

CHRONICLES OF ARBORELL

HONOUR AMONGST THIEVES



A COMPANION NOVELLA TO THE
WINDHAMMER CORE GAMEBOOK

WAYNE F DEPSLEY

HONOUR Amongst THIEVES

:honorum u harel shil'rim:



A Part of the Companion Series to the
Windhammer Core Gamebook

Written and Illustrated by Wayne Densley
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“For the Tak Lovar the world he knows has ended. The Guild has fallen and the power they once held has fled from their grasp. Hel'garad stands in ruins, a dark malevolence let loose upon the world, and within this turmoil only the true LoreMasters stand with their command of EarthMagic intact.”

“In the west a new power has risen, once held deep underground but now free to spread death and destruction upon the real world. In this desperate time men of different paths must come together, and in doing so bring to the oldest of the LoreMasters the one talisman that can save them all. The Shadowch is free upon the lands of Men and none are safe until it is destroyed.”

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Honour Amongst Thieves



Jonath Mac

The sky above spread as an endless blue vault unbroken by cloud or haze. Upon its pristine reach the twin suns of Arborell shone brightly, beacons of unbearable light that looked down upon Jonath Mac, taunting him in his helplessness, and reinforcing with each passing hour the uncompromising certainty that he was in deep trouble.

Desperately he pulled at the cords that bound his arms, the restraints firmly knotted to iron spikes driven deep into the wet earth. For two days he had lain immobile, spread-eagled upon the trampled ground, alone and at the mercy of the wind, rain and ever-present cold. As he tested the strength of his bindings one more time he knew his exposure to the elements had already begun to have an effect. From the corner of his eyes he could see vague phantoms of people he had known over the years passing him by. Visions and memories flooded his thoughts in a melee of unordered sequences, and within that confusion there sprung even stranger apparitions that would come into his consciousness and then disappear like shadows. Above it all however, he could feel the aching dryness of his throat and the weakness in his limbs. Another day without help and he would indeed be dead.

For the hundredth time Jonath tried to lift his head and see if there was any chance at all of rescue but Braddick Alun had picked his spot well. Jonath could see that he had been placed in a shallow, oval depression in the ground no more than a forearm deep. It served to hide him completely from anybody who might be crossing the plains, and unless someone ventured close he could easily go unnoticed. For hours he had shouted out a cry for help but his voice had become hoarse in the attempt. A lack of water now made it impossible for him to talk at all. He was beyond hope, beyond any chance of salvation.

It was difficult for him to admit it, but as he struggled against the ropes he knew he should have seen it coming. Over and over in his mind he had played out the events that had led to his current predicament and it pained him to admit that the cause was plainly

obvious. He was getting too old and that was the long and the short of it.

In a shifting delirium that left him cogent one moment and rambling to himself the next he relived the moments of his betrayal. It left a bitter taste in his mouth, one that he was beginning to savour as the only thread of sanity he had left.

Jonath knew that he was no ordinary thief, nor was his a soul worth saving. He could not be regarded as a nice man, his manner too coarse for most and too prone to violence if slighted. He had been a wanderer of the great plains since the age of fourteen years, and in those earlier times had learned his trade from some of the best, and most blood-thirsty, bandits Kalborea had ever reared. As he lay in his hole and stared at the clear sky above he felt no remorse for a life lived by treachery and greed. He had stolen and he had killed when the circumstances warranted it, but he had survived and if there was anything in his life he was proud of, it was the fact that he had survived.

For almost thirty years he had lived a life of freedom and adventure, and then one day found himself discarded by his bandits-in-arms. Too old had been their reasoning, too weakened by age to be of any further use. The old bandit smiled at that. Jonath Mac had proven himself too smart to let age or injury get in the way of life. Instead he determined to ply a different trade, one based on treachery and deceit. For twenty more years he traded instead in information; where the fattest merchants were travelling, times and dates of major convoys of valuable goods, and all under the benign guise of a kindly old traveller. In his own devious way he provided a service, and had been paid well for that service by the bandit gangs of the frontier.

Then he fell in with Braddick Alun, a rising star in the world of violence and criminality, and as treacherous a man as any who drew breath in the world. He paid very well and Jonath Mac had grown rich upon the spoils of his banditry. That was until two days ago. Information had been given and paid for. A convoy of rich fabric and leathers was on the move from Miller's Crossing to the border lands of the Faeyen in the west. It should have been an easy target and a lucrative one at that, but the convoy had been a trap. Kalborean soldiery had been lying in wait, and more than half of Alun's gang had been killed or captured in the battle that had ensued. The old bandit did not know what had happened and had waited patiently for the return of Alun's gang, and his cut of the loot. Such was not to be.

The first thing Jonath knew of trouble was a loud crack as the pommel of Alun's sword hit him squarely upon the head. Disoriented, he had been dragged into the depression and staked out. He could not be sure by whom, but he could swear he had been kicked more than once for his trouble.

When he had awoken the plains had been empty, Braddick Alun and his gang of cut-throats nowhere to be seen. All he could be certain of was that he lay more than two days travel from any decent settlement, and that upon the broad sweep of the grasslands he was completely alone. If he could not break his bonds he was going to die and he had spent all his remaining energy trying to escape. Alun had done his job well, what exposure would begin, thirst and starvation would inevitably finish off. Then Jonath would end up as food for the first predator who happened in his direction. It was a thought that had the old bandit seething as he pulled at his bindings. Vengeance was the only thought worth considering, and it gnawed at his thoughts even as he slumped back onto the cold earth.

Exhausted by his attempts to free himself Jonath resigned himself to his doom, and in the process swore upon the memory of his ancestors that if he got free he would find Braddick Alun and kill him. It was a thought that had sustained him through the days of his torment. If he ever got free nothing was going to keep him from his revenge. Nothing.

It was shortly after midday of the second day that the apparition appeared before him. At first he laughed, somewhere within his delirium he could feel himself losing touch with the world about him, and when the Dwarvendim had suddenly appeared at his side he knew it could not be real. Then his bonds had been cut and suddenly his thoughts focused as stiff, aching joints were moved for the first time, sending jolts of pain knifing their way up his nerves. Squinting in the brightness of the day he could do little but sit and stare blankly at the stranger.

The Dwarvendim meanwhile, made himself busy with a pack that had been left within the depression.

"My friend," he said quietly. "It would appear that your friends have left you a present for the afterlife." Rummaging inside he found food and a water bottle. Jonath recognised the canteen as his own and drank a good half of it before his voice returned to him.

"It'd be just like those ingrates to leave my food behind." He said hoarsely. The old bandit searched the pack's contents and sat back

shaking his head. "Just their style, leave a man dyin' on the plains and leave his food where he can smell it! Well I'll have the last laugh you wait and see!"

For a moment Jonath tried to recover his composure. The strange smells he had experienced had not been his imagination after all. There was a chance he had not been going crazy and he was relieved about that. With one hand he brushed back his long red hair and patted out his beard. It had been a long time since he had treated himself to a haircut.

The Dwarvendim sat a few metres away from Jonath upon the lip of the depression. He studied the bandit carefully, weighing up whether the old man had been driven mad by his exposure to the elements. He was powerfully built, not unusual for the Dwarvendim, but this man was almost intimidating in his obvious strength. Jonath could see that he held his hand lightly upon the pommel of a sword. And that was indeed a strange thing. The Dwarvendim carried a weapon and rode a horse of such breeding that it could not help but bring him under notice. The Dwarvendim were forbidden from such things and it gave Jonath reason to wonder what he was doing on the plains. There was obviously more to this man than was at first apparent.

It was the stranger who spoke first.

"Who are you?" It was a simple question and in the flush of freedom Jonath Mac forgot for a moment the reason, and the perpetrator, of his captivity.

"Me? Why I's Jonath Mac, comrade in banditry to the greatest of 'em all, Braddick Alun." It was only a momentary lapse, one which brought with it a great sense of betrayal. Jonath could feel his shoulders slump as he remembered what had happened to him.

"Well, at least I was until we had a little fallin' out and I ended up here, staked out like a hide drying in the sun, waitin' for the crows to pick me eyeballs out. Shows ya doesn't it, ya just can't trust some people."

The old bandit looked at the traveller and knew he had a question or two of his own. The Dwarvendim stood well armed, in possession of a horse more valuable than most people's homes, and wore a metal collar at his neck of a type he had only seen once before, and that had been on a corpse. Jonath spoke in a direct if somewhat colloquial manner, but he always made an impression.

"Your'e a stone-eater ain't ya. What the hell you doin' in these parts anyway? Don't ya know that the law'll have ya if they gets their

filthy hands on ya?"

Jonath's reference to the man as a stone-eater brought a red flush to the Dwarvendim's face but he seemed to control his desire to box the old man's ears, and instead smiled at Jonath and helped him with his pack instead.

"Don't you worry about why I'm here, I just want to know where your friends might be. I would like to avoid them if I can."

That made Jonath laugh. One thing a good bandit never did was hang about the scene of a crime for too long.

"Don't worry 'bout them, by now they'll be in Das Nephrim living the high life an' laughin' about what they've done to old Jonath, but I'll tell ya one thing for free." The old bandit leaned close towards the Traveller and spoke low in his ear.

"You don't fool me, that sword 'n horse ain't the property of no stone eater, an' that collar ain't for show neither. I'll bet ya that horse for an apple that you're on some mission for our glorious Lords 'n Masters eh?"

It was then that Jonath came to appreciate the real danger the Traveller was venturing towards. He kept looking to the west and the imposing peaks of the Krodestaag, and the old bandit could see that those forbidding mountains were his destination. As he considered the man who had saved his life he took a piece of dried meat from his pack and began to eat. The taste of food upon his lips was like a revelation and he pushed the whole piece into his mouth. It was too big to eat easily so he lost a part of it as he spoke again with his new-found friend.

"Don't worry, your secret's safe with me. Hell, I'd be dead meat if you hadn't happen'd along when ya did."

This was a debt that meant a lot to Jonath and he decided to begin repaying it with a small bit of advice

"The other thing I'll tell ya for free is that you'd better think twice about makin' for them mountains. I've seen the way you've been lookin' o'er that way and I tell ya it's crawlin' with critters, an' they don't like nobody snoopin' about. If I was you I'd stay well clear and go back home."

The Traveller smiled and thanked Jonath for his concern. There was a hardness to the Dwarvendim that told Jonath he was indeed on a mission, one that could not be delayed nor avoided. No matter the hardship he was going to the mountains, and nothing Jonath might say would dissuade him.

For a short time the two men spoke of the news of the world. The old bandit had been completely unaware of the siege at Maenum or the war building upon its frontier. He took in all the information and considered the possible money-making opportunities that such events might provide, but the Dwarvendim could only linger for a short time. Once he had assured himself that Jonath had enough food for the journey to the nearest town he called his horse to him and set off at a gallop to the west. Jonath did not know how, but he sensed he would see this man again, and as the Dwarvendim rode away he realised he had not even asked his name. He did know however, that the horse's name was Pallenten.

An Unlocked Door

With the mysterious traveller gone, Jonath Mac turned eastwards and considered his own future. Common-sense told him that he should rest and recover from his ordeal, but there was a burning hatred smouldering within him, one that needed release. In his mind he knew that Braddick Alun would not be an easy target, but the bandit believed Jonath to be dead, or at least in the process of dying. Surprise would be his if he could get to Das Nephrim quickly. Alun would not be on his guard, and an old man walking the streets of the city would seem neither remarkable nor dangerous.

To get to Das Nephrim quickly would prove quite a trick though. Standing alone upon the grasslands it seemed an impossible task. There were however, ways a man such as Jonath Mac might find swift transportation. Within the bogs and meres of the Faerron Marshes could be found many camps and hiding places, refuges used by the bandit gangs that roamed the surrounding plains. One in particular had been used regularly, and a skilled thief might easily take a horse in the night if one were needed. For Jonath Mac this would be the beginning of a process of revenge that would leave Alun dead, and his debt to the bandit leader repaid in full.

To reach the Faerron would take the better part of the day. It lay in the south but once crossed would give Jonath a straight journey to Das Nephrim, and the haunts where one usually found thugs like Braddick Alun. For a moment he stood quietly, listening to the sounds of the breeze, and the frenetic chirping of birds as they fought over a few scraps of discarded bread. He was free, and now there was only one course in his life, one purpose to his existence. He would see Braddick Alun dead, and only when that was done would he rest again. With pack in hand he began his journey.

He had walked no more than twenty paces however, when he found his coat upon the ground, crumpled in the grasses as if thrown away. Quickly he went to pick it up, but in doing so misjudged the effects his exposure to the elements had wrought upon him. As he bent down his head swam, a nauseating dizziness overwhelming him as he tried to regain his senses. In a faint he fell, and all about him went dark.

He awoke some hours later to the uncomfortable sensation of raindrops slapping against his face. It took a moment for him to clear his head and realise that it was night, the plains about him shrouded in darkness. Above him the sky lay veiled behind an overcast of rushing cloud, pushed by a chilling bluster that clawed at his damp

clothes and ruffled the long grasses around him. Carefully he tried to regain his feet but found them weak and unstable. Better he thought, that he should sit quietly for a moment and try and work out where he was. In the absolute dark of night he battled to regain his sense of direction and it was only when a flash of lightning to his right lit up the plains that he had any clue to which way he needed to go. Looking around he found his coat and pack close at hand, the contents of the pack luckily unaffected by the steady rain.

"Well Jonath," he mumbled grimly to himself. "You're in a pretty pickle an' no mistake. If you don't get dry soon you're gunna be in a sad state."

Again he tried to get off the damp ground and this time found himself better able to move. With stiff and aching joints he started off, heading slowly southwards. About him the rain grew stronger, veils of water falling in rushing waves, propelled by the steadily strengthening wind. Without adequate clothing the old bandit knew the chill alone would be enough to bring him down, but caught in the rain it would not be long before he would fall to the cold-sickness, and inevitably succumb to the elements as surely as if he were still staked upon the plain.

Looking about he could see little, the night veiled by the downpour. He needed to find shelter from the rain, and more importantly, the gathering storm that he could see flashing in the darkness to the north. Such storms were not to be treated lightly. Long experience had taught him that if he were caught out in the open when it hit there was a good chance it would kill him.

For the best part of an hour Jonath hobbled his way southwards. The Faerron lay somewhere before him, his plan to find its northern edge then follow the borders of the marshes until he found the Maiden Tree. There lay the marker that would direct him to a trail that led directly to the Bandit's Row, the old highway that cut through the marshes. In the rain and wind he struggled onwards. Without proper protection the cold had found its way inside his wet clothing and he could feel its effects numbing his hands and feet, weakening his legs and sending shivers of cold through his back and shoulders. He needed to find shelter quickly and warmth all the quicker.

Suddenly the night's deep shadows were cut by a huge blast of lightning that erupted upon the grasslands behind him. In its harsh light Jonath caught the ragged outline of a peaked roof to his left. Changing direction he struggled against the rain, sloshing through

ever widening pools of water towards what he hoped would be a refuge from the approaching storm. About him the lightning grew more frequent and more aggressive, and with each frightening detonation thunder crashed about his ears, solid shockwaves of sound that flowed through the air about him like ripples on a pond. He could tell that the tempest was almost upon him and the shelter ahead would be his last chance before it hit. In the rip and tear of the storm Jonath desperately sort the elusive refuge, and then, just when he was about to give up hope he found it, a trapper's cabin nestled between two rises in the ground.

At a run the old bandit made for the cabin. With legs aching and chest heaving he crossed the last piece of ground that separated him from safety. Then he saw the light flickering dully through its only glazed window and came to a jarring halt. Somebody was inside. Quickly he considered what he should do. He could not stay outside and the question of whether he might be welcome was something he could not afford to concern himself with. By force or otherwise Jonath had to find shelter, and whomever had found refuge within would be having a visitor for the night whether they liked it or not.

With the rain hammering against the shingled roof of the hut Jonath crept up against its slick walls and made his way to the door. It was of simple construction and to his surprise appeared to be unlocked. A careful turn of its latch confirmed that the occupant had made a serious error. Jonath cracked the door and furtively surveyed the single room that formed its interior. In the light of a single, flickering candle he could see that the cabin had been deserted for a long time but someone was indeed using it as a shelter for the night. In a sleeping bag the old bandit could discern the form of a man asleep, his body facing away from the door.

At the threshold Jonath pulled a long piece of wood from a pile of dry tinder and crept into the hut. He was in no mood for conversation nor in any state for a fight, he needed to dry out and this traveller stood in his way. If necessary he was prepared to do anything to survive. In the clamour of the approaching storm he crept up to the sleeping form and raised the length of wood above his head. It was only then that he saw the shadow loom up behind him, and felt the sting of a dagger blade pressing coldly between his shoulder blades.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you. That's a very expensive sleeping bag and I don't want to have to replace it." The voice issued coolly from behind, its implication too direct for Jonath Mac to ignore.

Again the voice spoke out of the gloom. "My friend, we can do this easy or we can do it bloody. Put the wood down and turn slowly with your hands raised. Make any quick movement and you'll see the point of this blade sticking through the front of your chest."

Jonath had no choice but to comply. In the confines of the hut he was trapped and well caught. Slowly he lowered the length of wood to the floor and then turned to face his captor. In the dim illumination of the candle he could see little except the end of the blade glinting feebly a few centimetres from his throat, and the vague shape of a hooded man holding it. The dagger held perfectly still, its owner ready to drive it home at the first hint of treachery. For a moment the two adversaries remained still, each weighing up the other as the man considered what he might do with this elderly would-be executioner. It was Jonath who spoke first.

"You know, I'm gunna catch me death if I don't get out of these clothes. Kill me if you must, but if you ain't then let me build a fire before I freeze."

The hooded man lowered his dagger and pulled back his cloak to expose his face. He was grinning from ear to ear and was obviously trying to restrain himself from laughing.

"I swear Jonath, if I live until the suns grow cold I will remember the look on your face. By the Fates its good to see you. I thought you'd be well dead by now!"

For a moment Jonath stood stunned by the change of events. Then recognition dawned upon him and he realised he had been bailed up by one of his most trusted friends. It was Camren Patrice.

"Camren?" was all Jonath could say. He was simply too stunned to speak.

"Yes its me Jonath. You were making so much noise out there I couldn't help but hear you. You can imagine my surprise when some bedraggled rodent creeps into my home and tries to lay a piece of wet wood across my skull. You might imagine my greater surprise when I find that rodent is one of my oldest friends!"

The old bandit shook his head and looked earnestly at his friend. "I had no idea it were you. All I saw was a dry place for the night. By the Fates I could've killed you!"

Camren Patrice appreciated the genuine concern in his friend's words but he had been a bandit for a long time and understood the ways of thieves and cut-throats. He would have done exactly the same thing himself under the same circumstances.

"Well, lets not dwell on it eh? You're going to need dry clothes and a bit of food in you before you'll be fit for conversation."

With that Camren Patrice went to work. Jonath watched his friend as he busied himself about a fire pit. The Kalborean stood tall and thin, his physique that of a man who had spent his life living rough upon the plains. The old bandit had no doubt as to the man's strength however. He had seen Camren lift a man bodily from the ground in a fight over stolen goods, and he had built a reputation amongst the northern gangs as someone not to be trifled with. It was a curious thing though, Jonath had known him for years and in that time had seen a man capable of daring thefts and then unusual kindness. Behind the long, dark hair and roughly-cropped beard there were secrets that Jonath had been unable to uncover. He was indeed a mystery, his origins unknown even to his friends. It seemed to Jonath that it was a situation his friend had become very comfortable with.

Carefully Camren built a fire in the centre of the hut and helped Jonath out of his clothes. Whilst they were drying he gave the old bandit a blanket to wrap himself in, and then proceeded to hang Jonath's clothing from the timbers in the roof above. Patrice seemed to have an ample supply of food and as the storm thundered outside he prepared a meal for them both.

Jonath sat dumbly as his friend went about his business. He had asked for none of this and it came as a real shock that someone should show him a kindness of any type. But then Camren was a strange one. He was neither a rogue nor a thug but he chose to ply a lonely trade as a solitary bandit on the plains. Jonath had his suspicions that his friend might be hiding from the authorities, and that life as a criminal might be preferable to the consequences if he were ever caught. On this Camren never talked and Jonath was not one to stick his nose in where it might easily be cut off.

It was only when Jonath had a hot meal before him, and his bones were finally beginning to thaw beneath the rough weave of his blanket, that Camren Patrice sat and began to talk.

"It is a rough night you have chosen for a walk my friend. What finds you out here, and with such a willingness to do harm?" He looked intently at his friend huddled beneath the blanket and considered how frail he looked. It was hard to believe that the old man could have been intent on killing anyone.

Jonath did not waste any time. In between gulps of hot stew he recounted his adventures of the past days; his betrayal at the hands of

Braddick Alun and his time staked upon the plains. The arrival of the strange traveller was one part of the story that Camren took particular interest in.

"By the Fates Jonath, you were damn lucky to save your hide that time. Did the Dwarvendim give you a name?"

Jonath had to swallow a large piece of meat before he could answer.

"None. But he did call his horse Pallenten. I mean, who ever 'eard of a horse with a name like that? What's more interestin' is what the stone-eater was doin' in the first place. Took off like the 'ole Kalborean Army was on his tail, straight for the Krodestaag. An I'll tell yer that ain't no place to be this time o' year."

Camren Patrice sat back and considered the old Bandit's words. Here was a mystery worth delving. The Dwarvendim had been in servitude for a century, their movements tightly controlled by the Kalborean administration. For the traveller to be so well equipped could only mean that something big was going on, something that had the approval of the frontier authorities. For a moment he considered whether he might not track this Dwarvendim and see whether there might be any profit in it for him. Jonath could see the look on Patrice's face and understood well what it meant.

"Camren, you are a good friend but leave the Dwarvendim alone. He saved me life and showed care where it was not asked for. Leave 'im be. I've got bigger fish to fry and you might just be interested in a piece of the action."

The look on Camren's face showed he would not be happy to let the Dwarvendim go, but with the storm building outside their small refuge there was not much that he could do about it anyway. Jonath's offer of possible profit was a completely different matter however.

"Alright, if you want the Dwarvendim to have immunity then I will acquiesce, but you had better have a more lucrative offer to put on the table." Patrice gave Jonath a look that underlined the need for the old bandit to come up with something good very quickly. Jonath knew the language of the plains, the only thing that talked was money.

"Camren my friend, I have a debt to settle. That vulture Alun left me on the plains to rot and I don't forget such a slight easily. There's a debt to be repaid and if yer interested there'll be silver coin in it for anyone who might be obliged to help. I need someone, lets say a well respected member of th' fraternity such as yerself, to go ahead into Nephrim and find out where Alun might be layin' his head. Any

information would lead to rich rewards and an old bandits undyin' gratitude."

Patrice smiled at the last words Jonath had uttered, for no more than twenty minutes before he had a dagger resting against the old bandit's backbone. He felt Jonath should already have developed an undying gratitude for not having that blade pushed through his chest. Still, the money would be welcome and it was easy work, the type Patrice liked best. Only one point needed to be resolved.

"How much and when do I get it?"

Jonath began to speak but as he opened his mouth an enormous blast of lightning crashed down close to the small hut. Instantly a vibrating roll of thunder swept along the plain and hit the wooden sides of the shelter like a hammer blow. Both men instinctively raised their arms to protect their eyes from the harsh light and winced in unison as the thunder cracked and buffeted the cabin.

"This is going to be no ordinary storm Jonath. I've been watching it grow in the north all afternoon and there is a power within it that I have not felt before. We've both seen enough of these tempests to know how they develop and this one just doesn't feel right."

With that another huge blast of lightning wracked the unprotected plains. Camren Patrice jumped to his feet, alarm in his eyes as he peered carefully through the only window in the shelter. It faced north and gave a good view of the approaching tempest even though the gloom of night wrapped everything in a cloak of darkness. In the light of another arc of lightning Camren stepped back aghast.

"By the Fates, Jonath come look at this and tell me I'm not going insane!"

Jonath jumped to his feet and rushed to the window. At first he could see nothing, rain and the shades of night obscuring everything from view; but then, as the storm raged and the cabin groaned and stressed in the powerful winds, he began to see the strangest of things. Unbelieving he wiped his eyes and squinted, trying to focus on the brief instances when lightning illuminated the plains outside. There was something out there. Neither man nor beast but definitely something.

"What is it?" Jonath whispered. Camren Patrice crowded next to him and both stared intently through the fragile glass. In the driving rain and intense energy of the storm both men saw the same thing. Shapes, both vague and then solid, dancing in the whip and tear of the gales, rejoicing in its violence and exuding a terrible malevolence that

both men felt as a cold shiver against their spines. Their presence grew upon the two bandits as a palpable sensation of unbridled malice, one that left them in no doubt that given the opportunity the phantoms would surely rend the life from anything that stood in their way. It was a feeling both men felt keenly and for Jonath it was almost too much to bear. Camren saw his friend's discomfort and motioned for him to withdraw to the warmth of the fire. Camren however, could not withdraw.

He considered himself an educated man and in his life he had never heard or read of such apparitions. In the power of the storm the phantoms danced and swirled, their mist-like forms tearing apart in the winds then reforming in grotesque eddies of shadow and concentrated hate. Almost immediately however, he realised that the spectral creatures were somehow tied to the storm, existing only within the raging power of the tempest's core, and just as the storm had brought them within reach of the cabin, so the storm would carry them slowly away into the south.

For all their malevolence however, Camren found that he could not turn his gaze from them. There was something about the creatures that at first glance seemed wholly unnatural, but as he studied their ethereal dance he came to realise that they were not something new, they were in fact something primordial. It became clearer as he followed their chaotic dance across the grasslands that these creatures lived within the storms, drawing their life-force from the energy they generated and fated to fade as quickly as the storms themselves. He knew without doubt that he should not be able to see them yet he could, and that worried him greatly.

Peering into the light and dark of the storm he wondered why it was that this particular tempest felt so unnatural and then it came to him. It was not the creatures that were turning the world askew it was the world itself, still turning upon its axis but shifting uneasily. For whatever reason the world hung upon the cusp of a great change and he could feel within the storm the imbalance that was driving it. Something big was about to happen and he had to admit to himself that he had no idea what it could be.

When the creatures had finally disappeared into the night Camren stood at the window for a short time longer then found a place for himself by the fire. Jonath handed him a plate of food as he settled.

"Are they gone?" he asked.

"Yes they are gone and I am thankful for it. Let us hope we never

encounter their kind again."

While the trailing edges of the storm lasted the two men waited, keeping close to the warmth of the fire as the remaining power of its receding squalls expended themselves upon the grasslands. The cabin withstood the relentless assault but only barely. Each bluster and twist in the wind tore at the roof and walls of their refuge, testing its structure and threatening to pull it upwards into the maelstrom. The Fates however, had other plans for the two bandits and the cabin withstood the storm's raging energy. By the early hours of the morning the storm had moved on and in the ensuing calm the men prepared for rest.

All talk of Alun and the plans of Jonath Mac ended as the two men found sleep a more comforting option, but neither could settle quickly. The storms upon the frontier were bad enough, as frequent as the sunrise and as deadly as any beast, but the phantoms left an anxiety in their hearts that could not easily be reconciled. Sleep embraced them both reluctantly.

The Maiden Tree

When Jonath Mac awoke he found the smell of frying sausages filling the limited confines of the cabin. It took him a moment to register exactly where he was, the familiar sounds of cooking directing his gaze to the centre of the cabin. There he found Camren hunched over the fire pit, busy with food and plates as he prepared a quick breakfast. As Jonath roused Camren turned and smiled.

"Well there you go. Just about to eat and the old folk finally decide to rise from their beds."

Jonath couldn't see the humour in the jibe but the smell of cooked food gave him reason to let it pass.

"Joke if you like Camren, but we'll see how you feel first thing in the mornin' if you're lucky enough to rack up as many years as meself."

With that he threw off the blankets that covered him and quickly got dressed. His clothes were dry and after the discomforts of the past days felt like a balm upon his skin. The food however, smelt much better and it took little time for him to find a plate and sit down to eat. Breakfast consisted of fried sausages, eggs and a portion of red sauce, something the old bandit had a particular affection for. It was a meal he could not have thought possible even a day before and in the chill of the morning it steamed vigorously, sending tantalising odours swirling about his face. It was certainly enough to keep him very quiet for the duration of the meal.

As he ate he surveyed the plains outside the open door of the hut and pondered the aftermath of the storm. Jonath was not surprised that everything lay saturated with water. Wide pools spread over the grasslands like shallow lakes, the earth soaked and muddied in the consequence of the deluge. The sky still moved as a grey overcast, but he knew both the cloud and the water would disappear quick enough. In these parts everything tended to flow rapidly into the marshes to the south, and all that had been dumped upon the plains during the night would find its way quickly into those wetlands by midday.

The sausages were good and Jonath had an appetite to match so breakfast did not take long. As Patrice packed his equipment and bedroll Jonath had one more look at the wet grasslands then turned to his friend.

"I was serious y' know. I have a debt that must be settled an' the money is available to make it well worth your while. All I need is for someone to go ahead and find out where Alun might be hangin' his hat. The rest'll be up to meself."

Camren Patrice looked at his friend and considered the offer. "How much are we talking about here? Your idea of worthwhile might be quite different from my own."

Jonath hadn't really thought about how much he might be prepared to part with, but decided that if it took everything he had, he'd use it. Including Patrice in his plan had only come to him overnight. Up until meeting his friend he had fully expected to do the job himself. Including a talented bandit such as Camren Patrice in his nasty little vendetta would ensure Alun's death and any money spent would be capital well invested.

"One hundred silver pieces when we get to Das Nephrim. Another fifty when he's dead. It's easy money and no one'll know you had anything to do with it."

"Two hundred silver pieces up front and we've got a deal." Camren put out his hand and Jonath hesitated for a moment, but he needed his friend and saw no reason to scrimp. There was one other thing however, that needed to be said.

"Camren, there is no doubt you is a bigger man than me, but on this little journey I'm the boss. Alun is my game and you'll have to take my lead while we is playin'. On this we must agree."

Patrice smiled and nodded. He had no intention of getting in the way of Jonath Mac.

"In that case." said Jonath, "we've got a deal."

They both shook hands and then readied themselves for the journey ahead. Jonath had nothing but the clothes he wore and the meagre possessions still in his pack. Patrice however, had an extra all-weather cloak that he could use and readily gave it over. Anything else Jonath needed could be acquired along the way.

As they organised their equipment both men discussed how they might make it quickly to Das Nephrim. It became immediately apparent to Patrice that on this matter Jonath had already decided. In his plan the Bandit's Row would be their first leg. For Camren Patrice that was not a reasonable option as he had always avoided the dark marshes if he could, but Jonath assured him that he knew a safer way, and that it would save them considerable time on their trip. There they could also find horses and additional supplies at one of the bandit camps that he knew existed within the borders of the Faerron. Once through the marshes, Das Nephrim would be an easy day's travel to the south-east. There they would find Alun's gang, and if they were lucky catch him off guard.

When all Patrice's gear had been packed and then equitably distributed between the two bandits they set off southwards towards the borders of the Faerron. The morning proved cold and damp, the wind an icy bluster that swirled mercilessly through Jonath's clothes, forcing him to pull his cloak close about him. As they walked the two men talked of the events of the past days, most of which came as surprising news to Jonath. Camren Patrice had heard a second-hand account of the battle at Maenum and had seen for himself a number of *crues* of Hresh warriors moving with purpose towards the western mountains. Such creatures he had learned to give a wide berth and had decided long ago that they should be left to the Rangers that patrolled the mountains to the north. Jonath of course, had a number of theories about the Hordim and Camren soon discovered that the old bandit had a strongly held opinion on almost everything.

Ahead the grasslands lay as an alternating patchwork of grass and water, of shallow lakes and small rises. The two bandits took no account of the pools that lay before them, sloshing through the water as they walked directly southwards. If Jonath's directions were correct they would meet the edges of the Faerron and then follow its damp border eastwards until they found the Maiden Tree. That old, grey remnant of a once mighty Oak stood as the only stable point of reference that could still be used to find the beginnings of the Bandit's Row. The borders of the Faerron ebbed and flowed with the seasons, and only the stark remains of the tree pointed directly to the old road that still survived within its murky wetlands.

Regardless of Jonath's obvious optimism Camren could not see how it might be an easier road. In his mind such a path lay filled with danger, and under other circumstances he would have voiced his concerns. It was however, Jonath's "game" as he had put it and he decided that, for the time being at least, he would play along.

"What exactly do you intend to do to Alun when you find him?" Camren asked as they walked southwards.

It was a good question, and one that gave Jonath reason to pause and think for a moment. He had been busy planning and scheming, but had given little thought to how his revenge might ultimately be extracted. In the end he decided that Alun's fate would rely greatly on what might be available at the time to do the job. Of only one thing was he sure, it was not going to be quick or painless.

As the long grasses rippled in the breeze the two friends trudged on. They talked most of the time, their conversation turning to

recounting old tales or speculating upon easy jobs to come. As bandits their only real concerns lay with survival on the plains, the probabilities of their next big score, and the constant need to avoid the mounted soldiery that regularly patrolled the northern reaches of Kalborea. On these points their conversation centred most, and in the clean morning air it passed the time as they travelled towards the waiting marshlands.

Ahead of them the plains lay as a broad spread of undulating ground, covered in thick grasses and punctuated only infrequently by tall upthrusts of grey stone. Through this verdant landscape the men walked and talked, fleeting appearances of sunlight illuminating a wild vista that spread for great distances to all points of the compass about them. It was sometimes easy, thought Camren, to forget the hazards that lurked even upon such benign ground, but both bandits appreciated what happened to men who ignored those dangers and remained alert, their eyes constantly scanning their surroundings, watching everything that moved.

By mid-morning they arrived at the borders of the Faerron. Upon the horizon it grew as a dark line, one that quickly expanded into an intimidating green wall that reached to the west and east as far as the eye could see. Jonath came to a halt and surveyed the thick line of vegetation that marked the edges of the wetland. It stood dark and foreboding before them and as the old bandit considered his next move he realised the marshes had grown even further since he had last used the Bandit's Row. If he was right the edge of the wetlands stood a good kilometre further north than he had remembered them. How this might affect his use of the Maiden Tree was something he did not want to acknowledge as a problem so he said nothing. He was set to his course, and in his haste to see an end to Braddick Alun could fathom no other way forward.

For Jonath the marshes had served on many occasions as a place of refuge, but he could also concede it was dangerous terrain for the unwary. There had always been an underlying sense of malice lurking within its borders, and for Camren Patrice the Marshes were a place worth avoiding. As the younger bandit stood there he was sure he could feel it watching him, hoping he might enter.

"I don't like it Jonath, the Marshes grow with each passing year and the usable sections of the Row wither as it expands. Might it not be better that we head for Miller's Crossing and book passage south instead?"

Jonath was set on his course and his friend's ill-feelings were not going to change it. "If we are to catch Alun off-guard we're gonna have to get to his ol' stompin' grounds quicker'n him. It'll take too long otherwise. Fear not Camren, the Marshes are my turf, no-one knows 'em better'n me. We'll be outta there quicker than you think."

For a time the two bandits followed the borders of the Marshes eastwards. It was slow going, Jonath Mac becoming more unsure of his way to the Maiden Tree. The fringes of the wetlands had indeed expanded, some of the more obvious markers consumed by rising waters and an unfamiliar dome-shaped bush that had spread all along the Faerron's edges. Jonath hoped the Tree itself could not be so easily overwhelmed, and he looked anxiously for the tell-tale sign of its upraised twisted branches. He knew it was tall enough to find even if it was surrounded by the wetlands, and once found would give a clearer direction to the Bandit's Row.

A good hour of slogging through muddy ground found the two men at the base of a series of shallow hills. Each hill rose no more than fifteen metres above the plain but each effectively obscured the way forward. For Bandits alone on the grasslands such hills required care. Cresting one of them was no great effort but the small summits exposed the traveller to immediate detection over a wide radius. It was a careless man indeed who blithely walked such hills without first checking what might be waiting upon the other side.

Camren Patrice took the lead as they carefully made their way to the first crest. Crouching low Patrice went through a process he had done a thousand times before. A wide survey of all four directions from just below the crest of the hill was his first task, searching out any mounted patrols or worse, other bandit gangs on the move. Too many times he had almost been discovered by Kalborean scouts sheltering within the saddles of two such hills and it had taught him to treat each with caution. He knew the one time he grew lax would be the time he would die. Bandits were given no opportunity for mercy in these wild lands.

At the first rise he found nothing, the four horizons clear of any obvious danger. He did however, find the fingers of a long dead tree reaching over the crest of the hill ahead. Jonath's tree must be just beyond the second rise. It was as he turned to motion the old man up the slope that he heard the first indication of trouble, a slight snuffling sound carried on the breeze. It was not much, just the familiar sound you would expect from a horse at rest, eating or arguing with another

of its kind, but it was enough for Camren Patrice. Turning on his heel he slid down the slope back to where Jonath lay waiting.

"There's something ahead, just beyond the second rise. If its Scouts then we'd better keep to the fringes of the Marshes." With that he motioned Jonath to follow him.

Carefully Patrice moved towards the southern edge of the hills, keeping close to the boggy edge of the Faerron. Luckily there was plenty of undergrowth to move through, the large dome-like plants growing along the wetland's edge providing all the cover they needed to get closer to the Maiden Tree. Ankle deep in marsh water they crept through the tangle of branches and mud, their progress masked by the ragged bluster of the wind as it blew from the north. What they found as they peered from the undergrowth chilled their blood.

Upon one of the lower branches of the Tree swung the body of a man. His tattered rags gave little clue to who he might be, but Jonath gave voice to the possibility that it might be Alun.

"What do ya reckon that this poor sod might be Alun?" Jonath had an edge of expectation in his voice, a hope that swift justice might have already been performed. Camren Patrice just looked at him, "Do you really want this to be him? Surely retribution is far sweeter when dealt from one's own hand?"

Jonath shrugged. He was pragmatic enough to recognise that if the Scouts had got to Alun first there was little he could do about it. Experience had taught him that revenge had to be accepted in whatever form the Fates dispensed it. There was however, more to this brutal tableau. From beneath the low branches of one of the dome-bushes the old bandit surveyed the gruesome scene before him. It proved quickly to be more than just a man alone, dangling from the Maiden Tree. The ground about the tree had been churned up by a large number of iron-shod horses. Hoof prints littered the soft soil and upon the northern edge of the depression a single horse stood eating grass, its tethers tied to a wooden peg pushed into the damp earth.

Patrice nudged Jonath's shoulder and pointed towards a shallow hill to the north. Upon its rise sat one lone Kalborean Scout, dressed completely in black, a crossbow by his side. He appeared to be eating, and between mouthfuls of bread, watching the area surrounding the Tree.

Jonath squinted through the undergrowth and frowned. "Now why would he be 'ere on his lonesome?"

Patrice had only one thought, "His comrades appear to have gone, but that could be a deception. The horse marks surrounding the Tree tell a tale of many horses having been here for some time. Probably up to twenty, I think. That is a large force of Scouts to be out and about without purpose."

Jonath agreed, "Aye, its a lot of Troopers for a quiet ride in the countryside. What's their game, I wonder. That poor sod there ain't worth that sort of effort."

Patrice studied the Kalborean for a time longer then retreated further into the Marshes. There he put down some food upon a dry table of rock and considered Jonath's question as he ate.

"I would say that they are definitely after the remnants of Alun's gang. Having ambushed them at the supply train they must have decided to pursue him as far as it takes to finish him off. Alun obviously had similar ideas to your own, making for the Bandit's Row."

The old bandit grunted, and took a piece of cheese from Patrice's meal. He realised he wasn't disposed to sharing his revenge with anybody else after all.

"Well, what do we do now? Wait fer that black-robed devil to go or just strike out for the Row?"

Patrice shook his head, "You know as well as I that the only safe way to the Row must be taken directly from the Tree. Any other path will surely lead to a quick death in the bogs. I think we're just going to have to wait."

Together the two bandits ate and then returned to their position at the Marsh's edge. The Kalborean Scout remained at his post, standing upon the summit of the hill looking to all four points of the compass in what appeared to be a systematic search of the countryside surrounding the tree. Jonath and Camren waited quietly within the damp of the marshland until mid-morning when three further Scouts appeared from the east. Uniformed in the same dark cloaks the troopers rode over the crest of the hill, rushing into the small clearing about the Maiden Tree. A single call had the lone scout at the run, making for his horse and quickly untying its tethers. Neither Jonath nor Camren could discern what they were saying, any words spoken between the troopers lost to the constant rustle of the undergrowth about them. Those words however, had the scouts on the move, all riding with purpose to the north-east. In their wake the clearing seemed empty, bar for the increasing swing of the hanged man upon

the Maiden Tree.

For a while longer the two figures waited in the shadows, unsure as to whether this might be some type of deception. Jonath Mac could wait only so long.

"Bugger this Camren, I've gotta get out of this stinkhole."

With that he forced his way out of the undergrowth, stretching his back as he walked carefully up to the dangling figure that now swung in a wide arc upon the breeze. For his part Camren Patrice stayed put. If this did prove to be a trap he would much rather that Jonath sprung it alone. For a further five minutes he waited in the bushes before climbing out of the undergrowth. He found Jonath standing beneath the hanged man and deep in thought.

"He's one of Alun's alright, but he ain't the Man himself. Looks like they gave him a fair hidin' before stringin' him up."

Patrice considered the remains of the Bandit and had to agree. The body hung covered in bruises and welts, all evidence of a prolonged beating. To both of the men it was clear that the unfortunate had been tortured first, then strung up.

