**N'Paag:** First Mate

**Tug, Little:** Near 7-foot tall half-lugron seaman

The Crew/Passengers of *The Grey Talon*

**DeBoors, Milton:** ‘The Duelist of Dyvers’. A mercenary

**Kaledon of the Gray Waste:** a Pict, mercenary

**Kleig:** Captain of *The Grey Talon*

**Knights of Kalathen:**  
mercenaries, work for DeBoors.

The Crew/Passengers of *The White Rose*

**Rastinfan Rascelon:** Captain of *The White Rose*

**Ginalli, Father:** High Priest of Azathoth, Arkon of The Shadow League.

**Ezerhauten, Lord:** Commander of the Sithian Mercenary Company

**Finbal, Brackta:** arch-mage

**Frem Sorlons:** hulking warrior, simpleton; Captain of the Pointmen

**Hablock, Par:** arch-mage

**Lugron:** hulking brutish humanoids

**Morsmun, Par:** arch-mage

**Mort Zag:** red-skinned giant

**Ot, Par:** arch-mage

**Sevare Zendrack, Par:** wizard

**Sithians:** sect of knights and soldiers, trained by Ezerhauten

## Others Of Note

**Angle Theta, Lord:** (Thay`-tah)  
(aka Thetan) knight errant and  
nobleman from a far-off land  
beyond the sea.

**Azura the Seer:** Seer based in  
Tragoss Mor

**Caradonian Knights:** priestly  
order of knights

**Dolan Silk:** (Doe`-lin) Theta's  
manservant

**Du Maris, Sir Hithron:** Preceptor  
of the Sundarian Chapterhouse in  
Tragoss Mor; from Dor Caladrill

**Einheriar:** supernatural warriors

**Kayla Kazeran:** Part elvish

woman from the Linden Forest

**Myrdonians:** Royal Lomerian Knights

**Picts:** a barbarian people from the Gray Waste

**Pipkorn:** (aka Rascatlan) former Grand Master of the Tower of the Arcane. A wizard.

**Snor Slipnet:** Patriarch of Clan Rumbottle; a gnome

**Talidousen:** Former Grand Master of the Tower of the Arcane; created the rings of the magi.

**Thothian monks:** monks that rule Tragoss Mor and worship Thoth

**Vanyar Elves:** legendary elven

people

**Volsungs:** men/humans

# THINGS

## Miscellany

**Amulet of Escandell:** detects presence of danger; Pipkorn's gift to Claradon.

**Asgardian Daggers:** legendary weapons created in the first age of Midgaard. They can harm creatures of Nifleheim.

**Dargus Dal:** Asgardian dagger, previously Gabriel's, now Theta's

**Worfin Dal:** "Lord's Dagger," Claradon's Asgardian dagger

**Wotan Dal:** "Odin's Dagger". Pipkorn's gift to Theta.



**Axe of Bigby the Bold:** Made of Mithril; given to Ob by Pipkorn

**Dor:** a generic name for a Lomorian fortress

**Dyvers Blades:** finely crafted steel swords

**Ghost Ship Box:** calls forth an illusory ship; created by Pipkorn.

**Mages and Monsters:** a tactical wargame using miniatures

**Mithril:** precious metal of great strength and relative lightness

**Ranal:** a black metal, hard as steel and half as heavy, weapons made of it can affect creatures of Nifleheim

**Ring of the Magi:** amplifies a wizard's power; one of twenty

created by Talidousen

## ABOUT GLENN G. THATER

For more than twenty-five years, Glenn G. Thater has written works of fiction and historical fiction that focus on the genres of epic fantasy and sword and sorcery. His published works of fiction include the first four volumes of the Harbinger of Doom saga: *Gateway to Nifleheim*, *The Fallen Angle*, *Knight Eternal*, and *Dwellers of the Deep*; the novella, *The Gateway*; and the novelette, *The Hero and the Fiend*.

Mr. Thater holds a Bachelor of

Science degree in Physics with concentrations in Astronomy and Religious Studies, and a Master of Science degree in Civil Engineering, specializing in Structural Engineering. He has undertaken advanced graduate study in Classical Physics, Quantum Mechanics, Statistical Mechanics, and Astrophysics, and is a practicing licensed professional engineer specializing in the multidisciplinary alteration and remediation of buildings, and the forensic investigation of building failures and other disasters.

Mr. Thater has investigated

failures and collapses of numerous structures around the United States and internationally. Since 1998, he has served on the American Society of Civil Engineers' Technical Council on Forensic Engineering (TCFE), is a member of that Council's Executive Committee, and is the past Chairman of TCFE's Committee on Practices to Reduce Failures. Mr. Thater is a LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) Accredited Professional and has testified as an expert witness in the field of structural engineering before the Supreme Court of the State of New

York.

Mr. Thater is an author of numerous scientific papers, magazine articles, engineering textbook chapters, and countless engineering reports. He has lectured across the United States and internationally on such topics as the World Trade Center collapses, bridge collapses, and on the construction and analysis of the dome of the United States Capitol in Washington D.C.

# BOOKS BY GLENN G. THATER

## THE HARBINGER OF DOOM

### SAGA

GATEWAY TO NIFLEHEIM

THE FALLEN ANGLE

KNIGHT ETERNAL

DWELLERS OF THE DEEP

*VOLUME 5+ forthcoming*

## THE HERO AND THE FIEND

(A novelette set in the Harbinger of  
Doom universe)

## THE GATEWAY

(A novella length version of  
*Gateway to Nifleheim*)

## HARBINGER OF DOOM

(Combines *Gateway to Nifleheim*  
and *The Fallen Angle* into a single  
volume)