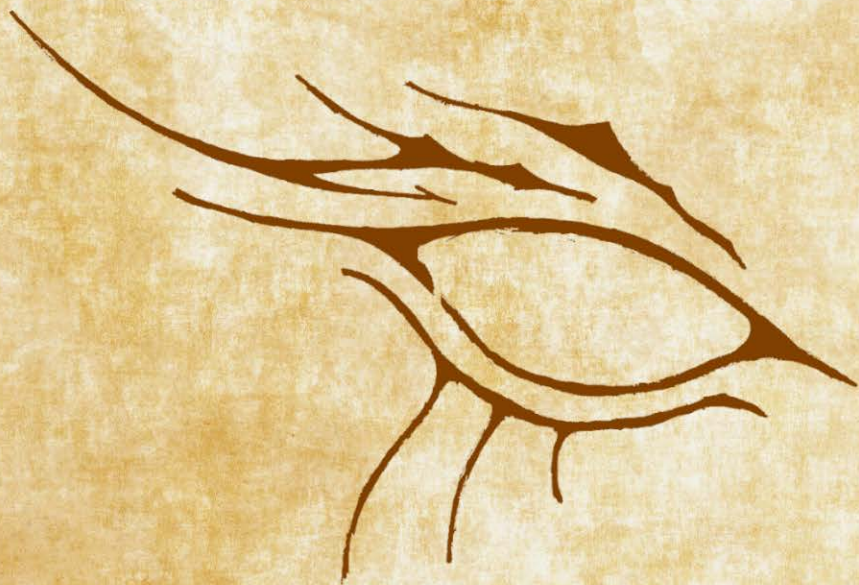


CHRONICLES OF ARBORELL

MYTHOLOGY OF THE QERA'DIM



A COMPILATION OF MYTHS, LEGENDS
AND FOLKTALES OF THE QERA'DIM
OF ARBORELL

WAYNE F DEPSLEY

Mythology of the Oera'dim



Written and Illustrated
by Wayne Densley
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An Introduction to the Mythology of the Oera'dim



The Mythology of the Oera'dim is a compilation of lectures, oral traditions and translated works drawn from the long history of the Oera'dim in Arborell. From the creation myth of the Sorrows of Gedhru and Aume to the Enkara, the Oera'dim Song of Regret, what is held within these pages is a truthful retelling of the greatest stories of a race of Beings whose existence can be measured in the hundreds of millennia.

It must be understood at the start however, that the Oera'dim are a manufactured race, built for war and hard labour and designed as they prosecute those tasks to remain absolutely obedient to those who command them. They are a Slave Race, their purpose to serve the needs of Masters who have long since been lost to a distant past. What you will find here is their legends and the evolution of their unique view of life and duty. For the Oera'dim there is only black and white. There is no grey.

Although it can be said that in times of conflict the Oera'dim fight as one, it is also true that they have been fractured by the circumstances of their history. Politics and personal rivalry, ambition and betrayal are as prevalent amongst them as any nation of Men. To live as an Oera'dim is to exist in a state of privation and danger, where only the Code of the True Witness stands to keep their societies civil and controlled. It is a truth of their lives that a Being who contravenes the Code will invite swift retribution. For all Oera'dim the Code is the one constant that ensures fair treatment in a violent world and all Oera'dim enforce it ruthlessly.

As time passes more of these stories will be uncovered, the history of the Oera'dim given its due recording as a testament to a long and ancient heritage. It will no doubt be recognised that like the great tales of Men, the mythology of the Oera'dim is replete with the great heroes and characters that have dominated the events of their time.

Honour and duty have ruled their existence since the beginning, and it is reflected in the grandeur of their legends and the sacrifice of those who have participated in them.

From Hamulkuk the Destroyer to Qirion'Delving, First Hammer of the World, to the malevolent tyranny of Aggeron and the bravery of Besson, the myths of Arborell provide an insight into the harsh reality that is the lives of those who are born of earth and dust.

As these mythologies are uncovered, the long history of Arborell will be brought into the light of day and you will come to know the honour of Ehrindiil and the restless exploration of Marduuk, of the great betrayal that brought down the Silvan Tree and the tribulations of Ghered who found purpose. In books to come there will also be found accounts of the War of Tree and Leaf and of the fate of the Unfettered, of the rise of Shamaril and the origins of the Colossi. If you have wondered on the last days of Nem'haleen or the Fall of Adamant then your questions will be answered. You need only turn the page.



A Short History of Arborell



Excerpt from a lecture given at the Academy of Histories at Landfall
in the Year of Settlement 419

“If we are to understand the history of Arborell it is important to recognise that little written evidence survives. What we know of the time before Men made landfall upon these shores is taken mostly from the oral traditions of the Hordim, and the scant texts that can be found carved into the many temples of this world. What is clear is that the story is a long one, and it stretches back into a prehistory that is difficult for Men to comprehend. It is a story however, that is compelling, one that explains the state of our world today, and provides insight into the reasons why the ancient works of this world lie in such ruination.

For all that will follow it must first be understood that the Hordim believe in a world where the supernatural is as important, and as real, as anything found in their waking lives. The history for which I am about to provide a brief overview must be considered from the perspective that for our mortal enemies the world is controlled by three great Powers, and everything that has happened, or will ever happen, is their doing. How these Powers came into being, and how they are bound into a single existence is the essence of Hordim mythology. It is also where we must begin.

The creation myth of the Oera'dim, or Hordim as we know them, concerns the travails of two Creator-Gods, Gedhru and Aume. It is in their celestial home that their son Emur is murdered, and from his remains is fashioned the world as we know it. The tale of the Sorrows of Gedhru and Aume sets the foundations for a world of magic and betrayal that results in the creation of the First Power, the Shan'duil, and thence all the history that follows from it. It can be said truthfully that we have only scratched the surface of that history, but what we have so far uncovered alludes to a past littered with vast empires, ruthless tyrants and genocidal wars. It is quite a story and one that begins with the River of Life.

Long before the arrival of either Hordim or Men in the world there existed only the Shan'duil, the River of Life; and it alone wielded all power, its purpose to act as a good shepherd for all that breathed or grew in the world, intent on balancing the rhythm of creation as it is expressed in the relentless cycle of the seasons. For time unrecorded it stood in solitary dominion of the world, a pulsing life-essence that bound the fate of all living things together.

In the oral histories of the Hordim it is said that the dominion of the Shan'duil remained unchanged until the roots of a great Tree came into contact with the River of Life. Somewhere within the vastness of the Malleron forests a monstrous Oak delved deep into the bedrock of the world and touched the Shan'duil, turning the tree instantly to white stone. In that moment a new Second Power was born, a sentient, immortal Tree possessed of all the powers of the Shan'duil, that spread its dominion over all other trees. From that chance encounter arose the Silvan Tree, and under its stewardship the forests of Arborell flourished, spreading to all the corners of the world.

In this manner the balance of life was maintained; the Shan'duil continuing its dominion over the cycle of life, the Silvan Tree its stewardship of all the great forests. Within the boundaries of this quiet existence the Two Powers grew in strength, and together found comfort in the verdancy of their world. It was a tranquil dominion that lasted for untold millennia, until the coming of the Forgotten Ones.

It is not known who the Forgotten Ones were. There are no records of their origin, or carven images that might give hint to their nature. All that is known is that they lived in this world and then were gone, but their story is a turning point in the history of Arborell.