"The Scouts must have wanted information and I would say that they got it."

Jonath nodded. "Aye, there ain't many men who could stand such a beatin'. Whatever the troopers thought 'e had 'e must have given over."

Camren Patrice took hold of the dead man's boot and turned the body so that he could gain a better view of the side of the man's neck. Against the bruising he could see deep scratch marks in the bandit's skin.

"This man's hands haven't been tied. See the wounds about his neck. They strung him up and then watched as he fought to save himself from the noose. Bastards must have enjoyed the cruelty of it."

It was something the younger man had seen too many times and it was the reason why bandits had only two options when found by the patrols. There could only be escape or a fight to the death. Anything else led only to capture and the inevitable slow death that followed. Patrice saw in the blank eyes of the hung man the grim possibilities of his own fate and wondered, not for the first time, how he had been able to survive for so long in such a precarious profession.

This Bandit could not be their concern however. The man had made the one mistake that had led to his demise. He had allowed himself to be captured, and torture and death were the costs of that

mistake. It was unfortunately a scene oft encountered upon the frontier, with an outcome neither of the men could undo. In truth Camren was more interested in the Tree and what it pointed to.

The Maiden Tree stood as old as the habitation of Men in Arborell. Once it had been a mighty Oak, standing amongst its brethren and part of a larger forest that covered the plains from Das Nephrim in the south to the Rift Mountains in the North. A great sickness had spread amongst the Trees many centuries before and the consequence of that contagion had been the almost total destruction of the woodlands. Only small patches of old forest still remained, scattered as isolated stands and small woods upon the endless plains of the frontier.

The Maiden Tree however, had found a different fate. Named after its uncanny resemblance to a young woman stretching to the sky, it had survived the destruction and had thrived as a landmark used by travellers and bandits alike. In its middle age it had stood more than sixty metres high, its branches visible more than a half day's travel distant. When it had died, the Tree's outer branches had quickly broken down under the constant assault of the weather, but its trunk had remained intact, its recognisable form still reaching for the sky. Now it stood as a timeless reminder of the forest that had once held dominion here and a reliable pointer towards the Bandit's Row.

Camren Patrice watched as Jonath cut down the hapless man and laid him out on the ground. He did not think this was a good idea.

"You should leave him alone Jonath. If any of the Scouts come back and see him on the ground, they will know that someone has tended to him. It could lead to us ending up as dead as this sod here."

Jonath disagreed. "I'm only doin' what I'd want done for meself. Anyways, where we're going, they won't be following. The Marshes is no place for anybody who don't know what their doin' and they know that. I'm just going to lay him out then we'll be on our way."

Patrice watched as the old Bandit placed the dead man upon the damp turf. Carefully he crossed the body's arms and laid the man's head upon a clump of grass to keep it staring upwards to the sky. It was a simple ritual but it seemed to satisfy Jonath.

"There ya go. All done. Now we'd best be off."

Gathering up their equipment Jonath looked carefully at the tree's branches. The southernmost branch pointed directly into the Faerron and this was the way they would go. As long as they kept on a straight line between the tree and the direction of its branch then they had a direct, and safe, route to the old highway known as the Bandit's

Row. Jonath had used this hidden pointer to the Row before, Patrice had not. It would test them both before the day was over.

To the Bandit's Row

Without hesitation Jonath Mac dove into the undergrowth at the edge of the Marshes. Camren Patrice followed on, still unconvinced that the old bandit knew exactly what he was doing. Before them lay a vast waterlogged expanse, one that had been growing with every passing year, and one that had been rumoured to hide creatures of ancient malevolence. It was a thought that bothered Patrice greatly.

"How sure are you that the Tree still points to a safe passage? Does it not seem possible that the steady growth of the Faerron has altered its terrain? Could it not be that we may simply disappear within its meres, never to enjoy clean air again?"

Jonath listened to his friend, but he had no doubt as to what he was doing.

"I can see it's time to do some explainin'. Otherwise I can see that we is goin' to have a fallin' out."

They had gone no more than fifty metres into the marshes and already the waters had risen almost to their waists. It was higher than Jonath had remembered, but the water was not the real danger such a place kept for the unwary. He turned and looked back at the Tree, then pointed at its branches.

"The Faerron is more than just water Camren. To get across it you needs to understand the bogs and traps that it has set for the unwary. Look careful at the branches on the Tree. The trick to gettin' safe to the Row is to keep its remainin' two branches aligned so that you can't see the one behind. Every ten steps you gotta turn and make sure you're steppin only on that line. Be a few steps off the line and bad things can happen. There's mud here that'll fix a hold of your leg and suck you down to oblivion, meres and bogs that'll take a man without a sound bein' heard. The Tree points the way an' all you gotta do is follow it."

Patrice looked dubiously at the old man but motioned for him to move on. They were in the Marshes now and whether he liked it or not his life was in the hands of his friend. He just hoped the Bandit's Row would prove the easy passage southwards that Jonath believed it to be.

For the remainder of the morning the two men followed the diminishing form of the Maiden Tree and its weathered branches. It was a laborious task, Jonath constantly checking and rechecking their position as they forged through the thick muds and tangled undergrowth of the wetlands. Ahead of them lay the uninterrupted

lakes and bogs of the Faerron and Patrice could not ignore the doubts he had about such unknown terrain. It sat as a brooding, complex landscape before them, one which Jonath was navigating with only the help of an old tree. He resolved to keep his eyes and ears open to any sign of danger that Jonath might miss as he concentrated on negotiating the path ahead.

About them the wind blustered, its strength rustling the reeds and bushes that crowded the marshes. On its heaving breath the day turned quickly to shadows and chill. Clouds once again were being torn from their seats upon the distant mountains and flung as ragged cloth to the south. Patrice saw the worsening weather as the last ripple in a tide of uncertainty that now overtook him.

"How much longer Jonath? If we are caught in the open like this we will be nothing but crow food by morning."

Jonath Mac had a measure of faith in the directions he had used for most of his life and resented his friends uncertainty. Ahead they would soon meet a trail that would lead them out of the bogs and on to the Row. He did quietly have his own misgivings however. The water levels had increased by a significant margin and he had to admit that the going was much harder than it should have been.

"The water is deeper than I had expected Camren but the trail will only be a short distance ahead. When we reach it we'll find dryer earth, an' a path that'll take us direct to the Row. Mark me words, everythin' ll be sweet shortly."

Patrice just snorted and both men went back to the laborious process of making their way through the marshes. By midday however, Jonath proved as good as his word. Without falling foul of the Faerron they found one of the small paths that criss-crossed the wetlands. It was not much but it led straight to higher ground and a chance to dry off. Jonath was as triumphant as he was obnoxious about their success.

"There, I told ya old Jonath 'd see us right. This path 'll take us straight to the Row. By the Fates, Alun 'll get the surprise of his life when old Jonath turns up fer a piece of his hide."

Camren Patrice smiled but couldn't help but temper his friend's enthusiasm.

"Well, you haven't found him yet Jonath. Let's get on our way. The weather isn't looking promising and we'll need to find some shelter within the next few hours."

Jonath looked at the sky and saw the reason for Patrice's concern.

The wind had indeed heralded a change, and the dark line of cloud to the north had grown broader and deeper even as they followed the trail eastwards. He agreed with his companion that they would need to move quickly, and in doing so cover as much ground as they could before the storm reached them.

Together the two bandits followed the trail as it wound through the complicated patchwork that was the wetlands. Areas of low boggy ground lay interspersed between thickets of dark, tangled bushes and languid pools of stagnant water, but the trail cut a safe path through it all, taking the men closer to the Row and the safety of its firmer ground. Patrice remained unconvinced that coming this way might provide any easier a journey for the pair, but he had agreed to run this race the way Jonath wanted it, so he followed, ever alert for any sign of danger.

Within the hour they hit the Bandits Row. Beyond a dense thicket of the large dome-shaped bushes they struggled out of the marshes and onto the old Highway. Stepping out upon its hard surface the two men took a moment to consider what they had uncovered. Reaching from the south into the north the road stood almost four wagons wide, its surface a mixture of durgat and crushed rock, tinted towards a dark grey and edged on both sides by a low, knee-high border of moulded durgat. At regular intervals the roadway sported a series of tall markers, moulded in the same substance as the roadway and highlighting distances to towns Camren Patrice had never heard of. For just a moment the younger bandit looked at the nearest marker and realised he was standing on a ghost road, one that led only to the deserted towns of a past most had forgotten. The thought occurred to him that a person might lose their life on a road such as this and be just as forgotten as the landscape itself. It was a notion that troubled him but only for a moment.

The road however, was impressive nonetheless, and Patrice had to admit that the way forward did now appear somewhat easier. It was not something though, that he would admit openly to Jonath, and when he turned to ask what his next move might be he found the old man staring at the thick hedgerow that lined the road's edges. The same bushes had been encountered by the two men on their journey to the Row but here they had settled thickly against the highway's crumbling borders. This had the curious effect of blocking off any view of either side of the road, but in doing so clearly defined its path to the south and north. It was something new and Jonath did not look

happy as he surveyed this stark change to the old Highway. Patrice noticed the old bandit's change of heart.

"What's wrong Old Man? I would have thought that reaching the Row would have lightened even your sour demeanour."

Jonath was indeed unhappy and he didn't mind expressing it. "You know Camren, I'm surprised you've lasted as long as you 'ave. This ain't no good and that's a fact. The Row's always had stuff growin' at its edges but this takes the biscuit. If ever I've seen the perfect cover for an ambush then this's it. We're gunna have to go extra careful here."

To accentuate his words he pulled a small dagger from a pocket within his jacket and started off southwards. Camren Patrice took up the rearguard and kept a close eye on his companion. He had not given the old Bandit any weapon, nor had he much in the way of clothing when they had met. Yet he had come into possession of a weapon and for the life of him he could not work out where Jonath had got it. Patrice resolved to watch his friend all the closer.

As the storm gathered energy in the north, the two men moved purposefully southwards down the old highway. Three hundred years previously it had been a main road, linking the cities of the south with the Stone Kingdoms and the Faeyen to the West. At that time the Faerron had been just a small patch of wetlands further west towards the Krodestaag Ranges, but with the destruction of a large part of the northern forests it had grown quickly, submerging settlements and farms alike, and with its spread overwhelming large sections of the roadway. Abandoned to its fate the Great Northern Highway had fallen into obscurity until it had been found once again by the Bandit gangs. A large section of it lay within the confines of the Faerron and it had been used by the gangs to move quickly between the plains of the north and the more settled areas to the south. All you needed to know was how to use it. On this point Patrice had to admit that Jonath Mac had learned his craft well. Everything he had said had so far proven to be correct.

The Row ran before them as a green-edged trail for more than thirty kilometres, its path mostly straight, only a few bends veering it roughly south of south-east. Jonath quickly relaxed his need to check every second hedge for signs of ambush and the two men ran as far as they could before slowly reducing their gait back to that of a walk. It would take the remaining of the day and most of the next morning to reach the southern edge of the Faerron, but once they were out of the

marshes they would emerge only a day's ride from either Kal Mulmi or Das Nephrim.

By mid-afternoon both had decided it was time for some food. Camren Patrice quickly pulled some bread and cold meats from his pack and laid it out on the roadway. The winds were now growing much stronger, though the hedgerows sheltered them from the worst of it. Jonath studied the approaching storm as he ate, and shook his head slowly as he realised the power that was building within it.

"You know Camren, I have seen some big storms in my time but I ain't never seen stuff like this. We're gunna have ta get into shelter before that lot hits, an no mistake."

Patrice turned and surveyed the sky. He could not help but agree.

"I hope this plan of your includes a safe haven for the night. We are surely going to need it."

Jonath thought for a moment and looked down the Row to the south. "Considerin' that these old bones have had just about enough fer one day, I reckon the farmstead should do us fine. Should find it about...two kilometres further on."

He pointed down the road and pushed another large piece of bread into his mouth as he did so. Behind Patrice the wind veered in direction and the hedges thrashed about in the sudden gust. In a spray of dust and leaf litter, the wind grabbed at the two men, forcing them to pull their cloaks tighter about themselves. They both felt the deathly chill the bluster carried towards them and in its wake Patrice was the first to move.

"I think its time we get on our way Jonath. We can finish the rest of our meal indoors when we find that farmstead of yours. This wind blows with an edge that can only herald another great storm."

Jonath agreed and they quickly collected their equipment. Camren Patrice took most of the heavy gear, Jonath left to gather a few of the lighter articles and the food bag. As they were shouldering their packs another sound rose above the bluster of the wind. It was the clatter of galloping horses coming from somewhere to the south. Jonath heard it first and he leapt into the hedgerows, beckoning Camren Patrice to follow.

"Camren! If you value you life get off the road!"

Patrice did not hesitate. As he also threw himself into the bushes that lined the old highway, a squad of mounted Kalborean Rangers rounded a bend in the road some two hundred metres ahead. Dressed in black and red, they rode four abreast down the Row

towards the bandit's hiding place. Both Jonath and Patrice knew they were relatively safe as long as they kept beneath the low cover of the hedgerows, but they dragged themselves even further into the undergrowth just to be sure.

As they watched, the Rangers came closer. Jonath knew little of the Rangers, except that they patrolled the Rift Mountains to the north, keeping the Horde from the Four Nations. Patrice knew much more of them, and understood their absolute dedication to their duty. He wondered why so many might be using the Bandits Row and he wondered also why they were so far from their mountain territories. Then something else crossed Camren Patrice's mind.

"Jonath!", he whispered, "Where's the food bag?"

Jonath stared at his companion blankly, "I don't know. Don't you 'ave it?"

Patrice rolled his eyes and couldn't help himself, he slapped Jonath across the back of the head. "By the Fates Jonath, if these killers see that bag and come after us I'm going to slit your throat myself."

Before Jonath could protest the Rangers reached their position in the road. With a sigh of relief Patrice watched as the Riders passed, but luck was not to be theirs. As the last of the Rangers rode by he reined his horse to a halt and quickly dismounted. As the two bandits watched the black-clad soldier called to his compatriots, and as one they wheeled back to where he stood. He had seen the bag and was kneeling by it, inspecting its contents. Within moments another of the Rangers stood also by the first's side, looking at the fresh food in the bag and carefully surveying the area about their find.

Patrice grabbed Jonath's shoulder and pointed in the direction of the Marshes. The Rangers had identified the exact spot where they had eaten and would have little trouble following their trail right to where they now hid. They would have to go deeper into the Marshes if they were to survive.

Carefully the two men crawled backwards through the remainder of the hedgerow and down a damp slope into the wetlands. The Row was about two metres above the level of the Marshes and the slope took them into a morass of clinging roots and knee-deep waters. Through this tangle they backed up, keeping themselves out of sight of the Rangers as they searched the Hedgerow. When they were some thirty metres from the old highway they again took cover beneath one of the large dome-shaped bushes. They could go no farther. Behind them the wetlands fell off into a deep lake and the bush could be their

only cover.

Crouched in water up to their chests they waited. The wind blew damp and chilled and the dark waters of the Faerron were no warmer. Patrice knew they could last here only a short time before the cold itself would begin to take its toll upon them. Before that happened they would have to move to a drier position.

As the wind blustered through the hedgerows the two bandits watched as the Rangers continued their search. The hedgerows were thick but a few small breaks in their cover gave the two bandits enough of a view to see what was going on. For fifteen minutes the Rangers looked for the two men but the approach of the storm hastened the Rangers on. It was with some relief that Jonath and Patrice saw them leave. Starting off again at a canter, the mounted soldiers moved off and were soon lost upon the road to the north.

Neither man moved though. They could not see the Row properly from where they were and waited until they were sure the Rangers had indeed gone. When they did move from under the bushes they found themselves stiff and sore from the cold. Jonath felt the cold acutely in his old bones but it was Patrice who gave vent to his disquiet. He was not happy.

"We came but a hair's width from death then Jonath and I blame you." He pointed his finger at Jonath and then raised his palm to silence any dissent. "If we had been anywhere else within these Four Nations, the Rangers would have hunted us until they had our skins as trophies. Its just blind luck that they don't like the wetlands and that we're knee-deep in one at the moment. I swear Jonath, if you put me in danger like that again I will stake you out myself for the crows. Do you hear me?"

Jonath was not going to be cowered by Camren Patrice's vehemence.

"Bellyache if ya want Camren, but I'll 'ave no blame put on me. Its the Fates that throw the likes of them in front of honest folk such as ourselves. Just be thankin' luck that we did have somewhere ta hide and it didn't happen further along the road."

Camren drew his hand up as if he wanted to strike at Jonath but there was something in the old man's demeanour that stayed his hand. Or was it Jonath's reference to the two of them as being 'honest folk'.

"Honest folk?" he said, a smile creasing his face. "By the Fates Jonath you didn't really just say that did you?"

In reply the old bandit just shrugged his shoulders and began to pick up the scattered contents of the food bag left by the Rangers. "Think what ya like. It's of no mind to me if you got a low opinion of yerself"

Camren couldn't help himself. He laughed out loud and shook his head. "I swear Jonath I do not know how *you* have survived as long as you have."

Together the two recovered their equipment and looked then to the long reach of the Bandit's Row. Before them it extended to the south as a clear run through the surrounding wetlands, its borders a thick tangle of dome-bushes and reeds. Jonath knew the way and already had a plan.

"Some ways down the road is Alleston Homestead. It was a camp used by the Ballenrig Gang but there'll be no-one home now. Most of 'em were killed last summer on a job down near Kra'sal and few of 'em made it back. Should find stores an' maybe even a few trinkets, eh."

"And what of the remainder of the gang, Jonath. Should we not be worried about them?" asked Camren.

"Nah, Two of us should see 'em off. Big guy like you and smart operator like me, no problems I reckon."

Camren smiled again but left the decisions to Jonath. He had agreed to do so, and no matter how hard it might prove to exercise in practice he was going to keep his word.

"After you, Jonath."

A Danger in the Dark

Middy came and went as the two bandits moved carefully along the reach of the Bandits Row. In its heyday the highway had been an integral part of a vital and productive farming region. Known to the locals simply as the Highway the road had connected a dozen large settlements and numerous smaller farming communities to the cities and towns of Kalborea in the east and south, and the Dwarvendim Stone Kingdoms and the rich Faeyen Provinces to the west. Always a frontier region the Faerron had proven rich and productive, and for a short time had supported more than fifteen thousand souls. As a consequence of their hard work hundreds of farms, orchards, vineyards and market gardens had prospered in a region that quickly became a major source of produce for all of Northern Kalborea.

Then the marshes that bordered the western edges of those farming communities broke their borders and began to spread, overwhelming the hasty defences put in place by desperate farmers and the more substantial dykes, walls and drainage systems built by the Kalborean civil authorities. Where farms once flourished the Faerron Marshes gained mastery, expanding in a seeping and relentless tide of dark water that gave no ground, and which eventually forced the evacuation of the entire civilian population. For many years thereafter there had been attempts to farm the edges of the Marshes but all had ended in defeat, the water an ever-growing stain upon the vast northern plains.

Through the remnants of these lost communities the two bandits moved quickly. At all sides of the Row the Faerron spread in a patchwork of wetlands, intersected by the remains of high walls, earthen dykes and a spider's web of broken fences and decaying buildings. Most of those broken structures stood as lonely reminders of labours long lost to the marshes, their rotting timbers either submerged in the dark waters or hidden behind walls of the ubiquitous dome-shaped bushes.

Through this untidy landscape Camren moved at his friend's side, watching as the old bandit searched the edges of the wetland. He could see that Jonath was having trouble locating the path that would lead them to the homestead, and at his back the storm reached out for them, its foundation an ever darkening veil of rain and mist.

"Come Jonath," he urged softly. "The storm is almost upon us."

For his part Jonath was also worried. The thick hedgerows that now dominated the edges of the Row had altered the landscape of the

marshes as he had remembered them. In haste he searched the crumbling boundaries of the old highway, looking for the secret marker that indicated the direction of the narrow path that led to Alleston Homestead. It was no more than a deep crack in the hard surface of the roadway, easily missed if you did not know its import. In the fading light of the afternoon Jonath could not see the mark, and as he looked back at the encroaching storm there lay no doubt in his mind that they needed the shelter the abandoned farmhouse could provide.

“It must be here Camren. Look for a deep crack that that leads off to the left-hand side of the road.”

Patrice lengthened his gait, his eyes focused on the ground. There were many cracks.

“I swear Jonath, this road is a dog's breakfast of neglect. How do you expect to find one crack amongst all this road has to offer?”

Jonath shrugged his shoulders, and in the act of doing so saw what he was looking for. The crack was deep and the buckling of the road's surface had raised the southern edge higher than the rest of the roadway.

“Here!” he yelled triumphantly. “Follow me!”

Immediately the old bandit dove into the hedge of thick bushes that edged the road, forcing apart the branches that stood between him and the path he knew lay beyond. Camren followed, taking the trail his friend forged and hoping the homestead would indeed be the shelter Jonath believed it to be. What they found upon emerging from the bushes was a flat area of flooded ground almost half a kilometre square. At its centre lay a substantial rise of ground, standing as an island in the midst of the waters, and upon that dry ground there stood a series of buildings. At the summit of the hill Camren could see a large farmhouse around which there settled a number of barns and outbuildings. Most of these had fallen into disrepair but the farmhouse itself had been worked upon in recent times, its roof and walls sturdy and whole. It was a curious sight, the island in the midst of the marshes and the perfect square of water that surrounded it.

“Weird, eh?” Jonath said. “Buildin's were always on the hill but when the waters started to rise the farmers 'ereabouts built a high flood wall to save the 'ome paddocks and stockyards. Didn't do no good, the whole lot got flooded when the marshes rose over the walls. Shame, but it makes a dam' good hideout when one is needed.”

Camren looked out over the water towards the farmstead and saw

there a safe shelter from the storm. Getting to the hill was however, an obvious problem. The water appeared deep and there seemed no obvious way across without swimming the distance.

Jonath saw his friend's concern. "Ah, don't bother yerself Camren. Just follow me, we ain't getting' wet."

Carefully Jonath worked his way down a shallow incline to a set of rocks placed at the edge of the waters. There he tested the surface of the water and stepped out. Camren sucked in his breath as he watched his friend walk out onto the surface of the mere. When he was some twenty metres out upon the lake he turned and motioned Camren Patrice to follow.

"What you waitin' for. It's just a wood bridge." With that he stamped his foot upon the waters. Camren could hear Jonath's foot hit something hard just below the surface of the lake. "Brilliant bit o' work don't ya think?"

Camren smiled and shook his head. "By Dellig's beard you're an old fool. Is it like that all the way to the farmhouse?"

"Yep, and I wouldn't be spending the time we 'ave insultin' me. If you don' wanna be caught in the storm you'd better get a move on."

With Jonath taking the lead Camren followed his friend out onto the bridge. It proved however, not to be a direct path, the hidden bridge changing its direction a number of times before the two bandits reached the safety of the hill. Upon its bank Camren turned and looked back towards the Row. He could see nothing of the bridge or any sign of their passage upon it. The waters were dark and still and as he considered the cunning nature of its design there came a thunderous blast from the north. From his vantage upon the low hill he could see over the marshes and directly towards the approaching storm. Stretching from the west to the north there grew a solid wall of cloud, founded upon heavy veils of rain and towering overhead in vast upthrusts of billowing vapour. Camren could sense the unnatural power building within its immense turrets, and as a squall line of cloud moved rapidly towards them he turned for the farmhouse.

"Jonath," he said softly. "I hope this house is strong."

Jonath swore and began to run up the hill. Camren followed as the first blanket of rain hit the grass about them. The *Treachersa* had come.

In a thundering impact the first assault of the storm hit the northern walls of the farmhouse, buffeting it upon its foundations. About the two bandits the structure shuddered as it took the full

measure of the tempest's rising fury. Within its dark interior Jonath strained to bar the door with thick planks of wood then motioned for Camren to find more so that they might reinforce its straining timbers. There was no opportunity for words between the men, the noise of hail smashing against the farmhouse's walls drowning any chance of communication. Quickly Camren found a pile of discarded timber and brought a few to Jonath. Together they jammed the planks diagonally across the entranceway and then stood back to determine if their work would prove enough to keep the door whole. It held but there was still much to do.

Jonath moved to a fire pit and began gathering a pile of kindling and papers. As he worked quickly to build a small fire Camren surveyed what he could of the interior of the house. It stood upon the hill as two separate levels and followed the customary organisation of most structures of its type. The lower floor lay as an open plan, with one large living space divided into a kitchen area, living room and a large circular fire-pit about which Jonath now coaxed a small flame to life.

What Camren also saw gave him hope that the house might provide the shelter they needed from the storm outside. At some point in the past the gangs had spent time and energy strengthening its structure. Wood from the outbuildings had been used to brace its supports and a second wall of thick timbers had been built into the living area to provide even greater internal strength. Why they had gone to this trouble Camren could not say but he was grateful that they had done so.

Turning back to his friend he found Jonath warming his hands. As Camren moved closer the old bandit picked up a torch and pushed its end into the base of the fire. He had a job that needed to be done. Above the noise of the storm he shouted to Patrice.

"I'll build the fire. You go see if there're any rats in the rafters."

Camren understood what he meant and took the flaming torch from Jonath. Before they could relax and wait out the storm they had to be sure they were the only tenants in the building. With torch in one hand and sword in the other he took the stairs and carefully searched the upper floor of the farmhouse, checking each of the bedrooms and then the attic space. In the tumult of the storm it proved an ethereal experience, his torch throwing a constant stream of distorted shadow across the walls about him as the tempest thundered and crashed outside. What Camren found as he surveyed

the upper floor proved similar to the living area below, but when he pushed through the trapdoor into the attic space he had to pause and take in what he had found. Within the attic he was confronted by dozens of boxes and crates, all filled with a trove of equipment, clothing and rations.

Quickly he searched through the nearest of the boxes then took from them what they needed. With food, a new fry-pan and extra clothing in hand he made his way back downstairs and gave over the booty to his friend.

“No rats,” Camren shouted to Jonath. “but a lot of cheese!”

Jonath smiled and rifled through Camren's find. In the midst of the storm they had shelter, a good fire and food enough to salve the hunger that gnawed at the gut of any traveller on the plains. Well pleased with himself Jonath surveyed the bounty procured by Camren and looked to his friend, proof before him that making for the farmhouse had indeed been a good idea after all. For his part Camren decided to keep his opinions on Jonath's plans to himself and instead moved to one of the living area's windows. They had found supplies, and for that he was grateful, but the storm was a different matter altogether.

Outside the tempest raged against the homestead, gale-force winds and barrages of hail blanketing their world in a cacophony of sound and arcing light. For some time Camren watched the storm unfold, each blast of lightning illuminating a scene of devastation that he was very glad not to have been caught within. His greatest fear however, lay not with the storm itself. Out amongst the driving winds and blasts of light he looked most keenly for any sign of the return of the grotesque spectres he had witnessed previously with Jonath. Such Beings he could truly be afraid of. The malice and the unbridled ferocity of their presence had stirred something very primal within him and he did not wish to feel it again. Through the window he watched as the storm sped southwards but in its assault saw no further appearance of the dark creatures.

When the winds and rain finally began to settle Camren moved back to the fire and took some food from Jonath. For the old bandit the storm was only a setback, one he was eager to limit. He had no intention of staying overnight.

“We'll wait for the storm to pass then head back to the Row.”

Camren looked at his friend and shook his head. “Travelling the roads at night is not a good idea Jonath. The Row is little used but

there is much out there that might find us easy prey in the dark.”

The old bandit waved away Camren's concerns. He had a plan and in this mind there could be no further delay.

“I know for a fact Camren, that the Whallis gang is sheltering at the edges of the Marshes as we speak. They have 'orses and a willin'ness to sell 'em for a decent price. If we can get a hold of two of 'em it'll be an easy ride all the way to Nephrim.”

“Then,” retorted Camren, “why not wait till morning and approach them for the horses. I can see no reason to take the risk.”

Jonath rolled his eyes. “Because I don't have the coin in hand to buy 'em. If we are to make for Nephrim with any chance of catchin' Alun we'll 'ave to pilfer 'em.”

Camren stood and tipped the remains of his food into the fire. “So,” he said deliberately, “your brilliant plan is to steal horses from a gang of bandits that you assume are somewhere upon the edges of the marshes. And you want to do it in the middle of the night.”

“Yep.” Jonath replied. “I ain't no friend of Frig Whallis and I'm sure he can spare two nags fer a good cause.”

Camren rubbed his face and considered whether his friend had lost all his reason. In the flickering light of their fire he could see that his friend was completely serious. There seemed little point in arguing further.

“Look Jonath, I will do what ever you think necessary, but we must at least rest before continuing. There will be no 'pilferin' if we don't get some sleep first. Even a few hours will serve us well.”

Jonath scratched at the back of his leg and looked out at the storm. It was beginning to settle but they could not travel until it was done. He shrugged his shoulders and took a blanket from the stores Camren had found.

“Just a few hours then.” he answered.

With the storm a rumbling backdrop to the dark of night the two men tried to find rest. In the shadows Camren lay upon his blankets and stared at the roof above him, his thoughts not yet ready to leave him quietly to sleep. Looking over at Jonath he knew the old codger would have his way. Alun was as good as dead and with the fire crackling in its low embers he wondered how Jonath had survived as long as he had. Banditry was not a long-term occupation, but his friend had somehow lasted and it was a mystery for which he had no answer. Perhaps the Fates did look kindly upon Jonath and if that was the case Camren decided it would be best that he stayed close.

He could honestly say that Jonath's last escape from certain death intrigued him most of all. The Dwarvendim who had saved him was a mystery on his own, and one that begged all manner of possibilities. Since their defeat in the War of Three Nations the Stone Kingdoms had been gutted, their peoples subjugated to slavery and deprivation. It was a situation that did not sit well with Camren. He found the need to enslave the Dwarvendim unnecessary, and considering they had endured that slavery for more than a century also a circumstance that had continued far too long. And that is what made the Dwarvendim's appearance so unusual. He could not know what the man's mission might be, but his appearance on horse and equipped in the manner described by Jonath could only mean that Kalborea was at a crossroad. He could smell the Guild all over it though. Only the LoreMages' Guild used the metal collar and only the Guild had access to the sword he carried. Unusual enough indeed.

From Jonath's description of its intertwined dragon pommel the sword could only be Than'durion and that was something Camren could not understand. The sword had once been part of the ceremonial armour of the Stone Kings, but had been taken from the Dwarvendim as a trophy of war. It had always remained in the care of the LoreMages' Guild and yet a Dwarvendim now had it in his grasp. Why such a treasure should be in the possession of such a man was an intriguing question, and as Camren Patrice lay upon his blankets listening to the pounding hammer of rain and wind upon the roof he wondered what sort of trouble the Guild had found itself in. The horse however, was just as curious, for Pallenten was well-known to him.

The black horse was the prize possession of the High Prefect of Maenum, usually stabled in Das Frontiere but apparently now at large upon the plains of the west. Not two years previously he had conspired with a syndicate of fellow bandits to steal the horse for the mutual advantage of all involved. It had come to naught however, as one of the conspirators had been arrested on other matters by a squad of Military Police outside of Kal Naelen. All had thought the plan discovered and gone their separate ways. As he recalled the whole thing had cost him a lot of money. On this matter he hoped the Dwarvendim had stolen the horse, for he would have paid good money to see the High Prefect's face upon discovering the theft.

A sword, a horse and a metal collar all added up to desperate measures and Camren had no doubt the LoreMages' Guild were up to

their necks in it. Memories of his own connections with the Guild still left a bitter taste in his mouth and he could only wonder at what trouble they might have conjured. As he fell into sleep his last remembered thought lay with the Guild. If they had anything to do with it, it was probably going to end badly.

Camren awoke to find Jonath standing over him. He had his finger to his lips, motioning for silence before looking to the north. Camren arose from his bed and followed the old bandit to the window.

“What is it?” he whispered.

“Dunno,” Jonath replied, “but somethin' bumped up against the side of the the 'stead. Fair scared the life outta me.”

Camren peered through the dirty glass and surveyed the water pools to the north. It was early morning, probably an hour before dawn and there was enough light to see clearly the languid waters. He could find nothing.

“Did you see anything at all?” Camren asked quietly.

“No. But I tells ya somethin' hit the side of the house. Like a fist or somethin'. I was gettin' breakfast together and bang fair rocked the 'stead on its foundations.”

In the half-light Camren could see no sign of danger but his friend had spent too long avoiding trouble to be discounted out of hand.

“Ok, Jonath. New plan. We'll ditch breakfast and have something on the road. If there is trouble here it would be better to put distance on it and find the Wallis gang instead. Grab your stuff, we're going.”

With that the two men quickly gathered up their possessions and made ready for the road. In haste the pair stowed equipment and packed away the food they had found in the attic. It did not take long and soon both were standing on the grass verge at the front door. Camren shouldered his pack and carefully scanned the marshes, focusing on the long lines of dome-shaped bushes that crowded each wall of the home paddock surrounding them. He could still see nothing and motioned for Jonath to find the hidden bridge. Quietly the two men entered the lake and began the strange walk that would take them from the homestead back to their entry point at the Bandit's Row.

Beneath his feet Camren could feel the unyielding structure of the hidden bridge. No more than half a finger's width beneath the surface the bridge lay completely out of sight, but strong enough to support the weight of many men. In the growing light of the morning the sensation of walking across the dark waters proved more unsettling

than his first venture across. Only when they were halfway across the bridge did he begin to realise how much danger they were in. At his right shoulder a dark shadow moved smoothly through the water then disappeared. Jonath was right. They were not alone.

“Jonath!” he whispered hoarsely.

His friend halted and turned. “What's wrong boyo? Ya look like you've bitten into a bad tater and don't know where to spit it.”

Camren shook his head and pointed down at the water. “Lurker!”

Recognition of Camren's words dawned upon Jonath in an instant. Turning on his heel he began to run, his boots slapping against the water as he raced for the muddy bank ahead. Camren moved quickly behind him but they could not be fast enough to avoid the notice of the creature that had taken residence there.

In a splintering impact the bridge ahead erupted in a turmoil of crashing waters and broken timber. Thrown off balance Jonath went into the mere, disappearing beneath its surface as a huge tentacle dived in after him. Seeing the danger Camren immediately ran forward and brought his sword down upon the writhing limb, cutting deep into its sinuous flesh. It was only then that Camren discovered the true magnitude of the danger they had walked into.

Shuddering from the pain of its wound the Lurker rose from its watery home, a multitude of tentacles thrashing the lake's surface as it heaved its enormous slug-like body from the bottom of the mere. In a frothing wave of displaced water the lake surged upward, the Lurker's tentacles searching the remains of the bridge for the men. It could find only one. Huge eyes focused upon the lone bandit and in that moment Camren could see the hunger, and the anger, it harboured. Behind him Jonath spluttered to the surface but Camren could not turn to help his friend.

“Make for the Row, Jonath!” he yelled. “I'll deal with our friend here.”

Jonath was not about to argue the point, and as his friend stood exposed upon the bridge he pushed through the shallower waters and made for safety. In Jonath's mind there was no saving his friend. Better to save himself.

For the old bandit it was not an easy path to travel quickly. The bed of the mere was uneven and littered with the captured detritus of floods and discarded rubbish. More than once he tripped upon these obstacles and only once did he look back to determine the fate of his friend. It was a sight he would not easily forget.

Upon the bridge Camren stood alone, the Lurker heaving its great body closer as its tentacles lashed at the bridge. With great arcs of his sword Camren cut at the reaching limbs, sprays of blood colouring the dark water as he fought for his life. In truth Jonath believed his friend to be lost, only a matter of moments left in the span of Camren's existence. It was at the last that the younger man played the only card he had left and it came in the shape of a small metal ball.

From his belt Camren pulled a Flash-charge. He has bought it from an arms dealer in Millers Crossing and had kept it always at his belt, ready for any situation that required something loud, and deadly. Without doubt it was now required. In one smooth movement Camren threw the charge into the monster's open maw and fell backwards into the lake behind him. He had no time to run, or turn to dive. All he could do was fall as the Flash-charge exploded in the Lurker's mouth.

In a massive detonation the charge erupted in fire and blinding light. Jonath covered his face as the concussion grenade tore open the monster's body, throwing pieces of its gelatinous form into the mere and arcing onto its far banks. Tentacles thrashed in mindless spasms as the Lurker drew back but the damage had been done, its smoking remains slumping in a tangle of limbs and bleeding flesh. For a moment Jonath could not hear or see anything more, the explosion leaving his ears ringing and his eyes blurred from the concussive shock of the charge's detonation. It was however, only for a moment.

Recovering his senses Jonath ran into the water, searching desperately for his friend. He was glad to be alive but now it was time to find Camren and he found him caught beneath the bridge, his leg pinned by a fallen timber. He could not tell if the younger man was still conscious but he knew what he had to do. Planting his feet in the soft mud he heaved at the timber and surprised himself as it slid out and upwards. Grabbing Camren he rose with him to the surface and then dragged him onto the sloping edges of the mere. Immediately Camren began to splutter and awaken, a long red weal forming across the side of his head and down his neck. With another heave Jonath dragged him further onto dryer ground then shook his shoulders. Rolling sideways Camren coughed up a flood of brackish water, then rose on one elbow to look back towards the mere.

"Is it dead?" he said hoarsely.

Jonath laughed and slapped him across the shoulder. "Dead as a lump o' clay brother. Wan'ted to take a bite outta ya, but got serious indigestion for its trouble. By the Fates I ain't seen nuthin like it. You

didn't practise that anywhere previous did ya?"

Camren smiled and shook his head. "No Jonath, it just seemed like a good idea at the time."

At that Jonath laughed all the louder and slumped down beside his friend. There was now nothing that could be done except wait as Camren recovered his senses and his energy. As he sat on the damp earth he watched as the suns rose in the east, a flair of orange and red spreading along the horizon as the two burning orbs began the long work of their day. It was too late now to raid the Wallis gang, the light of day leaving no avenues for easy theft. Still, he thought, there is more than one way to procure horses.

When Camren was able to stand the two men collected what was left of their belongings and took the short path that lead them back to the Row. There they found no sign of trouble and turned southwards, Jonath's plan still to find the Wallis gang.

"What will we do now, Jonath?" Camren asked. "It is now daylight and taking horses won't be easy."

Jonath looked at his friend and shrugged his shoulders. "I got some cred with Wallis an' he's made a load of silver out of me over the years. Maybe we can strike a deal." For a moment he paused then patted the dagger at his belt. "Of course if he don't we might have'ta resort to more direct persuasion."

Camren rolled his eyes, and when Jonath saw him he blamed the gesture on the blow he had taken to his head. In the morning light the two men walked slowly southwards.

Of Horses and Dellig Tull

For the remainder of the morning the men walked, slowly following the Bandits Row as it wound its way into the south-east. The day had grown clear, the sky overhead a blue dome cut only by wisps of high cloud, and as they walked Camren could feel his strength returning. Jonath for his part, did not hurry his friend. Camren Patrice had saved his life and that held great weight with Jonath. Braddick might have tried to kill him, and he would measure his revenge soon enough, but Camren had stood in the face of a monster and saved him. Such an act deserved loyalty and care, and he would not prosecute his own plans until his friend was well able to play his part.

As they walked Camren continued to improve and it did not pass unnoticed that the terrain about them had begun to change. Slowly the huge dome-shaped bushes were receding, no longer crowding the edges of the roadway but finding their purchase deeper in the marshes. Instead the highway now was bordered by the more familiar high rushes that edged the wetlands. In this open landscape the mountains of the Krodestaag became clear in the west, and with a light wind blowing from the south they picked up the pace of their travels. It was in the hour before midday that Camren first saw the statue.

About a kilometre into the marshes at his right he saw a tall statue rising out of the meres. It stood pure black in colour, and although it was facing away from the road he was quite sure it was a statue of a Dwarvendim. The shorter stature and obvious physical strength of the figure gave it away but he could not tell who it might be, or for what purpose it might have been constructed. What he could be sure of was that it was enormous. Only as he walked further along the row did he also see the collapsing remains of a large town built around a central market square. The statue arose from its centre and unlike the desolation of the surrounding buildings appeared in remarkably good condition.

“Jonath,” Camren asked, pointing out towards the statue. “What is that?”

Jonath peered out towards the town and then turned to his friend. “That is what folks roun' these parts call Ol' Dellig. Back in the day it was Kal Dellig, a town and a fair big one as a fact. Used to be a big routing point for goods an' people goin' north 'n south, but got flooded when the marshes grew too big. Shame really, I been told that it had some of the best drinkin' holes to be found any place on the frontier.

Can't even find it on the map these days.”

“And what of the statue. Who is it?”

Jonath smiled and looked at his friend curiously. “You dunno? Surely with all that fancy book learnin' you must know about Dellig Tull.”

Camren nodded and turned back towards the statue. “Yes Jonath, I know of Dellig Tull.”

“Then,” the old bandit replied, “yous'll know that where that great lump of stone sits is the farthest point west that Dellig explored before him an' his party were ambushed by the Horde. One o' the first men to make it within a stone's throw of the Krodestaag. Didn't do 'im much good but he got a statue built fer his trouble.”

Camren looked out toward the town and wondered how an entire community might disappear so completely. He knew much of Dellig Tull, the great Dwarvendim explorer who made his name in the early years of settlement. Much of the eastern and central areas of northern Kalborea were first explored by him, and his exploits in searching out the last of the old Gaels were legend amongst the peoples of the Four Nations. To think that the memorial to such a man might be so forgotten seemed unforgivable, but looking at the breadth of the wetlands that surrounded the flooded town it was not surprising that it might fade from memory. The statue itself however, did pose a mystery.

“The town itself is sinking into the marshes but the statue seems in remarkable condition. How is that so?”

Jonath shrugged his shoulders. “Not overall sure, but there is a legend that when it was built the LoreMasters put some Word on it to keep it hale an' hearty. Must be workin' eh?”

Camren had to agree. The workings of the Grand Circle were as much a mystery to him as any other man of Kalborea but he could not doubt that they held a great power. He had to smile though. Those who had defeated the Dwarvendim had never been able to usurp the EarthMagic of the LoreMasters, and the existence of a statue such as that in Kal Dellig must have irked them greatly. No wonder the town had been slowly but surely forgotten.

Jonath handed a piece of dry cheese to Camren and together they moved on, following the Row as it continued southwards. After a further hour's travel they again came to a halt.

“How far till we hit Wallis' camp?” Camren asked.

Jonath did not answer immediately. Instead he searched the edges

of the road. Camren could see that he was looking for another hidden marker.

“Anything?” he asked again.

“Aye,” answered Jonath, “but not what I was expectin.”

Without saying anything more he turned to the edges of the road and stooped to look at an area of exposed ground. After a moment he motioned for Camren to join him.

“What you make of this?”

Camren took to a knee and found also the objects of Jonath's concern. Impressed clearly in the ground were a series of horseshoe prints, each with a clearly visible RW4 embedded along the line of the shoe.

“Rangers were here Jonath, 4th Regiment of the Rangers of the Watch. Probably the same troopers that we saw earlier on the road.”

“Aye,” answered Jonath, “but they stopped here an' that ain't good.”

Jonath got back to his feet and walked to a broken tree stump at the other edge of the road.

“What ya think the chances are of havin' Rangers at rest on one side of the road and the marker for the Wallis gang's camp on the other? I got a feelin' that sumthin' real bad has happened.”

Camren couldn't help but agree. Drawing his sword he followed Jonath as the old bandit stepped into the rushes behind the stump and began walking a long path that led directly into the wetlands. Bordered on both sides by thick walls of reeds the path kept to a dry series of rises but one that had been traversed by others very recently. Upon the ground Camren could see a large number of boot marks, all Kalborean military and leading both into the camp ahead and then back towards the Row.

“See it?” said Jonath. “They left their 'orses on the Row an' then came through 'ere on foot. Some'ow they knew the Wallis gang was about and you can guarantee it wasn't just fer a nice mornin' tea.”

Carefully the men crept forward. All the evidence indicated that the Rangers had long gone but neither could be completely sure. It did not take long however, to find the camp. There was only one way in and one way out, and unsure that all the Rangers might have left both bandits stayed out of sight.

In the full light of day they peered through the reeds at a large, circular area of cleared ground roughly two hundred metres in diameter. At the centre of the clearing stood a clutch of wooden buildings, and about the perimeter a series of stables, holding yards

and a number of huge tents. It was not what Camren had expected. Clearly the Wallis gang was well organised, and had spent time and thought on planning this camp as a way station for stolen horses and the storage of contraband. Each of the large tents held an impressive amount of stolen goods, and in the stables he could see a full harras of horses and other pack animals. What he couldn't see however, were any sign of the gang themselves.

Jonath was the first to move. Tapping Camren on the arm he led the way, leaving the anonymity of the rushes and stepping out into the clearing. First he made for the buildings at the centre of the camp and found only broken furniture and bloodstains. In all the bedrooms the two men found overturned beds and sheets stained in splashes of deep red. Whatever had happened occurred in the night and had began whilst most of the bandits were sleeping.

While Jonath searched the main buildings Camren went to the horses and found all unharmed, but in need of water and feed. He had no time to tend them and instead released all the horses into the clearing to find food and water for themselves. Two of them he tethered however. They would be their rides to Das Nephrim and for these animals he gave oats and hay. Looking about he could not see a water spigot to fill buckets so followed the other horses as they made their way to a small pond behind the main buildings. There he made a discovery that had him shouting for Jonath.

His friend ran from the main house and rushed to Camren's side. There they both stared into a barbarous vision of violence and death. More than a dozen bodies lay half-submerged in the pool, all with gaping wounds, their blood staining the water crimson.

Jonath put his hand on Camren's shoulder. "By Dellig's beard, the sods didn' stand a chance."

Camren nodded and turned away. He could stand only so much bloodshed before it sickened him.

"What did you find at the house?" he asked quietly.

The old bandit scratched his face then replied. "All the signs are tellin' me that the Rangers hit em in the night, just before dawn an' no more than a day passed. Got em all while they were sleepin' I reckon. Must have been real quick. I couldn' find any sign of a struggle, just blood and overturned bedding as the bodies were dragged out. If the gang had any kind'a lookout he sure didn't do his job."

In the bright light of the day Camren stood at the edge of the carnage and could only agree with Jonath's assessment. There were

none of the usual signs of a prolonged battle. More than a dozen men had died here and he should have seen evidence of a running fight, one that should have spilled out from the main buildings and onto the surrounding grounds. He could see nothing except a trail of churned earth as bodies had been dragged from the house down to the pond's edge. The remains were all in a similar state, most with their throats cut or stabbed repeatedly through the chest. None showed any sign of defensive wounds. They were simply killed where they slept. Camren decided right then that he would not be staying here any longer than necessary.

“Jonath, go to the house and see what you can find of food and loose coin. I'll prepare the horses. Let's get out of here as quickly as we can.”

Jonath nodded his agreement and made for the homestead. While the old bandit rummaged through the remains of the dead men's supplies Camren readied the horses for travel. Finding tack and feed proved an easy matter. The stables were well organised and it appeared at least a few of the dead bandits were experienced in the care of their stolen property. Recently cleaned and stored Camren was able to locate everything he needed and with supplies in hand saddled the horses.

With that done he took a few moments to look through some of the storage tents and found within one of them two things he could not leave behind. One was a satchel bomb, military issue and small enough to hang about his shoulder. The other a bag holding five flashcharges. The first he took for his own personal use. After seeing what had been done to the Wallis gang he had resolved that he would never be taken alive. If the day came where he was cornered by the Army he would use the satchel bomb and blow himself and anyone else close enough to oblivion. It seemed the only way to appropriately return the mercy shown to his fellow bandits.

The flashcharges were another matter. For personal safety there was nothing better and he grabbed them up as soon as he saw them. For any traveller of the frontierlands such devices were life savers, sometimes the only real effective defence against the many predators that roamed the wilds. He had considered it a boon when he had been able to buy one in Millers Crossing, but to have five at hand would make both their travels to Das Nephrim a lot more secure. The bag of charges he tied to his horse's saddle and then waited for Jonath.

He did not have to wait long. The old bandit emerged from the

main homestead grinning from ear to ear and Camren knew immediately that he had found something of value. Jonath carried two cloth bags and had slung about his neck a purse on a long leather thong. It seemed as he got closer that Jonath's grin grew wider.

"What have you found?" Camren asked, his curiosity getting the better of him.

Jonath dumped the bags and took the purse from his neck.

"Well I found us some food," he replied, pointing at the sacks at his feet. "but in one of the back rooms I found the gang's stash. Coin and stolen gems, nothing traceable and now ours for the takin'."

He opened the purse and let Camren survey its contents. Even Camren's eyes widened at the amount of coin and gemstone Jonath had found.

"And how will we divide this boon Jonath?" he asked.

For a moment Jonath hesitated, then pulled back from his friend. "What you sayin'?"

"Well," Camren continued. "Seeing that we both are on a common mission here that kind of makes us partners, and partners split everything down the middle, right?"

Jonath stood red faced, anger building at the idea that such a find should be shared. That was until he saw the smile grow on his friend's face.

"I tell you, Camren. Ya shoudn't make light o' such things. Under other circumstances I might have had to teach ya a good lesson in etiquette."

At that Camren laughed out loud. "Etiquette, Jonath?"

"Aye. A man's find is his own, everybody knows that."

"Then I defer to your claim, Jonath. Now let us tie these bags to the horses and get out of this cemetery."

Jonath had no reason to argue and quickly they worked to stow what had been found securely. Camren could not help but notice that Jonath carefully hid the purse within his clothes. Some habits, he thought, die very hard.

With horses, and a good supply of food and coin, the last leg of their journey out of the Faerron Marshes began. Riding along the path they made it back to the Row in good time and after checking the road remained clear turned south, following the old highway. It was past midday but Jonath expected that on horseback they could find the end of the Row, and the open plains of Northern Kalborea by mid-afternoon.

For Camren he could not get out of the marshes quick enough. Regardless of what had happened along the Row it was the closeness of the terrain, the claustrophobic crowding of the vegetation against the roadside that bothered him the most. He liked the openness of the plains, to be hemmed in by high hedgerows of thick bushes and leagues of deadly meres gave him no sense of security. He would be well glad to be out of it.

As good as his word Jonath led them both out of the confines of the marshes by the mid hours. At its end the Row disappeared into the marshes, truncated at a high wall of reeds and thick brambles. At this barrier the old bandit did not pause, instead turning his horse east of the road and into a series of shallow meres. Through these pools the two men rode until they found a firmer footing beyond and a narrow path that ran through a thick bed of reeds then emerged onto the plains themselves. When they had fully left the confines of the marshes Jonath brought his horse to a halt and turned to his friend.

“There ya go boyo. Jonath told ya we'd be out easy like. Horses and a fair weight of loot to boot, just as I said.”

Camren looked at the old man and wondered seriously if his friend really had such a short memory. Twice they had almost been killed on their journey through the Faerron but in the end Camren could see no profit in arguing the point. Instead he motioned for Jonath to lead the way.

With the suns at their backs they turned immediately to the south-east and struck out along a direct line for Das Nephrim. If all went well they could find a safe bed for the night in that city, and then by morning begin to exact the revenge Jonath still felt so keenly.

Riding at Jonath's side, Camren enjoyed the clean air and the feeling of freedom that could be found on the open plains. He had travelled most of Kalborea, but had always considered the frontier most to his liking. For him it was a new world of its own, a place where a man might keep to himself and not be bothered by the suffocating bureaucracy of the Union. It suited him well but it came at a price. Wallis' gang had definitely paid that price.

Looking to Jonath he wondered if the old bandit had considered any further how he might exact his vengeance.

“Had any further thoughts on how you're going to give Alun his just desserts?”

Jonath thought for a moment but then shrugged his shoulders. “It'll come ta me at the time. Gotta know first where he is, and the

opportunities 'll come along. Find 'im first then kill 'im. That's me plan.”

Camren smiled but said nothing. From his own experience revenge could be a curiously random thing. For those who were successful there was almost never an actual plan, just a need for vengeance and a sure knowledge that when the person was found, retribution would be swift. He could understand Jonath's anger for he had been in the old bandit's shoes once himself, but in his own case justice had never been given. He knew very well that anger could take over the mind of the aggrieved and rage cloud their thoughts to the point where they could think of nothing else. For most it would be that very rage however, that would rob them of their chance, their capacity to act effectively compromised by the turmoil of their emotions. Somehow Camren could not see Jonath in that light. His plan was simple and direct. Braddick Alun was as good as dead.

Turning from his thoughts Camren searched the horizon, looking for any sign of approaching danger. He felt unusually relaxed as they rode towards Das Nephrim, Jonath's company and the satchel bomb at his waist curious comforts for a man who had spent too long alone, and far too long looking over his shoulder. In his survey he noticed first stormclouds in the north and east, large weather fronts moving south but away from their position. If they were lucky there would be no further storms before they reached the city. If they were even luckier there would be no further trouble either.

Without any further conversation the two men rode into the south-east. About them the grasslands were a vast undulating sea of deep green, the ground beneath their feet a thick blanket of knee-high grasses that waved in long ripples from a stiff breeze out of the north. In this verdant landscape Camren could see no emerging danger and leaving Jonath to keep watch he let his thoughts wander as they rode. In this cool weather he felt enervated, thankful that he had a horse to carry him to Das Nephrim, and more importantly a reason to go there. It was a place familiar to him but one he had purposefully kept far from his thoughts. It was curious that Jonath's need for vengeance should take him there again. The Fates, he considered, sometimes worked in mysterious ways.

As he let his mind wander however, an unease began to settle upon him. At the edges of his consciousness he could sense something, a shadowed veil lingering far from sight but pushing its way towards him, growing inexorably in his thoughts. At first he attempted to give

it no notice, but like a wave reaching for shore it grew until he could not ignore it any further. Something was wrong. Very wrong.

“Jonath!” he cried out. A feeling of dread overwhelming his senses as he fell from his horse and hit the ground.

Jonath reined his horse in and ran back to his friend.

“Camren, what’s wrong?”

The younger man could not answer. In his mind he could sense something struggling from a deep prison, and as it broke free a surge of malice and rage flooded outwards. Camren did not understand what was happening but old skills learned in his youth took hold and gave him direction. Pushing his hand as far as he could into the soft earth he let his mind roam freely, searching out the source of the power and finding it far to the west. Anger came in great waves that buffeted his senses and within the turmoil he could feel the emergence of a terrible presence, one that had only cruelty and destruction as its purpose. But that was not all.

Before Camren could remove his hand from the ground he felt the world turn in upon itself, a great tremor shuddering outwards, sending an overwhelming vertigo coursing through his body as it swept past him. Caught within the wave he could not withdraw, and helpless against the power that assailed him he could only surrender as a torrent of visions flooded his mind. In an instant he saw the towers of Hel’garad erupting in flames and the LoreMages of the Guild dying where they stood, consumed in a blue fire that searched them out and destroyed them. EarthMagic had changed, instantly soured in its purity but then reasserting itself in a counter-attack against the ravaging malice that had found its freedom. In both the real world and the ethereal a war had begun, and before its power Camren kneeled helpless.

It was Jonath who acted, pulling his friend from the ground and dragging him back to their horses.

“Camren!,” he yelled, “what has happened.”

Camren shook his head and tried to stand. Immediately he fell back to earth and again Jonath acted. Catching him he lowered him back onto the grasses. Something had happened and it scared him.

“Sorry Jonath,” Camren whispered. “The world has changed and I do not know how. I will explain but we must leave here immediately. I fear the only safety we will find will be within high city walls.”

Jonath scanned the horizon for the danger his friend spoke of but could see nothing. He had no doubt that something had indeed

happened however. If Camren Patrice said it was so then he would take notice. Carefully he helped his friend back onto his horse and together they raced for Das Nephrim.

A Servant of the Tree

In the cool of the night the Tak Lovar lay quiet, sheltered beneath the spreading canopy of a Deodar tree, his form no more than a shadow at its base, his life slowly but surely expiring. The fall from the Kreal had left him badly injured and much worse than he had at first thought. The broken shoulder he knew he could handle but he had taken internal injuries, his side swelling from a bleed that he could never staunch. It was, all in all, a slow and painful way to end his days.

Sleep was as elusive as comfort as he surveyed the plains about him. The storm that had brought him down had long passed, and another had vented itself upon the grasslands before the sky had cleared. As he looked through the long limbs of the Deodar above him he could see clear sky and the stars arrayed bright in their firmament. The moons had not yet risen and all about him the land was dark. In this stark landscape he was completely alone.

At his left shoulder the crumpled remains of the Kreal lay as a very large reminder of his attempt at reaching Hel'garad, and the utter failure of that mission. While he lay injured upon the grasses the Tellandra had been restored by the Dwarvendim and EarthMagic had fled the LoreMages forever. If Donemay was to be believed the power of the Guild had been a lie, their quest for political power and high office more important than their search for the key to harnessing EarthMagic. If he was right then Lovar's life had been a lie as well, one prosecuted in the search for truth but founded upon falsehood and deception. He felt sure that he would die before he might reconcile the folly of his blind obedience and ultimate gullibility.

Moving his injured shoulder Lovar settled himself for an attempt at sleep. The pain in his side had spread slowly into his back and as he lay against the hard bark of the tree he wondered how long he had to live. If he was lucky, he pondered, he might die whilst asleep but the growing pain gave him little respite and in the darkness he felt strangely alert, his senses scanning his surroundings, looking for something.

When Lovar first noticed the light it moved as no more than a dim glow upon the grasslands to the south. In the manner of a firefly it swooped and turned upon itself, its trajectory both chaotic and purposeful as it slowly made its way in his direction. Sitting up as straight as he could against the tree he looked more carefully at its curious path, watching as the light bounced off the ground and arced

backwards and forwards as it moved. Before it was no more than a stone's throw from his position it had grown into a recognisable sphere of light, but it did not remain so for long.

Before Lovar's eyes the sphere grew and elongated, its form lengthening into the shape and body of the most beautiful Being the Tak had ever seen. Shaped as a woman of middle years, it stood lean and statuesque, a veil of light and hair swirling about it as the Being seemed to emerge out of nothingness before him. When it was done it stood suspended just above the ground, its spectral form a roiling miasma of light that gave no hint as to its purpose. The Being seemed to be waiting for Lovar to speak.

Lovar grasped tightly at the bark beneath his fingers and tried to stand. In his thoughts he was sure that the apparition before him was a figment of a faltering mind, but he could not deny what he was seeing, and he could not help giving the spectral presence what it wanted.

"Who are you?" he croaked, his throat hoarse from thirst.

The Being brightened but did not answer him directly. "You are Malleus Lovar?" it asked instead.

Lovar nodded. "Yes," he replied in a whisper. "I am."

The Being moved closer, its veil of light extending out towards him. "I am Magma, a servant of the Silvan Tree and one who must act as messenger in times that have grown dark. To my people you have become important, your knowledge of the artifacts of the Ancient World needed in these trying times. There is something that must be done and only one such as yourself can accomplish it."

Lovar slid back down against the tree. He had no strength left and no capacity to engage with the creature. "You have come too late Magma for I am dying."

Magma paused for a moment then moved ever closer, its perfect face shining like a myriad of blue stars in Lovar's eyes. The Kalborean watched as the apparition considered his condition then stiffened as the Being reached out a spectral hand.

"Not today," it said quietly, and in the breadth of those few words Lovar could not prepare himself for what was to follow.

At the touch of the creature Lovar's body sprang from the cold earth, his arms and legs outstretched, his back arched as a field of crackling energy enveloped him. Unable to move he could feel his life draining from him, but in the midst of the pain he could sense something insinuating itself into his flesh. From his fingers and toes a

burning sensation spread across his body before digging deep into his muscles, forcing apart tissue as it drove down into his body. Before he could say anything pain welled up from within and he began to scream, the blue fire that surrounded him concentrating itself about his injuries. In those few moments of terror and pain Lovar could feel broken bones being moved and then knit, his organs burning and then becoming numb. But that was not all.

At every point of his being old wounds reopened, injuries that had healed decades before flooding out in pain and tearing flesh as the sum of his existence in the world was splayed open. Blood flowed across his body, the agonies of his life revisited in every detail as he was reminded of his mortality and the fragility of his existence. He felt blood forcing its way through his flesh as the fire dug ever deeper into his core, but as it did so he could also sense old scars disappearing, the spark of his existence growing stronger as bones and tissue healed. When it was done the energy about him winked out like a pinched candle flame and he fell back to earth.

“Do not move Lovar.” Magme whispered. “It will take a moment for the potency of your healing to take full effect.”

“What have you done to me Magme?” Lovar croaked through parched lips.

The apparition smiled at the Kalborean and then retrieved his bag. Within was a cup which Magme filled with water before giving it to him.

“I have opened your Book of Scars, Malleus. To bring you back from death it was necessary to do so. All the pain and injury of your life needed to be expunged, everything that had made you who you are scoured clean so that your flesh might be renewed. It is a great gift that has been given to you and one for which you will pay a reasonable price.”

“What do you mean?”

“I am of the Caer'dahl, Malleus. I am a servant of the Silvan Tree and that is the purpose of my existence. The life I live and the tasks I perform are dictated by the Second Power because her energy is also mine. I live as long as she does, and I do it joyfully. My obedience absolute in the knowledge that what is done is done for the common good of all those that live in the world. In opening your Book of Scars and cleansing your flesh a small part of her energy has been placed within yourself, and with it comes both great benefits and greater responsibility.”

Lovar could feel the effects of his ordeal lifting from him and with its release there came a wondrous enervation. In his life he had never felt more alive, or as scared as he did now. Before he could say anything however, the Caer'dahl continued.

“Your deliverance from the embrace of death comes with a cost. You may return to the world you know, and in doing so make any life for yourself that suits your wants or ambitions, but you must know that life for you will now be long, very long. The energy within you is but a spark of existence but it will burn brightly for many years to come and the Power that has given you this boon expects something in return.”

Lovar shifted his weight then rose from the grass. He felt completely whole, all his injuries gone.

“What is the price that must be paid?” he asked.

“As I am a Servant of the Great Tree so now are you. You are no longer Kalborean, no longer a Brother to the Guild you once served. When the Tree calls you will answer and your obedience will be as absolute as my own. The Tree calls you now Malleus. What is your answer?”

Lovar cricked his neck and considered the offer given him. His purpose in the Guild was now at an end, the burning pyres of Hel'garad no longer the focus of his existence. The answer for him was easy. To be given purpose once again was a greater gift than healed flesh.

“I am the Silvan Tree's servant, Magma. Command and I will obey.”

The Caer'dahl did not pause in the delivery of its message.

“The Great Tree is aware that you have met with a man named Donemay and that he has described to you the folly of Vor'ell. The creatures that he has created are now abroad in the world and they test our defences at every point, both in the world about you and the realm from which I have come. These Shadowch are monsters of a ruined malice that reside both in a corporeal and spectral existence, and they must be destroyed in both if we are to defeat them and return balance to the world. They are now abroad upon the lands of Men and Oera'dim alike, spreading death and torment to all who encounter them. They stand also at the borders of our realms and in their spite tear at the barriers that should deny them entry. We can keep them at bay for a time but they are products of a malevolent spirit, one that has its source deep in the far west of the mortal world. It is that source that must be destroyed and it can only be done with a

weapon fashioned for the purpose.”

“And what is my task?” Lovar says quietly.

“Do you know the whereabouts of the *Emurion* taken from Aggamem the Elder at the Battle of Kal Murda?”

For Lovar this was an easy question. “Yes Magma, the sword you speak of is held within the Prelate Vault at Hel'garad. We never could determine the weapon's purpose so it has been stored within the vault since its acquisition.”

Magma brightened at the news. “This sword must be retrieved and given to the LoreMasters of the Grand Circle. Alone it cannot drive down the Shadowch but it is a part of a greater puzzle that others must unravel. Listen to the LoreMasters and do as they say. The destiny of all Beings, here and in other realms will depend upon your success. How say you?”

Lovar nodded. “Such a task I can complete but how do I find the LoreMasters? The Dwarvendim are well hidden, their whereabouts unknown.”

The Caer'dahl withdrew a short distance from Lovar and grew in size before him. “You need only concern yourself with finding the *Emurion*. The LoreMasters may not be known to you but they are to others. A wagon rests upon the Great South Road no more than a league from here, its driver a servant of the Tree, and a man from whom you will be able to understand the nature of your new purpose. Go quickly Lovar, the Shadowch are coming.”

With that the Caer'dahl disappeared into the night, its light fading into the first gusts of a wind building from the north. Standing alone in the darkness the Kalborean did not move. Upon the breeze he could sense something on the move, a point of cold malice travelling swiftly towards him. It was a sensation new to him but there was much about himself that had changed. Everything seemed clearer, the landscape about him dark yet well defined, and under the light of the stars he could sense all the nocturnal life of the plains unfolding before him. It was both unsettling and extraordinary.

Taking up his pack the Historian dove back under the Deodar tree. Sheltered beneath its spreading branches he scanned the sky overhead and at first found nothing. In the dark he persisted, using his new, sharper senses to focus upon the anger that he felt so keenly, and realised then that whatever was coming his way was not upon the plain. It was above him.

Pushing himself against the bark of the tree he waited, unsure of

what might now confront him. Overhead a dark shape moved smoothly from the west, its form hidden against the night sky and visible only as a patch of nothingness that winked out the stars as it passed beneath them. Carefully he watched as the Shadowch flew overhead and then turned back upon his position. With the creature so close he could do nothing but remain quiet, listening as its enormous wings beat against the cool air. It was then that the Historian discovered another facet of his new-found existence. In the absolute dark of the night the tree above him gleamed within a shimmering field of blue light. Looking at his own arm he could see also the same glimmering energy, and realised then that it was the life-essence of both the tree and himself that glowed within the darkness.

Beneath the canopy of the Deodar Lovar watched the Shadowch circle the trees about him. He had no doubt that the creature was looking for him and his suspicions were confirmed when it was joined by another two, all of whom orbited the trees. They were indeed searching but for some reason were unable to discover his position. In the dark of the night the Shadowch circled until all three dropped from the sky and came to ground near the dead Kreal. The remains of the reptile lay no more than thirty metres from where Lovar now hid and he was sure that he would be discovered, but again the Shadowch did not see him. Instead they tore at the body of the Kreal, biting through flesh and bone as they fought each other for its remains.

In the midst of this turmoil Lovar tried to gain a better understanding of how these Shadowch had been formed. He knew from his conversation with the Prelate Donemay that it had been assumed that Vor'ell's inspiration in creating his creatures had been Hordim mythology, but the beasts that ate furiously before him were nothing that he could identify. All three Shadowch were the same, no more than indefinable silhouettes that moved beneath the stars as misting black forms. Each were roughly humanoid, legs and arms attached to an elongated body that extended to long spiked tails, but upon their backs Lovar could see something that reminded him of bat's wings, all frantically beating against the air as the creatures fought over the Kreal. All had the same featureless heads and it was when one of the Shadowch sniffed the air that Lovar realised why he had not been discovered.

The creatures were blind, their capacity to search for prey limited to smell and an ability to sense the life-essence of their targets in much

the same way as he could now see it enveloping the trees around him. These Shadowch could not smell him, the heavy odours of leaf litter and sap masked his presence, and as long as he remained still he was effectively camouflaged, his own blue energy melding with the Deodar.

Slowly he drew his pack to his side and waited for the dark creatures to leave. It was not until the first ruddy glimmers of dawn grew upon the eastern horizon that the Shadowch rose again into the sky, their skeletal, leathered wings lifting them quickly westwards. Lovar watched as they departed, relieved that the danger had fled with the first light of day. In his mind he could not believe what he had seen yet the evidence was undeniable. Vor'ell had succeeded in creating his Shadowch and in the midst of that success had recklessly set in motion the destruction of Mankind itself.

When he was sure the creatures had gone he got to his feet and surveyed the grasslands about him. Stretching after hours of inactivity he scanned the horizon, took his bearings then set forth westwards, making for the Great South Road and his ride to Hel'garad. It would prove to be the first steps on a journey that would take Malleus Lovar far from home.

The Wagoneer

In the early hours of the morning Lovar walked into the west. Magma had said that a wagon waited for him on the South Road and he had to admit he was curious as to the nature of the wagoneer who also served the Silvan Tree. As he walked he found himself doubting much of what he had learned in the past days, and it struck him that no less than three days prior he had lived a completely different life, his hours consumed by his duties as a Tak and his firm belief in the Guild and its purpose in the world. All that had fallen apart in the past day and as he strode into the morning he realised that his life was now one of uncertainty and danger.

As he continued westwards he surveyed the landmarks about him and realised also that the Kreal had not taken him as close to Hel'garad as he had supposed. The mountains upon the western horizon stood too far to the south and this could only mean that he had hit the ground midway between Kal Dor Tarma and Kal Mulmi. It would mean delays and more time than he had hoped to reach the towers of Hel'garad but it could not be helped.

By mid-morning Lovar reached a rise in the ground that looked down over the South Road and what he saw stopped him in his tracks. He was expecting to see a wagon and perhaps a few other travellers on the highway but what he found was a sea of confusion, thousands of refugees flooding southwards, most with nothing except the clothes on their backs and what meagre possessions they could muster carried upon weary shoulders. As Lovar surveyed the road as it tracked northwards he could see only an unending line of humanity, struggling upon itself as people fled from the frontier. Running down the slope he pulled up one of the travellers, a man of middle years who had taken to the roadside to rest.

"Friend," Lovar said, "Where have you come from and what is the reason for your flight. Have the Hordim broken the fortress at Maenum?"

The man shook his head. "No, the Hordim have been routed, the fortress has held but there has been no opportunity to give thanks for our deliverance. In the night just passed we have been visited upon by something far more terrifying."

"Creatures of mist and darkness?" Lovar asked quietly.

"Yes Friend, a great Host of the spectres fell upon the Faeyen first. They sent messengers east but before they could reach Kalborea the creatures spread over the entire frontier attacking everything that lives

and breathes. Both Das Frontiere and Kal Tor Darma have been assaulted and those of us that could make it out are now fleeing south.”

The man fell quiet, his fatigue taking the last words he might have offered from him. Lovar was about to help him from the roadside when a large hand grabbed the Kalborean's shoulder. Spinning around Lovar was about to defend himself when he froze with surprise.

“Well as I live an' breathe, its Master Lovar.” the man says. “I've bin told you'll be needin' a ride south.”

“Balkerik?” Lovar almost stumbled at the shock of seeing the wagoneer. “I swear I thought I'd never see you again.”

“Well, its a small world an' no mistake. Magme told me to keep an eye out for you, an' here we are.” He smiled then pointed to his wagon. “If we are to make Nephrim by sunset we best be goin'.”

Lovar motioned for his friend to wait a moment, then he turned back to man on the roadside.

“Has the Army been mobilised?” he asked.

The man shrugged his shoulders. “I don't know. We fought as hard as we could but nothing seemed to harm the creatures. I do not see how anyone can protect us from them.”

Lovar put his hand on the man's shoulder and leaned close to his ear. “You cannot destroy them Friend but you can hide from them. For some reason they cannot see a man who puts himself against a tree. Remain quiet and the creatures will move on.”

The man looked at Lovar with doubt upon his countenance. “How do you know this?”

The Historian smiled. “Three of them were eating my mount whilst I stood no more than a stone's throw from their feast. I would not be here but for the tree I hid against. Trust me on this and let everyone else know.”

Lovar helped the man to his feet and bid him farewell. The man immediately moved into the crowd and was soon out of sight. For the old Wagoneer it was one delay too many. Through the tide of humanity Balkerik pushed his way, taking no heed of who might be standing in his way. Crossing the road he stepped up onto the tray and helped Lovar up onto the bench seat. When he saw that his charge was settled he yelled out into the tide of crowding refugees.

“Old folk and the infirm! Old folk and the infirm! This wagon is goin' south to Das Nephrim, drop off point the central markets. The

ride is free but you gotta bring your own food. Five minutes and I'm goin."

Immediately the area surrounding the wagon became a frenzy of hurried activity. Upon the wagon Balkerik took names and identification, helping as many people as he could onto the tray. Within the five minutes given his wagon was loaded with two dozen of the old, the injured and those that would care for them.

"That should do." he mumbled to himself then took his seat. Lovar looked at the old man and wondered how he was going to make any headway against the crush of refugees ahead. Balkerik saw the look on Lovar's face and smiled once again.

"I'm a practical man at heart, Master Lovar. Watch and learn how kindness provides its own rewards."

Cracking his whip the wagoneer urged his team forward then began to call ahead. "Old and infirm! Old and infirm! Make way for the old and infirm!"

Immediately the crowd ahead parted, the wagon given the road it needed to start forward. Within the moving throng the heavy dray found its own path, Balkerik's call clearing the way as they followed the road south. It was in this manner that Lovar found his way to Das Nephrim. Amongst the fleeing peoples of the frontier the wagon lurched steadily onward, the road clearing before its enormous bulk as Balkerik cajoled and insulted anyone he thought too slow to get out of the way.

For most of the way south the roads were clogged with people or their belongings, all moving either on foot or upon any cart, dray or wagon that could be found for the purpose. There were however, a few times when the road cleared and for a short time Balkerik would sit and return to the conversations that Lovar had so enjoyed on their previous meeting. This time however, both men had something in common that begged discussion.

"Was it Magme that came to you?" the old man asked in a whisper.

"Yes." Lovar replied. "I fell from a Kreal and found myself too injured to move. I would have died but for her intervention."

For a moment there was no reply from the Wagoneer and Lovar turned to find him staring directly at him.

"What is wrong, friend?" Lovar asked.

"You fell from a Kreal?" The old man look incredulous but his countenance quickly turned to a smile. "Now that is a story worth the hearing but there will be more than enough time for it later. You must

have 'ad your Book of Scars opened our you wouldn't be here breathin' so I guess she gave you the skinny?"

"Magme did, but I'm not sure I understand exactly what has happened to me. I can see things and sense things but it is all very confusing."

Balkerik looked at his friend and leaned close to him. What he would say could not be for the ears of any other.

"You are a servant of the Tree now, Brother. When the Caer'dahl gave you back your life it was because the Tree sensed somethin' in you that needed to be preserved. I was found by a Caer'dahl called Honorum when I was injured during the Battle of Bardaros. Fair tore me apart then put me back together. I can tell you I wasn't half happy to survive, but livin' as a Servant needs a change in one's idea of how the world works. From now on you's is at the call of the Tree. It commands and you obey. There ain't no discussion about any of it, you just do it. Good thing is though, the Tree only asks every once in a while. Life is long and good but you gotta drop everythin' when the call comes."

"But what happens if you don't?" Lovar asked.

Balkerik laughed out loud and hit Lovar across the back so hard he almost toppled from his seat.

"There ain't no don't in the minds of the Caer'dahl. Think about what I've just told ya. I was saved at the Battle of Bardaros, that was during the Fifth Horde War more than three hundred and fifty years ago. I have served the Tree since then and have not regretted a day of it. Believe me Master Lovar. When the Tree calls you will answer."

Lovar looked at his friend and massaged his shoulder. "I knew you were older than you looked."

To this the old Wagoneer laughed again but his demeanour became serious as he continued. "Yer service for the Tree comes with many benefits but there is somethin' you must know. People in the world outside ain't happy 'bout things they don't understand. You will live long years but you cannot make yourself known in the world. Your service must be pursued in secret and without bringin' attention to what it is you do. There are many of us that serve the Tree and the Caer'dahl will be fierce in yer defence when it is needed, but do not bring notice to yourself. It brings only trouble and death if yer do."

Lovar nodded and put his gaze upon the road ahead. A new group of refugees lay ahead and Balkerik returned to his well-practised call. "Old and Infirm. Old and Infirm! Make way! Make way for the old

and infirm!"

Against the steady jar and pitch of the wagon Lovar held his seat and thought about what the old wagoneer had said. As a part of the Guild his life had been ordered and constant. He knew the rules that governed his occupation, and although his concerns about the Dwarvendim had placed him in conflict with his betters at the last, he understood his place in that world. Within the Guild he knew his purpose and for the greater part of his life it had been his only pursuit. He had been a Tak but that world had ended in a conflagration that had destroyed all the residing LoreMages. When he had thrust his hand into the wet earth and felt the world turn upon itself he knew the Guild had been lost. The burning towers of Hel'garad were still clear in his mind, the ruthless malice of Vor'ell's great folly bursting out of its dark prison. Whatever power the Guild may have held now firmly resided again in the hands of the Dwarvendim and as a consequence he had been recruited into a new world, one of real magic and real power. It was something he did not see coming.

Looking down the road he tried to divine what his servitude to the Silvan Tree might truly cost him. Lovar was grateful to have survived his fall from the Kreal but he had failed in his mission and Hel'garad had burned. In his mind he knew that there was nothing that he could have done to delay the inevitable, the folly of the Synod repaid in death and destruction, but there was a sadness in him nonetheless. Something valuable to him had passed out of his reach and he knew he would feel the loss for some time to come.

It was a loss however, that would have to be mourned later. The Caer'dahl had given him a specific task to accomplish and its nature filled him with curiosity. He knew much of the history of the Emurion. The ornate stonewood scimitar had been taken as a spoil of war from the personal effects of Aggamem the Elder at the Battle of Kal Murda. At first it had been held in trust by the Stone Kings, and then acquired by the Guild at the sacking of Menion Barac and the surrender of the Dwarvendim. From all the information obtained it was an artefact of great power but the Guild had been unable to activate it or divine its purpose. For decades it had been held within the Prelate Vault at Hel'garad and to complete the first part of his mission he needed to break into that Vault.

The second part was however, far more problematic. To deliver the Emurion into the hands of the Dwarvendim LoreMasters would

require knowing where they were. In all the years that the Guild had hunted them Lovar was certain that only two had been identified. One was the legendary Maturi Hedj but it had been rumoured that he had died, the other the Maturi Len, a man sought by the Guild since the building of the Fortress at Maenum but never found. Where the other nine might be located was something outside of Lovar's knowledge, and as he considered how he might go about finding them his thoughts began to wander. It was in the middle of this reverie that he began to sense something else and it sent a shiver running down his spine.

All about him he could feel a cold malice growing. It was no more than scattered points of intense anger that he could focus upon, but they were waiting, impatience for release, somehow held at bay until the fall of night. Focusing on the sensation he began to feel their hate and malicious will festering like a disease, and then overriding these sensations came visions of dark creatures hiding, taking refuge from the light of day. Lovar turned to Balkerik and the Wagoneer nodded his head. In his eyes Lovar could see that he had felt their presence as well.

Settling himself into a more comfortable position Lovar looked to the horizon. Within the afternoon haze he could see the towers of Das Nephrim rising in the south and estimated it would take the remainder of the day to reach the city. Like all around him his hope lay in reaching its high walls before nightfall.

The Battle of Three Fingers

In the late afternoon Camren Patrice and Jonath Mac rode towards Das Nephrim. Camren had explained as much of what had happened to him as he could but for Jonath each explanation left only more questions, and a greater level of confusion.

“What I don't understand is how you could feel the power of that thing. I felt nuthin' and I ain't blind or deaf either. You know I ain't the sort o' man that'd pry into another's personals but we're in this together. Seems unfair to only have half the story.”

Camren brought his horse to a halt and waited for Jonath to return to his side. Any advantage he might have had in the past by keeping his true history to himself seemed incongruous in the face of the danger that would soon confront them both. It was time to tell his friend the truth.

“I am going to tell you something Jonath, a secret that would get me killed if it ever left this piece of ground. Tell me that it will be your secret, one you will keep.”

Jonath nodded but said nothing.

“We all have our stories Jonath. What we did before we fell foul of the law, before we joined the Free Men of the plains. For me my story started with a life in the LoreMages' Guild, a novice identified as a possible Inquisitor and one of the few Guildsmen able to sense the presence of EarthMagic. For the Guild that was a big thing, a member who could reach out with his mind and find the types of artifacts they needed to build their power. When I started it was all I wanted to do; to go out into the world and bolster the power of the LoreMages. What I did not realise was how I was being used, and as my training intensified I sensed that many about me were beginning to see me as a threat.”

“A threat to what?” interjected Jonath.

“To their power. I am afraid Jonath that I have never been a disciplined man. As much as the Guild tried to mould me to their purposes I pushed back, fighting against the rules of their game that had little to do with harnessing EarthMagic, and everything to do with the power they wanted to garner for themselves.”

“If I had been an obedient servant of the Guild I would probably still be there, and perhaps one of the poor sods I saw obliterated in Hel'garad. But I wasn't. Instead I questioned if the Guild had any real power at all. I had seen nothing that showed anything other than an ability to activate a few ancient devices, and use their faltering power

for what amounted to no more than light shows. Maybe I had been wrong, maybe I had been too full of my own importance. I was rather young but a Guildsman cannot hold such thoughts for they are dangerous.”

Jonath leaned back in his saddle and shook his head. Somehow he knew where Camren's story would lead.

“And what happened?”

“In my youthful hubris I expressed my opinions to a young Tak in a bar in Nephrim. Too much beer I think and not enough restraint. Next thing I am being arrested and brought before the Prelate himself. Imposing cove he was, all decked out in his formals, looking down his nose at me like I was scum. Needless to say it did not go well.”

“An' they threw you out?”

“No, they couldn't just toss me out the door. They needed a pretext and found one readily enough. I was accused of theft and brought before a tribunal. I knew they had nothing on me but that wasn't going to deter them. That same Tak that I had confided in gave evidence against me, and as far as the tribunal was concerned that was good enough. Next day I was on the street.”

“So all this stuff you can do you learned in the Guild?”

Camren shook his head. “No, the Guild taught me nothing. Anything I could do had already been a part of me since birth and that is why they tried to kill me.”

“Kill you?”

“Yes. The same night that I was thrown out. You have to understand Jonath, that men who strive for power founded on a fictional ability to wield EarthMagic cannot tolerate those that might actually be able to do so. I was too much of a risk outside of their control, and I learned quick enough that they had no intention of letting me go quietly. That night two thugs ambushed me in an alleyway near the old markets in the Praag District. Obviously they didn't succeed but I knew right then that it was the Guild who was responsible. One of the men sported a Guild tattoo on his wrist and that was all I needed to know. Ran straight for the city gates and left Nephrim behind. I've never been back since.”

Jonath scratched at his chin and took hold of his horse's reins. “One thing though. It's always bin in me mind that only the Dwarvendim could wield EarthMagic. One o' the reasons why the LoreMages had made sure they were enslaved in the first place. You tellin' me that others can do it to?”

Camren shook his head. “No Jonath, only the Dwarvendim have that power. I am no Shadar and certainly no LoreMaster in the making. I can do only one thing and that is sense sources of EarthMagic. It's like seeing a light in the darkness, only a lot less clear.”

“Fair enough.” Jonath said after a moment. “Your secret is now mine. If there are things comin' our way then we'd better be gettin' off to Nephrim.”