From a place beyond the borders of our world the Forgotten Ones arose, settling in Arborell and making a life for themselves amongst the great Trees. Theirs was an existence without material want, nomadic and simple in their desire to do no harm to the world they ventured in. In the course of their wanderings it was inevitable that they encountered the Silvan Tree, and not being creatures of greed or distrust gave their fealty to that Power. In return the Silvan Tree introduced them to the Shan'duil, and in that meeting the Forgotten Ones learned of the great energy that the First Power had woven into the world. This energy the Forgotten Ones called EarthMagic.

Time flowed on and the world, which had only known the quiet dominion of trees, became filled with the voices of the Forgotten Ones. Favoured by the Silvan Tree they flourished, and soon their multitude found homes wherever the trees of the forest spread their boughs. Of all things that found favour with the Second Power it was the voices of the Forgotten Ones that intrigued the Great Tree most. In all the long years of its existence it had never known the clarity of the spoken word, and given the opportunity learned the language of these peoples and bonded it with EarthMagic. The words of the Forgotten Ones became one with the life-force of the world, a key that could be used to manipulate that great power in ways previously unimagined even by the Powers themselves. The Silvan Tree offered this boon to the Forgotten Ones but they declined, leaving mastery of such magic in the custody of River and Tree. It was not for them, they said, to have such a boon for it would surely be their undoing.

In truth the Forgotten Ones knew the dangers of unfettered power, and rather than wield it themselves built great Temples, and gave homage to the Silvan Tree in gratitude of her offer. Each of the Temples was built near a tributary of the River of Life, and each delved far into the earth, their builders' purpose to find solace with the pulse of the world. These *dorum* grew in all the corners of Arborell and so the world again continued for many more millennia.

As is the way of things there came a time when even a great Power can fall into folly. Without the care that should have been given the Silvan Tree created a race of Beings it called Trell'sara, or Guardians. The Guardians were to be custodians of the trees, as selfless and caring as the Forgotten Ones themselves, but instead their ambitions proved both treacherous and destructive. In secret the Trell'sara planned a great war, their aim to tear down the Tree and bring extermination upon her loyal subjects. In their plotting and scheming the world would have room only for themselves.

It is recorded as a part of the oral histories of the Oera'dim that in one night the Trell'sara betrayed the Silvan Tree, breaking it up then transporting it high into the western mountains of the world. There it was disposed of, thrown into a deep abyss and left to be forgotten by its traitorous creations. With the Silvan Tree gone the Trell'sara turned their malice upon the Forgotten Ones, and in that act of betrayal found themselves embroiled in a bloody civil war.

The War of Tree and Leaf did not go as planned. The Forgotten Ones proved themselves to be both doughty and effective warriors, and for some years held their own against the Guardians. Desperate to finish a conflict that had taken so many of their lives the Trell'sara searched for a weapon that might turn the tide and give them the victory they sought. In time they found it.

Out of the living earth the Trell'sara, who had been given the power to harness EarthMagic by the Silvan Tree, created the Hresh, vicious warriors designed as weapons of war. With a great host of these creatures they swept the Forgotten Ones from the world, and took dominion of Arborell for themselves.

But the Silvan Tree was not dead. In the depths of the earth the Tree struggled to survive, its tenuous grip on life growing stronger as it gained strength from its proximity to the Shan'duil. Far from the sight of the Trell'sara the Tree recovered its resolve and waited, mourning the loss of the Forgotten Ones and lamenting the folly of its actions.

In the light of day the Trell'sara knew nothing of the Silvan Tree's survival. Quickly they took dominion of the known world and began creating new creatures to meet their need for slaves. The Hresh were effective warriors but had no talent for the domestic, so the Guardians created the Jotun to serve as builders and engineers, the Morg as farm labourers and menial workers, and the Mutan to oversee them all. Only when all these creatures had been brought into the world did the Trell'sara create the Vardem, their personal servants for which little has been recorded.

Again the millennia passed as a flowing ocean of time. The slaves of the Trell'sara laboured hard at the behest of their masters, and no threat came to bother their dominion until the Silvan Tree had grown strong enough to act.

Such was the need for slaves required to meet the indolence and excess of the Trell'sara, that it came to pass that the balance of life and death in Arborell began to falter. All of the creatures created by the Guardians carried within them a small glimmering of the River of Life, and with that spark came sentience and a will to find a better existence. The Trell'sara were cruel masters and thought nothing of the loss of multitudes of slaves in the building of their great citadels

and pleasure palaces. Such losses released these sparks of existence into the world, but they had nowhere to go, and soon the burden of such unrestrained energy began to weigh heavily upon the Shan'duil.

In the dark recesses of the abyss within which it had been thrown the Silvan Tree came to an agreement with the River of Life. The cycle of Life and Death had to be restored, and it could only be done one way. In that deep abode the Silvan Tree created a mirror-image of itself, a third Power of the world concerned only with Death, and the force by which the sparks of existence now roaming freely could be gathered up and returned properly to the Living World.

Such a tree was given the name Dreya, and its dominion became known as Hallen'draal. In its domain the sparks of Life were gathered and scourged, to be reborn as new Beings into the world of light above. The Dreya Tree took to its task with great energy and in doing so scourged the memories of those it brought into its Underworld. It was through the Dreya Tree that the Silvan Tree found its opportunity.

It must be understood that the Trell'sara may have been indolent but they were not stupid. They knew the nature of their creations and placed upon them all a Word of Command, a spell that kept their slaves submissive and controllable. Without it they knew they would fall prey to the unrestrained hatred of their charges, and ensured diligently that the Word would never falter.

In the darkness of the Dreya's domain the Word of Command was scourged from all creatures memory only to be reasserted when a Being returned to the World Above. On a few select Jotun the Silvan Tree assured that the Word of Command could have no effect upon them once they were reborn, and as was the wish of the Great Tree they laboured in secret to throw down their Masters.

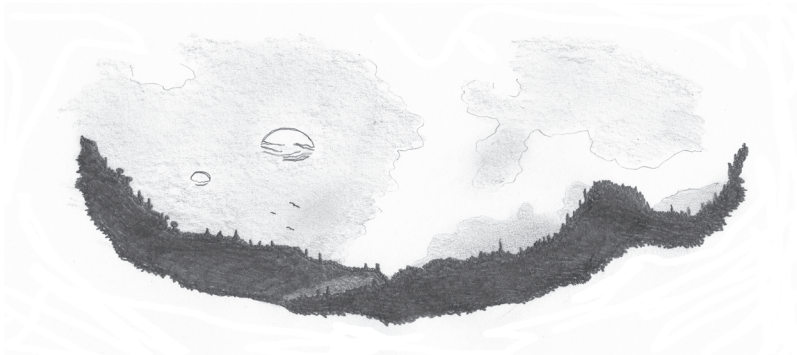
Although it is unclear to the scholars of Men how the Great Insurrection started it has been recorded that the rebellion grew quickly, the Trell'sara caught unawares as they pursued their interests in sloth and excess. In a wave of violence and death the Trell'sara were themselves destroyed, their vast cities and palaces torn down stone by stone. When the slaves of the Trell'sara had finished, their masters had been scourged from the world and their empire laid waste; their memory lost to a world that did not wish to remember them.

In a world where there was no longer control the slaves found themselves without purpose and soon spiralled into violence. Within this great upheaval the old overseers of the Trell'sara, the Ah'mutani, or Mutan as they are known to Men, took the Word of Command for themselves and Uttered it again into the world. It was a cruel irony that Arborell now belonged to the slaves of the Trell'sara, and it was the Mutan that now ruled them all.

Eight long millennia saw no challenge to the power of the Mutan. The Oera'dim, as the slaves of the Trell'sara now called themselves, divided along a series of tribal allegiances that spread into all the corners of the world, and such was the power of the Mutans' Word of Command that no challenge could be made against them. Then came the arrival of Men.

Out of the great eastern ocean a ragged fleet of ships arose into Arborell. Settling first on the island of Dromannion the Nations of Men then made landfall upon the shores of Arborell itself. Neither Man nor Hordim, as we have come to know the Oera'dim, understood each other's nature and misunderstanding and mistrust soon turned to open warfare. The result has been centuries of warfare, and the untold losses that have been endured in those great conflicts.

And now this tale is almost done. Our part in the history of this world began with our arrival upon the shores of Dromannion, but the history of this world stretches far beyond the borders of our understanding. To this date four great wars have been fought against the Hordim and they remain an intractable enemy, one entrenched in a culture of violence we are yet to fully understand. We can only wonder at what the future must hold for all of us.”



The Sorrows of Gedhru and Aume



A Creation Myth of the Oera'dim, told to the peoples of the Ancient World by the Sylvan Tree, and translated from inscriptions found upon the walls of Traebor
by the Maturi Paderian Hedj.

It is remembered that in the First Days of Creation there was nothing but void and shadows. Light and Dark had not yet been given a home within the great expanses of the Cosmos, and residing in their place there surged instead the roiling currents of an existence that had not yet found form or purpose.

Within this void life existed however. Scattered within the infinite space, but alone and without voice travelled the First Beings, their only goal to find others of their kind, so that they might give comfort to one another and find solace in a nothingness without boundary.

It was by chance that in these first days of creation that two of the First Beings found one another. Known to themselves as Gedhru and Aume, these creatures of the void came together, and having now a reason to speak conversed on the nature of their strange universe, and in that discourse discovered quickly the power of Words.

For it was found that hidden within their Voices lay the power to make, or unmake, anything that they might desire. Reality itself could be forged with a single Word, the solid and the corporeal drawn from the swirling mists of the Void and made real and purposeful. All that was required was that they speak the words.

Within the shadows and flowing mists Gedhru built a home for his Aume. Of its form or nature nothing can be said for nothing is known, but it is remembered that once constructed the River of Time began to flow, and having built their home within its narrow borders the First Beings became aware of its passage, and in their own time grew to understand that they too were servants to its relentless advance.

For aeons of time the First Beings resided in the Great Home that was their only world and all that they knew, and it grew in the mind of Aume that they should pass its splendour on to children of their own. For a span of ages Gedhru and Aume discussed how they might give life to Beings such as themselves, and once determined it was Aume who spoke the Words that brought them into existence.

From the swirling shadows that buffeted at their walls two daughters walked into the Great Home. The first Gedhru named Shabel, the second Aume named Elanna. Fair of voice and calm of disposition these two daughters found their place within the safe walls of the Great Home and for the ages that followed garnered great favour with Gedhru and Aume.

It came to pass however, that Gedhru found discontent in his existence. Great was the power of his Voice, and long was the discourse of his family, but in his time he felt the need of a son, and went to Aume, his intention to bring into their existence a boon that could settle his disquiet. Aume, who had been given two daughters, did not refuse him.

From the mists of the Cosmos a son arose for Gedhru, and he called him Emur. Strong of limb and fair of disposition, Gedhru's son also found his place in the Great Home, and with his sisters provided a joy to his parents that made the long spans of their existence all the happier. But in the Great Home all was not as it seemed.

With Emur's coming into the world a fracture slowly opened between himself and Shabel. It was a conflict held only within the heart of his sister, but well hidden and terrible in its possibilities. Competing for the attention of Gedhru and Aume, Shabel had come to hate her brother, and in her goodness Elanna did not recognise the power of the despite growing before her. It was a hatred that fumed and seethed within the mind of Shabel, twisting her disposition and turning her to plans constructed to place her at the centre of her parent's world. In her existence there was no room for Emur and she resolved quietly to murder him.



It was Gedhru who found Emur, the remains of his existence laying upon the floor of the Great Home. Without understanding of what had happened he called for Aume, and with his frantic calls came a tortured grief that brought her quickly to his side. With the power of her malice Shabel had brought down her brother and laid waste to his essence, and behind a veil of false words and grief hid her complicity in his murder.

In a Great Home that had only known joy and hope the death of Emur devastated Gedhru and Aume. Overwhelmed by a grief that they could not control the First Beings withdrew into themselves, and gave over their lives to despair. Elanna in her goodness consoled them, even though her own sorrow was great, but Shabel gave distance between herself and her family and in her brooding hatred considered the power she had found. In her thoughts there was only satisfaction, and the realisation that there was no barrier to her using such power again.

It is said that time is a great healer and with its passage the sadness of the Great Home lifted. From sorrow Gedhru turned his thoughts to what he might do to honour his dead son. Within the confines of his home he had no fitting memorial, yet there were the expanses of the Void at his door and he decided to use them. With the utterance of a Word he pushed back the shadowed realm that surrounded him and in the dark nothingness that remained he sent Emur's essence into its midst. Dark and lifeless Emur hung in the void, but this was not Gedhru's intent. In his mind was a Great Work, a project that would honour his son and bring life and hope again into the Void.

With a Word that cannot be uttered Gedhru shaped Emur into the dark contours of our world, but the sight of his nighted form brought all the torment of Gedhru's bereavement welling within him and for the only time in his existence he wept. Three tears fell from the visage of Gedhru and each had the power of creation held within them, unfettered and filled with the strength of his sorrows.

Within his falling tears came the arch of the night sky to Emur, the water and air that sustains existence and the power of EarthMagic that sleeps in the essence of all things. As Gedhru watched Emur was transformed, but there was much more still to be done. His Great Work had only just begun.

Into the night sky Gedhru placed the suns of Emur, one each for himself and Aume, and gave to them a great power so that they might give light and warmth to his creation. It was in the midst of this Great Work that Elanna came to him, her countenance troubled.

In her rooms she had felt the trembling power of his Voice upon the void, and knowing that he could not do justice to the memory of Emur in such a state of sadness offered to finish the work of creation for her Father. It was a task, she counselled, that she could do well. Her grief had left her, but her love for Emur endured, and she would use it as a vessel to fashion a great creation in his memory.

Gedhru acknowledged the wisdom of her offer and because he held great trust in his daughter passed to Elanna the Word of Creation, and then brought her down to the barren plains of the World he had forged. Upon the rocky ground Elanna set to work.

In the ages that followed Elanna took the power given by Gedhru and raised a world out of the ashes of her Father's despair. Great Mountains rose to greet the dawn and mighty rivers were scoured upon dry lands. Deep seas were carved from the belly of the world and two vast continents raised to harbour the verdant life that sprung upon them. Of all her creations Elanna most favoured the trees, and in the warmth of her regard they prospered, sending forth their verdancy across all the lands of the world. At the end of her labours the World of Emur was complete, and seeing that it would please her Father she rested.