Camren agreed. He could not know what the onset of night might bring and there was only an hour of daylight left. Turning back towards the south-east the two men rode for Das Nephrim, their mutual objective now safety within its stone walls.

It was in the red glimmers of dusk that Camren and Jonath came upon the ruins of Collet's Farm. Das Nephrim stood no more than an hour's ride further to the west and as they approached the derelict stone buildings they could see the lights of the fortress city shining in a wide spray ahead of them. Overhead the sky had begun to darken, the first stars of evening flickering within a vault of deepest blue. Upon the northern and eastern horizons storms crashed against the frontier, and as the men rode Camren gave thought to whether they should stop for the night at the farmhouse rather than risking any travel in the coming dark. The farm had been abandoned more than fifty years before and in its neglect had deteriorated to a roofless shell. Amongst the gangs it had become known as Three Fingers, its three surviving smokestacks a reliable landmark upon the featureless grasslands. Above all it maintained thick stone walls, and in times of danger had proven a solid defensive position.

Camren turned his horse towards the reaching stone stacks and Jonath's horse followed his lead. Jonath however, was not looking at the ruined farmstead. His eyes were searching the horizon to the south and he had seen something.

“Camren!” he yelled into a growing wind. “Critters, loads of 'em.”

The younger man drew his horse to a halt and followed the line of Jonath's outstretched arm. Sure enough he could discern a multitude of shadowed figures running as a group. They were Hresh and far too many for two bandits to handle alone.

“They haven't seen us yet. Make for the Three Fingers and we'll keep out of their way.”

Jonath nodded and urged his horse forward. Together they rode at the gallop, not stopping until they had reached the walls of the

farmhouse. Quickly they tethered their horses within its grey walls and found a position at the far end of the ruin. There they watched as the Hordim moved inexorably closer.

“Awful lot of 'em.” Jonath opined as they watched.

Camren could not help but agree. He could not see them clearly enough in the encroaching dark but he estimated as many as eighty warriors. What they were doing in the lands of men was a question he did not want answered.

“More than I would want to meet personally my friend. Whatever their purpose I vote we remain quiet and let them pass.”

Both men pressed against the cold stone of their hiding place and waited as the Hordim warriors ran northwards. Camren proved correct that they had not seen the bandits for they maintained a course that led them slightly further to the east. When they were no more than a hundred metres from their position Camren took the chance to have a look at the running Hresh. In the half-light they were large dark shadows, almost silent in their movement but well armed and powerfully built. Each carried a long curving scimitar and short spear, and from their general equipment discerned that they must be an insurgency *crue*, well armed and trained in sabotage. He could only guess at what damage the Hordim might have done but as he pondered the possibilities he heard a new sound growing upon the plains. It was the rolling drumbeat of horses at the gallop.

“Oh, cripes!” Jonath exclaimed. From the west a squadron of Kalborean cavalry thundered across the plain towards them. In the old bandit's mind there could only be one reason for their appearance and as he stood he resigned himself to the death that was to come. They had followed him and now he was well and truly caught.

Camren however, could see another, more obvious reason for their approach.

“Get down, you old fool!” he scolded, “They're not after us. Its the Hordim.”

Jonath immediately dropped back behind the crumbling stone. “Who are you callin' an old fool then, eh?”

“If the shoe fits, Jonath.” Camren mumbled under his breath. He had no inclination to save the old bandit's feelings, instead he watched intently as the cavalry rode to the south of the ruins and then swept northwards towards the waiting Hordim. The Hresh had also heard the approach of the soldiers and without a word the *crue* halted, reforming into a defensive position to meet the new threat.

Coming together in a tight formation each of the Hresh jammed their scimitars into the ground, razor-sharp edges facing outwards. Behind the blades the warriors tightened their numbers, using their spears as a thicket of honed steel. Against this the cavalry increased their speed, charging as they bore down upon the Hordim, long lances lowered in their deadly rush.

In truth Camren could not see who might win the contest. In the red glow of dusk the cavalry closed the distance upon the warriors, their blue and black uniforms contrasting with the camouflage green worn by the Hordim. He counted no more than thirty troopers and the Hordim stood at more than twice that. Larger and more physically powerful the Hresh were an adversary better confronted by larger number, and Camren felt himself fearing for the lives that would be lost. Unless the troopers had some advantage he could not yet see many of them would die before this battle was over. In the wars of Arborell there were never survivors on the losing side.

The answer came from the north. With the cavalry almost upon the Hresh another troop of mounted soldiers thundered out of the gathering darkness. With lances aimed at the backs of the Hordim there was little time for the Hresh to reform and both cavalry units hit the warriors simultaneously. In a clash of iron and flesh the battle was joined and in that moment of bloody violence the world changed.

In the midst of the melee a shadow formed, at first no more than a dullness in the grasses that expanded outwards, but one that quickly solidified into a dark, depthless fracture in the ground itself. All that surrounded the rift stepped backwards, both Hordim and Man, and in that hiatus all looked to each other. No one could know what was to come.

With a scream that heralded the emergence of a new force in the world a creature hauled itself out of the rift. Camren looked to Jonath and saw mirrored in his friends eyes the same confusion and fear he felt himself. The monster looked like an ape of the Old World, but grotesque in its proportions and covered not in fur, but in scales of black crystal. Upon impossibly long limbs the beast moved forward and as it advanced Camren could see claws bristling with scythe-like blades. From its presence he could also recognise the same overwhelming sense of malice that he had felt when he had fallen from his horse. But that was not the worst of it. There was more than one.

As he watched two more of the same creatures emerged from the

rift, each struggling to free themselves from the dark pit. In a great heave they slumped onto the damp earth and then tested limbs that had never felt the firm resistance of solid ground. It took only moments and they too stood upon the plain, three monsters with only one purpose. To kill.

In a rush they fell upon both Hordim and Man, attacking whoever stood closest, tearing at flesh and crushing bone in a frenzy of unrestrained violence. Against this assault the Hordim retreated, but only to regroup and throw themselves at the monsters. With spear and scimitar in hand the warriors attacked, probing the monsters' defences as they stabbed and tore at the beasts. In turn the troopers rallied their number and dismounted, their intention to use their lances to corner the creatures and destroy them. It was a plan that seemed logical in its intent but one that proved wholly ineffective. These were Shadowch, nightmares created to live in both real and spectral existences, capable of tearing flesh and breaking stone but as corporeal as a morning mist. Blade-like claws cut and tore at warriors and troopers alike, raking them down as easily as scything wheat in the field, and against this attack Men and Hordim found they had no defence.

Lances that should have cut deep stabbed at no more than the air itself, razor-sharp scimitars that should have cleaved limbs swept in great arcs but found no purchase in flesh. The creatures were no more than mist and no matter the efforts expended by their adversaries were untouched and unharmed. Man and Hordim stood side by side as they battled the Shadowch and all died where they stood.

The two bandits watched aghast as the creatures cut down all who stood before them. In truth there was no battle, just a massacre measured only by who the monsters chose as their next victim. Both Camren and Jonath remained silent but as he watched Camren realised that a voice was softly whispering in his ear. He turned to Jonath but it was not his friend who had spoken. The voice however, had planted the kernel of an idea in his thoughts.

"Jonath," he whispered, "Do you not think it interesting that these creatures only appeared after the suns had already retreated into dusk?"

The old bandit shrugged his shoulders. "What are you thinkin'?"

"I have a theory Jonath. Care to test it with me?"

Jonath could see his friend reaching for a satchel at his side. "No thanks," he replied quickly. "Theories ain't for the likes o' me."

Camren smiled then pulled a flashcharge from his shoulder bag. "Watch what transpires then. You may be the only witness to what happens."

Out on the plain the Shadowch continued their bloody assault and into this turmoil Camren ran for the nearest creature. Coming to a halt he depressed the trigger and threw the flashcharge into the melee, shouting for the nearest troopers to run. As one the men retreated but not quick enough. In a thundering detonation the charge exploded, a brilliant flash of light cutting through the evening gloom and sending out a shockwave that threw all to the ground in flailing tangles of limbs and torn grass. Camren knew what was coming and braced himself for the blast, but he could not have been prepared for the consequences of his brave act.

Within the expanding sphere of light the creatures recoiled in agony, their bodies pierced by its brilliant rays and thrown outwards by the blast. All landed upon the wet grasses and struggled to regain their feet but it was that moment of hiatus that gave both Men and Hordim a fleeting chance to turn the tide. From his bag Camren took another charge but this time threw it beyond the creatures and further to the east. In another blinding explosion the Shadowch were again thrown to the ground but this time they retreated, making for the rift in the ground from whence they had arisen. Seeing the effectiveness of the charges other troopers also threw bombs of their own, a staccato blast of light and sound filling the deepening gloom and forcing the creatures into a rout that only ended when they dove into the ground and disappeared. On their heels warriors and troopers alike ran after them but they were not quick enough to unload any more of the charges into the dark void. As quickly as it had opened the soldiers found the rift gone, only a smoking area of ground remaining to prove its previous existence.

Camren reached the edge of the burnt ground as the remnants of the cavalry gathered to determine their remaining complement. All their officers had been killed and only one sergeant remained to organise the survivors. He was not in a good mood.

"Hold that man!" he shouted. Before Camren could react two pairs of strong hands grabbed him by the upper arms. "Jansen and Bolt, search the farmstead. If there's one here there'll be others about. The rest of you, find the damn horses and where in Providence are those bloody Hresh?"

Immediately the men sprang to action. Two made directly for the

ruined farmhouse, the rest spread out upon the grassland, looking for those horses that had survived the battle. Of the Hordim Camren Patrice could see nothing.

The Sergeant watched as his men set to their tasks then he turned towards Camren. "First things first. Who are you and what were those things?"

Camren thought for a moment. He could not reach the trigger of his satchel bomb but he was a man who never liked to go unprepared.

"I cannot tell you what those things were, for I do not know. What I can tell you is that the flashcharges only repelled them. They'll be back and I don't think we want to be here when they do."

Camren pulled himself free from one of the soldiers holding him and straightened his clothing. None of the men had yet noticed the explosive hanging from his shoulder but he was not about to use it until he had at least tried to talk his way out.

"As for who I am, I am Jaden Durragh, bounty hunter commissioned by the Civic Authority in Das Frontiere to chase down a bandit by the name of Braddick Alun. He stole a number of documents from the Civic Library that the Aldermen are very keen to recover."

Camren could see the Sergeant's disbelief but he was prepared for that as well. "Inside my vest pocket is a warrant issued by those same Aldermen commissioning me to the task. I would read it first before thinking me a liar."

The Sergeant gestured to one of the troopers to take the document from Camren's pocket. Camren had paid good money for the best counterfeiter on the frontier to provide such a warrant. He was now going to see if it would prove money well spent.

With paper in hand the Sergeant lit a match and read through the document. "I don't see the name of Alun anywhere on this warrant. Why is that?"

Camren shrugged and pointed in the general direction of Das Frontiere. "What can I say. I do a lot of work for them and they're too tight to provide a new warrant for each. You haven't seen Alun recently have you? Last thing I heard he was making for Nephrim."

On this point the Sergeant smirked and folded the paper. Motioning for the remaining soldier to release Camren the Sergeant handed back the warrant. He had been convinced of Camren's purpose and as the soldiers returned from the ruins empty-handed he could see no danger in Jaden Durragh.

“It's a dangerous business being out here alone, but I can't say I'm not grateful that you were here. Whatever those things are I'll need to report them to Headquarters and let them know that the charges are our best defence. You be on your way.”

Camren bowed and began to walk quickly back to the ruins. As he went the Sergeant called him to a halt and the bandit could feel his shoulders go cold. Had he been found out?

“One other thing, “ the Sergeant called out. “Braddick Alun was caught outside of Nephrim this morning. Him and his remaining gang were ambushed and killed. Quite a fight I heard. I'm afraid that's one bounty you won't be collecting.”

Camren turned and raised his hands in acceptance. “Such is life.” he replied then turned back towards the farmstead. He did not know if Jonath would be happy, or more likely disappointed, at such news but he was glad to be alive to deliver it.

His deliverance from the hands of the Kalborean Army was not altogether complete however. Until they had gone he could do nothing but light a fire and appear, for all intents, to be making camp and settling for the night. Somewhere in the darkness Jonath had to be hiding, waiting for the troopers to leave. Camren had known that the soldiers would find nothing when they searched the ruins. Jonath was altogether too cunning to remain close once the battle had ended, and he must have removed himself into the gathering dark.

Luckily for the bandits the troopers were in no mood to remain at the battlefield. While a number of the soldiers either collected their surviving horses or tended to their wounded, the remainder began the difficult process of properly identifying their fallen comrades. When it was done the cavalrymen had lined up more than thirty bodies, and planting a lance bearing the Union flag at either end of the line, the troopers left the remains as they were. It was all they could do in the night. Collection and proper burial would have to wait until the light of day and the assumed safety that it would bring.

When the troopers had finally gone Camren waited for Jonath to return. He knew he would not expose his position until he was sure that the cavalry had actually left. There were good reasons why the old man had survived in his vocation as long as he had, and Camren decided to take the time to eat whilst he waited.

With some meat cooking upon the fire he watched the sky darken to the full veil of night. The moons of Arborell had not yet risen and with their absence the sky reached over him as a perfect dome of

black, the stars a spray of pointed lights that gave no illumination. Before his fire he found warmth and as he waited for Jonath he watched the wood spark and break apart as it fell into embers.

Only after a full hour had passed did Jonath make an appearance. He arose from the night's shadows with horse in train and a smile on his face.

"By the Fates, Camren. I thought you'se was well an' truly took. What did you say to tha' trooper that made 'im let you go?"

Camren smiled and took the counterfeit warrant from his vest pocket. "It would seem," he said, "that being a Bounty Hunter is more preferable to the Union than being a bandit. I hope I will never be in a position to have to use it again."

Jonath laughed and shook his head. "Well, its not like you'se was really lyin'. We is after all huntin' scum anyway."

"Actually Jonath." Camren replied. "There's something you should know."

Jonath looked at his friend. "That don't sound so good."

"I guess it depends on your point of view. Braddick Alun is dead, his whole gang ambushed outside of Nephrim. According to the Sergeant who told me it was quite a fight, and one that ended very badly for Alun. I am afraid there will be no vengeance there."

For just a moment Jonath Mac stood silent. Then he just laughed.

"By Providence's blind eye." he exclaimed. "Just imagine if I'd still bin with that lot. I'd be as dead as a post just like them. Just goes to show that no bad deed goes unpunished, eh."

Camren looked at his friend. "You're not disappointed then?"

Jonath shook his head and looked out towards Das Nephrim. "Nah. I just wanted 'im dead an' now he is. Best vengeance of all is breathin' when the other ain't. I'll spend the money I'll save havin' a good time instead. Serves the bastard right. He got just what he deserved."

"Well then," Camren said, 'we'd better be on our way. The open plains at night are now no place for Men."

On that Jonath's humour faded, replaced instead by a seriousness that Camren had not seen in him before.

"What about those critters though. In sixty-five years I ain't seen nothin' like 'em. Those flash-charges did the job, fair itched 'em up, but they won't be goin' away."

Camren agreed with his friend. "I don't know what they are, or for that matter what their purpose might be. But I'll tell you this, there are men in this world that know exactly what they are and who made

them. I felt it when they emerged from the pit. The hatred they radiated was human and I'll bet all the silver you've got in that purse around your neck that some fool created them. I don't know how I just know someone did."

Jonath considered Camren's words. He had no reason to discount anything that the younger man might say. He had seen enough to know that the world they understood had fundamentally changed and if those creatures were truly man-made then that would indeed be typical.

"Fair enough," he said after a few moments of silence. "Jus' leaves us with one question. What ta do now. Alun is dead an' don' get me wrong that's a good thing, but it leaves us with no purpose."

Camren kicked at the edges of the fire and thought on it. "I think Jonath, that we must devise for ourselves a new purpose. You've got enough coin and jewels in that purse to live out the rest of your life in comfort. You have no need to thieve any more. Maybe we should make for Nephrim now for the safety it provides and then perhaps find for ourselves a less trying existence. Maybe even something legal."

Jonath's first instinct was to laugh out loud, the idea of going legit somehow ludicrous, but he didn't. In his bones he felt weary, all the long years of his banditry now weighed heavily upon him and he could see the same weariness in his friend's face as well. Maybe there was a chance for an easier life. He was however, a practical outlaw.

"Only problem we've got Camren is the law. They ain't gunna just let us ride into the sunset all safe and proper like."

To this Camren stood and began to prepare for the ride to Das Nephrim. "Think on this Jonath," he said as he worked, "As far as the Law is concerned the Alun gang have *all* been killed. When was the last time you heard the Administrators Guild properly identify, or for that matter, sign off on the death certificate of a dead bandit. As far as they are concerned you were a part of that gang and there's nobody alive to say otherwise. Change your name Jonath, buy some new papers and get a haircut."

"But what about you Camren, how do the Fates give you a free passage?"

Camren looked out towards the lights of Das Nephrim and thought on what he had seen happen in Hel'garad. "I've been thinking about that. I have lived a bandit's life for too many years, all to keep distance between myself and the Guild. If what I saw of Hel'garad is true the Guild is now no more, and if that is so then I may also have a

chance for a less troubled life. I just have to make sure.”

He turned to Jonath. “I wonder Jonath, if you might indulge me for a few days. I believe that Das Nephrim is indeed our best chance for refuge but it is to Hel'garad that I must go in short order. It would not take long to determine what has happened to the Guild and in doing so ascertain whether they remain a threat.”

Jonath did not have to think long on Camren's request. He had faced death all too frequently in the past days and had decided he was well and truly done with banditry.

“Sounds like a plan.” he said quickly. “And of course I'm comin' along for the ride. When do we start?”

Dark Shadows and an Unexpected Meeting

Quickly the two men saddled their horses and doused the remnants of Camren's fire. In the ensuing dark the bandits rode eastwards, using the flickering lights of Das Nephrim as their only landmark in a world beset by shadows. It was not a pleasant ride. Both Jonath and Camren could feel the change that had gripped the world and in that embrace both began to see evidence that the lands of Men were under attack. From the north a bitterly cold wind blustered across the grasslands and upon its chilled breath there came the smells of burning wood and seared flesh. Smoke billowed from several points along the horizon to the north-east, and with the rising of the moons they could see clearly the dark forms of huge herds of Sempaca moving southwards. But that was not all.

High upon the winds great shadows moved against the stars. Vast flying creatures unlike anything the men had seen glided silently in the night sky, their monstrous forms winking out the stars as they moved. Purposefully the creatures flew, searching the ground as they moved eastwards, all in groups of three and all radiating a malice that Camren could feel keenly in his thoughts as he rode. When they were no more than twenty minutes from the gates of Das Nephrim one of those flying monsters saw them.

From on high the creature turned from its eastern path and curved in a wide arc, its triangular stingray-like wings slowly beating as it veered back towards the men. Immediately its two compatriots turned to follow, the three monsters tracking to intersect Camren and Jonath's course across the plain. Camren noticed them first and brought his mount to a halt. Calling to Jonath he pointed at the sky and saw his friend's face as he recognised the danger.

"Cripes!" Jonath exclaimed. "Got any more of them charges?"

Camren looked at the enormous creatures and shook his head. "I'm not sure they'll do any good against such huge adversaries and I'm not that sure I want to test my luck again."

Quickly he surveyed the plains and then gestured towards a large herd of Sempaca to the north. The huge herbivorous animals were on the run, thundering over the thick grasses as they tried to outrun a danger that neither of the men could yet see. For Camren the Sempaca were their only hope.

"There's our chance Jonath," he yelled as he turned his horse towards the herd. "If we can get inside their number we'll be lost to the creatures above. We just have to get to them before those monsters

can get to us.”

Jonath didn't like it but he understood the intent. Urging his horse on he followed Camren as they both galloped towards the approaching herd. Only at the last did Camren veer towards the edges of the rushing beasts and then turn in behind them, his horse finding a position amongst the stranglers at the rear. Jonath followed him in and with the beasts all around rode hard as the flying creatures arrowed in on the herd. Camren could not know what to expect, his only hope that the creatures might lose them amongst the surging stampede, or if it was hunger that ruled their actions take some of the larger Sempaca instead. What did happen almost killed them both.

Out of the dark sky the monsters descended upon the herd. Only when they were almost on top of the Sempaca could either men see them clearly, and when they were close enough there came upon both a cold recognition of the nature of their monstrosity. For Camren it was proof that there was nothing natural about their creation for they were indeed the product of a sick mind.

Slamming into the ground ahead of the herd the creatures stood on thin taloned legs and roared at the approaching Sempaca. More than twelve metres tall the creatures were a combination of a predatory cat's body upon which had been fused the wide flat wings of a manta-ray. The head was that of a Voor'cat and each possessed a tail extending as a scorpion-like appendage to the rear. All were covered in the same black, crystalline scales that the men had seen before, and in the silver light of the moons they glistened with a faint blue tinge. They were indeed the product of someone's nightmares and their intentions proved both simple and brutal.

Immediately the monsters advanced upon the Sempacas and began killing them. With claw and tooth the monsters tore at the Sempaca, the unfortunate beasts driven by their own momentum into the killing ground. Camren and Jonath both realised their danger as one, drawing back on their horses and veering to the east as the screams and grunts of the animals rose to a pitch before them. Lost in the killing the monsters revelled in the deadly violence of their purpose, and for a short moment did not see the bandits riding out of the herd. Then they did.

With a bellowing roar one of the monsters arose from the ground, throwing torn Sempaca bodies to earth as huge wings dug at the air, dragging its immense form skywards. Before either men could put hand to weapon the creature had glided over their heads and then

swooped in an arc back upon them. With talons extended it made directly for Camren's horse, its mouth gaping with rows of black teeth, and in that moment he knew he had no choice. Pulling one of the flashcharges from his belt he depressed the trigger and threw the charge high into the air over their heads. Seeing what his friend was doing Jonath instantly dove from his horse and lay upon the ground. In that same moment Camren dismounted also but he did not go to ground. Instead he threw another of the charges directly at the beast and waited.

In the space of two heartbeats the first of the flashcharges detonated. Exploding no more than metres from the monster's head the creature recoiled, its wings folding up about its face as if to protect itself from the full force of the charge. It was not fast enough. Embroiled in a sphere of expanding light the monster screamed and began to dissolve, a huge part of its upper body embraced within a shockwave of roiling gases and burning embers. Just as it fell to ground the second charge detonated, and this time caught the monster squarely in its chest. In an eruption of light and shredded ground the creature disappeared within the blast, the night torn aside for those few seconds as the flashcharge did its work. Just as quickly however, the light dissipated and then something curious happened.

At his back Jonath called to Camren. Turning around he saw the herd milling in confusion and to the south two huge piles of smouldering ash. For a moment he could not fathom what had happened but as Jonath ran to his side all came clear.

"Did you see it!" gasped Jonath.

Camren shook his head. "No. What happened?"

"When you threw the charges I hit the dirt, facin' back towards the 'erd. Saw it all. Bleedin' brilliant I tell ya. First charge went off and blow me down both of the other critters heeled backwards as if someone 'ad hit 'em with a club. Second charge pops and all hell breaks loose. Both start going all blue and then just slumped to the ground, all ash and queer smells. I tell ya old Jonath knows somethin' nobody else does."

Camren looked to his friend for an explanation and Jonath was happy to provide it.

"Don't ya see? All these critters are connected. Hurt one of the three and the same happens to the others. Kill one o' their number an' the other two die. Bleedin' brilliant."

"And light is our only defence." Camren continued. "We are going to

have to tell someone and quickly.”

“Then let's get outta here.” said Jonath. “I've 'ad enough o' these critters.”

Recovering their horses the men rode swiftly for Das Nephrim. Against the horizon it was an impressive structure. More than five kilometres in circumference the Outer Wall of the city encompassed the entire population within stone ramparts that rose twenty metres above the surrounding plains and farmlands. Within this immense outer wall the city itself was divided into three distinct districts. The Praag district laid claim to being the oldest of the enclosed areas and in modern times made up the majority of Das Nephrim's mercantile and market activities. the Alto district that protected most of the residential areas and the Keep, a high man-made mountain at the city's centre that rose in three levels above the rest of Das Nephrim. Upon each of those levels could be found the administrative and military installations that signified its regional importance, and at the very summit of the Keep a high tower known simply as the Watch.

Glistening grey and white in the moonlight the city stood as a fortress capable of providing refuge for half the entire population of the frontier, and as the men rode towards it they could see that many others had decided to also seek shelter within its high walls. From the north there trailed a long line of lights, moving slowly upon wagons and carts as a mass of refugees flooded out of the frontier. Camren could not see them but he knew the South Road must be thick with people on foot or travelling upon whatever contrivance they might have found to move them. All saw Das Nephrim as a sanctuary and Camren and Jonath would be no different.

Like its sister city Das Frontiere, Das Nephrim possessed only two immense gates, one within the north wall and another upon the south. Camren elected to make for the north entrance even though it stood crammed with wagons and a multitude of tired, desperate people. It was both closer and he could see a large contingent of soldiers marshalling refugees through the open gates. For the first time in a very long while Camren found himself glad to see those blue and black uniforms, and with Jonath at his back rode directly for a large command tent situated to the west of the highway.

Jonath however, did not stand as eager to make the acquaintance of those he knew simply as the Law. Holding back he chose instead to watch from a distance as Camren rode up to the tent and called for the unit commander. To Jonath's surprise the Commander strode out

of his tent and listened intently to all that Camren Patrice had to say, their conversation culminating in a number of messengers being sent both into the city, and by horse northwards to Das Frontiere. The old bandit had to smile when the Commander shook Camren's hand and motioned for him to enter the city. That was Jonath's cue and he was soon by his friend's side once again as they rode beneath the enormous lintel of the North Gate.

"Well," Jonath said quietly as they entered the milling crowds of the Praag District. "Aren't you one ta mix with the quality. Fair thought he'd have yer head before you 'ad a chance to say ought."

Camren smiled and shrugged his shoulders. "What can I say Jonath. Maybe I'm getting used to being legal."

Jonath laughed and then abruptly yelled at the crowding bodies ahead to let them through. The market district lay crammed with refugees and frantic town officials attempting to make sense of the sudden influx, but Das Nephrim was a city designed for such extremes. In times of peace the Praag served as a vast market and commercial area, one that in times of danger could be opened up into a series of open squares. In those squares small tent cities could arise and even as the two men pushed through the crowds they could see the first pieces of canvass being raised.

Within this melee of frightened people and shouting soldiers Camren noticed something that immediately took his attention. It was a wagon at the southern edge of the market square and upon its large tray he could see a collection of children and old folk being carefully unloaded. Unlike the chaos of the crowds it struck Camren as a scene of unnoticed compassion that kept his gaze until he noticed something else, and then his demeanour changed dramatically. Upon the wagon's bench seat he could see a man sitting in shadow, waiting for the Wagoneer to finish his work. Even in the half-light of the market square he recognised the man's profile, dishevelled as he was and obviously trying to remain incognito. Some faces, he thought, you can never really forget.

"Mind the horses Jonath. I have a score to settle."

Pushing through the remains of the crowd Camren strode deliberately up to the seated man and grabbed him by his travel coat. With one heave he pulled him straight off the bench and into the mud, his balled fist coming down once upon the man as he struggled to regain his feet. The blow put the man down, but he was no easy victim. Striking out with his boot he caught Camren across the knee,

buckling his leg and toppling him sideways. With that moment of opportunity the other man sprang to his feet and drew a long bladed dagger from his clothing. Camren did the same, his face alive with the expectation of close combat and a long-awaited revenge. It was not to come. Before he could counter the blow a long Wagoneer's whip lashed down upon his arm, wrenching the blade from his hands. Backing up Camren took in his new opponent, a large but old man of dubious parentage.

Considering that the tide had turned against him he waited for the attack to come but found instead Jonath moving in front of him, dagger also ready for whomever might wish to continue the fight. The old bandit seemed more than ready for blood.

"Ok boys, whose first?"

It was Camren that stayed his hand. "It's alright Jonath. This man I know even if he does require a good beating."

Turning to the first of his foes Camren bowed slightly. "Its not like an Inquisitor to be so comfortable with violence. You've changed Lovar."

To this Malleus Lovar rubbed his head and answered. "Maybe so, but not as much as you Brother."

The Guild House

Within the chaos of the milling crowds the two men faced each other. Camren wished only to lay his hands upon Lovar and exact a measure of revenge for grievances long past but long remembered. He stayed his hand however, at the other corner of the square he could see three Guardsmen looking their way and their attention he did not wish to foster. Instead he decided accusation to be the better path.

"You call me Brother but it is you who denounced me. Face the man you dishonoured and give reason for your treachery!"

Lovar moved forward, his intention to calm the situation before it became any more violent. It was Balkerik however, who moved with greater purpose, placing himself between the two antagonists.

"Now friend," he said quietly. "Why would you be wishin' to do harm in the midst of so much anguish. Is there not enough trouble here for us already?"

"Stand aside old man. This is not your concern." replied Camren

"Well, I'd be careful who you be callin' old. You don't look so prim yerself." With that Balkerik pulled a dagger from his belt and stood his ground. It was Lovar that placed a hand on his friend's shoulder.

"There is no need friend, this man has a reason for anger even though he does not know the truth of it."

Camren stepped forward and sneered at Lovar "Truth! You gave no vouch for my innocence and in consequence my vocation was terminated. Because of you I have spent years in the wilderness, my life given over to banditry and violence. Tell me what other truth there is that I need discover?"

Lovar slowly lowered Balkerik's blade and moved towards Camren.

"It was the greatest mistake of my life that I did not speak on your behalf, Camren. It was a different time then and we were both novices, fresh to the Guild and without voice. I was pressured by the Prefects to remain silent, and I see now that I was told lies that left me believing you would remain in your studies. For all of this I am truly sorry."

For just a moment Camren was taken aback. He had spent years rehearsing in his head how he might argue the point of Lovar's guilt, and in doing so counter all the arguments the man might use to justify his betrayal. Lovar's word had left him instead without counter. He had never expected an apology.

In that moment of pause the two men remained silent as the crowd moved around them. Through the mud and piles of discarded

belongings the people of the frontier milled aimlessly as town officials began the arduous task of organising food and shelter for the multitude. When the first drops of rain settled upon them all it seemed the wrong place for Camren to press his case, and instead he decided to bide his time.

“Well we can settle our differences at another time. Right now we should look to shelter and a decent meal.”

To this Lovar nodded his head in agreement. “I know just the place.”

For a moment Lovar spoke softly to Balkerik and the Wagoneer nodded. “I have lodgings only a few blocks from here that will provide us with shelter. My friend must stable the horses and will join us later. If you are willing you need only follow me.”

With that Lovar moved off, pushing through the crowds as he made for the eastern edge of the market square. Both Camren and Jonath Mac followed, although Jonath did pull his friend back for a moment. “Are ya sure we should be goin' anywhere with this cove. He does not strike me as the trustworthy type.”

Camren smiled. “Don't worry Jonath. Malleus Lovar is a Guildsman who now finds himself without power or privilege. He is alone in the world and his changed circumstances will no doubt have unsettled him. We will eat his food, and we will take whatever shelter he can give. When the time is one of my choosing I will settle properly the differences we have between us.”

Jonath smiled in reply and gestured for Camren Patrice to lead the way. Quickly the two men caught up with Lovar and followed the Historian as he negotiated a path through dimly lit and overcrowded streets. With the influx of refugees the narrow lanes of the city were almost impassable but after a few carefully selected detours Lovar found himself at the door of a small three-storey terrace apartment. It was there that he paused.

“Understand me Patrice,” he said firmly. “I offer you sanctuary here because I believe you may be of use to me. Both food and shelter are yours to take, and because of my past injustice to you are given freely as a token of the part I played in that injustice. Don't however, think of these offerings as some sign of weakness. Make trouble here and you will find that I am not the man you once knew.”

With that Lovar whispered something towards the door. In response a series of latches were thrown and the door swung wide. Standing in the doorway stood a small man, clothed in the colours of

the Guild and holding in one hand a damp cleaning cloth. He appeared surprised to see the Historian.

“Master Lovar,” he said in a whisper. “How is it that you come here? I received notification from the Guild that your lodging rights were to be revoked. Something about you being summoned to the Synod. All sounded rather serious.”

Lovar pushed his way inside and shook the man's hand. “Things have changed, Madden. The synod is no more and we all now have greater affairs to concern ourselves with. I will need four beds and food for the same. Are you able to provide?”

Madden nodded. “Yes Sir. Nobody has been in for days and we are fully stocked.”

Lovar looked to his companions and then turned again to Madden. “Take these men to the wash rooms and find them some clean clothes. I will be in my usual room if you need me.”

“Very well Sir. Come along gentlemen. While I prepare a meal you can get cleaned up.”

With that Madden ushered Camren and Jonath into a large communal bathing area at the rear of the house. For the bandits it was as if they had stumbled into paradise. Clean tiled floors and three large white baths, towels and hot piped water awaited them as Madden busied himself running baths, and after a short absence from the bathing room, returning with clean clothes for both men.

Jonath could not remember the last time he had taken a bath and as he slid into its hot waters he tremored from the sensation of it. He did not speak for a while, relaxing in a fashion that he had not allowed himself for a very long time. When he did speak again his words echoed about the neatly tiled room.

“This Lovar doesn't seem so bad after all. Seems accommodatin' enough.”

Camren snorted and rubbed soap across his arms. “Don't be fooled by his civility Jonath. The man is an Inquisitor of the Guild and if he's being accommodating its only because he wants something from us.”

“What like?”

“I do not know,” replied Camren. “but you can be sure that its got something to do with those creatures. I don't know how but I believe the Guild is involved and I'll be damned if I'm going to help him fix it.”

Jonath sat for a moment, he was going to advise his friend not be too hasty but then he sniffed the air.

“Camren,” he said quietly. “Is that fryin' bacon I can smell?”

Camren sat upright and took in a deep breath.

“By Gedhru's beard.” he replied. “It certainly is!”

As one they stood and then stepped from the baths, grabbing for towels and quickly drying themselves. Selecting clothes from the pile provided by Madden they dressed and then made their way down the house's main hallway until they found a large, well lit dining room. Upon its central table there was carefully arrayed a selection of fried meats, pies, cheeses and fruits. Standing at the foot of the table was Madden, his hands filled with glasses and one large bottle of wine settled in the crook of his elbow. When he saw the bandits he turned towards them and half bowed.

“Were the clothes satisfactory Gentlemen?”

Both Camren and Jonath responded in the affirmative and this seemed to please the man greatly. “If you would take a seat Master Lovar has asked that you wait a few moments for him to join you. Both he and Master Balkerik will be with you shortly.”

At the invitation both men took a seat, and although it was difficult for Jonath, waited. As they did so Camren looked about the dining room and a flood of memories returned to him. Simple things jogged the most curious of remembrances in his thoughts. The standard Guild cutlery immediately became familiar in his hands, the crest fixed to the eastern wall above the fireplace a strong symbol of a life that had been torn from him. As he surveyed the food and felt the smooth comfort of the clothes he had chosen it only reinforced in his mind the injustice that people like Lovar had perpetrated against him. When the Historian and Balkerik strode into the room his anger had returned in full measure.

Seeing Lovar, Camren Patrice rose from his chair, his intention to jump at the man and beat him down. What he received instead was the heavy hand of Balkerik, taking him by the shoulder and forcing him back onto his chair. The wagoneer proved immensely strong and Camren could not resist the force that Balkerik so easily placed upon him. Right then Camren realised that there was more to these men than he could see. The old wagoneer had the strength of a Dwarvendim Axeman and he could not reconcile the man's aged frame with the overwhelming power he had applied to his shoulder. He could see also that Lovar was not the same man that he had known all those years before. He was much older, but there was something about him that radiated a self-assurance he could not remember in the man he had known in his youth. Anger evaporated

quickly as he watched the two men take their seats and instead curiosity took its place. If there was to be a reckoning it would be at another time and another place.

Lovar sat upon the opposite edge of the table and Balkerik took a place at his side. With the two groups of men facing each other Lovar motioned for all to eat and in an uncomfortable silence all partook of the food provided by Madden. Neither Jonath nor Balkerik spoke during the first half of the meal but Camren Patrice had questions and no wish to wait for them to be uttered.

“Why have you brought us here Malleus?” he asked. “You could have just as easily called for the Guardsmen as given us quarters for the night.”

Lovar cut a piece of beef and laid it on his plate before he answered. “Did you feel the change?”

Camren sat back in his chair and looked hard at the Historian. When he answered he did so carefully.

“I did. Something awful has arisen in the world and it doesn't like us at all.”

Lovar nodded and gestured towards Balkerik. “We know what has happened and the danger that now prowls the four Nations cannot be defeated by force of arms alone. I have a mission that must be completed and I would like you to join it.”

Camren looked at the Historian and laughed. “Me. By the Fates Lovar, you've lost your mind. I am not about to help pull the Guild's backside out of any fire of their own making.”

“So you know the Guild is responsible?”

“I have my suspicions. Why don't you explain exactly what has happened. I have almost been killed twice by those things and I would really like to know why.”

Lovar put down his knife and fork and began to tell Camren Patrice everything that he knew of Vor'ell's Folly. In detail he outlined the attack on the Fortress at Maenum and the mission given to the Dwarvendim to restore the Tellandra. Although it proved difficult he told all of his meeting with the Prelate Donemay and the Guild's corruption and need for power. With no word spoken by any other at the table he outlined the breaking of the locks that held the Shadowch in their dark prisons, and of his flight to the south and ultimate failure to turn the Synod from its own folly. What he could not mention was his service to the Silvan Tree. That was something that had to remain secret. When he was done the room remained quiet. It was Jonath

that first gave voice to the silence.

“So that stone-eater who saved me was the guy you’re talkin’ about?”

Lovar looked to the old bandit. “You met Vesh?”

“Yeh. There was me all staked out an’ ready fer the crows, when he rides along on that enormous ‘orse of ‘is and saves me bacon. I told ‘im not to go near the mountains you know. Full o’ critters they are. Gotta say I’m impressed that he lived long enough ta do the job.”

Camren put up his hand and gestured Jonath to silence. The old bandit shrugged and returned to his plates as the younger placed both hands on the table. “So these Shadowch now roam at will and there are multitudes of them?”

Lovar nodded.

“And you have a plan to stop them?” said Camren softly.

“I do.” replied the Historian.

“Then I’m all ears. What must be done.”

The Historian looked directly into the eyes of the man sitting opposite him and considered for a moment whether it was worth telling him anything more. When himself and Balkerik had driven through the gates of Das Nephrim a voice had come into his thoughts. It had been no more than a whisper at the edges of his consciousness but it had been clear nonetheless.

“The man in blue will help you.”

Curious as it was he knew it was a message, and one that he should take notice of. Looking around he could see no such man and it was not until Patrice had pulled him from the wagon that the import of the message had become clear. Surrounding the man there glimmered a thin aura of blue light, something he had never seen before, but somehow not surprising when he considered the way his senses had changed after the opening of his Book of Scars. Whether the aura was a product of some special ability Patrice might have, or whether it was simply a marker placed upon him by the Caer’dahl to identify him, was something the Historian did not know.

Looking at him in the bright light of the Dining Room he could see much of the man he knew so many years ago but he had definitely changed. Violence and rough living had left their marks upon him and Lovar could not say that Patrice was a man that could be trusted. Then, of course, there was the matter of Patrice’s own distrust. Betrayal was a blunt object that had the capacity to distort the character of even the best of men, and considering the years that had

passed he could not say that Patrice would even want to help. The Caer'dahl however, had given Lovar a sign, and he was not about to ignore it.

“The destruction of the Shadowch is not something that any of us have the means to achieve alone. Other men and greater magics must battle with the forces unlocked by Vor'ell's great folly, but in the fulfilment of that goal I have been given a small part that I must play and I believe that you can help. Within the Prelate's Vault in Hel'garad there is an ancient sword known as the Emurion. It must be found and then taken in haste to a Maturi of the Grand Circle. Finding the sword shall not be so difficult. Finding the location of one of the LoreMasters is, quite frankly, a part of the task I do not know how to begin.”

For a moment the room remained silent. Again it was Jonath that spoke first. “So killin' these things for good depends on findin' a sword and taken it to a Maturi?”

“That is right.” answered Lovar.

“Well that's fine then. Getting' the sword is just a matter of ridin' off to Hel'garad. If ya want a Maturi then I knows of one, and he's a reasonable cove ta boot.”

Lovar looked hard at the old man, his heart quickening in his chest.

“You know the location of a Lore Master of the Grand Circle?”

“Sure. Done a load of work for one of 'em a few years back. Secretive types but they pay well.”

“And where might he be?” Lovar asked carefully.

“Ah,” Jonath replied. “Now that's the kicker. You see I'm not one to give over a client, especially one whose be'in hunted by the Law. Doesn't mean that I won't help though, just requires you find the sword first.”

Camren looked at his friend and wondered at his loyalty to the Maturi. “What do you mean Jonath?” he asked.

“Well, the Maturi is only gonna be of help if the sword can be taken to him. No sword. No need to see the Maturi and no need for me to give up a friend to possible 'arm. You find the sword and I'll take ya straight to 'im. Seems a good deal and a fair one at that.”

The Historian stared hard at the old bandit then smiled. No matter the man's motives, finding the Emurion was indeed the key to everything. Without it everything else would be moot.

“Agreed Jonath Mac,” he said firmly. “but when we have the Emurion in our possession I will expect your help in getting it to the Maturi.”

Jonath smiled and stuck his fork into a huge piece of cheese. "You've got me word on it."