Within the rooms of the Great Home Shabel watched the labours of Elanna and quietly planned her destruction. The malice and malcontent that had seen an end to Emur now focused upon her sister, and in the quiet of her existence she sensed that hatred had a Power of its own. If her Father would not favour her as he did Elanna, then she would take power for herself.

Upon the highest of the mountains of Emur Elanna raised a great Palace to rest within, unaware of her sister's enmity. At the summit of Araheal she founded her apartments and named them the First Halls. Looking out upon the total of her labours she smiled, for she knew her Father would indeed be pleased.

And it came to pass that in his gratitude Gedhru gave a gift of two moons to Elanna, advising her that one should be named after herself, the other her's to name as she pleased. In her goodness she named the other Shabel, after her sister, and placed both in the sky to soften the darkness of night. Without the knowledge of her sister's malice Elanna could not know that it had been in the cover of night that Shabel had been at work, forging the instruments of a deadly plan.

Consumed with a malevolent will that had soured over the course of many ages, Shabel had found Power in the hatred she harboured for her sister. She had not been given the Word of Creation, but had discovered instead that malice could alter the nature of their existence just as efficiently as the Voice of her Father. In the dark places of the world she laboured hard, creating the creatures she would use to prosecute an unnecessary revenge.

Beyond the knowledge of Gedhru and Aume, Shabel forged the *dweo'gorga*, creatures of uncertain form, and imbued them with all the malice that she could pour into their creation. Gifted with the ability to take on any shape, they lurked in the darkest shadows of the Great Forest and waited for the command that would compel them on their deadly quest. For Shabel it was only a matter of time.

But in her jealous fugue Shabel misjudged her ability to work covertly against her sister. Gedhru loved both his daughters, and as he watched Elanna work her creation upon the new World he also took note of the many comings and goings of Shabel from the Great Home, and of her many visits to Emur. Blinded by his great affection he saw no ill in it, but the distance that Shabel had placed between them gave him cause for concern. It was a concern he shared with Aume.



In her thoughts Aume had sensed the same dissonance and agreed with her Husband that they should watch Shabel all the closer. If there was indeed a sadness in her then they should do all they could to help her find peace. What neither could see was her deadly intent, and the devastation she was prepared to bring upon them.

It was in the early hours of night that Shabel descended into the world of Emur and called her dweo'gorga to her. In a circle of trees she bound the creatures to her will and sent them into the shadows, their one goal to find Elanna and kill her. Many of the creatures were sent and in was only a matter of time before the first of the beasts found Shabel's sister asleep and alone. On that fateful night Elanna died, and Shabel rejoiced in the totality of her betrayal.

In the Great Home Gedhru felt the fracture of Elanna's death as a lance of sorrow that cut through his consciousness. Unaware of what had been done he called to his daughters but it was only Aume, his Wife that answered. From the quiet of the Void Aume had seen Shabel's treachery and hurried to her husband's side, her voice filled with the horror of their daughter's terrible betrayal. Within the walls of the Great Home the purpose of Shabel became clear to Gedhru and grief again welled within him, but this time anger rode upon its back as a great unstoppable wave.

Descending into Emur Gedhru called for Shabel but she did not answer. Consumed in her own malice she had not given thought to the retribution that might be brought to her by her Father, and in the dark hours made for a darker place where she might hide. The anger of her Father however, was not to be denied.

In the midst of the First Halls Gedhru found Elanna's form, torn by the claws of the dweo'gorga and ragged from its ferocity. It was a fate unlooked for and unearned, and Gedhru could not control his rage. Reaching out with his Voice he called again for Shabel, and this time his power tore her from her hiding place and brought her to him.

Embraced in her Father's wrath Shabel could not move, fear gripped her as she looked upon his countenance but he would not hear her pleas for mercy. With a thought he tore her apart, sending her essence into the winds, dispersing her into a dissolution that she could not return from. In the First Ages of the World Shabel was dead.

Once again submerged in grief Gedhru held his murdered daughter and waited in the dark hours, unable to reconcile the malice of Shabel and the loss of Elanna. In his mind he could see only his own dissolution, a collapse of spirit that would find him once again alone

in the void, wandering the grey shadows of a lonely existence that had no end and no hope. It was his darkest hour and it was with Aume that he found salvation.

From the Great Home Aume descended also into the First Halls and took Gedhru's hand. Her grief was great but so was her compassion, and without words took Elanna from Gedhru. Look, she said to her husband as the dawn glimmered upon the mountain of Araheal. See the great work that has been wrought by your daughter in your name and in the memory of Emur. Here is a memorial to your creation and it needs a guardian, a spirit that will see it thrive and protect it from imbalance. Elanna may have left us but her essence is still here. Use the power you have to remake her as the life-force of this world, a River of Life that shall ensure Emur and Elanna will always have a presence in the Void. Do this and your creation will live forever.



Gedhru turned to his wife and even in his grief could see her wisdom. With a thought he took Elanna and interred her in the deepest ground, reviving her essence and infusing it into the hard stone of the World. Beneath his feet he felt the pulse of her life and gave her the power to guard all that she had wrought from harm. In sadness though he knew that she was no longer the daughter of his creation. She had grown now into something greater and he renamed her Shan'duil, River of Life. It was a gift that would see her safe and purposeful for all eternity, but there was little that could salve the bitter edge of his sorrow. Then dawn broke across Emur.

In a dance of light and colour the full splendour of Elanna's labours came to life. It was the First Day of the guardianship of the Shan'duil and in its glimmering vibrancy Gedhru paused and reflected on the beauty of what had been wrought. From the long horizon the suns of the world rose to spread light upon all that now lived, the vast forests and mountains of Emur glistening in the First Day of the world. Such was its grandeur that Gedhru could only feel joy, but the sadness forged by Shabel still lay at his core. It was Aume who counselled him once again.

Husband, she said softly, Elanna has given life to your great creation but she will not rest easily without her sister. It is true that Shabel has done great wrong, but her essence survives even now and I sense that there is good to be found within her. You have the power to take her and give her a purpose, one that shall allow her to know her sister and give her company in the long years that are to follow. We are Beings that know the sting of loneliness and the despair that can be found in solitude. It is a fate we should not visit knowingly upon our daughter.

Gedhru turned to his wife and nodded, for once again she had spoken wisdom. In his anger he had sent Shabel into dissolution but her essence still remained, writhing unfettered upon the winds of Emur. He knew what he had to do.

As he had given Elanna guardianship of the ground beneath him, so he gathered what remained of Shabel and gave her to the winds. He could not trust that she would not try and harm Elanna once again, but it was his hope that they would find comfort and counsel in each other's company. To be sure of Elanna's safety Gedhru bound Shabel to the furthest side of the world and gave her guardianship of all that could be found there. As he had named Elanna, Shan'duil, so he named Shabel, Hev'duil, the Breath of Life, and gave her dominion over those far reaches of his creation.

In forgiveness Gedhru gave over the Word of Creation to his daughters and bade them use it wisely. With Aume at his side Gedhru rose once again into the halls of the Great Home and looked down upon the wonder of the world that had been forged in the memory of Emur. Upon its countenance he could sense the power of his daughters and he knew that their creation was safe. As he turned to give thanks to his Wife he found consolation in the thought that although there was sadness in his heart he could now also feel joy, and for a Being that had known such grief that was enough.