With that Lovar turned his attention back to Camren Patrice. He could see in the man's eyes the lingering embers of an anger that would not be quelled easily.

"The Shadowch have been released, Camren," he said firmly, "and it is only the Emurion and the knowledge of the LoreMasters that will save us all from disaster. I ask that you leave aside your anger for both the Guild and myself at least whilst this task remains incomplete. What say you Brother. Will you help?"

Camren shifted in his seat, but before he could answer a loud knock echoed down the hallway. In response Madden shuffled up the corridor, wiping his hands on a cloth as he answered the door. From the dining room all the men could hear was the muffled sounds of a low conversation and then the door closing upon its latch. After only a short pause Madden appeared in the doorway.

"Sorry to interrupt Gentlemen but things in the city have become quite grave. The City Eldermen have declared all homes to be opened for the accommodation of refugees including all the Guild Houses. We have been allocated fifteen families to billet within these walls and I will be hard pressed to keep them all within the rooms available."

Lovar looked to his companions and then asked, "Will you need us to leave, Madden?"

The Housekeeper went wide eyed at the thought. "Oh no, Sir. It would not do that a Tak of the Guild be pushed from his own house. It would help though, if you Gentlemen might accept the old servant lodgings in the attic space. It is clean and dry and will keep you away from the noise of so many within these walls."

"That will be no problem Madden. Will you need help with the refugees?" asked the Historian.

"No sir. I have an assistant who will be in tomorrow morning. I would ask however, if you know how many days you might be staying?"

"We will be leaving at first light of morning. If you might have a breakfast ready I would be most appreciative."

"Very well Sir. I will make up the beds and take your belongings to the attic. Will there be anything else?"

Lovar considered the question then shook his head. "No, but thank you Madden."

With that the Housekeeper turned on his heel and moved quickly

into the hallway.

When the man was gone Lovar looked again to Camren Patrice. “In the morning myself and Balkerik shall be riding for Hel’garad. There we will recover the Emurion and then, with Jonath’s direction, take it with speed to the Maturi of his acquaintance. I would value your company on this mission, but it is your choice whether you come or not. I would advise that we finish eating then take advantage of the beds provided by Madden. It will be an early morning, and a long day.”

Together the men finished the remains of their meals then retired to the attic for the night. It proved to be just as the Housekeeper had described it. The old servant quarters spread before them as a long room divided along one side by a series of stalls, each separated by walls from floor to ceiling but open at the front. Within each sat a wood-framed bed and a small set of drawers. The other half of the attic served as a common area, with a long table, a set of wash basins and a series of storage lockers lining the walls. Only one window graced this room, its four-pane glass providing a narrow view to the north. Good to his word Madden had made up four of the beds and placed their belongings upon each. Quickly the men found the stall that the Housekeeper had chosen for them and then made ready for the night. Exhausted from the trials of the day it did not take long for all to fall into sleep.

The North Gate

In the second hour before dawn Lovar was awoken by a sharp tremor that ran through the floor beneath his bed. Startled by the sudden movement he lay still and listened hard for some clue to its origin. About him the attic remained quiet. He could hear the heavy rise and fall of Balkerik's slumber in the stall next to his own, but when a shadow crossed the floor at the foot of his bed he grabbed instinctively for his dagger.

"Who goes there?" he commanded. It was Camren Patrice that answered.

"You felt that too?"

Without waiting for Lovar to answer Camren made for the window and peered out into the clear night air. Both moons hung high overhead and he had an unobstructed view of the cityscape to the north, including the Gates and the ramparts that guarded them. It was as he surveyed the dark grey stonework that he saw a huge gout of dust arise from the rear of the gates, and then the almost black forms of soldiers running across the battlements. Within a heartbeat a great tremor ran through the floor again, a shockwave that brought Lovar immediately to Camren's side.

"What do you see, Brother?"

Camren looked at Lovar and pointed towards the North Gate. "Something's come knocking Lovar, and I don't think its welcome."

Without a word Lovar ran back to his stall and began to dress.

"Where are you going?" Camren asked urgently.

"I am to going to see what is going on. Care to join me?"

Camren nodded and moved with haste for his clothes. As he dressed Lovar roused Jonath and Balkerik.

"There is trouble at the North Gate. Myself and Camren are going to determine what it might be."

"And what should we do?" asked the old wagoner.

Lovar stopped for a moment and considered what should be done. "Wake up Madden and get him to put together food for two days. Get all our belongings and ready the wagon and horses. If we do not return by sunrise make for Hel'garad. If all goes well we will find you upon the road later in the day. If we do not follow you know the mission and what is required to complete it."

Balkerik nodded and got to work.

Quickly Lovar and Camren Patrice took up their weapons and

made their way downstairs. They had got no further than half-way down the hallway when another enormous impact shuddered through the house. With that tremor the men could hear tired voices rising from each of the bedrooms and at the door they found Madden, standing in his night shirt and peering out through a peep-hole in the door.

“Are the streets clear, Madden?” Lovar asked.

“No sir. Soldiers are out in force and moving towards the Gates. Can I do anything?”

Lovar nodded. “Balkerik will be down in a few minutes. He’ll give you instructions.”

The Housekeeper bowed his head and then opened the door. Out into the night air both men ran, the chill a dull ache in their chests after the warmth of the Guild House. With boots slapping upon damp cobblestones they moved quickly through the streets, passing through the tent city that had once been the central markets. There they found a huddled mass of refugees, all crouching quietly in the dark and all with a fear upon them that Lovar had only ever seen before on terrified children. Once proud men cowered in the shadows, paralysed by the nightmares that threatened them and the historian understood their fear. Here at their gates hammered unknown monsters, beings without form yet able to kill without need of defence. The threat was beyond the salvation that might be found in sharp steel and high walls. He could understand their fear for against the Shadowch they were helpless.

Through those quiet crowds the two men made for the city walls. Only one soldier tried to stop them, but a quick gesturing of the sign of the Guild gave them passage directly to the battlements no more than a hundred yards from the North Gates. In the dim light of the moons above both men looked down upon the surrounding grasslands and despaired at what they found.

Before the Gates there stood three enormous creatures, humanoid in appearance but giant in form and as black as the darkest night. Lovar watched as they balled huge fists and slammed them relentlessly into the thick gates. The iron shuddered under the impact but held, only to be hammered again and again as violent tremors ran through stone and metal alike.

Against this onslaught the Town guards were unloading everything they had. Cross-bolts and arrows hailed down upon the creatures but had no effect, most passing through the monsters as if it were no more

than smoke. Burning oil poured out upon it but achieved only to illuminate the plain in a ruddy glow that outlined the approach of dozens more of the grotesque creatures. In this light the danger to Das Nephrim became all too clear. The Shadowch attacking the gates were only a precursor to the monstrosities that were gathering on the plains beyond.

In groups of three the creatures advanced upon the walls; insect-like monsters and snakes, grotesque apes and winged horrors that broke from the surrounding dark like nightmares come to life. All were different but all had one thing in common. They all possessed the shimmering black skin that Camren had seen before. In the reflected light of the city they glistened and flashed as they ran or loped forward. It was a vision that any of the men standing upon the wall could ever forget.

Black as shadows the creatures skittered and rushed towards the stone walls of the city. For a reason that Lovar could not define none of the Shadowch could climb over, or pass through, the solid ramparts and instead howled and yammered at the gates, waiting for the first of their number to break through the shuddering entranceway. About the two men the soldiers of the Town Guard stood dumbfounded, unable to bring an effective defence and all on the verge of panic. It was Camren Patrice who gave them a way forward.

Looking to the nearest guardsman he shouted above the howls of the creatures. "Do you have flashcharges in your armoury?"

The Guardsman stood unmoving, his senses filled with the horror of the creatures below. Camren saw his terror and hit him squarely in the shoulder. "Soldier!" he shouted again. "Do you have flashcharges?"

The guardsman broke from his confusion and stood to attention. "Sorry Sir. A supply arrived from south only this afternoon. All are stored in the armoury."

Camren pointed to the gates and then stood in the face of the guard. "If you want those things off your doorstep you run for the armoury and bring me every box you've got. If you need anyone to help you grab them as you go. If you're not back here at the run it won't be those things out there that'll be your biggest problem!"

With that the soldier ran for the stairs that led down into the armoury. As he went Camren could see him take four other guards with him and he had to smile at the sight of it.

"What are you doing Camren?" Lovar yelled over the rising clamour.

“Something,” he shouted in reply, “that others should already be doing.”

With no further word he ran along the battlement towards the gate. As he ran he pulled his last remaining flashcharge from his belt and when he was within range lobbed it over the parapet and down amongst the attacking creatures. An officer on the wall saw what Camren had done and immediately raised a warning.

“Charge!” he yelled to his men. “Eyes down!”

It was a warning that came almost too late. With a shuddering detonation the flashcharge exploded, its shockwave thumping against the wall of the city and radiating out upon the grasslands surrounding it. In a blinding dome of expanding light the Shadowch were caught unprepared, their bodies torn apart by the charge's brilliant illumination.

For a moment everything became quiet, only the echoes of the blast ringing out upon the plain. Then a great cheer erupted from the walls and all who stood upon them saw a new hope in the face of such horror. Where there had been despair there came orders, the soldiers now fully aware of a defence against the creeping horrors. By good fortune the soldiers Camren had sent to recover the city's supply of flashcharges arrived on the scene exactly as the Last Officer of the Night Watch began shouting for more of the devices. Quickly the small metal bombs were disseminated along the battlements and they came just in time.

Out upon the plain the Shadowch had recovered their momentum and in a seething run rushed again for the walls. From the Gate came a clear command and a hail of small metal balls fell amongst the charging monsters. In a series of detonations that erupted like thunderclaps upon the grasslands the charges exploded, their searing light tearing at the creatures, the deafening crump of shockwaves throwing the remains in blooming flowers of broken earth and shredded grasses. It was a battle that could not be won quickly however.

From out of the night more of the creatures emerged and from above a new menace threatened. Arcing out of the starred sky a multitude of flying creatures descended upon the battlements, most were humanoid in appearance but all were different, some possessing reptilian heads and tails, others with grotesque spider-like legs. In the face of this threat the Officer of the Watch found his own solution. At regular intervals along the battlements of the city there had been

built towers, each equipped with a number of ballista. Capable of firing explosive charges up to a range of five hundred metres he let them loose upon the winged monsters and in that remaining pre-dawn hour the battle for Das Nephrim began in earnest.

From the battlements charges fell upon the Shadowch that tried to continue the attack upon the gates, and from the towers of the city long arcing lines of fire defined the trajectories of explosive bolts as they shot into the dark sky and erupted in huge blasts of blinding light amongst swarming multitudes of flying creatures. Within this chaos Camren watched as the world about him became a swirling cauldron of deafening thunder and blasts of actinic light. It was both overwhelming and exhilarating and standing next to Lovar he could not take his eyes from the battle. As he stood upon the battlement he could see that the Historian was not watching the fury that was erupting around him. He was instead looking directly at Camren himself.

“How did you know the flashcharges would be so effective?” he shouted over the din.

Camren pointed to the west. “Had our own encounter with a few of them earlier in the day,” he replied.

“I told the guards when we first arrived that a defence could be had with the charges, and watched as messengers were sent to both Das Frontiere and the lake Districts. It seems nobody told the garrison here.”

“But now they know, eh?” said Lovar smiling.

“Yes,” replied Camren. “Now they know.”

In that last hour before dawn the garrison at Das Nephrim saved the city from devastation at the hands of the Shadowch. The gates of the city held against repeated attacks and with the coming of sunrise the creatures disappeared, fading away as the first rays of daylight spread across the grasslands. Standing upon the high battlement Camren and Lovar surveyed the plain before the walls and found no bodies, nor sign of the Shadowch themselves. It had been as if the creatures had never existed, and with their passing there remained only the evidence of explosions upon the cratered ground and the garrison's own dead that had fallen from the walls. The city however, had been saved.

In those first glimmers of dawn the weary defenders of Das Nephrim searched the far horizon for any further sign of the Shadowch and only when the order to stand down had been relayed

along the battlements did any of their number relax. For Camren Patrice the experience had affected him profoundly and in the broader light of day he realised that the life he had once led was not the life he wished for the future. Standing alongside the town garrison he had felt a part of a greater purpose and it was something he had not felt for far too long. The guards that only days before would have cheerfully placed his head upon a spike now looked towards him with respect, and the feeling shook him to his core. He had been too long in the wilderness and too far from the responsibilities of a normal life, and he began to realise that Lovar was indeed offering him a way out. He decided on those parapets that Camren Patrice was no longer a bandit. He would help the Historian in his cause, and once that cause was done he would find for himself a better life. He had to smile though, for any thought of a better life depended wholly on the proviso that he lived to see it done.

With the battle over Lovar took to the nearest stairs and gestured for Camren Patrice to follow. Together the two men retraced their route through the central markets and thence on to the Guild House. Just beyond the Guild House, in a dark side street still crowded with refugees they found the stables, the building's lights throwing shadows across its cobbled entranceway. At its threshold stood two stable-hands and after a short greeting found their horses and equipment waiting for them. Balkerik had already left with the wagon and Jonath Mac's horse had also gone. The Historian did not ask his companion again whether he might come with him to Hel'garad. He had seen Patrice's quality upon the battlements of the city and he had come to the view that he was not a man who could be cajoled upon any path not of his own choosing. If he would help he would follow, and to the Historian's relief Patrice took to his horse and waited for Lovar to lead the way. In the cool morning air both men rode southwards, their objective to catch up with their friends upon the road to Hel'garad.

The Sapphire Towers

In the city's waking hours Lovar and Camren Patrice moved quickly for the South Gates. In the morning's half-light the roads of Das Nephrim had grown crowded with refugees and the populace of the city, all sleepless from the battle of the night, were hungry for information about the causes of the great disturbance that had taken them all from their beds. In the streets both men could hear City Criers delivering the first news of the battle and large crowds of men and women congregated about them, their attention fixated on any information that might be brought forth.

Lovar could see the fear that remained in the eyes of those they passed. The furtive glances of each small group of city-folk underlining a panic that was welling within the city. With each snippet of news flowing through the shadowed streets the realisation grew that the battle of the night was only the first, and that the Shadowch would return with the next sunset. It was a possibility that left all who would remain in Das Nephrim in fear and Lovar could not blame them.

Within the growing clatter Lovar led the way, the crowds parting as he negotiated the largest of the city's boulevards southwards. Beyond the city's centre the way became easier, the streets lined with the townhouses of the merchant middle-classes. Here the road spread wider, its cobbled surface reaching towards the imposing structures of the southern gates. Over the townhouse roofs Camren could see the grey line of the city walls, and the two high towers that guarded each side of the massive South Gate. It was said that the South Gate of Das Nephrim was the gateway to Kalborea, all the major population centres of the Union situated beyond the Twin Lakes and the vestiges of the Northern Malleron forests that lay a day's journey further to the south. Indeed it was the edges of those forests that delineated the settled and more cultivated districts of the Union from the wilder lands of the Northern Frontier. Camren considered as he rode that it had been a long time since he had seen any of the city states, and even more so since he had wanted to.

The South Gate arose before the two men as they felt the first blusters of an approaching storm hit the edges of the city. Pulling his cloak closer about him, Lovar motioned towards the enormous gatehouse. The thick metal-strapped gates lay wide open, their guards not evident as the two men rode closer. It was only as they came to a halt beneath the huge arch of the gates themselves that a

single guard called to them.

“State your business, Gentlemen.” he yelled over the growing winds. He was not a young man and looked uncomfortable in the uniform he had been issued.

“The Tak Lovar,” answered the Historian, “and a companion travelling to Hel'garad. Guild matters are our purpose.”

The Guard looked both men over and went to wave them through. Lovar did not move however, until he posed a question of his own.

“How is it that you guard the South Gate alone? Where are the Regulars that should man this post?”

The Guardsman thought for a moment before answering. “Most have gone to the north walls to help with repairs. Some have been sent south to ferret out explosives and me and Haggath are manning the Gate. He's asleep and, for the moment at least, I'm it.”

Lovar leaned forward in his saddle and gestured towards the road ahead. “Any news of the conditions out there?”

The man nodded. “Three wagons just came through. The road south has been attacked and reports say there have been many losses amongst the Lake farms. Hel'garad is burning and nobody has heard anything from the Guild. It's a right mess and no mistake.”

The Historian straightened himself and thanked the man for his time. Overhead the clear skies of the early morning were quickly being overtaken by a ragged scud of cloud, and without any further delay Lovar urged his horse forward. Camren followed, and together they made their way onto the the South Road.

In those early hours the two men rode swiftly towards Hel'garad. Under other circumstances they could have struck out across country and made straight for the city, but with Balkerik and Jonath somewhere upon the road ahead it was important for Lovar to meet with them first. With this in mind they followed the road until finding the intersection that would take them directly to the Guild's seat of power. At first in surprised the Historian that the road proved to be almost deserted. Considering the mass of refugees that had entered Das Nephrim from the north the lack of people continuing their flight southwards gave him reason to express his thoughts openly to Camren.

“Do you not think it odd that we have passed so few of our countrymen upon the road?” he asked.

Camren Patrice shook his head and gave an answer that showed he had been pondering the same question himself.

“At first I thought so, but if you consider what lies upon the road to the south it makes sense that no-one has ventured further. There are no fortified cities of the size of Das Nephrim until you reach Das Yorda in the Home Districts. That's two days travel and two nights exposed to the Shadowch without safe haven. If I was a refugee I wouldn't want to leave Nephrim either. At least not until the danger had passed.”

Lovar had to agree with the logic of it.

“I guess,” he replied, “that only the foolish now travel the roads.”

“Aye,” smiled Camren. “only the foolish.”

At the intersection the road forked to the south-east and the men took to the new path without pause. Overhead the cloud cover had grown to a complete overcast and with its approach the winds blustered in strong gusts that rippled the thick grasses edging the roadway. Beneath this darkening sky the road to Hel'garad lay as a meandering grey line cut upon green hills. Thick and verdant grasses spread in all directions, the shallow hills undulating like a frozen sea towards the east and south. The road would normally have been a busy thoroughway, clogged with the traffic of the Guild and busy with the commercial activity that supported it. On this day it lay before them as an open path, and with no other traffic the two men rode quickly.

Lovar let his horse set the pace, and without encumbrance it galloped along the hard surface of the road. Camren kept pace and it was not long before they saw a wagon moving slowly ahead. At its side a rider maintained a close station and both men had no doubt that it was Balkerik and Jonath. As they rode to meet up with their friends however, something else drew their attention.

Upon the horizon there lay thick columns of smoke, each reaching into the sky before being torn southwards by the wind. Lovar knew the road to Hel'garad well, and at this stage of their journey the Sapphire Towers of the city should have been visible. Instead he could see nothing but the smoke and a single broken finger of stone that rose above the darkened line of the horizon. He knew what he had seen in his vision but to see it with his own eyes left him in dread of what they might find there.

Camren also recognised the smoking pyres for what they were but he had no sentimental attachment to either Hel'garad or the Guildsmen that had lived there. His only concern lay in completing the mission he had committed himself to, and there were questions

that remained unanswered. With the wagon only a kilometre ahead he drew back on his horse's reins and called Lovar to his side.

"There is much of this task you have not explained, Historian. I would ask that before we rejoin our friends you give me answer to a few obvious questions."

Lovar looked at Camren and motioned for him to continue.

"I know that Balkerik has your confidence and for an old man he seems particularly capable. I have no doubt he knows exactly what we are doing and I would like the same consideration. You say that we must find the Emurion and I accept that mission, but why is it so important? How does it give us an edge over the Shadowch and above all who gives you reason to search it out? It is not the first option I might think of in such dire times."

For a moment Lovar considered what he should say. He would not tell Patrice of his allegiance to the Silvan Tree, and as far as the rest went he had to admit he was almost as much in the dark as the bandit was. He decided it would be best to answer a question with another question.

"What do you know of the Emurion?" he asked.

Camren smiled and looked away. He could tell a brush-off from a league away but he would play the game nonetheless.

"As far as I know the Emurion is a ceremonial sword, taken from Aggamem the Elder as a spoil of war at the Battle of Kal Murda. What he was doing carrying it around a battlefield I don't know but I believe he defended it to his death and the demise of his entire army. Of course the Guild eventually got hold of it and has held it ever since. I only heard rumours of its existence whilst I was in the Academy but I did hear that there has been found no clear indication of its true purpose. Apparently the word was that it was the only artefact held by the Guild that was inlaid in gold and did not attract the attention of Dragons."

Lovar nodded and motioned towards the smoke of Hel'garad. "And that is where it has lain since being acquired by the Guild. You are absolutely right about its mysteries. None of the Taks ever determined its true purpose although it showed great potential as a source of power. To answer your question I do not know exactly why we must take it to a LoreMaster but I do have my theories."

"And they are?" prodded Camren.

The Historian flicked his reins. "What good are theories Camren, without facts to back them up. When we have the sword in our

possession I'll know more, and then so will you.”

With that he urged his horse on and together the men rode towards their friends. It only became apparent that the transport had come to a halt when they were no more than a stone's throw from its position on the road. It stood upon a shallow rise in the ground ahead, silhouetted against the gathering shadows of the growing overcast.

Lovar could not see Balkerik, and Jonath Mac's horse stood alone, tethered to one of the wagon's wheel spokes. Neither of the men were in sight and for a moment the Historian could only assume the worst. Luckily for the two missing men it was an assumption that quickly proved incorrect. As Lovar and Patrice rode upon the wagon they first saw the bedraggled red hair of Jonath emerge from behind its ponderous bulk and then the shorter, and even less elegant form of Balkerik. Upon spying the Historian, Balkerik raised a hand in greeting and waited to take his friend's horse in hand.

“It is good t' see you Master Lovar.” he said hoarsely. “We have found somethin' and are unsure what to do about it.”

Lovar dismounted and followed Balkerik as he walked quickly about the wagon. Upon the further edge of the road he stood dumbfounded as Camren Patrice moved to his side. All four men looked out upon the grassland beyond and fell silent.

Upon the wide sweep of the plain Lovar surveyed a field of brutal massacre. Hundreds of bodies lay upon the grasses, all torn and bloodied and all thrown about like rag-dolls upon the plain. Men and women, soldiers, children and old-folk, all victim to some appalling malice, and in their ragged fall telling a story of desperate flight and ruthless killing.

“Bloody hell,” Camren whispered, “what has happened here?”

Nobody answered at once. The scale of the disaster took their breath away and only the oldest of their number, one who had seen too many battles, found his voice first.

“The bodies tell the story, Master Patrice.” said Balkerik. “See the soldiers in blue and black, how they are concentrated at the road's edge about a hundred metres to the east. That is where the attack started. For whatever reason these families were being evacuated from Hel'garad. More than likely support staff and other civilians that needed to be moved to the safety of Nephrim.”

“Whatever attacked them hit the soldiers first, and the troopers responded, forming rank and advancing upon the assailant. Looks like their commander used a standard three rank formation, lances

and shields and no idea of what they were up against. That's where they died.”

“Seeing the quick demise of their protection everybody ran, and as there were more than likely three of the things they ran northwards, away from the Shadowch but not fast enough. Most were killed on the ground to the north before they could get any more than a few hundred metres off the road. Some however, made a stand and that is where it gets complicated. I've had a look at the area near those bodies at the far edge of the killing ground and its covered in scorch marks. Somebody had flashcharges and used them all, but it was not enough and they were also overwhelmed. I reckon everybody who remained here died within the space of six, maybe ten minutes.”

Lovar looked to his friend. “You say everybody who remained here. What do you mean?”

Balkerik pointed towards Das Nephrim and answered. “Five sets of tracks lead away from the scorch marks and then on towards the city. Whoever had the smarts to use the charges wasn't doing it to kill the Shadowch. They were used to mask the retreat of a woman and four children. They probably had only moments to make their escape and it looks like they were able to get away. Damn fine job I think.”

Camren walked forward onto the grass. “Should we go after them?” he asked.

Lovar shook his head. “No Camren we can do nothing for any of these people. If there have been survivors they will make their own way to safety. Our concern must be acquiring the Emurion. Anything else can only mean delays, and a longer time that Men must feel the weight of such violence without any capacity to defend themselves.”

It was an argument that had no answer and all four men felt the gravity of it keenly. Quickly Lovar, Camren and Jonath remounted and Balkerik climbed onto his bench seat.

“Balkerik.” Lovar shouted over the wind. “We will ride with haste for Hel'garad. You follow with the wagon and we will meet at the Gates. If all goes well we will have the sword in hand when you arrive and then we can determine our next move. Be safe.”

The old man smiled and waved them on. “Find the sword and we will all be the safer for it.”

With a crack of his whip the wagon lurched forward and with no further word the three horsemen made for the burning towers of Hel'garad.

The journey to the walled city passed without further incident. Camren kept his questions to himself and instead, gave himself over to a careful survey of the lands surrounding the Towers. For his part Lovar found himself lapsing into periods of deep thought, his mind wandering as he considered all the ramifications of the folly of Vor'ell and of his own changed circumstances. It had been a while since he had found need to travel to Hel'garad, his duties as a Tak having kept him in the north for many years. His memories of the city were clear though but he was not prepared for what confronted the Historian as the men crested the last rise in the ground and looked down upon the shattered fortress.

Hel'garad lay a burning ruin, the high walls of its fortifications the only barrier to the wild conflagration that was swiftly consuming what remained of the city. In Lovar's vision he had seen the blasts of energy that had brought down the Sapphire Towers, and in their destruction also the Prelates of the Guild, but he could not have envisaged the utter devastation of the resulting fires. It put their entire mission in jeopardy and as he looked down upon the raging inferno the problem the fires represented had not been lost on his companions either.

"Well," said Jonath. "If that don't take the biscuit. I dunno what the Guild was keeping there but it sure burns a treat. How are we gunna get the sword?"

It was a good question and one that Lovar spent a moment thinking upon. As a fortification Hel'garad was unusual among the cities of the Union as it had been designed initially only as a safehold, its high walls and deep vaults built to hold the collected treasures and artefacts of the Guild. The collection of those items led to the building of the Sapphire Towers so that the Prelates of the Synod might have accommodations close to their treasures. Quickly Hel'garad became the seat of power of the Guild and all its attendant functions. With no space in the Inner City a larger, circular wall was constructed where all the administrative functions of the LoreMages could be located and carefully watched. Supply houses, libraries, the Guild Academy and a host of other smaller departments of the Guild found their home within those high walls, all connected by a series of boulevards that spread from the inner city like the spokes of a wheel. All had been lost to the conflagration, but what could be seen above ground was not all there was, and in that there lay a possibility of a solution.

The magnificent blue towers of Hel'garad had fallen, their remains

smashing the walls of the Inner City and spreading the resultant fires throughout the remainder of the fortress. Lovar could see little of the buildings that lay consumed by fire and smoke but the object of their mission did not lay within any of them. The Emurion had always been kept safe in the deepest of the chambers hewn from the stone beneath Hel'garad. Within a reinforced safe known as the Prelate Vault it would be found, along with the greatest of the treasures taken from the world beyond its walls. The sword would be safe, the only difficulty finding a way to its door.

“What are we to do?” asked Camren.

Lovar dropped from his horse and began drawing a large diagram in the dirt at the roadside. It was crude but as he worked the solution to their problem came to him in the form of a half-forgotten memory.

“What do you remember of the Vaults of Hel'garad?” he answered.

Camren shrugged but knelt by the Historian's side and perused his work. “I remember that the Vaults all spread from the Synod Chamber and are connected by long corridors. The Prelate Vault is the deepest and was secured by eleven locks, each controlled by one of the Prelates. No single Prelate could open the Vault without the attendance of all the others. When I heard of it, it struck me as a singular lack of trust between them.”

Lovar smiled at that. “Believe me Camren, you do not know the half of it, but that is not the solution to our current dilemma. For the vaults to be furnished with breathable air secure ventilation had to be provided to all the underground facilities. Most of the shafts constructed for the purpose had their outlets built within the city walls. One however, could not. The position of one of the vaults meant that its ventilation had to be fed from an outlet constructed outside of the city's defences. If we can find that vent we have a way in that should keep us far from the fires, and provide a direct access to the lower levels of the city.”

Camren nodded but had to ask the obvious question. “And where is the vent? I can see nothing upon the ground ahead of us but grass and a few trees.”

The Historian surveyed the open ground then turned to Camren. “The vent is camouflaged by a glammer, one cast to allow it to be kept open but secure. Put your hand in the earth Camren and see if you can detect its presence.”

Camren looked to the ground and chose an area of loose earth. Carefully he burrowed his hand into the soil and focused his thoughts

on the area of grassland between the road and the fortress further to the east. Almost immediately he began to feel a strong focus of energy in the city, one that pulled his consciousness deep into the burning structures and then down beneath the city's rubble strewn streets. Before he could make sense of what he was seeing he realised that his ability to sense sources of EarthMagic was being hijacked by the multitude of artefacts and talismans stored within the city's vaults. Only by force of will was he able to withdraw, his mind pulling itself away from the vaults and back out onto the open plains. Ignoring the call of the magic held within the city he instead let his mind wander the grassland, and it was there that he began to sense something odd only a short distance from a small copse of trees directly ahead. Focusing on the area surrounding the trees he could feel a disturbance. There was no actual source of EarthMagic there but he could sense the residual effects of a talisman's use in the area, and as he concentrated further something happened to him that he had never experienced before.

Suddenly he was standing on the plain himself, dressed in the robes of a LoreMage and handling a talisman that he recognised as a Gathering Stone. Everything about him lay in shadow, the gloom of night masking the ritual he was performing. Before him there lay an open shaft, its dark maw blowing humid air into his face as he spoke words unfamiliar but charged with power. In all respects the vision felt as real as if he had been there himself but he knew it was just that, a vision, and with that realisation the sensation dissolved away. When he had fully recovered his senses he found himself again kneeling on the road, his hand still fixed in the earth beneath him. On his shoulder he could feel Lovar's hand providing him support.

"What did you see, Camren?" Lovar asked.

"More than I had expected Historian. The ventilation shaft lies only a short distance ahead and it is protected by an unusually strong glammer."

The Historian smiled and helped the bandit to his feet. "That is our way in then."

Camren Patrice nodded and as he regained his balance, Lovar turned to Jonath. "It will only require two of us to enter the Vaults. Jonath, you should wait with the horses and when Balkerik arrives with the wagon keep him here. There will be no need to get any closer to the fortress. Wait for us and we will return with the Emurion."

"An' how long should we wait before comin' to find *you*?" Jonath

asked.

Lovar shook his head. “There will be no rescue missions here Jonath. The vaults can only be traversed by members of the Guild, and there are more than enough devices set within to quickly dispatch anyone else who might try. This is a job only for Camren and myself but do not worry for we will return.”

Together the men arranged their equipment for the task, leaving most of their belongings in Jonath's care. It was only mid-morning but the overcast had thickened further, and in the half-light Lovar followed as Camren led him out onto the plain.

A Need for Keys

The first drops of approaching rain hit the plains just as Camren and the Historian found the ventilation shaft. In truth Lovar already knew where it was. With the new abilities given to him during the opening of his Book of Scars he had sensed the location of the shaft as soon as they had ridden close enough to observe the towers of Hel'garad, but he had wanted to see how developed the younger bandit's ability to sense EarthMagic had become. He remembered keenly from their early days at the Academy that Camren Patrice had demonstrated unusual and unexpected abilities. Most candidates chosen as novices for the Guild were taken from the general populace and all had to have some ability to sense EarthMagic. In most it was rudimentary at best, but Patrice had exhibited a natural talent for identifying sources of EarthMagic and over the years those talents had indeed increased. He had touched Patrice's shoulder and in that moment of contact had seen what Camren himself had been sensing. For Lovar it was confirmation of the man's latent powers and another good reason why he should keep the bandit close.

The shaft lay obscured by the glammer but the power of the magic was waning. Although obscured from the roadway at close quarters it came into view, a neat circular shaft around two metres in diameter covered by a metal weather-proof cover. The cover had been designed to keep out the rain but for some reason had been blown open, its hinges broken on one side and badly twisted on the other. Something had forced its way out and in the process thrown the metal vent aside. It had been no mean feat, for it took both men to push it from the shaft and lay bare the opening.

"There's our way in," said Lovar. "The shaft should descend for fifty metres then meet a junction that connects with a series of horizontal shafts. The eastern shaft will open into one of the main halls and from there we should be able to find the Prelate Vault."

Camren looked down into the black maw and saw an iron ladder bolted to the stone wall. He did not make for the ladder however. Instead he hesitated for something was not right.

"There is no wind," he stated flatly.

Lovar peered over the edge of the shaft and noticed the same thing. There should have been a strong blast of air blowing up from the depths of the subterranean halls but there was nothing.

"You are right Camren. The ventilation system is not working. There should be a huge amount of air being forced through the halls but the

pumping system must be broken. When the towers fell they must have destroyed one of the venting stations.”

“And how does that affect us?” Camren asked. “Will we be able to breath?”

Lovar nodded and pointed towards the burning city. “The halls are huge and there'll be plenty of air for the short time we'll be inside. It may actually prove to our advantage that the system has shut down.”

Camren looked dubious but Lovar had good reason. “Without the venting station air can't be drawn from the city above. That means that little of the smoke and ash generated by the fires will have been dragged down and that means, at least for a while, that we will have cleaner air to breath. Let us not tarry though, the longer we talk the more chance there is that the halls will begin to fill with smoke. All things considered I would advise that we move quickly.”

Lovar took to the iron ladder first, the bandit following as they descended deep into the earth. The shaft proved to be well maintained and faced in a smooth stone that would have been impossible to climb but for provision of the ladder. The Historian thought it curious that a ladder might be installed at all, his thoughts that security would dictate the shaft should be impassable. What he found as he descended however, was that the ladder was not a permanent fixture and had indeed only recently been bolted into the polished stone. It was a curious circumstance but one he was willing to let pass. He had not relished the idea of having to use ropes to make the descent. This was much easier.

Into the dark the two men descended, the shaft reaching a full fifty metres into the earth before ending within a small square chamber. It appeared as no more than a box of stone perhaps four metres on each end from which there extended a further series of shafts cut into two of the walls. Each of these lay as shadowed holes in the stone, most less than a metre in diameter.

“Do you smell that?” Camren asked.

Lovar sniffed the air and nodded. “Smoke. The halls must be starting to fill.”

For a moment the Historian considered the shafts in the eastern wall and picked the largest. “This will take us into the Synod Hall and from there we should be able to make for the Prelate Vault. Let's go.”

With no further hesitation he lit a torch and climbed into the shaft. Camren followed and the two men scrambled along its length, using an uncomfortable half-crouching posture to move quickly to its end.

They found no obstacle along the way but soon were forced to a halt, their way blocked by a large and ornately cast iron grille. It appeared to be solidly fixed to its surrounding stone casement.

Lovar edged closer and tested the grille. He did not appear overly concerned when it did not budge and seemed instead transfixed by the large chamber that opened beyond it. For a moment he said nothing and instead surveyed the extent of the Synod Hall. It had been the first of a series of large chambers that had been embedded in the foundations of the city, built as a meeting hall for the inner echelons of the Guild and as a court presided over by the eleven Prelates of the Synod, the ruling council of the LoreMages.

Constructed in the style of a sunken amphitheatre it lay as a wide semi-circular chamber, possessed of high walls and a towering vaulted ceiling. From this arched ceiling there descended a series of ornately carved hanging pillars, none of which touched ground, each suspended as if floating upon the air itself. As a feat of engineering there were few other buildings in the Union that could boast such technical brilliance. It had been rumoured however, that the Hall had been built by Dwarvendim slave labour, although this had always been vigorously denied. It was curious however, that any research into the history of the chamber had always been discouraged, and in some cases with considerable prejudice.

The focus of the Hall lay at its northern end. Upon a high platform of black stone the eleven chairs of the Prelates lay neatly ordered and at their centre the largest of their number in smooth white stone to seat the High Prelate. All now stood vacant and in the eerie quiet of the hall they remained alone, like ancient monoliths of a time that had long past. Lovar looked upon the empty chairs and wondered at the gruesome fate of those that had once occupied them. Most of their number had been men of politic and malice, but a few had been Scholars of considerable merit and he could say he was sorry for their passing.

Camren could see the intensity written upon the Historian's gaunt face. "What is it?" he whispered.

"Nothing that matters now." Lovar answered. "It seems curious though, that only a few days past I was being brought by my own Guild to this very chamber for judgement. Where are the High and the Mighty now Camren? Where lies the power they once craved?"

Camren did not answer. He had heard the words and they had certainly piqued his interest but even as Lovar uttered them

something else stole his attention. Upon the farthest edge of the chamber the shadows had moved, the grey stone wall opposite veiled momentarily in darkness as if something had drawn all light from that part of the Hall. For a moment he considered that his eyes might be deceiving him, but then it happened again and he saw it clearly outlined against the stone. It was indeed a shadow and it was moving.

Tapping the Historian on the leg to gain his attention he motioned Lovar to silence and pointed out across the large Hall. Lovar focused on the shadowed walls and saw veiled in the darkness a figure, but it was no man nor beast. Small like one of the Morg, it stood against the wall, sniffing the air and scraping at the stone beneath it with arms too long for its diminutive body. Lovar held his breath as the Shadowch, for that is what it was, scanned the Hall then moved in a frenetic series of dashes for the only exit, a wide arched doorway set into the eastern wall. As it moved the Historian could see its tangled aura, a swirling mist of blue and red energy, that barely maintained a hold upon the small figure as it moved for the door.

What Lovar sensed most however, was the utter hatred that exuded from its presence, a tangible malice that he could feel against his skin like a hot breeze. Camren felt it as well and as the creature skittered along the wall they both watched, at once repelled and yet intrigued by its purpose. It was looking for something though it seemed it could not find it. Every few paces the thing would stop and sniff the air, each pause ending with its long arms pawing at the stone, its aura radiating out from clawed hands as if it were trying to sense something on the other side of the wall. It was a strange dance that lasted only a few minutes.

Both men remained still as the Shadowch searched the stonework then disappeared through the darkened archway. When it had gone Camren let out an audible exhalation of breath and looked to the Historian.

“Well that's taken the shine of this little expedition.” he whispered. “I never expected those things to be within the precincts of the city itself.”

Lovar agreed. “It surprises me as well, but it does give me cause to believe that obtaining the Emurion quickly is now more important than ever.”

“How so?” Camren asked.

Lovar pointed towards the exit and the dark passage beyond. “The

Shadowch are looking for something here, something important enough to take at least some of them away from their true purpose, to kill and destroy. It tells me that there is an intelligence at work here, controlling the actions of these creatures and needing something stored within these lower levels.”

“The sword?” Camren queried.

“Exactly. If it is important to us it must hold the same gravity for the Shadowch. Keeping it out of our hands would seem a tactical necessity for our new enemy. For that and many other reasons we must get to it first.”

Camren grabbed hold of the iron grille and again tested its seating. It proved just as immovable.

“Of course we do need to get beyond this grille.” he proclaimed as he slumped back onto the floor of the shaft.

Lovar smiled and seemed unconcerned. “The one thing that has true power in this world Camren Patrice is knowledge. A little can sometimes go a long way.”

With that he placed one of his fingers through the grille and felt along the stone on its other side. Camren watched as the Historian tested the casement until he found what he was looking for. With a muffled click he depressed a stone trigger and moved back as the entire grille raised itself into the wall above. A few moments later the shaft was clear, their way forward now open.

“There we are.” Lovar said simply.

Quickly both men pulled themselves out of the ventilation shaft and regained their feet. The Synod Hall lay quiet and cast in shadows, but the sense of malice left by the diminutive Shadowch lingered as a tangible presence in the air about them. Camren ran his hand through his backpack, his fingers searching for the possibility that he might still have one of the flashcharges in his possession. He had none left and saw no point in drawing his sword.

“What will we do if we come across that creature again?” he asked.

Lovar shrugged and then shouldered his pack. “There is nothing we can do but run. I believe it will be in our best interest to keep out of its way.”

Camren considered the Historian's words and found no comfort in them. Taking up his own pack he looked towards the dark exit and wondered how such a strategy might play itself out upon the long corridors and wide halls ahead. In the end he found a small measure of consolation in the knowledge that he could probably run faster

than the Tak.

Together the two men descended the curving steps of the amphitheatre and made their way towards the only exit from the Synod Hall. Carved into the wall at the base of the Hall's enormous stage it stood as a wide curved archway, embedded in Azuril with the dogma of the Guild and above all else, exhorting those that passed beyond its threshold to obedience and the prosecution of those that might falter. Lovar looked at the scrolling text and snorted. He might have laughed out loud but for the proximity of the Shadowch, and as he considered the deeply carved words cast in sparkling blue he wondered what was going to happen to all the hundreds of Guildsmen that would still truly believe the edicts of their Guild. How long would it be, he thought, before the true nature of the LoreMages might be revealed, and their culpability in the rise of the creatures of mist and shadow be realised. It gnawed at his gut that so many of his fellow Brothers had been so deceived and he knew that most would bear the brunt of the backlash that would surely follow. Scapegoats would have to be found and many of the unsuspecting Guildsmen would definitely be the first to meet the gallows.

Looking into the darkened corridor Lovar searched his breadth of knowledge, his mind analysing what he knew of the Shadowch and married that with his own observations of the unnatural creatures. In the subterranean confines of these chambers he needed something that might give him an edge, no matter how slight. It came to him as a chill that ran down his spine.

"I believe Camren," he whispered as he surveyed the archway, "that we have an advantage over the Shadowch."

Camren looked at him but waited for the Historian to explain himself.