THE END

Hamulkuk and the Moon Dragons

:edda nar hamulkuk a'dehr ell'adrim:



As told by the Living Book at Shalamai to Gremorgan Hedj, Maturi of the Grand Circle and servant to the Silvan Tree.

"It is the imperative of our creation that determines who we are. We kill because it is our purpose. We burn and we destroy because it is our duty, but it is not all that we can be. We are who we are because of the designs of those who made us, but I would say that we are more than the petty objectives of our Masters. We are Hresh'na and in this life we are greater than those that have given us breath. I would say that there are choices that we can make, and a capacity within ourselves to define a destiny of our own."

Attributed to Hamulkuk the Destroyer, First Hresh in the World .

"What is myth? Is it a tale told, once founded in fact but in the telling of countless generations embellished and retold until nothing remains of its truth? Or is it something far more potent, a truth given utterance as a faithful recount of real events and great deeds, which in its telling remains immutable to change, its message too important to alter? I would say that the tale that is about to unfold is the latter. No witnesses survive to lay testament to its truth, no scrolls or temple walls remain that might give its story credence, but it is truth nonetheless. In these words can be found the first history of the Oera'dim in the world, told with each successive generation and committed to the memories of the Living Books for all eternity. Here is the story of Hamulkuk, known also to some as Amakek, the First Hresh to find breath in the world, and the travails of his destruction of the Ell'adrim, who we know in these modern times as the Moon Dragons."

"It is well-known to all Oera'dim that the first few moments of consciousness we experience exist as void and nothingness. In these glimmering heartbeats before our struggling birth within the loose

soils of Gorgoroth, we find ourselves floating within a great darkness, only the sound of a monstrous wind pushing us inexorably towards the World Above and a new life in mortal form. In this short time we are given little but the Code that we must live by, and the assurance that Beings of our own kind are waiting for us somewhere beyond the darkness. It is a time of confusion and fear, but one that passes as we find our way from the borders of Gorgoroth and are met by those who show us our place in the world. It can be said that for Hamulkuk such was not the manner of his emergence.

Manufactured as an artifice of magic he was a Being unique, the first of the Oera'dim and a creature made for a specific purpose. For him life began not in confusion but with the surety that he had a mission, and that until its end his existence would be one of pain and sacrifice. For Hamulkuk there could be no doubt, and those that had made him ensured this would indeed be so.

In those moments of void that should have been his only peace he was instead bombarded with the knowledge of a race that was already ancient before his conception. Designed as a weapon for a war that had already gone on far too long he had been given everything he needed to fight and survive against an enemy that had proven itself doughty and determined. To make him resilient he was given cunning and intelligence. To strike fear into those he would kill he harboured a ferocious brutality, and to ensure his obedience he was bound to a spell of magic that would channel his every thought to the needs of his Masters. In that age of violence he was to be a perfect weapon, a warrior built for a war of extermination.

What Hamulkuk could not know as he lingered in the Great Void, was that his Masters were not perfect, nor all-knowing. For in the time of his creation he was truly the last chance for a race that bordered upon on the edge of destruction, the hubris of their ways having brought them almost to the brink of extinction. For the Trell'sara the power they had coveted for themselves had evaporated in the turmoil of a great war, and if they were to win they needed something more powerful than themselves to finish it. In that time of desperation their answer would be Hamulkuk.

It is a truth of our history that the Trell'sara were created by the Silvan Tree as Guardians, Keepers of the Eternal Forests that had thrived under the stewardship of the Great Tree. It is said that the Trell'sara were formed from the essence of the living leaves of their creator, imbued with a mortal form but given an ageless life span that

could only be cut short through accident or misadventure. More importantly they were created to serve the trees of the world, and to provide assistance to another race of beings we know only as the Forgotten Ones. Who they were is a mystery that provides no answer in these modern times. We do not know who they were, nor where they came from, only that they entered our world from somewhere else and found sanctuary beneath the canopy of the eternal forests. For the Great Tree the new visitors were a revelation, adding their voices and language to the music of the forest, their laughter and joy an accompaniment to the movement of branch and leaf in the wind.

Though great in number they trod the paths of their new home lightly, finding a place within the trees that added beauty and life to the creation tended by the Tree. For a Power that had never known companionship the Forgotten Ones became a balm unsought but welcomed, and in their company an ocean of time passed as the Great Tree's dominion grew in strength and power.

It came to pass that the Great Tree offered a boon to her companions. Beloved by the Silvan Tree for the care the Forgotten Ones had given to her domain, she offered to them the power of EarthMagic, but they refused, their concern that with great power came even greater temptation, and in turn the loss of the peaceful existence that had been theirs for millennia. As a gift the Great Tree instead offered the Trell'sara as reward for their wisdom, to act as servants to the eternal forest and provide all that the Forgotten Ones might wish without the need to wield power themselves. To her new creations the Silvan Tree granted the ability to harness EarthMagic, and the free will to make lives also within the protection of her domain. It proved an act of innocent folly that would bring down the Great Tree and plunge all into war.

Although it is known to all Oera'dim that the Trell'sara were false and treacherous Beings they had not been created so. For the Great Tree her attempt at providing an ease for the burdens of the Forgotten Ones was a gift honestly given and an offering of gratitude. For an age of time the Guardians gave service to the Forgotten Ones but unknown to even the Tree herself they conspired and plotted, their only intent to take dominion of Emur for themselves. It is not known what turned them to deceit and avarice but it is evident that just as the Forgotten Ones feared the corruption of great power so that same power corrupted the Guardians, turning their purpose of service and care into a need for domination and malice. Within an atmosphere of

machination and plotting there came a time when the forest fell silent, an expectation of disaster gripping all that lived beneath the trees.

In the shadowed places of the world the Trell'sara schemed and laboured, their ambition to throw down the Great Tree and destroy her favoured peoples. On a terrible day of betrayal the Trell'sara tricked the Silvan Tree and in a moment of distraction attacked her, hacking down her limbs and severing her from the dark earth that had been her home. In a final humiliation her remains were flung into a deep pit, and to the knowledge of the Trell'sara she was destroyed.

History tells us that the Great Tree survived her ordeal, to grow anew again in the deep reaches of the world, but on that day of reckoning she was broken and diminished, unable to help those that had been her greatest joy. For the Trell'sara it was the beginning of a war that had only one objective, and only one ending.

Before news could spread of the treachery brought to the Great Tree the Trell'sara fell upon the Forgotten Ones. In great number they swarmed into the deep forests and began their murderous attack, their intention to remove the Silvan Tree's beloved companions from the world. What confronted them proved instead that they had actioned a traitorous plan, long in the making but flawed from its inception.

Standing before the Trell'sara as they advanced were not the peaceful people they had expected, soft from long years of safety and comfort and unprepared for war. The Forgotten Ones were a peaceful people but they were not defenceless, and their years in the sanctuary of the Forest had not been spent in quiet indolence. Quickly they organised a defence and the true strength of their host soon became apparent. In their haste to take Emur for themselves the Trell'sara had attacked an enemy prepared for war, and able to marshal far greater numbers than they had expected or could hope to match. The War of Tree and Leaf had begun, and it would not be the easy victory the Guardians had assumed.

From the four corners of the world the Forgotten Ones arose, the power of their multitude growing as they gathered to throw back the assault of a race they had understood to be their friends. Nomadic in nature but ordered in their society they brought together a vast host, well-organised and equipped for war.