"Without flashcharges we have no defence against the Shadowch but we do have a way of avoiding them. Remember as we watched the creature searching the walls here that we could feel the malice washing from its form. Close your eyes Camren and project your thoughts outwards. What do you see?"

Camren placed his hand against the cold stone wall at his shoulder and did as he was asked. Immediately he detected the malicious tension of the Shadowch. At first he could only sense it as a general fog of anger somewhere further to the east, but as he concentrated on its presence he could feel its movement focus to a defined point of malice, one that he could track.

“You feel it?” the Historian asked.

Camren nodded but he held his hand out towards Lovar, gesturing him to wait. In his mind he could sense the Shadowch but as he searched further into the ruins of Hel'garad he found much more.

“What is it?” Lovar whispered.

The Bandit opened his eyes and shook his head. “There are dozens of them in the ruins, Lovar. At least three beneath the city and many more roaming the rubble above. All are searching and all held within the walls of Hel'garad by the light of day. If we are to retrieve the Emurion we had better move quickly.”

Lovar could sense the creatures in the ruins about them but not with the precision shown by his companion. In the quiet dark he had no reason to doubt what Camren had found. Without a word he moved forward, keeping to the southern wall of the corridor as the two men followed the passage eastwards. Ahead the Historian could see the passage's end, its shadowed interior opening into a large chamber beyond. At his side Camren kept his focus upon the Shadowch and trusted to Lovar as they followed the smooth stone corridor. At its end they waited, crouching in the shadows as Lovar surveyed the hall beyond.

Known as the Parade the hall stood as an enormous chamber, one that extended for a considerable distance to the south. At its northern end lay a wide circular annexe and a broad stairway that extended up into the city of Hel'garad itself. This was not their path for the Prelate Vaults resided to the south beyond a series of enormous metal doors. All of these doors lay open, their locks broken, their metal surfaces torn by some terrible violence.

Camren saw the state of the first set of doors and looked to the Historian. “Are we too late?” he whispered into the dark.

“No,” replied the Historian. “The doors here can be brought down if enough force is laid to the task but the Prelate Vaults are hidden by more than just thick iron. The fact that our friends above are still searching the ruins tells me that they have not found the Vaults, nor what it is they seek.”

Looking down the southern length of the Parade Lovar could see three sets of doors, each in turn smashed and brought low by unnatural hands. At the end of the hall however, there opened no discernible exits. Through the rising haze, and a growing dust raised by the fall of huge pieces of masonry he could see only the faint impression of a richly carved stone mural, and to his relief it stood

unmolested. It covered the entire end of the hall and apart from the subject matter, which recorded the surrender of the Dwarvendim during the War of Three Nations, it appeared unremarkable.

“It is there, Camren,” he whispered as he pointed to the end of the hall. “that we shall find our way forward.”

With the Historian taking the lead they moved with haste down the length of the Parade. From its northern end Camren could hear the rumbling turmoil of the conflagration above, and in sharp retorts there came the thundering echoes of structures collapsing as the fires relentlessly attacked the remains of the city. In Lovar's wake he ran, the bandit trying to focus not on what was happening around him, but on the creatures that roamed the edges of his consciousness. It was a task made harder by the more insistent nature of their flight. About him Camren could smell smoke beginning to fill the hall, and as he looked to the high vaulted ceiling overhead he could see a fine pall beginning to obscure its carved elegance. Lovar noticed the growing haze as well but said nothing.

Picking up their pace the two men ran southwards. Through the first set of doors they rushed, side stepping the rubble left by their destruction and thence to a second set of doors. These doors lay not upon the ground but hanging from enormous hinges, all bent or broken by an immense force that had twisted them out of the way. Beyond these second doors Lovar slowed his pace then came to a stop.

“Can you sense anything ahead Camren?” he asked.

The Bandit placed his hand to the floor and searched their surrounds, his mind extending out into the stone about them and then down the Parade to the south. He could feel no anger ahead but a single defined point of malice was slowly moving towards them from the north.

“Nothing ahead Lovar, but definitely something gaining ground at our backs.”

The Historian nodded and returned to the run. The Parade extended for a great distance and it took some minutes before they made its end. What they found was the quiet magnificence of the mural and two doors. One set in the eastern wall and the other to the west.

“Where do we go from here?” Camren asked, looking at each of the doors in turn..

Lovar smiled and turned instead to the mural itself. “The doors here lead only to a Scriptorium and one of the many Guild Libraries.

What we seek lies behind the mural.”

Camren looked at the solid stone and waited. He had enough experience of the Historian to simply wait and see what he would do.

“When the Guild built the Vaults they needed to hide them from the eyes of Men, but more importantly they needed to mask their existence from anyone who might have knowledge of EarthMagic.”

“The LoreMasters?” Camren offered.

“Yes Camren. Remember your studies and you will recall that we never found any of them. The last thing the Prelates wanted was their treasures found by the Dwarvendim and then stolen back. There is more than just stone here and it is the reason why the Shadowch have not yet found the Vaults themselves. The Vault entrance is glammered, the stone here no more than an illusion.”

For a moment Lovar searched the length of the mural. It stood over twenty metres in breadth and more than twenty-five high, a richly detailed representation of the King's Hall at Stoneholme, and in its confines the surrender of the Armies of the Dwarvendim to the Grand Marshall of Kalborea. Camren Patrice watched as his companion surveyed the wall but as he did so he noticed something rather unusual. Amongst all the figures represented, the rows of soldiers and the kneeling Stone King there stood one figure that seemed out of place. Unlike all others this figure looked out at the hall towards himself and Lovar, not at the unfolding surrender. Strangely he had one hand cupped to his ear as if he was waiting for something to be said.

“What is that?” he whispered as he pointed to the unusual figure. Lovar smiled and wondered at his companion's capacity to focus upon points of EarthMagic.

“It is what I have been looking for. I think I should have started at this end of the mural, eh?”

Walking closer to the figure Lovar lent forward and began to whisper into the man's ear. Camren only heard one word clearly. It was “emru”, the Haer'al word for “open”. With its utterance the area to the right of the carved figure dissolved away, the solid stone disappearing into vapour and revealing a wide arched doorway. Quickly Lovar motioned for Camren to follow and both moved through the entrance.

Beyond the archway they found themselves in a large square chamber, covered in ornate decoration and stone murals but with three doors in its southern wall. Each of these doors stood locked and

possessing only a central escutcheon with no handle of any type. To Camren it was certain that a key would be needed.

"I guess you do not have the key?" he asked.

Lovar shook his head and considered what should be done. He had hoped that with the destruction of the Prelates that their magics would pass with them, but he had not countered on a good old-fashioned set of locks.

"On this I have no answer." he said. "The central door leads to the Prelate Vault but any key that might turn that lock will be on the body of one of the Prelates. We will have to find another way through."

For a moment both men stood in silence. It was Camren who spoke first. He knew what needed to be done and he had the tool to do it with.

"Lovar, it appears that I have the only key at hand."

Lovar turned to find Camren taking a satchel from his shoulder. In Camren's hands was the satchel bomb he had taken from the camp at the Bandit's Row. "This explosive should blow a fair hole in that door, probably enough to get us in. Stand back and let us test our luck."

With that he lay the satchel upon the ground at the base of the door and placed some large pieces of fallen masonry across it. Looking to the Historian he smiled and moved his thumb across the device's trigger.

"We don't want to be in this room when this thing goes off, Lovar. Five seconds and this wall's history."

With an audible click Camren pressed the lever. In a rush the two men ran back through the mural door and flung themselves against the solid stone at the western corner of the hall. Before they could take breath the satchel bomb exploded, and with its detonation the world about them erupted.

In a deafening explosion the satchel bomb did its work. Beneath them the stone shuddered, a tremoring roar thundering down the hall, a gout of fire and smoke spewing through the open door as rock and carved masonry scattered across the floor of the Parade. Within the chamber both men could hear great pieces of its interior falling to ground, a series of crushing impacts slamming stone against stone as the power of the bomb tremored through the bedrock beneath them.

Instantly the hall became filled with dust, a choking haze billowing into the Parade that quickly obscured everything about them. For long moments they could do nothing but hide beneath their cloaks, protecting themselves from the suffocating miasma of powdered rock.

Covering their heads they waited, the world outside their flimsy coverings an echoing thunder that rolled repeatedly up and down the Parade. The Historian shook his head in disbelief. Certainly the Shadowch would now be aware of their presence.

“What was in that thing?” Lovar roared at Camren.

In truth Camren had not expected such a vicious detonation. He had taken the satchel bomb from the Wallis gang's weapon cache and had assumed it was standard issue. He could only now assume that one of the gang had tampered with it somehow. With a loud ringing noise obscuring his hearing his only thought was very well done indeed.

Any admiration for the bandit who had jerry-rigged the satchel could only remain short-lived however. The look on Lovar's face told a less than appreciative story as he arose from the ground in a billowing gout of falling grit. Covered from head to bootlaces in a fine grey dust the Historian slowly, and deliberately brushed himself down. For Camren the humour of it quickly overtook him. The vision of the Tak Lovar as a grey apparition showering grit and small pieces of stone proved too much. He laughed out loud.

“And what are you finding so humorous Camren Patrice?” Lovar sneered. “Do you think you are not also a pale shadow of your former self?”

Both men stood and looked at each other. Camren could do nothing but smile and in the end Lovar succumbed also to the humour of the situation, but only for a moment. He laughed, then walked over to the younger man and punched him in the shoulder.

“Didn't you think to check what it was you were about to detonate in an enclosed space.” he yelled. “By the Fates we are lucky that the entire chamber didn't collapse in upon us.”

Camren stood his ground and decided the best defence must be attack. “Don't play the victim here Lovar, you had no answer to the Vault and I gave you the only way in we had. As far as I can see no harm done.”

Lovar stopped for a moment and pointed towards the open doorway that led to the Prelate Vault. “No harm done! I'll warrant half the artefacts that lay within the vaults have been destroyed. Not to mention almost killing both of us.”

“What can I say Lovar. When I say I can open a door I mean it.”

The Historian stood ready to argue the point but a noise further up the Parade caused him to hesitate. It was a furtive scraping sound, of

claws scratching upon stone. Camren heard it also and turned towards the north. The aftermath of the explosion had taken his focus from locating the Shadowch but in a jolt the presence of the creatures rushed back into his thoughts.

“They’re coming Lovar,” Camren whispered. “Three of them and big enough to ruin our day.”

The Historian nodded and grabbed up his pack. Motioning to the open exit from the Parade he moved quickly through its open archway and waited for Camren Patrice to follow. When the bandit stood at his side he waved his hand across the face of the doorway and intoned the Word that would seal them from the hallway beyond.

“Sardiil.” he whispered, and with the utterance of the Word the arch fell like a draped curtain, its stone form reshaping itself and closing off the chamber from the larger hall. Within moments the archway had vanished and in its place there stood instead a solid wall of finely carved rock.

For a moment Lovar did not turn for the gaping hole that had once been the locked entry to the Prelate Vault. Camren stood with his hand upon the wall, his face a study in concentration.

“What is it Camren?” he asked.

The younger man did not answer for a moment. Instead he stood silent, his thoughts reaching out beyond the Parade and out into the ruins of Hel'garad above.

“They are coming Lovar,” he answered, “All of them.”

“Then we had better find what we have come for.”

Camren waved Lovar to silence and leaned harder against the wall.

“Lovar. There is something else at work here. Since tracking the Shadowch I have come to feel their thoughts and they are primal. There is no complexity, no agenda to them. They are no more than vessels, filled with hate and motivated only by a savage need to destroy. But when I reconnected with them after the blast I felt something else. It withdrew quickly when I touched upon it but it was intelligent, and it wanted to remain hidden.”

“What do you think it was?” Lovar asked.

“It was their Master, Lovar. All these creatures are like a pack of wild dogs, leashed to a greater Being who directs them as he will. It is not they who are looking for us, it is he who controls them.”

“Can you sense where this Being might be?”

Camren shook his head and withdrew his hand from the wall. “It is gone now, but its will remains. The Shadowch know where we are,

and now they crowd the Hallway beyond. The pale magics of the Guild will not keep them from us for long.”

Before Camren's words could fade into the silence a great hammering blow smashed against the stone. Dust fell away from the walls as the blow was met by a further impact, and then an escalating wave of impacts shuddered through the walls. Both men took two steps backwards as the air about them dissolved into a miasma of dust and choking grit. Both knew that the wall could only last a matter of minutes and they had no time to waste.

Grabbing Camren's arm, Lovar pushed him towards the Prelate Vault and then ran in after him. In the dull half-light he motioned to his companion to strike a torch and in the flickering glare of the brand the full extent of the Prelate Vaults opened up to them.

Constructed as a series of wide, arched hallways each Vault reached for two hundred metres into the solid bedrock beneath the city. From each hall there had also been crafted annexes, storage rooms and an array of shelved chambers, each designed to hold artefacts according to their kind and catalogue. The halls themselves were furnished with large reading tables, desks for the study of the Guild's treasures and a wide collection of armchairs and other fittings for the personal comfort of the Prelates. Overhead large spherical lights hung from the vaulted roof, suspended upon heavy chains and placed to illuminate the reading tables beneath. Apart from the growing mist of dust the Vaults had weathered Camren Patrice's explosive charge without apparent damage.

“Where do we look?” Camren yelled to Lovar. Behind them the hammering had become a deafening thunder and both men could hear stone cracking beneath the blows.

The Historian did not answer, instead he ran down the central hall, his eyes fixed upon a small doorway at its mid-reach. Camren followed but came to a halt when he saw Lovar hesitate at the door. From the north there came an enormous crashing blow that was followed by a tremoring impact. The wall had collapsed.

“No time now for subtlety Camren.” With that he kicked at the door, splintering its lock and smashing it inwards. The bandit waited as Lovar ran inside and then emerged with a long, though plain looking wooden box. It was not what Camren had expected but there was no time for disappointment.

“Do you have it?” he cried out.

Lovar nodded but did not stop. At the run the two men rushed

southwards, at their backs the clear sounds of creatures smashing and tearing at the hall as they advanced upon them.

“What are we to do?” Camren yelled as they ran.

It was a good question but one the Historian had an answer for. The Vaults were ultimately no different from any other building in Kalborea. They were constructed within the guidelines of the same rules followed by all other civic authorities and at the centre of those rules lay the requirement that all structures required more than one exit. The Fire Safety and Building Construction Code had stood for four hundred years and even the Dwarvendim that had built the Vaults had followed those rules to the letter. One way in meant there must be another way out and Lovar knew where it lay.

“There is another way out.” he shouted breathlessly. “At the southern end of the Vault there will be a small ante-room. There we can find our salvation.”

Together they ran but as they did so Camren noticed Lovar surveying the shelved chambers that they passed. At one entrance he stopped in his tracks.

“Wait here!” he yelled, then disappeared into the small room. It took but moments, in his hands three talismans that Camren recognised as two Lightstones and a Shieldstone.

“Why do you want those?”

“You’ll see. The way out should be just ahead.”

True to his word the hall ended abruptly, its wide breadth suddenly truncated to the narrow confines of a small room. It stood bare of adornment except for an archway carved in its eastern wall. There was however, no door.

The Historian whispered the Word that would open the archway, and in the few seconds left to the men before the Shadowch would be upon them the wall fell away to reveal a tightly spiralled stairway. Lovar did not hesitate and he ran onto the stairs. Camren could see no reason to linger either and the two men hit the steps running.

The Fires of Hel'garad

Upon the stairs the men ascended quickly. Behind them they could hear the Shadowch hammering again at the walls of the stairwell. Lovar had closed the arch behind them but both knew it would only be a matter of moments before the creatures would force their way through. In the exertion of the climb Camren concentrated on the stairs, and the hope they brought when truly he had believed they were about to die. It did not mean however, that he did not have questions.

“Why did we not use these stairs to reach for the Vaults? Would have saved us considerable time and trouble.”

Lovar looked at his companion as if he was an idiot. “Do you not remember the state of Hel'garad, the fires that still consume the city above? We could not have reached the Fire Stairs even if I had known where they had been concealed. It is only because we are already in the Vaults that we can now use them, and we are by no means safe yet.”

Camren stood ready to defend himself but again his arguments were stalled as Lovar found the upper steps and moved quickly onto a small landing. In front of him there stood an ordinary looking doorway and a handle to match.

“More magic to get out?” Camren asked.

“In this case, no. It locks from the outside but opens to anyone from within.” The Historian turned to his companion and smiled. “Nobody can escape the Building Codes, not even the LoreMages.”

Carefully Lovar turned the handle and breathed a sigh of relief when the door cracked ajar. He was not prepared however, for what greeted him on the other side of the exit.

Before he could push the door shut the landing was engulfed in a cloud of ash and smoke, a great roaring heat radiating through the narrow opening until he could put his shoulder to the door and force it closed. Gagging from the smoke the Historian moved back down the stairs until the air had cleared enough to breath easier. Camren followed him and both men stood in the dark stairwell and tried to recover their breath.

“By Gedhru's Beard!” exclaimed Camren hoarsely. “Shadowch at our backs and the fires of Hel'garad ahead. I think we're going to have to think of something rather clever to get out of this one.”

Lovar shook his head and smiled at his companion. The look on Camren Patrice's face told him that the bandit wholly expected him to

find that clever solution. For a moment he stood in the stairwell and considered their dilemma. It was fortunate he thought, that he knew exactly what he had to do.

“As it happens,” he replied. “I do have a solution to our problem.”

As he spoke he held before him the Shieldstone. The Sharyah gleamed in the shadows, its shimmering gem encased within a clasp of solid iron and held firmly upon a long silver chain.

“It occurred to me as we ran for the Fire Stairs that there stood a good chance the conflagration above would still be burning strong. Any way out would be blocked and we would need help to get out. This Sharyah'durien will take us where no Man can safely venture.”

Camren looked at the Historian then turned to survey the stairs below them. From the depths of the stairwell he could hear stone breaking and the shrieking cries of the Shadowch as they struggled to smash through the solid rock.

“Well, if you're going to use that thing you had better do it quick!”

Lovar could not help but agree. Taking the talisman in hand he motioned for Camren to stand at his side and place his hand on his shoulder. He had never used one of the Shieldstones before but he was well aware of their capabilities and also of their eccentricities.

“The Shieldstones were designed to protect Jotun Miners in the Ancient World.” Lovar yelled above the growing roar of the fires. “I will be protected because I must wear the Sharyah for it to activate. You however, will only be protected whilst you have hold of my shoulder. If you let go, or lose contact in any way it will push you away and that will be the end of you. Do you understand!”

Camren nodded. He could hear stone breaking below and that meant the Shadowch could only be seconds away.

Taking the Emurion's box in the crook of his arm Lovar took the iron surround of the Sharyah in his other hand and held it a short distance from his mouth. The Words that would command it were well-known to the Guildsman, he needed only to whisper them into the air.

:theoduris a' theoden:

Instantly the Sharyah crackled into life, a ball of shimmering blue energy expanding out from the talisman and quickly enveloping the two men. For a moment Lovar did not move. The Shieldstone needed time to evaluate its surroundings and determine what protection

might be required. In those moments the Historian waited, and as the talisman adjusted to its environment Lovar could sense its power searching out the walls around them. It was a curious experience, for he was now a servant of the Silvan Tree and here was an artefact of the Ancient World manipulating the very essence of EarthMagic. He could feel its connection to the River of Life, and as he let his mind follow that connection he felt himself being drawn inexorably towards something terrifying in its power. Without thinking he forced himself away from the workings of the Shieldstone and instead looked towards Camren Patrice. It was then that it struck him how much the world about them had changed.

Encased within a prefect sphere of blue energy the two men looked at each other. There was absolutely no sound, the small sphere a bubble of protection in a world that was quickly filling with smoke and ash. They could not smell it, or feel any heat upon themselves, and through the azure-tinged ball of energy the world itself had become filtered, the grey stone of the stairwell replaced by a curiously muted scale of blues edged with the faintest borders of red.

“I never expected this.” Camren whispered.

“I also,” Lovar replied. “But we cannot stand and consider the wonders wrought by this Sharyah. We must get out of here.”

Quickly they moved up the stairs. Before them the doorway stood broken and charred, the landing a wash of swirling ash and ruddy flickering shadows. The fires beyond had caught upon the door and the heat had splintered it, its hungry flames clawing at the cracks as it burned. Neither man could feel any effects of the raging conflagration and tentatively Lovar stepped beyond the exit's threshold. Camren followed and together they moved out into the fires of Hel'garad.

In a roiling calamity of fire and swirling debris the two men left the safety of the Fire Stairs and moved out onto the grounds of the Novitiate Library. The Guild had hidden the exit as part of the basement wall of the Library and Lovar could say that he had had no knowledge of its existence prior to their mission. Against the smooth stone wall of the building it had been glamoured from the knowledge of all, but in the dark shadows of the raging inferno it stood as ruined as the city itself.

The grounds of the Library should have been a swath of neat, rectangular gardens, carefully tended by the Novices themselves but now all had been laid waste. Piles of fallen rubble covered the once cultivated grasses, the towers of Hel'garad reduced to piles of broken

stone that lay in slews across its length. At their left shoulders the Library had collapsed in upon itself and beyond its once imposing entrance Lovar could see the wide reach of a boulevard, its broad roadway now covered in ash-riven trees and smashed statuary. At all sides the fires raged, a massive conflagration that had brought low the entire city, its civic spaces and Guild Halls reduced to crumbling piles that flared with an unnatural and all-consuming energy.

Within this firestorm Lovar and Camren Patrice navigated a path westwards. Within the protection of the Shieldstone they felt no effect of the fires, the safety afforded by the talisman allowing them to negotiate a path to the main avenue that would lead them to the West Gate.

Like most fortified cities to be found in Kalborea, Hel'garad consisted of a series of wide roadways, each leading from a major or minor gate and intersecting at a single central public area. From these major roadways the utilitarian roads, lanes and pathways would branch forth, connecting residential areas to the commercial and civic quarters. It was said frequently that nobody ever get lost in a Kalborean city, as once you had become familiar with one all the rest held no further secrets.

Lovar found however, that his knowledge of Hel'garad now afforded him little assistance in finding a true path through the rubble. He knew the city better than Camren but he could find none of the usual landmarks, and amongst the burning ruins he found himself having to use the position of the shrouded suns to give him a useful direction. It came to pass however, that the men found their way onto the main road west and there Lovar decided to pause.

"We should stop for a moment Camren." he said. "Can you see the Shadowch?"

Lovar crouched on the roadway and this allowed Camren to place his hand upon the hard surface beneath them. Within the sphere he could hear nothing and he found he had no ability to extend his senses beyond its shimmering edges either.

Standing he shook his head and instead peered out upon the ruination of the city.

"I can sense nothing Lovar." he answered. "The sphere has saved us from the flames but it is a barrier to my mind. I believe we will not know where the Shadowch are until we are beyond these walls."

Lovar nodded. He had tried himself and found the Shieldstone's protection impenetrable. Turning for the gates they began to walk

again, the smoke and billowing ash sliding across the surface of the sphere as they travelled. It was an unnerving experience, to walk through a conflagration of such ferocity and be no more than spectators to its fury. No heat penetrated the Sharyah's energy shield but the devastation of the city was absolute, and it stood burning all around them, the shimmering towers and solid buildings that he had known so well shrouded within a veil of smoke and flame. In their stead he now found piles of rubble and ash, strewn before the two men as if a giant hand had pushed them aside, and as they followed the road to the west gate they were forced to climb the debris, each summit of broken rock a vantage from which they could see only more devastation.

When they reached the West Gate they found only another pile of burning rubble. The gate had collapsed in upon itself and at its right shoulder the armoury of the City Guard flared within the ruin. From between the fallen stones of its once thick walls exploding Black Powder charges erupted as spraying jets of gas and fractured stone, throwing torn metal and other debris in lethal gouges into the air and across the roadway before them.

In the absolute silence created by the Shieldstone Lovar and Camren watched as the Armoury erupted in arcing sprays of debris. They were safe enough from the exploding charges but the collapsed Gate itself could provide no way out of the city. Halted in their progress Camren searched the wall for another way forward and found it only a short distance to the south. There the smoke cleared to reveal a large piece of the fortification that had fallen outwards, the thick wall punched violently by some unseen hand, its large uniform stones tumbled haphazardly upon the grasses beyond. This would be their way out and Camren pressed his hand on the Historian's shoulder, pointing with the other towards the new exit. Lovar followed the line of Camren's outstretched hand and nodded. Together they walked southwards, pieces of metal thudding against the protective sphere as they crossed an area of open ground that led onto the wall itself. It was only when they had passed beyond the rubble and once again stood on the open grassland that Lovar deactivated the Shieldstone.

In a torrent of sound and heat the glimmering blue shield dissipated, the outside world once again fully impressing itself upon the two men. At their backs the city burned and even with the remains of Hel'garad's walls between themselves and the

conflagration the roar of the flames, and the acrid smell of burning flesh immediately assaulted their senses. Above it all however, there erupted an impossible lingering scream, an unbridled expulsion of hate and malice that ran through the ground like an earth tremor.

“By the Fates!” shouted Camren. “Let's get out of here.”

Lovar didn't need any convincing. In one smooth motion he shouldered the Emurion and started to run. Further to the west he could see the silhouette of the wagon and its horses strung out across the roadway. Jonath and Balkerik he could not see but he knew they would be close. With Camren at his back the Historian ran across the grasses, at one elated that they had survived the perils of the burning city but saddened by the absolute devastation wrought upon it. It was now a truth that the seat of the LoreMages was no more, the Guild a burned husk as dead as the inhabitants who had once resided within its high walls. Only when he was no more than a few hundred metres from the wagon did he slow down and look back at Hel'garad. Camren ran to his side and stopped also to catch his breath.

“What was it?” he breathed quickly. “Do you think it'll be after us?”

Lovar nodded and placed the box on the ground. He knew that everything the Shadowch could muster would now be after them, even more so if Camren was right and they were under the command of a central Master. The creatures had sought the Emurion and he was certain they would hunt them for it.

“The stakes are higher now Camren,” he replied. “Their Master will know that we have the sword and if he believes it is indeed a threat he will charge everything he has to the task of getting it back. It is only the light of day that keeps the Shadowch at bay, and I am not sure we will survive even one night in the open. Anything we do now will have to be done quickly.”

The younger man considered Lovar' words and knew them to be true. “What should we do then? It is already mid afternoon.”

Lovar looked at the sky and considered how far they might travel in the hours of daylight remaining. It did not leave them with many options.

“As I see it,” he said. “We can only make Das Nephrim in the time left to us today. But if we return to the city we place the entire population at risk. What we have in our favour are the Lightstones and the Shieldstone, and they may be the only things that will keep us alive in the next few days. What we must know first however, is where the Maturi Len resides. Let us go and find our friends.”

The Historian picked up the box holding the Emurion and both men ran for the wagon. They covered the distance quickly and both saw Jonath sitting beside one of the wagon's heavy wheels. He seemed to be playing dice with another man. It was someone neither of the men recognised. Immediately Camren pulled his sword and advanced on the stranger but then stopped as if he was unsure of what he should do.

“Who is this man, Jonath?” Lovar commanded, but he too had to stop. There was something about the stranger that was indeed familiar.

In reply Jonath jumped to his feet and walked towards his friends. He had his hands held before him, a great smile upon his cragged old countenance.

“Wait up there, Master Lovar. No need fer anguish here . Don' you recognise yer friend.”

Lovar paused, but then it dawned upon him.

“Balkerik?” he ventured.

“Aye Master Lovar. It is me, Balkerik. Young Jonath here, was good enough to give me a proper shave and a decent haircut. A new set of clothes and I am, as you might say, a new man.”

The Historian stood gobsmacked, the old man he had come to know now stood before him as a man of middle years, well-groomed and postured straight and tall. He had divested himself of the heavy accent that Lovar had come to recognise as his companion's and he looked overall, at least twenty years younger.

“I don't understand.” Lovar muttered.

Balkerik pulled the Historian aside and spoke into his ear. “Do not make too much of it Master Lovar. You will find that a man who lives as long as we must be able to move unnoticed in the world. Of all the disguises that allow us to move freely and without note, it is as the old and the homeless that serve us best. To most such men are invisible and for a servant of the Tree that is a great boon. I am still Balkerik but for a short time I have chosen to live as myself.”

“Are you not concerned that you might be recognised?” Lovar asked.

Balkerik shook his head. “The times we find ourself in will serve to keep us hidden just as well as any disguise. All the peoples of the north are now on the move and the towns of Kalborea are a milling sea of strangers. When we have achieved our mission I will find another persona, and continue my service in another form. But that is enough about me. Did you achieve your objective?”

Lovar placed the box on the roadway next to the wagon and prised open its locks with his knife. Both Jonath and Camren came to his side, all eager to see the great talisman that would save the realms of Men from the Shadowch.

“Not much of a box” opined Jonath.

The Historian raised the lid and lifted out a long object wrapped in finely woven cloth, secured by a length of tightly plaited blue rope. He laid it out upon the hard earth and turned to his companions.

“This is the Emurion, known also as the Light of the World to the Hordim. The Guild held it for more than a century and in that time were unable to determine its true purpose. In truth I have never looked upon it, but this is indeed the sword. Let us see what we have found.”

Carefully he untied the rope and then folded away its cloth covering. Afterwards even Lovar had to admit that what he uncovered left him speechless. Upon the ground lay a scimitar, very much in the style of the Hordim and well recognised by all Men. Made from blade point to pommel from a single piece of white stonewood it lay inlaid with intricate patterns of blue Azuril and brilliant gold. Its guard had been forged from iron polished to a high sheen and wrought as a tree's roots that twisted about its grip and the handle had been carved as the trunk of the Silvan Tree capped in a truncated canopy of green gems. Altogether it seemed an impossible weapon, too fragile to employ in combat but infused with a power that even Jonath could feel itching against his skin.

“Do ya feel that!” he exclaimed. “Fair makes ya wanna scratch.”

Lovar could definitely feel it. In fact he knew it would not be prudent to handle it in any way. Somehow he could sense the almost infinite energy that rested quietly within its delicate form and he did not know what might happen if his flesh came into contact with it. He decided quickly that it would remain unspoiled and secured in its box.

All the men stood looking at the talisman for a short time then Lovar carefully re-wrapped it in its cloth bindings and placed it back inside the box. When he was done he turned to Jonath.

“We have the Emurion Jonath, now we need to know where we can find a Maturi. It is up to you.”

Jonath had said he would give over the location of the LoreMaster if the sword had been found and he was, when it came to business amongst friends, a man of his word.

“The LoreMaster you're after is the Maturi Len. Old as the 'ills he

is, an' currently residin' at Kal Arbor. Did a few jobs for him a couple a years back. Pays well an' values 'is privacy."

Lovar stood quietly for a moment and laughed out loud. "Kal Arbor." he whispered to himself. "By the Fates, who would have thought."

Camren could not see the humour in Jonath's declaration and had to ask why it was a reason for laughter.

"You laugh Lovar. Is there a jest here that we have missed?"

The Historian shook his head and picked up the box. "No Camren, there is no jest here, only the folly of men who did not know what they were doing, and it would seem were completely out-played by those who did."

"What do you mean?" asked Camren.

"For a century the Guild hunted the LoreMasters of the Grand Circle, their purpose to obtain knowledge from them by whatever means necessary. We expended huge amounts of time and money in that pursuit and never found a single one, never garnered a thread of new information in all those long years. Yet one of those same LoreMasters has lived within an hour's ride of Maenum and we never knew. For all I know the rest could have been residing in Hel'garad itself. What a waste of time."

"Perhaps," said Camren, "but at least you had a purpose to your life other than just survival itself. The Guild gave you education and a mission. Not everyone in this world has had those advantages."

Lovar looked at Camren and could feel an argument building but he had no time for it. It was Balkerik who stepped between them.

"The light ebbs away as we speak Gentlemen. What is our purpose now. We have the Emurion, and thanks to Jonath someone to take it to. What should we do?"

The Historian took up the sword and considered their next move. For him the way to Kal Arbor was clear.

"We have only one mission here and that is to deliver the Emurion to the Maturi Len as quickly as possible. We stand here as four men but have only three fast horses between us, and that means that only three will be going. Camren, Jonath and myself will be going north. Balkerik, for you I have another mission."

Balkerik stepped forward, his expression troubled by his exclusion. "Master Lovar, I..."

Lovar cut him short. "Comrade, we can take the sword to its destination but Das Nephrim needs you more. The city will not

survive long with only Flash-charges and courage to rely upon. Thousands are going to die unless we can provide a boon that will give them the defences they need against the Shadowch and we have that boon here.”

From his satchel Lovar pulled one of the Lightstones. “You know the power of these talismans. Like all the Sharyah it meters its power to the level of the task placed before it. Give this to the Captain of the Guard at Das Nephrim and instruct him on its usage. Placed at the highest point of the city it should illuminate the entire fortress and keep the Shadowch at bay. Do this task and you will save many lives.”

Balkerik took hold of the talisman and placed it about his neck. As it touched his skin it began to glow a deep blue. “I will do this task.” he said quietly. “But what will become of you once the Emurion is delivered?”

Lovar smiled at the man's optimism. “Once the sword is handed to the Maturi I will return to Das Nephrim. The Guild House will be our meeting point. Fair enough?”

The old man nodded and turned for the wagon. Once he was aboard he raised his hand in farewell. “Ride fast,” he shouted into a growing wind. “You have no more than three hours of daylight left.”

A Light in the Darkness

Quickly the three men gathered their belongings and made ready to travel. Balkerik would take the remainder of the day to make it back to Das Nephrim but they could not journey with him. Their mission lay to the north and Lovar could see only a direct route to Kal Arbor, across the open grasslands and keeping to the east of the road until they hit Das Frontiere. From there it would be a day's fast ride to Kal Arbor. He did not intend to use the roads but they would have to enter the city itself.

"Why stop?" Jonath asked. "It'll take us fer'ever to get through Frontiere."

The Historian mounted his horse and turned it northwards. "All the population of the northern frontier will, by now, reside in either Das Nephrim or Das Frontiere. If Balkerik can reach Nephrim in time they will be safe but Das Frontiere will be helpless against what is still to come. I can feel more of the Shadowch breaking from their prisons, and as they do so they embolden those that have already escaped. We will deliver the other Lightstone to Frontiere for their defence and gain fresh horses at the same time. Do you agree?"

The two bandits nodded their agreement and all urged their mounts forward. The ride to Kal Arbor had begun.

In the cool afternoon, the three men rode northwards. About them the terrain lay as open grassland, green and slick with the aftermath of rain. From the north a strong wind blustered and at all sides the land lay as a verdant carpet unobstructed by either fence or riverbed. To the west they could see the towers of Das Nephrim and used the gleaming spires as a fixed point to navigate their way into the darkening evening. Against the wind they rode, testing the horses upon the flatland, urging them on as the suns of Arborell slid relentlessly towards the western horizon. By dusk they passed east of Kal Mulmi, but there lay at least another four hours before they might find safety within the walls of Das Frontiere. Camren knew that they would be attacked the moment the suns fell below the horizon and he could already sense the presence of the Shadowch nearby.

"Lovar," he yelled into the wind. "We need to stop!"

Reigning in his horse the Historian turned and rode to Camren's side. "What is it Camren?" he said urgently.

Camren did not reply. Instead he dropped from his horse and placed his hand upon the ground. "You had better see this," he replied.

Lovar also dismounted and placed his own hand upon the wet earth. At first he could sense only the lingering aftermath of Hel'garad's destruction, no more than a glimmering point of EarthMagic upon the horizon but still there nonetheless. It came upon him quickly however, that there was something else moving beneath the ground, a multitude of points of energy and all spiralling in their direction.

"By the Fates." Lovar exclaimed. "They're under the ground."

"And they're coming our way. I hope that Lightstone is active for we are going to need it a long time before we get to Frontiere."

The Historian quickly re-mounted his horse and together the men returned to their journey. Ahead lay a long ride in darkness and the only defence they would have would be the Sharyah. Lovar considered that he did not actually know if the Lightstone would work, but consoled himself with the knowledge that if it didn't he would not live long enough to regret the error.

In the diminishing light of the day the companions galloped northwards. Their course stood only slightly east of north, Lovar's intention to skirt the towns of Kal Mulmi and Kal Dor Tarma, keeping the riders clear of the roads and farms that clustered about the South Road. In doing so he believed that at a gallop they could reach Das Frontiere by mid evening, and so deliver the last of the Lightstones to the city garrison there. Given the chance to rest overnight they could make Kal Arbor in the daylight hours that followed and not need the protection of a Lightstone for the journey. That was his hope and as the last glimmers of day receded into the western horizon he took hold of the Sharyah'ka and searched the darkening grasslands for any sign of the Shadowch. He did not have to wait long.

Upon the western horizon the dusk fell as an orange haze, masked by high clouds and a mist that moved in long veils upon the blustering winds. Overhead the sky remained clear but Lovar could see an overcast spreading from the north and with only the sounds of their horses' laboured breathing and pounding hooves in his ears he watched the landscape about them. All too quickly he saw the first signs of the Shadowch and he did not hesitate to protect himself and his comrades.

Taking the Sharyah in hand he whispered the Word that would activate it. Unlike other Sharyah its command was simple enough. "Ka" was all that was needed and in the gathering dark the talisman exploded into life. In an instant the dark plain turned to daylight, the

Lightstone illuminating all three horsemen in a rapidly spreading dome of brilliant white light. Within that dome Lovar could see everything upon the plain with a crystal clarity and he urged his horse forward, holding the Sharyah'ka before him, its gleaming gem crackling with blue energy.

Immediately Camren and Jonath closed in behind the Historian, their eyes also searching the plains for any sign of the Shadowch. Sure enough they found them and so started a battle between the power of the Sharyah'ka and the relentless hatred of the Shadowch. At the edges of the light the men could see the Shadowch, running parallel to their position but unable to get any closer than the darkness beyond. Many tried, gruesome nightmarish beasts that loped upon impossibly long legs, each pushing against the light and dissolving like ash upon the ground. All about them the Shadowch flung themselves against the sphere and in roiling clouds they dissipated, their remains picked up in the winds and blown southwards. Lovar did not sense the talisman was killing the creatures, that he thought would be too easy a solution to the danger they presented. Instead he could feel the Shadowch being hurled back towards their place of origin, somehow bonded to a source of power that would then bring them back into the corporeal world. On this his suspicions were validated when the same creatures inevitably returned to the chase, only to fling themselves once again into dissolution.

It was a battle however, that was not going all their way. With each creature sacrificing themselves upon the power of the Lightstone the dome of light contracted. Only slightly at first, but as more of the Shadowch charged the horsemen so did their protection weaken. It was a circumstance that the Historian had not considered and as they rode for Das Frontiere he estimated that the talisman's power would fail at least an hour before they could reach the city. The Sharyah'ka he had taken from Hel'garad should have been inexhaustible but this one was being relentlessly weakened, the swirling clouds of ash whittling away at its connection to the source of EarthMagic that fuelled it. It would indeed only be a matter of time before it would fail completely.

Camren also saw the effect the Shadowch were having on the dome of light and rode up beside Lovar.

“The Lightstone is weakening Lovar!” he shouted. “Even if we make the city we will bring all these Shadowch with us and give no

protection for the people themselves.”

“What do you suggest?” Lovar replied.

“That we stop.” shouted Camren. “If the Lightstone dissipates out here, at least we will keep the Shadowch from Das Frontiere for a while. I do not need my hand upon the ground to know that we are drawing Shadowch from all over the frontier to us. Let them hurl themselves upon the light here rather than drag them to Frontiere.”

Lovar had in mind only one objective, to make Kal Arbor as quickly as possible, but he could see no good purpose in turning Das Frontiere into a killing field for the Shadowch. If they were going to die it would be better that they had only their own lives at risk. In a heartbeat he decided his fate.

“You are a good man Camren Patrice. Let us give the people of Das Frontiere at least one further night of peace.”

Pulling at his horse's reins the Historian brought his mount to a halt and then dismounted, holding the faltering Lightstone above his head as Camren and Jonath also dropped to earth. All around them they could see the furtive movement of the Shadowch in the darkness, large and grotesque shapes that circled the light, screeching and growling as they tested its boundaries. It seemed that they had gathered to them all the forces the Shadowch could muster on the frontier, and in the face of this crowding melee of monster and malice the Men stood their ground, waiting for the light to falter. At best the Historian believed they would have maybe half an hour.

Jonath held the horses as Camren and Lovar watched the edges of the light, able to do nothing but wait for the inevitable attack. Against the light the Shadowch pressed inwards, smoking palls of ash blasting past the men as the wind took hold of the creatures' remains and blew them southwards. It was a relentless assault but one that itself faltered just as the Sharyah flickered its last.

In a surprising turn the Lightstone gave out, the dark of night crowding in as surely as the three men expected the Shadowch. What they found however, was an empty night, the stars overhead fading against the advance of an overcast from the north. For a moment they stood waiting but no attack came. It was Jonath who broke the silence.

“Look!” he yelled, pointing to the south. Against the horizon it was as if the suns themselves were rising in the dead of the night, a vast dome of light expanding out from the darkness.

“Balkerik made it.” Lovar said in a whisper.

“Surely that is not the Lightstone you gave him.” Camren queried.

“Surely it is Camren.” replied the Historian. “You must remember from your studies that Sharyah, no matter their purpose, are intuitive devices. They expend only the power needed to do the job asked of them, whether it be small or large. Balkerik asked the Sharyah'ka to protect the city and it has done so. It would seem that it has saved us as well.”