Caught in the jaws of a conflict that had quickly turned against them the Trell'sara retreated to the mountains of the west, their plans

of domination and genocide withering before a determined foe that had found even greater strength in their discovery of the fate of the Silvan Tree. Battling for survival the Trell'sara bolstered their mountain territories and looked for a way to escape the folly of their ill conceived aggression. Their answer came in the form of an ambitious Guardian known to his own kind as Aggeron, and to all else as the Darkness.



It is with the ambitions of Aggeron of House Delving that the fortunes of the Trell'sara shifted. As has been said before, the Guardians were of mortal form though gifted with an endless mortality. In those ancient times the Trell'sara had not yet protected themselves behind cloaks of magic and shadow and each was as open to death as any of their enemies. Many of the Trell'sara died in the opening debacle of the war and Aggeron saw no advantage in it. What he proposed instead would be creatures of EarthMagic, created as weapons and used for the glory of the Trell'sara, to fight their war on their behalf. It was an idea that quickly took hold even though their capability to create such weapons had yet to be tested.

As the War of Tree and Leaf ground on, Aggeron and a small cadre of the most knowledgeable of the Guardians retired to the north of the world, to a barren plain bordered on two sides by immense arching spires of stone. In this place, which is known to us as the Horns of Gorgoroth, the Trell'sara began their experiments.

It can be said that the capacity to create life is a gift that should only be given to those who can look down upon a world and judge the consequences of its existence. The Trell'sara were not Beings of such calibre and to them the creations that they brought into the world were no more than tools, to be used for a purpose and then discarded without thought. Long they delved into the mysteries of EarthMagic and in time brought into the world a creature that they called the Gaelwch. Such a beast has long left our world, its spectral form locked away from the memories of our existence in a place that has remained hidden, but in the time of its creation it lived as a manifestation of malice and cruelty that even the Trell'sara could not control. Designed as an elemental beast it gave no service to its creators and instead went upon a rampage of destruction, its only

mission the death of anything that might stand in its way. Many Trell'sara died before they caught and locked it away, its body destroyed but its essence bound to a vault that should never be found. With its demise however, new knowledge came to the Guardians and they used what they had learned to bring a far more vicious manifestation of their hatred into the world.

The first of the Dragons were not the monstrous beasts that we know of today. Smaller and imbued with little intelligence they found no effect on the battlefield. Like their predecessor they proved an uncontrollable part of a war that was quickly being lost, but unlike the Gaelwch the Trell'sara had formulated a Word of Dissolution, a spell of EarthMagic that could stifle and remove the spark of life that gave such creatures their existence. When it was judged that the Dragons held no value to the Guardians they were removed from the world forever, the utterance of the Word leaving nothing in its wake.

In those dark days the Trell'sara laboured on, Aggeron attempting to create a creature that might operate effectively in the face of their enemies yet remain completely under their control. It was only as desperation spread through their ranks that the Darkness found what he believed to be the key to his ultimate weapon.

In a moment of inspiration Aggeron decided to build a monstrous creature, one that might set fear into the hearts of the Forgotten Ones yet still be held within the thrall of its creators. Taking their previous designs to a new expression of malice they built a Great Dragon, more powerful than those that had gone before, who they called the Ell'adrim and whom we know as Moon Dragons, and invested in its substance an addiction to gold in all its forms. As is the way of such things the Ell'adrim were infused with the spirit of the precious metal, immutable and ageless, and utterly unable to live without it. Addicted and needy it would do anything for gold, and the Trell'sara controlled the mining and extraction of the precious metal. If the Dragon wanted gold it would have to do as the Guardians commanded.

The first Ell'adrim proved merciless in the prosecution of its duty. Thrown into battle the Great Beast destroyed its enemies, sending the assembled host of the Forgotten Ones into disarray and confusion. Never had they seen such a creature and in its majestic posture it was a terror that none of the Silvan Tree's folk could stand against. Defeated at the foothills of the western mountains the Forgotten Ones retreated to their forest homes and searched for a viable defence

against this new threat.

Encouraged by their victory the Trell'sara immediately set to the task of building more of the Ell'adrim. In great number the Moon Dragons were created, vast creatures of scale and leathery wings, silver black in countenance, their bodies a shimmering landscape of moonlight incarnate. And as was the way of the Trell'sara none were left idle. Immediately their new charges were sent into the world to hunt and destroy, to root out every vestige of the Forgotten Ones and remove them from existence. It was a dark time of violence and fear but one the Forgotten Ones survived, for in their desperation the Trell'sara had once again failed to stand back and consider the consequences of their ill-thought creation.

They had built the Ell'adrim to win a war but to control them they had addicted them to gold. In their eagerness they had created an army of the creatures and had given no thought on the amount of the scarce metal that would be needed to keep the Moon Dragons satisfied and compliant. It came to pass quickly that the demands of their new weapons had to be left unanswered, and with their inability to find the required metal a terrible vengeance fell upon the Guardians.

From their nests in the far Mountains of Ul'ashma the Ell'adrim marshalled their number and moved upon the Trell'sara themselves. Stronghold after stronghold fell as the Moon Dragons exacted a cruel tribute from every butchered Guardian they could find, despoiling them of their personal jewellery and breaking apart their homes. In the midst of this turmoil the Forgotten Ones saw a chance to end the war quickly and again marched against their enemies. It almost proved the end of the Trell'sara but again it was Aggeron who came to the fore, and it is in the midst of this great furore that Hamulkuk took his first breath.

In truth Aggeron had been dissatisfied with his new creations even at their inception. He foresaw that even though the Ell'adrim were impressive and lethal creatures, they were altogether too big to complete the task of genocide that had always been his overarching objective. He reasoned that for the Trell'sara to have dominion of the world there could be no place in it for even a remnant of the Forgotten Ones. His sole purpose lay in their utter destruction and he knew that the Moon Dragons would turn the tide of battle but they could not win the war. He recognised that his enemy stood their ground as a determined and cunning foe, adept at the ways of the vast Forest and

sure to have many hiding places. The Ell'adrim could keep the Forgotten Ones on the run but it would take an altogether different creation to finish the job. In the darkest recesses of his thoughts Aggeron knew that any new creation would have to be one similar to the enemy they must fight, able to go where the enemy might hide and in the bloody business of extermination harbour no concept of mercy in its prosecution.

And so Aggeron laboured on. When word reached him of the betrayal of the Ell'adrim he brought his new creation into the world and knew without hesitation that he had found his weapon, and that it would be the salvation of his people. For Hamulkuk the trials of his existence were about to begin.



Standing at the borders of Gorgoroth Aggeron looked upon his new creation and was well pleased. Here stood the epitome of his vision, a creature of war, unconstrained by any concept of mercy and one truly obedient to its Master. In the red light of dusk the Hresh'na stood quiet but alert. Roughly the same in size and form as the Forgotten Ones it would soon face, the warrior had been built well muscled and ready for the rigours of its purpose in the world. Aggeron had spent some time in the design of his creation and had ensured that it was in every way physically superior to its enemies. Equipped with perfect night vision, an almost inexhaustible stamina, and skin that changed to match the textures of any environment it might have to fight in, Hamulkuk was built for war and as lethal as any weapon that the Trell'sara could both create and control. To this weapon Aggeron gave but one concession to vanity. Along the length of its arm he artificed a tattoo similar to that of his own house, marking it as his alone. This warrior would be his weapon and no others.

Unlike his previous creations he was not about to trust to Hamulkuk's obedience however. For all the Oera'dim that might follow he had decided that something must bind them to his will, and he had no illusion that they should be obedient to anyone but himself. Upon Hamulkuk he artificed a new spell, a Word of Command that bound the Hresh to whomever might utter the Word upon him. For the First Hresh it was the first word heard as he stepped out into the living world and it stole his free will from him in an instant.

"Do you know who you are?" Aggeron asked as the warrior came before him.

Hamulkuk nodded, a compulsion to do whatever this Being might command undeniable and insistent.

"I am yours to command, Master. Tell me how I must serve."

Aggeron smiled and turned to a number of other Trell'sara that stood close. "Go with these Masters and they shall teach you the ways of war. You are my warrior Hamulkuk, and I have need of you."

The Hresh lowered his head and made for the assembled group. For Aggeron the warrior would be the first of many but it was a weapon unproven, one that needed to be tested. As he watched his creation walk away he already knew how he would measure his new warrior's mettle for in his thoughts there existed only malice and vengeance.

In the days that followed Hamulkuk learned the power of the body he had been given and became familiar with the weapons that would be his to wield. Of those that were placed before him it was the scimitar that found most favour in his hands, and soon it became his only blade, forged in blue steel and honed to an edge that could hew any living thing. For Aggeron, who watched from his pavilion as the warrior was schooled and tested in the arts of his new life, his growing satisfaction was quickly tempered by news arising from the far south and west of the world. Messengers arrived on the fourth day of Hamulkuk's training with dire tidings of battles lost, and the retreat of the Moon Dragons to their nests at Ul'ashma. Although caught off-guard by the first attacks of the Ell'adrim the Forgotten Ones had found a way to repel their assaults, using the deep forest to lay ambush and then meld back into the undergrowth. It was a strategy that quickly disheartened the Moon Dragons, and unwilling to lose more of their number had retired to their nests in the western mountains. Frustrated in their assault they began to fight amongst each other and then accost those of the Trell'sara that still foolishly held any golden metal in their possession. It was a time of devastation and one that suited the personal ambitions of Aggeron perfectly.



From the safety of the borders of Gorgoroth Aggeron sent forth a messenger to the strongholds of his brethren. Salvation would be

theirs he proclaimed, but only at the cost of their own freedom. He would deliver the Guardians from certain destruction and give over to the Trell'sara dominion of the world, but he must be their Dominus and they must obey him. It was a bargain that desperation made easy and the other Trell'sara acceded to his will all too quickly.

With their collective strength now his to command Aggeron began his quest to grind down the Forgotten Ones and remove the threat of the Ell'adrim from the shoulders of the Guardians. The Forgotten Ones were the greater nemesis but they could not be defeated if the Ell'adrim were left to continue their destruction of the Trell'sara strongholds. It would be to the Moon Dragons' lairs that Hamulkuk would be sent first, his success there proof of the First Hresh's effectiveness, and confirmation to all the Guardians that Aggeron was indeed their true Dominus.

With haste he completed Hamulkuk's training and stood proud before the warrior he had brought into the world. Here was the instrument of his ascension to leadership of the Trell'sara but everything depended on the Hresh's effectiveness. Strong and agile his Hresh'na had been imbued with all that was required to prevail as a weapon of war but against the Ell'adrim Aggeron needed one thing more.

Hamulkuk would be his perfect warrior but the Moon Dragons were no simple foes. The Trell'sara had been able to remove their previous creations with the utterance of a Word of Dissolution, and although they had tried, the spell had not worked against the Ell'adrim. The melding of the Dragons' essence with gold at their creation had made them immune to the power of the spell in its uttered form. To destroy the enormous beasts would require a weapon, infused with the Word of Dissolution and wielded by one who could meet them face to face. Such a weapon would have to be created first, and quickly.

With Hamulkuk at his side Aggeron removed himself and his entourage from the barren wastes of Gorgoroth and returned to the western mountains. From the stronghold of Menion'Enath he sent the design for a new weapon to his armourers, and it was not to be a simple artifice. With a haft made from a carved remnant of the Silvan Tree, and barbed with the talon of an Ell'adrim, the Orncryst would be a melding of EarthMagic and the natural power of the Moon Dragons themselves. Forged as a single-bladed axe, and inlaid in gold and precious gems, it was both weapon and jewel, as fine a creation as

anything previously artificed by the Guardians. Upon its polished iron blade Aggeron cut the Word of Dissolution himself and with that done considered the sacrifices that he knew were still to come.

In its physical form the Orncryst was a weapon of great beauty and fine crafting, but not enough to bring down the Moon Dragons alone. With the axe in hand Aggeron gave it to his most trusted assistants and instructed them on its final forging. If it was to kill the Ell'adrim it would have to be plunged into the River of Life itself, and in doing so transform the axe from a weapon of iron and stonewood into the most powerful talisman of EarthMagic ever created.

To touch the Shan'duil however, would be no easy task, and one that no Trel'sara would take upon themselves lightly. Since the bringing down of the Silvan Tree the Guardians had maintained no contact with the River of Life and none could know the punishment that might be visited upon those who might try. In their desperate hours however, there remained enough Guardians of courage to brave the exertions of such a task and without hesitation Aggeron sent them forth.

The tale of the descent of the Eleven Guardians into the Mines of Mourning is a story that requires its own telling. In the long history of that race it is the only tale of bravery and sacrifice that an Oera'dim can recount of the Fallen Masters with wonder and grudging admiration. It is a truth that no Oera'dim can look upon the Shan'duil without suffering complete dissolution and because of this we do not search out the low places of the world, but for the Guardians it was a mission that would take them into the ancient delvings of the Mines of Mourning and ultimately to the root of the world itself. Such a tale must be left for another day, however. Suffice it to say that only one of the Guardians survived to return to the light of day, the Orncryst pulsing with the power needed as act as a physical manifestation of the Word of Dissolution. One touch would be enough to bring down the Ell'adrim, it need only be wielded by a Being brave enough to take it forth and destroy them. In Aggeron's plan that Being would be Hamulkuk.

It must be said that in that dark and desperate time Hamulkuk was not to go alone. Bound by the Word of Command he would be compelled to fulfil his mission but Aggeron had to be sure that the task would be completed. In the early hours of a cold morning the Dominus gathered those that would travel with his creation and gave Hamulkuk his orders.

"Who are you?" he asked quietly.

"I am Hamulkuk, Master, yours to command unto death."

Aggeron looked to his fellow Guardians then turned to his creation. "You are to leave this place and travel north-west to Ul'ashma. There you will find the caves of the Ell'adrim. Call to them Hamulkuk, compel them forward and as each is drawn to you destroy them. In this your task is clear. Kill all that respond to your call, then return the Orncryst to me. Do you understand?"

Hamulkuk bowed, the Order a clear compulsion now within him. It would be impossible for him to return to his Master without the task being prosecuted to the letter of every word uttered. For Aggeron there could be no doubt that Hamulkuk would do his duty, but to get the Hresh'na to the far mountains he would require protection of his own. Forty Trell'sara would travel with him and in that chill morning they set forth, their goal the far mountains of Ul'ashma and the lairs of the Moon Dragons.