Camren knelt upon the wet ground and placed his hand upon a bare patch of earth. Immediately his senses searched the surrounding terrain and found nothing. The Shadowch had disappeared but he could feel where they had gone. The points of energy that indicated their positions were all surging southwards, like moths to a flame they could not resist the enormous power generated by Balkerik's Sharyah. He had done his job well, and in the success of his mission had saved his comrades as well.

“I think Lovar,” Camren said, “that whilst the Lightstone shines over Das Nephrim we will be clear of the Shadowch. In this time of reprieve we'd better get going.”

There was no further need for negotiation. Their salvation had come as a stroke of luck in the darkness and none of the men were going to squander it. Mounting their horses they urged them northwards and in the gloom of a clouded night they rode onwards, the towers of Das Frontiere rising as indistinct shadows against the edges of a darker horizon. Within the hour they would be safe.

Das Frontiere

At its start the rain began to fall as a misting drizzle, its touch a chilled, wet hand that slowly saturated the earth about them as the horsemen rode northwards. Relentlessly however, the downpour strengthened, the rain increasing as the northern wind grew apace. Within the remaining half hour of their ride the men found themselves caught in a wild bluster, their horses veering to the east as the cold rain slapped at their unprotected eyes. Against this downpour Lovar pulled his travel cloak tighter about him and persevered. Under other circumstances he would have found cover and made the best of the storm until it had passed but there was no time to find any shelter here. In the dark of night and in the face of a driving rain Lovar could do little but put his head down and ride, and in doing so he concentrated instead on the necessities of his mission and how glad he was to have companions on the journey.

It was a truth that he had done badly by Camren Patrice. The man had been made a scapegoat in his youth and Lovar could admit to himself that he should have told the truth rather than have given his friend up to punishment and exile. With the end of the Guild and his indenture now as a servant of the Tree he could see the futility of his previous service, and he felt compelled to right the injustice that had been wrought upon his friend. How, was the question though. How indeed.

Jonath Mac however, was a complete mystery to him. The man seemed devoid of grace or culture and appeared on the surface to be as ignorant as any man he had ever met in his life. But having said that the old bandit hid a cunning nature and a ferocious loyalty to his friend that he could easily respect. Jonath was a Plains Bandit of that Lovar had no doubt, a man who under other circumstances might be both dangerously amoral and quick to anger, but he seemed genuinely pleased to be a part of their mission and Lovar was glad to have him as a part of their company. Some tasks, he thought to himself, are bigger than one man, and the help of others necessary to their completion. He was indeed glad to have the two men with him.

As he rode he noticed a number of other things that gave him hope for the future of their mission. The first regarded the unusual expansion of his senses since his servitude had begun. In the dark of the night he found he could see everything about him. It was not a clear sight that one might have in the bright light of day, but instead a curious deep blue glimmering that enveloped everything, an aura

given off by the grasses beneath him, the smooth undulations of the land itself, and even the horse that he rode. The winds whipped and flowed in passing rivers of energy and within this moving tapestry of shades of blue he could see his way forward and found himself becoming more adept as he concentrated his focus. It was a wondrous moving apparition, one that allowed him to see ahead the distant, but closing, walls of Das Frontiere.

It came to him also as they rode on, that the Lightstone was not altogether dead. He had not discarded it, instead hanging it again about his neck. It was after all, an artefact of the Ancient World, and dead or not it had value for study and research. The Sharyah'ka had faltered and almost led to their deaths but its power had not been destroyed by the Shadowch. Just as the creatures had been able to return to their corporeal forms after testing the light, so the Lightstone was reconnecting with the EarthMagic that gave it power. As it hung at the Historian's neck he could feel it struggling against the damage that had been inflicted upon it, and in the midst of the rainstorm a great warmth radiated forth, the first glimmers of light illuminating his chest and inner lining of his cloak. Holding the Lightstone in his hand he could feel power returning to the talisman, and with its return he knew that he still had something to offer the people of Das Frontiere. There might be salvation for them yet.

Struggling against the winds the men kept to their course, all staying alert for any return of the Shadowch. At their backs the lights of Das Nephrim could no longer be seen, both Kal Mulmi and Kal Dor Tarma passing without notice. It seemed that the world itself had contracted to no more than the small circle of ground that supported the men's horses as they galloped north. It came to pass however, that the first lights of the city arose through the rushing mists, and with their emergence the men turned straight for them.

Like all fortresses of the north Das Frontiere had been constructed as a city held tightly within high stone walls. Unlike Das Nephrim however, Frontiere had been built hundreds of years before the construction of the Barrier Wall at Maenum. For centuries it had been Frontiere that had born the brunt of the Horde Wars and it had been built as a bulwark against siege and outright assault. Constructed upon a huge hill the fortress had no less than three fortified ring walls, each standing more than thirty metres above the surrounding plains and each in turn standing higher upon the hill, providing a defensive advantage if the outer wall be overwhelmed. Within these

walls the city itself had been built and at the summit of the hill there had been raised a tower known as the High Watch. From its vantage a lookout could see more than thirty leagues in any direction, effectively giving three days warning to any advance of the Hordim. It was with considerable pride that the citizens of Frontiere could boast the city had never been breached, but never in its long history had it seen a foe such as the Shadowch.

In truth Lovar did not know how long it would take the LoreMasters to defeat the Shadowch. He did not know how the Emurion was to be used but he could not leave the populations of the north defenceless. The Lightstone would be the boon that would give Das Frontiere a chance and he meant to deliver it to them.

In the hour before midnight the three men reached the South Gates of the fortress. As vague shadows galloping out of the veils of rain the City Guard did not see the horsemen until they were close upon the southern walls. From high overhead a challenge rang out, one that brought the men to a halt.

“Oi! Who goes there?” came an urgent shout from the battlement.

To this Lovar answered. “Three men of the south, all in need of the sanctuary these high walls can afford.”

For a moment there came no reply, then another voice rang out from above. “Let them pass.”

Immediately the gates opened, the iron-braced doors swinging inwards only enough to admit the men one horse at a time. When they had passed through the gates closed again behind them. Coming to a halt in a large enclosed courtyard the men dismounted and waited as a soldier of rank approached. He did not seem to be in any mood for small talk.

“Explain your purpose here.” he ordered abruptly.

In reply Lovar stepped forward. “We are travellers heading north, our purpose to stop here first and deliver assistance to the city. It is our intent to rest this night and then continue our journey in daylight tomorrow.”

The Officer snorted and moved closer to the Historian. Lovar could tell that this man used intimidation as his stock in trade. “And well that may be. Of greater interest to me is how you have survived the plains at night? The nightmares that have brought such destruction upon us would not just let you pass freely.”

Lovar did not step back. He knew that such men responded only to the exercise of greater power and he still had his Guild insignia in his

vest pocket.

“What is your name and rank?” Lovar commanded. The Officer hesitated for a moment, sensing that the three travellers were perhaps not all that they seemed.

“Benk,” he replied. “Officer of the Third Watch and Adjutant to the 7th Company of Foot.”

The Historian pushed himself closer into the Officer's face and pulled the insignia from his clothing.

“Well Benk, I am not here to answer questions from the likes of you. I am the Tak Lovar, an Inquisitor with a need to see your Commander. If you want to be useful you can take me to him for I have news of the south, and a possible defence against those nightmares you speak of.”

Recognising the insignia Benk did not hesitate. Stepping back he turned on his heel and motioned for the men to follow. With horses in tow the group made for a large archway at the western edge of the courtyard. Beyond the arch lay a wide cobbled street, lined with commercial buildings and retail shops, its length packed with wagons and crowds of refugees. Through these crowds Benk pushed forward, shouting at any who stood in his way as he forced a path. Within minutes however, he had brought them to a large market square, its area completely covered in tents and the materiel of an army unit in camp. Through these rows of tents the Officer shouted at any hapless soldier who found himself under foot, pushing them aside as roughly as the refugees they had encountered in the street. At the camp's centre however, rose a larger tent and there Lovar found the Commander of the garrison at Das Frontiere.

At its entrance two soldiers challenged Benk's advance but a swift word saw Lovar given entry. Before he entered however, he gave over the box containing the Emurion to Camren.

“Keep it safe.” he said quietly. “There is something I must do here before we can move on.”

Both Camren and Jonath stayed outside, not yet sure exactly what the Historian had planned. Within the tent Lovar waited as a group of officers talked earnestly over a series of maps draped upon a long table. Most were topographic maps of the region surrounding the city but the focus of their discussion he could recognise as a layout of the city's sewers and catacombs.

“If you are looking at a way to evacuate the city using the sewer system it will not work.” he interjected.

At the sound of his voice the Commander and his subordinate

officers turned towards Lovar. They were all men wearied by the events of the last days. None looked as if they had slept and all had the air of men who had found themselves out of their depth, unable to fully comprehend exactly what they were up against. Only the Commander himself spoke.

“Benk, who is this man?”

Benk stood to attention and answered quickly. “Sir, I do not know his name but he comes to the city in the dead of night unmolested. He says he has a defence against the night creatures.”

The Commander looked Lovar up and down and did not seem impressed. He was however, too desperate to dismiss Lovar out of hand.

“Why can't we use the sewers?” he asked.

“The creatures you fight are known as Shadowch, Commander. They are creatures of magic, engineered to exist in both the spectral and corporeal worlds. They cannot abide sunlight and in the daylight hours find their refuge below ground. If you move people through the sewers the creatures will sense their presence. Below ground you will find only death.”

In the silence that followed the Commander stepped closer to the Historian. He was a tall man, with a physique honed by long years of military service. Even in the low light of the tent Lovar could see three distinct scars etched across the full length of his face. At some time in the past this man had been in close combat with a Hresh and had lived to tell the tale of it.

“Who are you?” he asked again.

“I am the Tak Malleus Lovar, Historian and Inquisitor of the LoreMages' Guild and for this night at least I am at your service.”

“And how can you assist us Tak? Your fellow Guildsmen have deserted their posts and left us to fend for ourselves. For that matter how is it you know so much of these creatures? Tell me that and I might be disposed to listen to you.”

Lovar stood straighter and addressed all the officers about him. “I cannot account for the actions of my compatriots, for they are just men and the masters of their own actions. I can tell you however, that the Guild has fallen and most of its leadership is now dead. Hel'garad lies in ruins and this new enemy assaults all of us without discrimination. If you wish we can spend our time in these dark hours bandying accusations or I can provide you with a defence against the Shadowch. It is your choice.”

For just a moment the tent fell quiet. Each of the officers looked to their commander but he had already made his decision. Smiling broadly he held out his hand and Lovar took it.

“We would very much appreciate a defence against this enemy Lovar. Too many of us have died already.”

“Then,” replied the Historian “we had better begin.”

In the hours that followed Lovar explained the use of the Lightstone to keep the Shadowch at bay and how to use it in the defence of Das Frontiere. Lovar believed that whilst Das Nephrim used their Sharyah to ward the Shadowch they would keep the focus of their assault firmly on that city. There was something in the energy produced by the talisman that drew the creatures to it, and in the thrall of that energy the Master did not appear to have complete control over them. It was an assumption made by the Historian for the attack on Das Frontiere had ceased, and whilst the Lightstone shone over Nephrim it was possible that Das Frontiere itself might be spared from further attack. It was in his thoughts that such a situation might continue as long as the defenders of Frontiere did not bring further attention upon themselves.

With this possibility in mind he cautioned that they should continue to defend the city with their flash-charges, for that would draw no more of the creatures to them. If however, their assault became a sustained attack that might breach the walls then the Lightstone should be activated. It was a new weapon the soldiers were glad to take possession of, and within a hastily built cradle it was installed upon the High Watch.

When everything that could be done had been done the Commander thanked Lovar and asked what he might require in return. For the Historian the list was both short and practical. Fresh horses, clean clothes and a place to stay for the night.

These requests were organised quickly and by midnight all three men had been issued with fresh clothes and a note from the Commander himself to collect three horses from the Cavalry Billets at first light. On the point of a place to stay the outcome proved both surprising and useful.

The Black Horse Inn

From the organised activity of the army camp the Adjutant Benk took them on a short journey through the back streets of Das Frontiere, passing through the second ring wall of the city and deep into the commercial quarter. There he stopped at the entrance to a boarding house, an establishment hailed by its hanging shingle as the Black Horse Inn. There seemed little about it that might engender any remark but that changed when the door was flung open.

Standing silhouetted in the entrance rose the imposing figure of a woman, tall as Lovar himself but huge in proportion. Clad in drab work-clothes and wielding a cudgel the size of an axe handle the proprietor of the house seemed already primed for violence.

“By the Fates Roland,” she said loudly as the enormous woman turned her eye to the Adjutant. “What have you brought me now? Doesn't Jancen know that we're a full house?”

Benk himself drew back from the stairs. He seemed genuinely afraid of the woman, although she seemed to have his acquaintance on a first name basis.

“Sorry Dear,” he answered. “The Commander requires these men be fed and given a bed for the night. It is important that they are rested.”

All three men looked to the Adjutant. He could see in their eyes a question that had to be answered.

“Gentlemen, this is my ex-wife, Madam Benk, proprietor and keeper of the Black Horse. Follow the rules as she relays them and you shall have no trouble here.”

With that he turned on his heel and disappeared down the street, his fleeing form lost quickly within the crowds of refugees and wagons.

Madam Benk stood on the stoop and laughed quietly. “I tell ya that never gets old. Six year's since we got divorced an' he still terrified.”

Lovar couldn't help but smile at the power the woman held over such a disagreeable man. She was also however, their key to a meal and a decent night's sleep and he decided to be diplomatic.

“Madam Benk. May we introduce ourselves?”

The proprietor stepped back from the door and took up a large book

“I'll have each of yer names, an' usual place of residence, for the Ledger.”

The Historian gave over his name and Madam Benk let him in through the door. Camren followed quickly but as Jonath climbed the

steps the proprietor slammed her ledger closed.

“Jonath Mac,” she cried out. “You old smuggler. I thought you'd been chased out of Frontiere year's ago.”

For his part Jonath was taken aback. Only when he came into the light did a glimmer of recognition mark itself upon him.

“Megs?” he whispered.

“As sure as a roast on Sunday. By Providence's fickle hand it must be twenty years. I can see it's been time enough fer you to get damn ugly.”

Jonath smiled and hugged the woman, stepping back only to return the compliment. Deliberately he looked her up and down.

“It would seem that the years haven't bin kind ter you either.”

For just a moment Madam Benk became silent, Lovar could hear her fist squeezing upon the handle of her cudgel. It was only for a moment however, the silence broken when she laughed out loud and slapped the old bandit across the back.

“Come on in gentlemen. The food's hot and I reckon I can rustle up a few cots. Any friend of Jonath's is a friend o' mine.”

Following Madam Benk down a long passage the companions soon found themselves in a busy dining hall, filled with refugees and townsfolk, all eating quietly.

“First off you need to know the rules,” she declared as the men found themselves a seat. “First rule, no fightin'. Second rule, no stealin'. Third rule, pay yer bill. Keep to the rules an' there'll be no trouble here. Got it?”

All three men nodded quickly.

“Good. I'll go fetch some grub.”

Madam Benk proved as good as her word. Within a few minutes a young girl appeared from the Kitchen carrying three plates of food. In the Black Horse it seemed that you didn't have a choice or a menu, you ate what was given and paid for the privilege. Under the circumstances however, none of the men felt disposed to complain and soon found themselves enjoying a thick meat stew, followed by a heavy cake and custard. It was the first decent meal Lovar had eaten since the Guild House and he relished every mouthful. It was only when all three companions had finished that Camren looked to Jonath and asked the question both himself and Lovar were hankering to ask.

“How is it Jonath, that you are acquainted with the Madam Benk?”

Jonath shifted in his seat and leaned towards his friends.

“If I tells ya, does it stay with us an' no one else.” he whispered.

Both men nodded and leaned closer for the answer.

“Madam Benk as she calls herself was once Megatha Tills, a good friend an' fellow purveyor of info'mation to the gangs up north. Made some good coin with 'er help but she decided to go legit when she met that arse Benk. A Voor'cat does'n change its stripes an' I'll warrant that she's still got 'er ear ta the ground. Ask her a question an' see if I'm not right.”

It was a conversation that could only have got more interesting but one that stalled at the outset, interrupted abruptly by the woman herself.

“Well, well,” she said as she slumped into a vacant chair next to Lovar. “Plannin' something are we?”

Both Lovar and Camren Patrice shook their heads quickly but Jonath did not seem perturbed.

“Come on Megs. You know men 'ave gotta 'ave somethin' ta do with their spare time. We go crazy otherwise.”

Madam Benk smiled and tapped her thick fingers on the table.

“Some little birds tell me that you lot are plannin' to go north. Seems a daft idea considerin' the state of the roads an' all them nasty critters out there. I'm thinking it must be somethin' big to take the risk.”

The Historian raised an eyebrow, impressed with Madam Benk's ability to divine the intentions of her patrons. Perhaps, he thought, this woman may have information useful to them.

“Tell me Madam Benk, what news have you of the north?”

Madam Benk took a deep breath and looked at Jonath. “You bin tellin tales out of school?”

Jonath shook his head quickly. Even he did not want to get on her bad side.

“Jonath has told us nothing we did not gather for ourselves Madam.” interjected Lovar. “You are however, the proprietor of a busy inn, one I can see frequented by many travellers. I could imagine you would hear much of the to and fro of the frontier.”

Madam Benk looked about her and pushed her chair closer to the Historian. At once he was overcome by a heavy odour of curry powder and Geldu spices.

“As it 'appens.” she whispered. “I 'ave heard a few things.”

“Well then Madam, we would be very appreciative of anything you might know.”

“The first thing I heard of trouble came from the Faeyen. Had a

communication officer in, half drunk and loose tongued. Got a carrier-bird from Caravanserai and all sorts of bother ta report. Apparently Faehlan got hit real hard, nothing at all coming from Morenahl. The Faeyen had no idea what had 'appened and most shut their doors and hunkered down. Soon there's chaos spreadin' everywhere and no idea the cause. Nobody 'ad a clue what to do and the troubles crept real quick to our neck of the woods. The Shadowch, I think they're bein' called, are everywhere over the north, killin' everythin' that moves and only daylight provides any respite. But that's not all of it."

"What do you mean?" asked Lovar.

"Well, we think we got it hard. The Hordim have been well and truly hammered an' they ain't got any high fortresses to hide in."

"How could you know that?" Camren whispered.

Madam Benk tapped her nose. "Sources me lad. The Barrier Wall held at Maenum but it wasn't the stone-eaters that sent them on their way. Those Shadowch monsters crawled out of the ground an' jumped the entire Horde Army that same night. Slaughter apparently, lost half their number before they realised they had to run for it. It was only some kind of magic that kept those things at bay. The Shadowch are huntin' just as hard north of the Rift as they are south of it."

Lovar leaned back in his chair and could see the terrible logic in it. Vor'ell had designed the Shadowch as weapons to use against the Hordim and many of them must have stayed true to their original design. The monsters created by the Guild's folly were not focusing their attacks on any one target in particular. Life in general was the target, and everything was going to be destroyed if they could not be stopped.

"Tell me Madam," Lovar said quietly. "What will we find now on the road to Maenum."

The woman got up from her chair. "If you go that way you will find only death. The roads are clogged with the remains of those who didn't make it here in daylight. I ain't gunna ask you why you're headin' north but you might want'a rethink it."

The Historian thanked Madam Benk for her concern and then asked if they might be seen to their beds. The huge woman turned towards the door and motioned for one of the serving staff. The boy could have been no more than fourteen, tall and thin, and eager to show them the way. With all the men in train Jerod, as he was named by Madam Benk, saw them up one flight of stairs and then another as

they rose through the building. In short order the three men found themselves ushered into a long, dark room. It was apparent that their accommodation for the night was to be an attic space, cleaned and tidied for the three camp beds that lined the eastern side of the room. Apart from themselves and their beds there was very little else within the attic. At one end Lovar could see a collection of small, neatly stacked crates, and in the western wall two dorma-style windows looked out over the city and the farmlands beyond. As they dropped their belongings Jerod informed them that breakfast would be at first light, and if they needed anything to see the night staff in reception. Lovar thanked the boy and waited near the door as he left.

With packs and equipment piled at the room's centre they prepared themselves for sleep. The Historian could say that he was thankful for any space that might afford them safety and a good night's rest and in the flickering light of a single lamp he chose a bed. Before he retired however, he made for one of the windows and peered out upon the city. It was mostly dark but he could see lightning flashing against the far horizon and he took a moment to watch as the storm thundered out its power on the distant plains.

It was something he always found curious, and with no knowledge of how mere clouds might generate such energy he pondered the things that men did not know, and probably should. Perhaps, he thought, the Guild should have spent more time uncovering the true mysteries of the world rather than trying to reconstruct the magics of the Dwarvendim. In any event all of their efforts had come to naught and their greed for power had destroyed them. He only hoped that in the process the Guild had not destroyed everything else as well.

Turning back to his bed he removed his boots and tried to find rest. In the semi-dark Lovar could hear Camren pulling his bed across the door before extinguishing the one lamp that gave them light. In the full shadows of the night they fell into sleep.

Of Roasting Skewers and Vengeance

It took a while for Camren Patrice to follow his companions into slumber. The events of the day had given him much to think about and in the quiet of the night he took the time to consider all that had happened to him, and all that he expected in the day to come. He knew as well as his friends, for that was how he now considered both of the men, that the following day would be pivotal to their success. Without a Lightstone they would have to complete the entire length of their journey to Kal Arbor in the hours of daylight afforded them. He had a suspicion that the Shadowch would prove no match for the powers that could be marshalled by a true LoreMaster yet anything could happen along their route that might delay them. It was a possibility that all the men had considered, and in the dark he felt more than a twitch of hesitation at the thought of being caught out in the open. There was much about their mission that he did not yet fully understand, although as he lay in his bed he was convinced that their mission had a true and urgent purpose. Something niggled at his thoughts though, a persistent disquiet that revolved around the changes that had obviously remade Lovar and the unusual strengthening of his own senses. All he could be sure of was that there was something Lovar was not telling him.

Camren had always felt things that seemed to slide past those around him. The ability to sense EarthMagic had always been a talent sought by the Guild, but he had never seen anyone demonstrate the capacity that he could now muster. With a simple thought he could feel the malice of the Shadowch, even though they might be leagues away, and he had noticed that his ability to do so increased substantially when Lovar was anywhere close at hand. In the confines of their room his presence charged Camren's senses, sending them flooding out into the city and the plains that surrounded it. It was a process of thought that he found difficult to control but in the dead of the night he let his thoughts wander. He attempted no conscious direction, just let his ability free into the darkness. Within the confines of the city he felt only the fear of its populace, and the resolve of those that defended it. Upon the plains however, he came to a sudden and jarring halt. There he discovered the Shadowch and it chilled him when he touched their malice.

In the shadows he found them lurking, their anger and their spite directed towards the city and all those that lived within its walls, but they were not moving. Strung out in a wide arc that circled the

fortress the creatures were straining for blood, like ravening dogs held upon the tight leash of a Master that had regained control of his monsters. In the dark he searched their number, trying to sense their purpose but found only a need to kill and a command to remain quiet. The Shadowch were waiting for something and Camren believed he knew what it was.

Morning came all too quickly. In the hour before dawn Jerod tapped upon their door and in response the three men dragged themselves from their beds. Upon the windows of their room rain pattered against the glass, a thick mist obscuring the city from their vantage.

“Well, this not the best weather fer a day out.” Jonath ventured.

Camren agreed as he reached for his travel cloak. “You are right Jonath. Not a good day for a fast ride at all.”

Lovar made for the nearest of the panes and found only white veils of cloud obscuring any view of the city. From the north a strong wind had grown overnight and brought with it an overcast that would turn the roads and fields to mud. As he peered through the glass Camren came to his side.

“Do you sense their presence?” he asked.

“I do.” answered the Historian. “We are safe from them whilst the suns remain above us but they will be following us nonetheless. We must make Kal Arbor today or we will die.”

Camren nodded and turned to find Jonath struggling with his pack. “Come on, old man. We can finish packing once we have eaten.”

Jonath snorted in reply and threw his rucksack onto his bed. Food would always be a first priority for the old bandit and he did not require any further convincing. Locking the door behind them the three men made their way quickly to the dining hall. The night had not been long enough for a decent rest but a good meal would provide some compensation. Within the hall they found only a few of the Black Horse's residents, most still smart enough to remain in their beds. It was not however, the quiet hall they expected. Madam Benk could be heard from the kitchen, her voice a booming cajole that rang clearly through the inn. She was not happy.

“I tell ya for nothin', anybody who steals from Madam Benk ain't gunna be smilin' when I gets them. By the Fates I only ask three things from me guests and this ain't good enough!”

Lovar looked at his friends and raised an eyebrow at the commotion. None could properly take a seat before the huge woman

stormed into the hall.

“Somebody's got 'em and I want 'em back!” she yelled.

Lovar raised his hands and stood before the Innkeeper. In a rage she was truly intimidating. It became clear to the Historian in that moment that in the long progress of their marriage the Adjutant probably never stood a chance.

“What has been taken?” he asked quickly.

“Some worm has taken me roastin' skewers. They were on the bench in the Kitchen and now they's gone. Solid brass and worth more than the life of who'vever took 'em.”

Lovar took one step back and tried to calm her. “Madam, I can assure you that myself and my friends did not take your skewers. Perhaps we should conduct a quick search of the floor. Is it possible they were mislaid?”

Madam Benk hesitated for a moment, but only for a moment. When she replied her voice seethed with anger.

“You don't get it do you? They're only skewers, who steals skewers fer pity's sake. Well I'll tell ya who, a thief, that's who. Long and thin they're perfect for pickin' locks an' I don' abide stealin'. Somebody in this house's got somethin' worth nickin' and we got a thief who wants it.”

For a moment the Historian took in Madam Benk's words before their true import dawned upon him. As far as he was concerned there was only one thing of value in the Black Horse Inn and it was in their room upstairs.

“Camren, Jonath!” he yelled. “Upstairs!”

As one the men rushed for the stairs. Behind them Madam Benk and Jerod followed, all five hitting the steps in quick succession as they raced for the attic. It took no longer than a short minute to make their room and an even shorter time to realise the door had already been forced. The Historian did not wait for the others and burst through the door, Camren and Jonath only a few steps behind. What they found brought them all to a halt.

Standing in the centre of the room was a man, tall and lean but showing all the signs of someone who had been living rough. The room was filled with the smell of sewage and his clothes were damp from the rain. Even through the beard Jonath recognised who it was.

“Braddick Alun as I live an 'breathe.” he hissed through his teeth.

The Bandit stood motionless, his hands already on the box that held the Emurion.

“Yes it is I,” he replied. “And imagine me surprise when I saw you Jonath, a man I figured good an' dead walking with these fine gentlemen on the night past. Noticed how you were coddling this here box also. Figured it couldn't be anythin' but treasure so I figured I might have a look fer meself. Considerin' how you let me down I figured we might strike a deal and let bygones be bygones.”

Lovar was about to move forward to retrieve the Emurion by force if necessary when he felt Jonath's hand on his arm. The look on the old bandit's face stopped him in his tracks. Lovar looked to Camren and saw him slowly shake his head. This was for Jonath to reconcile and no one else.

“Tell me Braddick, how did ya get away from the law? Last thing I heard yer gang was gone and yer head was stickin' on a pole.”

Alun nodded and moved to stand face on to Jonath. “Aye, I was lucky. The gang got hit on the South Road but I had already rode on to Frontiere. Heard about the guys all dead an' people shoutin' about how they had killed the great Braddick Alun. Didn't feel obliged to rain on their parade an' have been hiding in the sewers since. With this however,” he held up the box, “I can see better days ahead.”

Jonath moved to within arm's length of the bandit and scratched at his face. Camren stood only metres away, his hand on his sword and his stance ready for anything. Lovar did not see what was coming. Out of nowhere Jonath produced a long bladed knife and thrust it forward into Braddick Alun's chest. Before the man could cry out Jonath drew the blade back and slashed across Alun's neck, cutting into the bandit's throat deep enough that all present could hear metal scrape against bone. In a strangled gurgle the man slumped sideways, dead before he hit the ground.

Standing over the body Jonath spat of the remains and turned back towards his friends. On his face was a look of absolute joy. Something long in the making had come to pass and Fate had brought it straight to his door. As he has expected revenge had indeed been sweet. For good measure he spat on the body once more before stepping away.

“That's the sort o' deal I like. Everybody wins except bastards like 'im.”

Immediately Camren ran forward and checked that Braddick Alun was indeed dead. Jonath had done his work well however, the bandit's remains limp, his blood draining out across the floor.

At the doorway Madam Benk stood aghast. The ferocity of Jonath's

attack leaving even her speechless. Jerod stood pale in the half-light, his arm on his Madam's shoulder.

"By the Fates," she said when she recovered her wits, "you really didn't like 'im did ya?"

"Sorry Megs," he replied, "Just somethin' old that washed up unexpected like."

In the moment of quiet that followed the violence Lovar grabbed up the box and checked its contents. The Emurion remained whole and immediately he began to pack his belongings.

"I am sorry, Madam Benk, but we must leave quickly. Can I impose upon you not to call the authorities until we have left the city. The task we must undertake does not allow that we be delayed here."

Madam Benk stood for a moment then a smile creased her face.

"I'll do better 'n that. Leave the body with me an' I'll not give it up to the Law until tomorra'. Jerod!" she yelled even though the boy stood only a few paces from her. "Get to the kitchen and get together food an' water for three men for two days. Go on boy. Make it quick!"

Turning back to the men she advanced upon them and had a closer look at the dead bandit.

"You've fair made a problem for me lads." she said bending over the corpse. "Gettin' rid of a body ain't no easy thing but it'll be best if yer on yer way quickly. The supplies 'll be up soon enough and you can use the trade exit to get on yer way. Nobody 'll know you've gone but that fool Roland, an' I can handle him."

Jonath took her hand and thanked her for her trouble. "You're a good old girl, Megs. Next time I'm back in Frontiere I'll look ya up."

Madam Benk looked particularly dubious at Jonath's promise and didn't bother to reply. Instead she made for the door. "Five minutes lads an' yer food'll be ready. I'll get Jerod to guide you out. Just tell 'im where you need to go."

Lovar tried to thank the woman but she disappeared quickly down the stairs, the swish of her dress against the wood steps following her as she returned to the kitchen.

"What's next then?" Camren asked when Madam Benk had gone.

The Historian stopped his packing and belted his sword to his waist. "We have a long ride ahead, and if Jonath has no further murders to commit, a need to get out quickly. We'll make for the Billets, collect our horses and then get out of the city."

Camren nodded and the three men worked swiftly to ready themselves for the day.

A Friend Found

At the first light of morning Lovar, Camren and Jonath Mac sat upon new horses at the North Gates of Das Frontiere. Madam Benk had been as good as her word and had provisioned them with everything they would need for two day's solid travel. The Cavalry Billets had provided their three best horses and with all their equipment packed and stowed they could do nothing but wait until the all clear hailed from the High Watch behind them. The rain had tempered, but there lay still upon the plains a fog that ran across the grasses in ragged veils, pushed relentlessly by strong northern winds. It was no surprise to the men that they were the only travellers waiting in the wide courtyard. Standing alone upon the cobbled ground they lingered impatiently as those that passed by looked suspiciously at their apparent eagerness to leave the safety of the city walls.

There was little that any of them could do but wait, and in the cool pre-dawn light Lovar sat quietly, pondering the events of the past day.

"Do you not think it curious that Madam Benk proved so eager to keep that wretch's body for us." he whispered to Camren.

His companion smiled and shook his head. "No Lovar. I think you might have missed the point of her apparent willingness."

"What do you mean?" he replied.

"Well, consider the tableau that played out from her point of view." answered the bandit. "On the floor of her attic lay one of the most notorious plains bandits still at large. Everyone thinks he's been captured and executed but there he is, only recently dead and I guarantee she will say by her hand. Just think of what that will mean to her."

Lovar looked blankly at his companion.

Camren laughed. "By the Fates you can be thick sometimes. Bounty, Lovar. Last thing I heard the reward, dead or alive, for Alun was more than five thousand *rials*. That's enough coin to make her a very rich woman indeed. All she has to do is make the claim and hand over the body. Any good story about how she brought him down will do and nobody will ever think twice about asking questions. Jonath's knife has made her a wealthy woman."

The Historian could see the cunning nature of Madam Benk and he had to laugh as well. All those years as a Innkeeper had not tempered her opportunism and he had to admire her for that. In the midst of sudden violence she had seen only opportunity and had

taken it with both hands. The woman was indeed truly formidable.

From the High Watch came a single bell, tolling in the growing light of the morning. In response the north gate swung open, though only enough to give them a way beyond the walls. In single file they rode out onto the plain and then urged their horses on. Their last ride to Kal Arbor had begun.

For Lovar the way ahead still remained clear. As he had expected the roads were cluttered with the debris of a mass migration. Abandoned wagons and scattered possessions clogged the roadway, piled high upon the verge but spilling in great mounds upon the highway itself. Bodies lay everywhere and amongst this tide of refuse and desperation there was only one possible way forward. Leaving the road completely Lovar urged his horse to a gallop, his objective to skirt the highway and its close knit landscape of farms and stone-walled fields and make for the open plains further to the west. From there the way would be unimpeded, a straight ride to the West Road and beyond that highway a direct route north-east to a small bridge known as DeMontell's Leap, a crossing of the Laneslem and then on to Kal Arbor itself. If all went well they could make the small village by mid afternoon. That was his plan and it relied on only one constant. They could not be delayed.

Turning to the north-west they rode on, veering north again once they had cleared the farmlands that edged the South Road. In this manner they made their way northwards, the ground open, the way ahead a wide grassland that quickly divested itself of the lingering shrouds of grey overcast. The veils of fog persisted only in patches and as they rode they discovered scattered areas of ground covered in personal belongings and debris. Through all of this they travelled quickly, making good time in the cool early morning air. It was good, Lovar thought, that they were out in the open once again. Since gaining his new vocation he had found the cities of men particularly overwhelming, and out in the clear air he found his senses focusing upon the vibrant energy of the natural world about them. He could sense the Shadowch beneath them, their spectral forms hiding from the suns in the deep earth but following them nonetheless. If night drew in upon them and they had not reached Kal Arbor, they would not have to wait for them to catch them up. The Shadowch were already beneath their feet and there were dozens of them.

There were other things however, that fought for his attention. The Caer'dahl had delivered to Lovar a new life, and a mission that he

was determined to complete, but what he found as well was a strange attachment that he now had to his past. If he let his mind roam he found he could focus on a particular person that he had known in his life and sense exactly where they now were. If he let his thoughts settle upon the High Prefect at Maenum he could feel the man's presence as a vague focal point of energy far off towards the fortress. Others he brought into his thoughts and found to his dismay that many had been taken by the Shadowch. It seemed a curious but distracting side-effect of his new powers and he had to be careful not to let such thoughts crowd his attention. Like ghosts of the past they would creep up upon him and like ghosts disappear just as quickly into the void.

One person that he did allow into his thoughts as they rode northwards was his assistant Pel. He did not know why a memory of the youth might suddenly intrude upon him but when it did he felt something very powerful trigger his senses. Immediately he reined his horse in and focused his mind upon his memories of the last time he saw him, standing in the crowd at Baellum, and like a beacon he found himself staring at a bright point of light, fixed upon the plains somewhere just north of north-east. Pel was close and still alive.

“What is it Lovar?” Camren asked as he rode to his side.

“There is something ahead that we must discover before we can go on. Ride for the low hills ahead, I am sure we will find it there.”

Camren did not ask what they were doing or why. He had given up trying to fully understand where the Historian's new powers might take them but he was fully prepared to follow, and with Jonath in tow the three men rode swiftly for an area of shallow hills just east of their chosen path. With only grass between them and their objective it did not take long for them to meet the hills, and in doing so discover a scene of confronting devastation.

In a wide saddle of ground between two hills the men came to a halt. Before them lay a field of death, the ground a broken patchwork of bare earth and mounds of torn grasses. Amongst the huge clumps of grass and earth there lay the scattered remains of wagons and their horses, and the ragged bodies of dozens of men and women. Something had attacked them with such fury that the ground itself had been assaulted, the earth just as much a target as the people themselves. It was random and wild in its ferocity and in the face of such rage Lovar could not believe that anyone might survive it, but in his mind he sensed Pel was here and he had to look.

“Jonath,” he called out. “Check the perimeter of the field. See if you can find sign of anyone escaping this attack. Camren, help me search the bodies. Look for anyone still alive.”

The two men took to their tasks and as Jonath rode the edges of the field Lovar and Camren checked each of the bodies, searching for both life and answers to what led them to their demise. It did not take long to find sign of the attackers. Pressed deep into the soft earth Lovar found a number of footprints, more than a metre in length and possessed of long raking claws. Whatever attacked them had spent time scraping deep furrows in the earth, its claws leaving behind bloody trails as it cleaned itself after killing. Against such beasts, for there were at least three of them, the refugees stood little chance. All must have been sheltering for the night, seeking safety in numbers but then attacked by the Shadowch. Like so many others they had found, these people had no defence and no time to run.

Walking through the bloodied debris of the killing field Lovar surveyed the appalling losses but then heard a voice crying out from within the mangled remnants. Camren also heard the plaintive cry and immediately began running into the debris. Lovar followed after his friend but signalled for Jonath to remain on his horse and maintain a lookout.

“Do you see anyone?” shouted the Historian.

“Not yet. Wait... over there!” Camren pointed to the north and began to run towards a wagon, surrounded by dead horses and tipped fully upon its side. On the open side of the wagon a huge mound of belongings had been thrown chaotically about and from beneath a part of that mound a hand was moving weakly. The men had indeed found someone alive. It was Pel.

“Pel!” the Historian exclaimed as he kneeled beside him. “Are you hurt?”

“Master Lovar?” came back a hoarse reply. “How is it so? Am I not yet dead?”

“Not yet Pel. Answer the question though. Are you hurt?”

His assistant lay partially beneath the wagon, his foot held against the earth by the full weight of the overturned wagon. With a piece of timber and Camren's help the two men levered the wreck up enough for Pel to pull his foot out. With a further amount of effort the remains of the wagon's cargo were pushed aside and they were able to draw Pel out onto clear ground.

“By the Fates Pel, what are you doing here?” Lovar asked.

The young man took water before he answered. His voice was dry and full of fatigue. "We were fleeing Miller's Crossing and found the roads too congested to make any headway south. With no way forward we took to the plains with another larger train of wagons but found ourselves no better off. The ground proved too soft and three of the drays became mired a kilometre to the west. Night fell and we decided to make camp between these hills. All I can remember is falling asleep on the driver's bench of this wagon and then an impact that sent everything flying sideways. When I awoke I was covered in bags of clothes and my leg caught beneath the wagon. I truly thought I was going to die."

As Pel spoke of his ordeal Camren quickly checked him for injury. Apart from a deep gash upon his lower leg and a significant bruise that reached from his ear to his lower jaw the youth was relatively unharmed. For just a moment Lovar breathed a sigh of relief and thanked the Fates that his charge had survived. There was however, no time to explain why they were here, or for that matter take him with them.

In truth there was much that Lovar wished to say to his young assistant but the mission could not allow them to tarry any longer than was absolutely necessary. Just as quickly as he had found his attendant he would have to release him again to his own devices. But in doing so he would help him on his way.

Lovar held his assistant by the shoulder and looked directly into his eyes. "I am very glad that I found you Pel but we have little time and you must listen very carefully to what I am going to say."

Pel nodded as he took a piece of bread from Camren.

"It is vitally important that myself and these two men ride north immediately. That means that we can only tend your leg and find you a horse before we go. It is not as I would wish it but circumstances dictate it nonetheless. You must go south, Pel. Das Frontiere will be best and you must reach there before nightfall. The creatures that attacked you here will be abroad again after dark and you must be safe within the walls of the city by then. Do you understand?"

Pel nodded again but attempted to ask a question before Lovar stopped him.

"There is no time for questions boy. Go to Das Frontiere and find the Black Horse Inn. Here is some coin that will provide you with paid lodgings there. The proprietor is a formidable woman by the name of Madam Benk but I know she will be very happy to see a

paying customer. Go to her and take a room until I can return there myself.”

“Now this is very important, do not say to anyone that you are a Guildsman. The creatures that now roam the world are in part the folly of the Guild, and the Guild will be held accountable once the crisis is over. From this point forward you are just another citizen of the Union seeking safety. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” Pel replied.

“Good.” Lovar said. Looking to Camren he directed him to find clean cloth and bandage Pel's leg. Whilst that was in progress himself and Jonath searched their surroundings for a surviving horse and found one a short distance beyond the hills. It was only a draught animal but it would do, and with Pel bandaged and provisioned with some of Madam Benk's food in short order the Attendant was sitting on the horse's broad back. He was somewhat the worse for wear, but able to ride south to safety.

“Remember, Pel.” Lovar said. “Say nothing of your vocation in the Guild. When the rumours start the people of Kalborea will seek scapegoats and they will find them amongst the Guildsman. Make Das Frontiere by dusk or you will be lost to us.”

“I understand Master.” he replied. “but are you sure there is no way that I might go with you instead?”

Lovar smiled and shook his head. “I will explain everything to you when I return to the Black Horse. Do not despair Pel. The Guild may no longer exist but we will have a vocation nonetheless. Now go!”

With that he slapped the horse upon its haunches and watched as his young attendant rode steadily southwards. The horse was no thoroughbred but it would get him to safety in time. When the boy was on his way he turned to the other men. “Something tells me that the Powers need that boy alive. I cannot divine their purpose but then I am only a man.”

Making for their horses the three men mounted and turned northwards. It was mid-morning and most of their ride still lay ahead.

DeMontell's Leap

With no further delays the men rode northwards and met the main West Road at midday. There they paused for only a short time, their concern to water the horses and take food themselves before continuing on. Upon the open plains they had seen no sign of man or beast, the grassland an undulating ocean of green broken only in places by outcrops of grey stone. They had seen nothing of the vast herds of Sempaca-Beasts that should be littering the plains during the change of seasons, and in the cool air the only thing that moved before them was the sky itself, a patchwork of ragged cloud and brilliant blue. It was indeed the season of *Olvic*, those short few weeks when the long dry months turn inevitably to wetter, and cooler weather. Lovar could feel the chill in the wind, and within the constant bluster from the north he could sense the air of the mountains, pushing southwards with all the promise of storms and rain. To the north he could already see the grey shadows of rain falling upon the distant foothills. Such rains would feed the Laneslem and its tributaries and therein lay a problem for the three travellers.

“Do you see the rain?” Lovar asked of his companions.

“Aye,” replied Jonath. “The river'll be up and the Leap all the more difficult.”

Camren stood and surveyed the far horizon. “Its heavy alright. Is it necessary for us to use the Leap? Perhaps we could make for Millers Crossing and take the bridge north instead?”

Lovar considered the possibilities but believed strongly that the plan should remain unchanged.

“The Leap will give us a direct line to Kal Arbor and that is all that matters. I think we should move on.”

Together the men organised themselves for the ride to come and returned to their journey.

The afternoon proved uneventful as they rode steadily for the bridge known as Demontell's Leap. Although the location of the bridge remained unknown to most men of Kalborea, for those who lived on the frontier the legend behind its name was as infamous as the reputation for its safety. Known to most simply as The Leap, it spanned the Laneslem at a point where the river flowed fast and treacherous, its waters having cut a deep ravine that had proved for many years to be impassable. With the construction of the bridge however, that had changed and in the cool of the afternoon it remained the Historian's intention to use its crossing to their

advantage.

As Lovar rode swiftly north, he considered the bridge and the role it would now play in their survival. The bridge crossed the Laneslem within sight of the foothills of the Great Rift, at a point where the river stood at its narrowest. Built more than a hundred years before, it had fallen into ruin, used only by travellers who wished to avoid Miller's Crossing and any of the entanglements that might flow from the civil authorities there. Barely usable the structure had been forgotten by most, but the story of its builder had persisted to this day as a part of the folk-lore of the frontier.

Its builder, Aldus Demontell, had been a farmer, a man well-known for his capacity to drink as much as his capacity to offend those that lived around him. As a pioneer settler he had carved a large, prosperous farm out of the wild plains that edged the foothills of the Great Rift, and for a number of years grew rich on the meat and hides he sent southwards. As happens with many successful men his success fuelled greater ambition, his vision to trade not only with the towns and cities of the south but also the richer provinces of the Faeyen to the west. To do so he needed a bridge across the Laneslem that would afford him a direct route to the West Road and thence to Caravanserai and the Provinces beyond. Once decided it was a plan he prosecuted with vigour, paying Dwarvendim contractors to furnish the crossing of the Laneslem that would give him the access he desired.

In short order a solid bridge of wood spanned the river and Demontell determined that a great party would be held to celebrate its building. Invitations were forwarded to all the settlers that farmed the local area and in due course the day of celebration arrived. Demontell however, had not given thought to how the bridge might be used by his fellow farmers, for in his mind he had paid for the structure and it would therefore be his alone to take advantage of. It proved an error of judgement for on that point most of his neighbours disagreed.

It can be said that in the midst of the celebrations an argument started, one fuelled by ale and ending with two settlers bloodied and unconscious on DeMontell's homestead verandah. Anger grew and with a mob of settlers on his trail Demontell ran from his home and eastwards towards the river. Thinking to use the bridge to make good an escape he ran quickly, keeping just ahead of the mob and reaching the rushing waters as the first of his pursuers came within earshot. Turning to judge how far he might have outdistanced them he did not

watch what lay before him, and in that moment of inattention ran into the hedgerows that lined the eastern edges of the river. It was there that he met an unforeseen doom.

Barrelling through the bushes he did not gauge how close he was to the river's edge and ran out into clear air, tumbling off the edges of a steep cliff and crashing into the ice-cold rapids below. Upon those chilled rocks Demontell met his end.

For a time the bridge remained in use but eventually fell into disrepair, the local settlers unwilling to pay for its upkeep. In those early days of settlement most eyes still looked southwards and the markets that lay in the Kalborean Union. Without a true purpose the bridge fell out of the memories of men, and with the growth of the hedgerows surrounding its greying timbers were soon lost from sight as well.

It was not until the advent of the plains gangs that the bridge took on a new import. As a way for the gangs to circumvent Miller's Crossing it became an important route across the Laneslem and to this day its location remained a secret known mostly to the criminal element of the frontier. Lovar himself, had only heard about the bridge as part of a frontier history he had worked upon when he had been a novice in Hel'garad. Now that knowledge would give them a way across the river and a straight ride north-east to Kal Arbor.

Urging his horse on, he scanned the horizon for any sign of danger. It was a habit he had learned early in his life as a Guildsman but it seemed innocuous now. The imminent danger they faced he could sense in the earth beneath them, the Shadowch moving in tandem with the riders, matching their speed as they rode for the bridge. It was however, only the light of day that kept them there, and Lovar knew that with the first glimmers of dusk they would arise from the ground, and take the Emurion from his grasp. Everything depended on reaching Kal Arbor before dark, and the bridge would see them there all the quicker.

Turning back to check his fellow riders Lovar could see that Camren also could feel the Shadowch beneath them. The way he turned his head to each side of his horse and then survey the ground at their feet as it whipped past stood as a sure sign of his concern, but it was Jonath who caught his attention. He saw Lovar and pointed forward, but slightly east of their current track. It was a line of hedgerows. The bridge lay close.

Acknowledging Jonath's gesture Lovar turned his mount towards

the bushes and within five minutes the three men were riding parallel to the course of the Laneslem. Unlike the slow, languid flow of the river to the south, it ran close to its headwaters as a fast series of rapids, cut deep into the landscape and utterly impassable without the bridge they desperately searched for. Jonath did however, know of its location and quickly took the lead, following the edges of the deep ravines until he found the two simple wooden posts that delineated the bridge's western end. What he found brought all three men to the edge of dismay.

Across the river the bridge had collapsed, most of its structure a tangled crush of timber that lay scattered and rotting upon the floor of the ravine below. The rapids ran fast and loud, none of the timbers any barrier to the strength of the Laneslem as it ran southwards. Upon this destruction the men looked silently. The bridge had gone, their way forward blocked.

"Well thats that then." said Jonath. "There ain't no gettin' round this."

Lovar looked at the remains of the bridge and quickly considered the options left to them. Just as swiftly he realised they had none.

"We will be unable to reach Kal Arbor, and it is too far to make for Miller's Crossing in the remains of the day left to us." he said. "At this point in time I'm open to suggestions."

For a moment all remained quiet but then Camren spoke.

"We have no choice here Lovar." he replied. "We cannot take the horses across this river but look at how the support timbers have fallen. It will take some time but we could climb over the bridge's remains and make the other side."

Lovar looked at his friend but could not see any benefit in attempting such a traverse. "What is the point Camren, without horses are we not lost?"

Camren rubbed at his nose and sniffed. "I don't know about you but I would rather that we died running for Kal Arbor than waiting here for the Shadowch to catch us. Even with the climb we will still have maybe four hours of daylight, and at least a chance of making the foothills before the suns fall. Did you not say that the Shadowch could not see anyone hiding in the trees. Rather than make directly for Kal Arbor why not run north straight into the forest itself and then turn east towards the village. It may be cat and mouse but it might give us a chance."

Lovar turned towards Camren and considered his suggestion. It

took him only moments to realise it was indeed their only chance.

“If we are to do this,” he said. “we cannot stop, nor can we hesitate. If one of us falls behind we cannot slow our pace. The only thing that matters is that the Emurion is delivered. Are we agreed?”

Both Camren and Jonath nodded their agreement.

“Then let us begin.”

The Battle of the Wall

As Camren had predicted it did take time to negotiate the ruined bridge. Using the remaining timbers the three men found a way over the raging rapids below, and with only the Emurion in hand made it safely to the eastern bank of the river. Their horses they left behind, all their equipment and provisions set in a neat mound upon the open ground. Once they had climbed through the thick hedgerows they found themselves again upon open grasslands and looked northwards to a thin lines of trees that lay against the far horizon. That was their objective, and it seemed a long way indeed.

“How far do you think?” asked Lovar.

“At least seven leagues, maybe eight.” replied Camren.

“And do we have time?” returned the Historian.

“Only if we start now.”

Overhead the suns of Arborell shone through a haze of high cloud, the air about them a chilling bluster that rolled off the far mountains and rushed southwards. Upon the grasses the men began to run and in the mid-afternoon made straight for the far trees. It would be there that they might evade the Shadowch and with only the forest as their salvation they ran hard. There was no talking amongst the three as they moved quickly across the plain, all their energy and hope focused on how much ground they could cover before night fell upon them. It was a gruelling run that sapped their strength and tested each of them in turn, Lovar's words that stragglers would be left behind forcing them to run as a group and keep a pace that pushed them closer and closer to the forest.

With feet upon the ground Lovar could feel the Shadowch beneath them, and as they ran he could sense more and more of the creatures joining the chase. It was a visceral concentration of hate that crowded in around them, keeping pace with their race northwards and getting stronger with every hour that passed. Upon the plains they ran, and in that slog of boots against wet earth they all felt their hope dwindling. Legs unaccustomed to such labours faltered but somehow forged on, the fatigue in their limbs an ache that became all the more insistent as time slowly dragged towards evening.

By the last hour before dusk they knew they were not going to make it. The forest's edge stood more than a league from their position and all three men came to a halt. Breathing hard in the chill air they fell to the ground, their legs and lungs crying out for some short respite.

“By the Fates,” Camren whispered through dry lips. “I'm almost

spent.”

Jonath echoed the sentiment but somewhat more crudely and Lovar pushed himself up onto one elbow, his eyes fixed upon the distant trees. No longer was the forest a dark shadow upon the horizon. He could see the trees individually and sense the blue auras that surrounded them.

“I tell you,” he replied. “I could do with some water. Is there anywhere close?”

Jonath pulled himself from the grass and brushed himself off. Looking northwards he pointed to a distant pile of grey rock.

“Up ahead is the ruins of a farmstead. Can't remember its name and not much left, but the well is clean. We could get some there.”

Lovar rose further from the ground and saw what the old bandit was pointing towards. It seemed no more than a mound of broken stone.

“And there we'll find water?” he asked.

“Aye, there we'll find water.”

“Then we'd better move on,” he replied. “Come gentlemen let us return to our journey.”

Camren rose slowly to his feet and again the men began to run, but this time there was no haste in it. The fatigue of their travel laid heavily upon their limbs and no temporary rest could allay the leaden weight that dragged them inexorably, step by step to a standstill. The farmstead however, lay less than a kilometre from their position, and with a closer objective to strive for the men ran until they could do so no more. It was then that they had to stop, and it was then that they found themselves within the ruins of Nordvaalde Farm.

As Camren and Lovar slumped against a low wall of broken stone Jonath made for the well and returned with a small bucket of water. The bucket looked as old as the ruins themselves but it kept some water within its metal-bound interior. Each drank enough to satiate parched lips, and when each had recovered their breath all three men looked towards the west.

There the suns of Arborell were settling against the horizon, the sky a flaming wash of orange and red that sprayed long, dark shadows across the plains to the south. All knew that the dark could be no more than ten minutes away and as the light of day quickly withdrew with the suns they also saw their own lives dissipating with them.

“What do we do now?” Camren asked quietly. “The forest lies at least another hour to the north and we have no time left.”

Lovar stood and considered how far they had come, and how close they were to the trees. They could not continue their run northwards for they would be caught in the open, and this ruined farm could provide no shelter from the Shadowch. With only minutes to decide what to do, he walked towards what remained of the main farmhouse. It stood only a bare metre above ground, its ruined walls long ago fallen outwards, its roof lost to the countless storms that had assailed it. Roughly rectangular in shape all that remained was an outline of its foundations, and as he searched his memory for some possible salvation he put his hand to his chest. There he felt the Shieldstone.

Pulling it out of his shirt he held it before him. In their desperate race from Das Frontiere he had placed it about his neck and completely forgotten its presence. He had discarded everything at Demontell's Leap except for the Emurion and had not given the necklace at his throat a second thought. With the talisman in hand he remembered he had pushed the gem itself into his tunic pocket and there it had stayed unnoticed, but now it could well be their salvation. Looking at it gleam in the evening light he had an idea.

"Jonath, Camren!" he shouted to his friends. "Come here."

Together the two men pushed themselves from their wall and stood with Lovar within the confines of the ruined farmhouse. The Historian had an idea but it came with a deadly risk.

"What do you have there?" asked Jonath.

"It is the Shieldstone that myself and Camren liberated from Hel'garad. I have an idea but it is one that we must all agree upon."

Both men looked at the Historian. In their eyes any idea was welcome indeed.

"Unlike the Lightstones that seem to keep the Shadowch at bay I do not know how this Shieldstone will affect them. It seems to me that as creatures of magic they are sensitive to the talismans of the Ancient World and we have one in our possession."

"What do you propose?" asked Camren.

"I propose that we go no further today. Instead we activate the Shieldstone within the confines of this farmhouse and hope that it will protect us from the Shadowch. It will either guard us from them or it will have no effect at all. We will either live to see another sunrise or we will die in the next few minutes. I do not know which will be our fate."

Camren looked at Jonath and both nodded their approval.

“It seems Lovar, that we have little choice here. Any hope is better than none.”

“Then we had better prepare ourselves for the nightmare to come.”

Together the men worked quickly. The Shieldstone needed to be secured to the centre of the structure if it were to be most effective, and by chance a piece of a stone door frame still stood rooted in the buildings foundations. About this stone pillar they affixed the talisman, and as Lovar and Camren attended to that task Jonath drew more water from the well and pulled a supply of wild Chudja-berries from a bush using one of the walls as a windbreak. It was the work of only a few minutes but it was all they had. In the glimmers of dusk the world fell inexorably into night.

Standing within the ruins the men waited. About them the plains darkened and with the first veils of night the Shadowch arose from the ground. Out upon the grassland the first of the creatures forced themselves into the corporeal world; three huge beasts, not unlike Jotun in form but grossly distorted, their skin deep black and covered in quills of obsidian, their limbs impossibly long and possessed of hands formed as ball hammers. As they watched the three creatures began to smash their grotesque fists into the ground, each hammering blow sending great tremoring waves through the earth, and with each impact more of the Shadowch struggled into the world. Behind them arose even more creatures, all equally terrifying, and in the encroaching darkness moving as fleeting shadows possessed with deadly purpose. Before this growing multitude the three men stood alone.

“If you're going to activate the Shieldstone you'd better do it now.” whispered Camren.

Lovar needed no inducement and knelt beside the talisman. He motioned for his friends to lay upon the ground and whispered the Word that would bring it to life.

:theoduris a' theoden:

Immediately the talisman activated. Within the borders of the old farmhouse the Shieldstone extended a truncated dome of blue energy that grew in power as the stone evaluated its surroundings and determined the energy needed to complete its task. It had been commanded to shield and protect, and it would use whatever power

needed to accomplish that end. It was the beginning of a titanic struggle between the coruscating energy of the talisman and the corrupted powers of the Shadowch.

Within the protective shield the three men stood and watched as the creatures charged their position. Like a wave of dark water the Shadowch hit the edges of the shield and recoiled as a blast of blue energy reinforced the barrier between themselves and those they would destroy. The men could hear nothing but a dull thumping sound as the Shadowch attacked the shield, great fists and clawed hands smashing down upon the shimmering energy as they attempted to break through. In turn the huge creatures spent what power they had upon the barrier and with each blow a wave of rippling power tremored across the shield. It was a struggle that neither side seemed to make ground upon. The Shieldstone did not possess the same potency against the creatures that the Lightstones could muster. Touching the shield wall did not destroy the creatures it only repelled them, each Shadowch requiring only moments before it could rejoin the assault. In turn the Shadowch themselves could only muster a few creatures at a time to pound at the shield, most of the vast host gathered about the farmhouse physically unable to reach the shield and prosecute an attack. The assault turned quickly into a grinding fight that left the men safe from the roiling horde of creatures but trapped as well, unable to do anything but watch as the Shadowch pressed hard against the power of the Shieldstone.

For a good hour the creatures attacked the domed shield and behind its shimmering wall they watched as the dark monsters vented their malice and frustration against it. Then the battle changed. Lovar was the first to notice the first subtle alteration in the shield wall. With each brutal hit the shield brightened slightly but with each blow a small part of the Shadowch was left behind. In time the Historian could see the colour of the shield change, its azure blue aura ever so perceptibly growing clouded. By the time Lovar was sure that the shield was being corrupted Camren also recognised the change.

“Lovar,” he whispered to the Historian. “Do you see it?”

“Yes,” returned Lovar. He said no more for there upon the shield wall he could see a swirling mist forming, no more than a vaporous smudge against the power of the shield but growing with every strike from the Shadowch.

“What does it mean?” asked Jonath.

“I do not know,” answered Lovar, “but the power of the shield is

weakening, I can feel it being corrupted further with each blow.”

For a moment Lovar watched as a trio of Hammer Jotun faced up to the wall and began pounding at the barrier. Each great blow resounded only as a dull thud within the dome but the effect upon the shield itself was changing. Ripples of energy radiated from each impact but rather than return to a solid field of energy the shield remained irregular, its surface a patchwork of translucent blue and darker blemishes that did not dissipate. The shield was weakening and soon, just as the Lightstone had, it would also fail.

Turning to his comrades the Historian took up the Emurion and felt the first real sign of panic since beginning his mission. There was no way forward and no further protection once the Shieldstone faltered. They were all going to die and there was nothing he could do. Both Jonath and Camren saw the look on his face and realised the significance of what had happened. About them the sounds of the assault were getting louder, the dull roll of each impact growing. On the plains surrounding the farmhouse they could see only the enemy, a vast array of monstrous forms, all clamouring for blood and possessed of an unfettered malice that would not be assuaged by their deaths alone. The entire power of the Shadowch stood upon the plains about them and Lovar could only believe that they were all going to die. But he was wrong.

Like lightning out of a clear sky a series of massive bolts of energy fell to ground to the east of the massing horde of Shadowch. Each blinding strike threw the creatures back, their number unsure of what had descended upon them and their prey. Each blast of energy was attended by huge rolls of thunder that shook the ground and exploded outwards in blossoming sprays of grass and burnt earth. It was only when the last of the bolts had hit the plains, and their energy had dissipated that the men saw the cause of the sudden assault. Standing between themselves and the Shadowch lay an extended line of illuminated Beings, formed not unlike the Hresh warriors of the Hordim but clothed in white light and armed with swords and shields that shone as bright as the suns themselves.

Against this unexpected intervention the Shadowch recoiled, the light from the Beings a barrier that held them at bay, but only for a moment. From somewhere within the throng of creatures a lone voice rang out, a clear command wrapped in malice and hatred that spurred the Shadowch forward. In a great rush they attacked.

In the face of this assault the Beings acted. Before Lovar's eyes the

Beings grew in height and power and as he watched he knew that they were Caer'dahl, having taken the form of warriors and sent to protect them all from the Shadowch. Standing firm against the surging tide of creatures the Caer'dahl raised their shields and met the creatures in a crashing tangle of light and dark. For a moment none of the men could move, their world suddenly enveloped in a turmoil of raging darkness and unfettered power. At all sides the Caer'dahl held their ranks, their swords cutting cleanly through the Shadowch, the grotesque creatures exploding in clouds of ash and fire.

Standing within the boundaries of the ruined farmhouse the three men could only watch as a brutal struggle grew upon the grasses. Against the ruthless efficiency of the Caer'dahl the Shadowch fell in great numbers, but as the Beings shone brighter the plains to the south became fully illuminated and what the men saw left them breathless. To the south stood all that the Shadowch Master could marshal to the fight. Thousands of creatures moved in vast array, all pushing forward to battle, and in truth Lovar could not see how even the Caer'dahl could defeat them all. One by one the Caer'dahl themselves were falling and with each loss the line grew thinner. Amongst all this turmoil the shield wall failed and an urgent voice came crashing into Lovar's thoughts. It was familiar. It was Magma.

“Run for the trees, Master Lovar. We are the Wall and these abominations will not pass. Run!”

Immediately the Historian answered Magma's command. Grabbing at Jonath and Camren's arms he shouted at them both. “The forest Friends, There lies our salvation.”

Neither of the men asked why. With the battle growing in intensity at their backs they fled northwards, the line of trees their objective, the forest their only possible escape from the Shadowch. All sense of fatigue had left them in the sudden change of fortune and with strength anew they sprinted across the grassland, the trees before them growing larger as they ran. Hope had arisen again in all their thoughts and with the forest tantalisingly close they ran all the faster. The Master however, had not yet given up the fight.

From out of the sky to the east a number of huge winged creatures swooped down upon the men. From on high the Shadowch arced downwards, their forms that of Dragons, their size just as immense. Totally black against the night sky none of the men saw them until the Caer'dahl responded, a multitude of bright balls of light erupting from

the Wall and arcing up to the meet the Shadowch on their fall. Most of the enormous creatures disappeared in gouts of ash, but the most agile of their number avoided the attack and veered upon its path, misjudging the ground and crashing onto the plain, its enormous bulk sliding across the wet grasses until it came to a shuddering halt.

Next to the fallen Shadowch the men did not stop, and even as the creature struggled to regain its feet they continued their run. To the south Lovar could hear the battle raging, the Shadowch screaming in frustration as the Wall held, the explosions of ash dull detonations echoing through the cool night air. In his mind however, Lovar sensed that the Caer'dahl could not hold forever. The Shadowch were falling in great number but just as the Lightstone could only send them into temporary dissipation nothing the Caer'dahl might do could actually kill them. The Wall stood firm, but it was only returning the creatures to the shadowed prisons from whence they had escaped. Unless a greater power could be brought to bear upon them, all the Shadowch would in time return to the world of the living. With this realisation Lovar understood the purpose of his mission. The Emurion was that greater power and although he would not be the one to wield it, he knew that getting it to the Maturi Len would be his part to play in that greater cause. It was a cause that a man could gladly give his life for, and in the dark of that night his success or otherwise balanced on a knife's edge.

It was Jonath who saw the light in the trees. It shone as no more than a dim blue glimmer in the shadows but it was enough for the men. They were no more than a few hundred metres from the edge of the forest and with the possibility of safety now close they raced for the trees. Adjusting their track to meet with the light they ran quicker, and at that moment the Shadowch Dragon lunged forward.

In a screaming rush the Dragon leapt towards the fleeing men. With claws extended and wings beating at the air the creature had the three men within reach, and such should have been their end, but Fate had not yet finished with Malleus Lovar, Jonath Mac or Camren Patrice. From the edge of the trees a diminutive figure clad in dark robes detached from the shadows. With one arm raised the Maturi Len uttered a single Word and unleashed all the power he held at his command.

In a devastating eruption of light the Dragon was caught squarely in mid flight, its body hit by an expanding wall of blinding luminescence that spread outwards from the Maturi. Hit by the light

the Dragon disappeared in a roiling cloud of ash, its spectral form dissipating as smoke. The rushing barrier of light however, did not stop with the destruction of the Dragon. With an ever accelerating rush the light spread outwards, enveloping the Wall to the south and crashing into the multitudes of Shadowch that fought with the Caer'dahl beyond. Turning to watch, Lovar saw the Shadowch erupt in gushes of ash, those that had time to run fleeing the light into the south. The light however, could not let them survive and chased them down, each Shadowch meeting the same end in clouds of dark ash. The light did not stop until the plains were clear of the creatures and it was only then that the Maturi called out to the men.

“Come quickly friends. The Shadowch are reeling but they are not yet done!”

In that first hour of night the men ran for the LoreMaster. Overhead the first stars of night had found their place in a dark sky, and tired as they were they struggled for the safety of the trees. It took no more than five minutes to make the edge of the woodland, and within the shadows of the forest all three fell to ground, their bodies spent.

For a moment the Maturi waited as the men regained their breath. He could see the fatigue written upon their faces but there was little enough time for rest. As he waited he gave each water, his gaze ever turning towards the now empty plains to the south. The Caer'dahl had left and in their place the grasslands had embraced the shades of night. It was Lovar who spoke first.

“You are the Maturi Len?” he rasped through dry lips.

The LoreMaster nodded to Jonath who he recognised, and then answered. “I am. Although it has been a long time since I have had to acknowledge such to anyone.”

“I believe then, that this belongs to you.” said Lovar. Standing he pulled the Emurion from its wrappings and extended it towards the Dwarvendim. The Maturi Len took it tentatively and examined it for damage.

“In actual fact, Historian, this does not belong to anyone. It was once held in safe keeping by the Grand Circle and then taken as a spoil of war to Hel'garad, but it is the Light of the World and can be possessed only by a Being that is given permission to wield it. I am not that Being and I am thankful for it.”

“You know who I am?”

“Yes,” replied the Maturi. “Magme has kindly instructed me on

your identity and history and, I have to say, I am rather surprised that you have all survived the journey. The Caer'dahl have always been good judges of character, even if they are sometimes... ruthless."

Lovar was about to ask the Maturi what he meant but he was cut short by a chilling cry that echoed out of the sky to the south. The Historian could not see what was coming but he sensed the same malice radiating from its presence. It was another of the Shadowch and it was flying straight for them.

"It is time for us to go." pushed the Maturi. "We must make for Kal Arbor."

The men gave no argument and as the LoreMaster shouldered his canteen they dragged themselves to their feet. The Maturi pointed to a path that led northwards into the forest.

"Do not despair gentlemen, the path will take us to safety but we need not flee with haste. The trees will mask our presence here and it will be stealth instead that will see us to safety. Follow me and stay close."

With that the Maturi drew his robes about himself and made his way onto the path. In the dark of night the trail was almost invisible to the men but Lovar could see the LoreMaster clearly and both Camren and Jonath followed the Historian. For Lovar the journey proved to be a test of his new senses. In the dark the trees were no more than dark shadows that slipped silently by as the line of men moved with purpose along the path. To Lovar however, the forest opened up to him in a landscape of blue energy that glimmered all about him. Each of the trees stood silhouetted in azure mists, the ground itself a carpet of blue-tinged life, all the verdancy of the forest displayed for him in a clarity that belied the dark that surrounded them.

This was not all that he could sense however. Far below him he came to appreciate the presence of a vast power, a surging river of EarthMagic that coursed through tributaries and branches as blood might flow within a living thing. He knew this to be the Shan'duil, the River of Life itself, and although it had always been treated as a myth by the Guild, it ran beneath him in great pulsing waves. And that was not all.

With the senses given him he found he could widen his mind now, extending his consciousness in any direction and feel out the life force of anything that breathed upon the world. In particular he could pinpoint the positions of the Shadowch that still roamed the frontier

and in this he found himself surprised. All the multitudes of creatures that had assaulted them at Nordvaalde Farm had disappeared, the battle having swept them from the world. What remained were stragglers, scattered but converging upon their position, and as they ran he could feel their presence growing in his thoughts. Looking back at Camren, Lovar could see that the bandit also felt their looming presence.

For his part the Maturi Len kept his attention upon both the narrow path before him and the shadowed canopy above. He also could sense the approach of the Shadowch but he was not concerned with engaging in battle with any of the them. The forest itself lay as a camouflage that the creatures could not penetrate, the energy radiating from the trees masking their passage as they moved purposefully towards Kal Arbor. Keeping to the path led them through the thickest, and steepest forests of the foothills of the Great Rift. To the north rose the vast peaks of the Rift itself and in the cool of the night all of the men could feel the chill winds that slid from their cold stone shoulders. Rippling through the tree-tops the winds blustered loudly and against the star-filled sky beyond the Maturi saw something moving.

Motioning to the rest of the party they all took shelter against the nearest trees, pushing themselves upon their coarse bark as the stars above were blotted out momentarily by a huge flying creature that slid silently through the air. Looking up, the men could recognise the Shadowch only by its outline as it glided quietly across the stars, and from their low vantage they watched as the creature methodically searched them out.

“Will it see us?” Camren whispered to Lovar.

“No,” he replied. “The Shadowch can only see their prey by the life energy they radiate. The forest is a carpet of intermingled auras and as long as we remain still it will not be able to find us.”

Camren looked to the sky and watched the slow progress of the creature. It was enormous in scale, its triangular wings slowly beating against the backdrop of the night, and as it searched he held his breath. What it truly was he could not tell, though it brought back long forgotten memories of his boyhood on the shores of Kalthalas. He had once seen manta-rays in the shallows near Port Antilles and it struck him that the creature flying above them looked the same, only vast in size and far more dangerous. Only once did it cry out and then in frustration flew on, leaving the men once again alone in the dark.

“Come,” whispered the Maturi. “We must move on.”

Together they returned to the trail, its winding path taking them on an ascent over low foothills and then into a series of steep rises. By midnight they had made most of their way to Kal Arbor. Upon a rise the small village came into view, its dark, dilapidated buildings veiled in shadows and almost completely hidden by the encroaching woodland. As far as Lovar could tell there was no sign of life there at all, but with complete exhaustion about to overtake him it seemed the most inviting settlement he had ever seen.

Carefully they moved down the slope. The moons of Arborell illuminated the edges of the forest and between themselves and the village proper there remained only a small, open area of grass, bordered on three sides by old wooden fencing. Together they walked quietly and as they did so a sense of something familiar came into Lovar's thoughts. Ahead of them the moons shone brightly and it took a few moments for the Historian to see the imperceptible change in the air ahead of them. It did however, gather quickly into a growing sphere of light, one that lengthened and then coalesced as the image of a most beautiful woman clad in robes of pure light.

Before this apparition the Maturi raised his arms and brought all to a halt. Then he lowered himself to one knee. Lovar felt no need for deference, he only smiled and moved closer to the spectral form. It was Magme.

Magma

In the cool of the night the Caer'dahl motioned for Lovar, Camren and Jonath to come forward. "I see you are all whole?" she said.

Lovar smiled and gestured for Camren and Jonath to move closer. "My friends, this is Magma, a Caer'dahl of the Silvan Tree. She saved my life and in these difficult times gave me purpose."

Both Camren and Jonath acknowledged the spectral Being warily. Apart from the circumstances of the battle at Nordvaalde Farm they had never thought possible such an entity.

"This will take some getting used to." said Camren. "But any friend of yours is justly a friend of ours."

To this the Caer'dahl brightened slightly then looked to the Historian.

"Malleus Lovar." Magma began. "In your journey here you have proven yourself a true servant of the Tree. What you did for Das Nephrim and Das Frontiere did not go unnoticed. You have shown yourself to be a man of honour and this is something rare enough in these troubled times. In bringing the Emurion to Kal Arbor you have kept your word to the Second Power and in doing so have done a great service also for the realms of Men. I must tell you now that your duty here is not yet done."

"What do you mean?" asked the Historian.

The Caer'dahl dropped to earth and walked the short distance to Lovar's side. "There is another task that must be attempted, one far more difficult than that which you have just completed. Circumstances have chosen you and the Caer'dahl have faith that you can complete it."

Lovar felt the fatigue in his limbs and wondered what use he could be. He was about to express his reservations when Magma cut him short.

"Do not concern yourself Malleus for there are many ways that a man might recover his strength. What is more important is how that strength is used, and circumstances have changed since our last words."

The Historian looked to his friends then turned back to the spirit. "What is it you want of me?"

Magma smiled and looked towards the Maturi. "It is an uncomfortable truth, Malleus, that the rise of the Shadowch will be remembered as a surprise to both LoreMasters and Caer'dahl alike. The secrets kept by your Guild went unnoticed by our Agents and

when the creatures broke free of their prison we did not know what they were, how they had been created, or for that matter their true purpose in the world. Many of us went to fight the Shadowch but others resolved to find answers, and find them we did.”

“It was not difficult to locate the prison from which they had escaped. Far to the west, in the Mines of Mourning, we found the remains of the locks that had kept them below ground, and deep within those mines we found the remains of the man that you knew as Vor'ell. He had died many years ago but within a series of chambers we discovered his research notes and most importantly his journal. Within that book we found the answers that we sought and with that knowledge a way to destroy the Shadowch.”

“Vor'ell had been a man of great intelligence and dangerous ambition, and from his writings it is clear that he felt his ambitions were being stifled by his superiors. In response he resolved to create creatures that would prove his worth to the Guild and give him the power he felt should have been his. It is clear that he did not truly understand what he was doing, and when he was found out, both himself and his malformed creatures were exiled to the depths of the Mines. It is there that he built his Army of Shadows and it is there that he lost control of them.”

“Imprisoned within the Mines, and kept hidden by cunningly designed magical locks, he worked at his craft, refining his knowledge until he had built his army. His last act was to design a creature to lead them, and into that monstrous form he funnelled all the knowledge, malice, and cunning that he could draw from himself. He bound all the other Shadowch to his Master and only then realised that he had gone one step too far. His last journal entries outline his growing isolation, and his suspicions that the Master was planning to murder him. We can only assume that he was successful for nothing more was written.”

“And where are Vor'ell's notes and journals now?” Lovar asked.

Magme smiled and pointed into the west. “They remain in the Mines of Mourning and will never see the light of day again. What they have shown us however, is that in creating his Master, Vor'ell made the most formidable of the Shadowch but in doing so also artficed their greatest weakness. By bonding all the creatures to their Master he linked the existence of the entire Army of Shadows to that one Being. It is our belief that killing the Master will send all the remaining Shadowch into dissolution. We need the Emurion for that

purpose and Halokim Vesh to wield it.”

“And the Master is aware of the danger the stonewood swords presents?” Lovar asked. The Historian scratched at his face as he waited for a reply and felt the stubble roughly upon his fingers. Magma did not answer immediately and he had the distinct feeling he was about to get some very bad news. The Caer'dahl did not disappoint him.

“It was no coincidence that the Shadowch trailed you so closely. Somehow the Master became aware of the threat the Emurion posed to himself and his army, and it was our intention that they should hunt you down. By keeping their eyes on you and your party, rather than on the realms of Men we were able to save many lives and afford time for the populations of the north to find safety. While the Army of Shadows followed you they were not attacking the cities of the south.”

“So you used us as bait then.” interposed Camren brusquely.

Magma turned to the younger bandit and shook her head. “You were going to be a target no matter what we did to protect you. By letting the Shadowch converge on your position we allowed the Master to fall into a trap, an ambush if you will. Massed upon the plains the Caer'dahl were able to cut them down, and at least for a short time return them to their nests. Do not be dismissive Camren Patrice, of what is at stake here, or what it is going to cost to rid the world of these abominations. We needed time to develop a strategy and your actions gave us what we needed. By diverting the attention of the Shadowch we saved not only the Realms of Men but also the Kraals of the Oera'dim as well.”

“But doesn't that mean that the Master knows the Emurion is now here in Kal Arbor?” said Lovar.

“Yes,” answered the Caer'dahl. “And that is the nature of your next task. Halokim Vesh shall be here within the next twelve hours and you must be ready when he arrives. The Maturi Len will be giving Halokim a specially modified Nuulstone that shall mask the power of the Emurion and make the Dwarvendim almost invisible to the Shadowch. They will only know of his presence when they are close, and they will not recognise him if they do as the bearer of the Emurion. You will not have that luxury.”

“What do you mean?”

“While Halokim is going west you will head into the south-west, making for the Krodestaag and then north-west into the mountains. Your objective will be the Lake of Mists. On your person you shall

carry a Callingstone tuned to the same energy aura as the Emurion. To the Master you will be recognisable as the bearer of the sword and he will direct his forces against you. He will be expecting the Light of the World to be used against him and it will not surprise him that you Lovar, will be the one to wield it. You will draw the Master's attention away from Halokim. That is your mission."

To this Camren stepped forward. He was not happy.

"You cannot ask a man to do such a thing. Will he not be killed within hours of leaving Kal Arbor?"

Magma shook her head. "Just as you were all protected by the Caer'dahl at the Wall so shall we protect Malleus on his journey. He shall draw out the Shadowch and when they show themselves the Caer'dahl shall cut them down. The purpose is to make the Master believe that Malleus is the bearer of the sword. The greater the forces we use to protect him the more the Master will be convinced that he is the danger."

Camren was not convinced. "But you are asking him to travel the wilds of the western mountains. There are more dangers there than the Shadowch alone. While you are waiting for the Shadowch to attack Lovar may well die at the hands of a dozen different predators that roam the mountains. It is not good enough."

To this the Caer'dahl smiled and approached Camren. "And what would you say to that? What is your solution?"

Camren hesitated, his mind quickly considering all the different options that might help his friend. In the end there was only one.

"I will go with him. Together we may just survive."

Magma laughed and slowly rose into the air. "I will tell you now Camren Patrice, that you and your friend Jonath Mac are both favoured by the Caer'dahl. Above all things we value loyalty and truth and you have displayed those values time and again. The Silvan tree will not forget your actions here."

"An' what of me?" Jonath asked. "What part do I play in this grand shemozzle. Too much 'as gone on ta just leave me hangin'."

The Caer'dahl looked to the old man and suddenly became stern of countenance.

"For you Jonath Mac, we have an important task but only if you are willing to undertake it. The Caer'dahl will not send a man of your age into the wilds of the world, but there is something of equal import that must be done."

"An' whats that?' Jonath interjected.

“Two nights ago the Caer'dahl saved the life of a youth known to you as Pel. He had been travelling with a group of refugees that were ambushed by the Shadowch. The Silvan Tree needs that youth to be guarded, protected from all harm. He cannot know that he is being watched but it is important that he survive both the troubles of this time and the dangers of Das Frontiere. It may not seem a task of value but that is only as it seems. The boy will do great things in this world and you must be his Guardian. Do you accept such a commission?”

For Jonath there was no need to think on it. “Yeh. I can do that.” he said simply.

“Then my task here is complete. Halokim shall arrive by midday tomorrow and all further information you need can be garnered from the Maturi. Remember Lovar, the Caer'dahl will not leave you unprotected. Good luck.”

On the breath of those last words Magme faded into the night. In the dark that remained there blustered only a cold wind and a single lantern that shone out from the village ahead. It was the Maturi Len that broke the ensuing silence.

“Come now friends, your journey has been long and you must be in need of a meal. Halokim is no more than twelve hours from us and we must prepare for his arrival. The world turns towards darkness and it will be good to be rested when we pull it back into the light.”

The End.

The Shoulders of Emur



"Malleus has brought the Emurion to the Maturi Len but his service to the Silvan Tree has only just begun. As Halokim carries the sword into the wilds of the north, Malleus and Camren Patrice must act as decoys, drawing the Shadowch southwards and away from the Dwarvendim.

Such is their new mission, and in its prosecution they shall be pursued by the malevolence of the Army of Shadows and in their defence have only the promise of the Caer'dahl to protect them. Whether they survive or not will depend upon the cunning of one and the knowledge of the other. Only by relying upon each other will they live to tell the tale.

Within this new world of magic and spectral beings Malleus and Camren must contend also with the predators that infest the mountains of the west, and the human denizens of those wild summits. Against deadly blizzards, fractured glaciers and the unknown dangers of the Forests of the Caer'dahl the two men must struggle to keep the eyes of the Master fixed firmly to their course, and far from the true bearer of the Emurion.

To play their part in the defeat of the Shadowch is their objective, but in doing so they shall stumble upon the answer to a great mystery, one that will change man's understanding of the world forever. Malleus shall discover that the most potent of secrets can be hidden behind the highest of mountains, and none are as high as those peaks known to the Oera'dim as the Anlaim'emur, the Shoulders of Emur."

The Shoulders of Emur is the fourth book in the Chronicles of Arborell Companion Series and is currently in development. For more information on this book and all other publications in this series please visit the Chronicles of Arborell website at www.arborell.com.



HONOUR AMONGST THIEVES



"FOR THE TAK LOVAR THE WORLD HE KNOWS HAS ENDED. THE GUILD HAS FALLEN AND THE POWER THEY ONCE HELD HAS FLED FROM THEIR GRASP. HEL'GARAD STANDS IN RUINS, A DARK MALEVOLENCE LET LOOSE UPON THE WORLD, AND WITHIN THIS TURMOIL ONLY THE TRUE LOREMASTERS STAND WITH THEIR COMMAND OF EARTH MAGIC INTACT."

"IN THE WEST A NEW POWER HAS RISEN, ONCE HELD DEEP UNDERGROUND BUT NOW FREE TO SPREAD DEATH AND DESTRUCTION UPON THE REAL WORLD. IN THIS DESPERATE TIME MEN OF DIFFERENT PATHS MUST COME TOGETHER, AND IN DOING SO BRING TO THE OLDEST OF THE LOREMASTERS THE ONE TALISMAN THAT CAN SAVE THEM ALL. THE SHADOWCH IS FREE UPON THE LANDS OF MEN AND NONE ARE SAFE UNTIL IT IS DESTROYED."

HONOUR AMONGST THIEVES IS A COMPANION NOVELLA TO THE WINDHAMMER CORE GAMEBOOK AND CONTINUES THE ADVENTURES OF THE TAK LOVAR AS HE STRIVES TO SAVE A WORLD QUICKLY SPIRALLING OUT OF CONTROL. HE WILL COME TO DISCOVER THAT ALL THE FEARS OF MEN CAN INDEED BE FOUND IN THE DARK.