For any Being that has travelled the far marches of the west it is understood that no journey there can be undertaken lightly. Before the company stood the high massifs of the Great Rift, a long jagged line of mountains and high plateaux that spread for hundreds of leagues into the north and west. Beyond those granite borders extended the cold wastes of the north, but at the Rift's shoulder arose the lesser mountains of Ul'ashma and the homes of the Ell'adrim. Deep within those cold peaks a vast complex of caves served as the lairs of the Dragons and they would be the company's objective. North they would travel, traversing a series of passes beyond the Great Rift, then follow the edges of the Massif as it veered westwards to Ul'ashma.

The journey itself would not be their greatest challenge however. Away from the remaining strongholds of the Trell'sara the world was now the domain of the Forgotten Ones and even upon the coldest peaks of the north they maintained a presence, units of Rangers and other frontier forces on guard upon the many passes and trails that crossed the high mountains. If Hamulkuk were to make it alive to Ul'ashma their company would need to escape the attention of their enemies as well as survive the rigours of their passage.

Unknown to the company as it made its way steadily into the north, the Forgotten Ones had already become aware of their journey. Rangers holding vigil in the shadows of Menion'Enath sent word of their passage northwards and soon the company was itself being

stalked, prey to a foe that had no intention of letting the strange party out of the precincts of the cold mountains. As it would come to pass it would only be the immensity of the mountains themselves that would save the company from an early failure.

Along the high trails of the Great Rift Hamulkuk and his Guardians moved quickly. In this endeavour the First Hresh took the lead, his stamina undiminished by the labours required to overcome the steep climbs and narrow mountain paths that directed them inexorably northwards. Determined to make the northern reaches of the Great Rift without detection they struggled on, a series of hidden paths leading them between the summits of Laman'thel and thence into the darker shadows of the Northern Massif beyond.

Days passed beneath clouded skies, the company moving upon high ridges and through deep, misted vales. Within the shadows of the cold mountains they remained unseen, their passage lost to the rugged terrain and the vastness of the Great Rift itself. Wearied by the endless labour of the march the Guardians started to fall behind, and there came a time when Hamulkuk had no option but to stop and wait for them. With stormclouds crowding close the First Hresh waited upon a rise in the trail as his guard made up the distance between them. It was as he paused there that the Rangers of the enemy first made contact, and it was there that Hamulkuk first drew blood.

At the crest of a long track edging a wide plateau of broken stone a small unit of Rangers came upon the company. For both groups it was a surprise, the Rangers unaware of the movement of the Guardians northwards, the Trell'sara yet to discover they were being tracked by other forces that still moved some distance to the south. In the gloom and noise of an overcast evening however, it took less than the drawing of swords for the two groups to come together.

Surprise gave way quickly to the hatred felt between mortal foes and in the melee each took losses quickly. At the centre of the battle stood Hamulkuk, a cloak thrown upon him and protected by a ring of Guardians as they endeavoured to keep his existence secret. The Rangers were the best and most hardened warriors that the enemy had at their disposal and it soon passed that the Guardians began to waver, their numbers being broken before the onslaught of a superior force. In this battle Hamulkuk could not remain quiet and when only a few of his guard remained he had no choice but to fight.

Overhead the encroaching night turned to storm and upon that

desolate trail the First Hresh to draw breath in the world threw away his disguise and joined the battle. Armed with his scimitar Hamulkuk charged into the Rangers and slew the nearest with a single blow. Amongst the combatants he struck out with his blade cutting down another before the nature of the battle changed. In the narrow confines of the path the two sides divided, the remaining Guardians withdrawing behind the Hresh, the Rangers finding a position ahead of the warrior, blocking the way forward. For the Forgotten Ones the sight of Hamulkuk proved a shock that kept them at bay, but only momentarily.

In the fractured light of a monumental barrage of lightning this new Being in the world stood tall and armoured, a creature of war designed for the purpose, its skin shimmering as black as the night that surrounded them. Hesitation however, turned quickly to action. From within their number a voice called clearly and a bow drew back. One word sent an arrow thudding into Hamulkuk's shoulder and in that moment of searing pain the First Hresh became unstoppable.

Pulling the arrow from his shoulder Hamulkuk charged into the Rangers, his scimitar a flickering reflection of light as he hew down his enemies, none able to stand before the ferocity of his anger. Amongst the Forgotten Ones he found his purpose and in a slew of blood and pain came to understand his true nature. In the midst of the struggling crowd he felt a power coursing through his body, a natural need to kill and to destroy expressed in cold and deliberate violence. For all Oera'dim it is the familiar exaltation of combat, that state of focused aggression that allows no recognition of pain or fear, but for the First Hresh it was new and unrestrained. Before Hamulkuk's fury the Rangers had no answer, falling back as he drove them down, his scimitar a razor-sharp scythe that cut through the Rangers like they were reeds upon a river's edge.

In a blustering gale the Rangers died but not all fell to Hamulkuk's sword. Two of their number retreated early in the confrontation and unknown to the remaining company fled southwards as messengers, their tale of death one that would set a vast army against them. If such a pursuit ensued it would only be a matter of time before Hamulkuk himself would fall.



With only four Guardians still remaining to the company Hamulkuk did not wait for the storm to pass. Knowing that it would not be long before the Rangers would be missed he took again to the path and left the remaining Trel'sara behind, desperately trying to keep up with their charge. For Hamulkuk they were no more than a disguise, a device to mask his presence until he had found his way to Ul'ashma and the completion of his Orders. It was not however, beyond his understanding that if the enemy became aware of his existence that they would stop at nothing to put him down. If he was in their position he would do the same and he had no intention of failing his Master.

Upon the high trails Hamulkuk made his way northwards, using the many narrow tracks and footways to navigate a path through the steep mountain vales and around the many obstacles that stood in his way. Even for the First Hresh it proved a hard road forward, the mountains unwilling to allow passage lightly. Upon loose scree slopes and the winding trails of ancient paths he found his own way, though always at the mercy of crashing storms and chilling gales. At many points he almost failed, the terrain a treacherous march of rockfalls, steep ground and lurking predators that proved unforgiving and relentless. In the isolation of this journey Hamulkuk found his mind wandering, giving thought not only to his mission but also to who he was, and what he was doing.

Alone and able to keep his own counsel he tried to make sense of the existence that he had been brought into. He was a weapon, of this he had no doubt, but Aggeron in his haste to produce a Being with the capacity to think had also left him with the need to understand and find worth in what he was doing. His Orders compelled him to kill the Ell'adrim, to take all that would answer his call and send them to Dissolution with the Orncryst. It was simple enough, but as he travelled the lonely trails of the Great Rift he began to feel something else, and it nagged at him as insistently as his Orders.

He was a Being of EarthMagic, created for a purpose but made from the essence of the world itself. As such a Being he was captive to the whims of his creator, and he accepted that as the fate of his existence, but he also felt something else, a deep connection to the mountains he was traversing and to all the natural forces that surrounded him. In the unrestrained power of the storm he had felt a kindred spirit, in the wind and the rain he had found connection and familiarity. In the stone he recognised a brother, and above all else he

could feel the pulse of the Shan'duil, no matter how deep it coursed in the root of the world beneath him.

It was a realisation both disconcerting and enervating. As he struggled upon the loose scree slopes at the base of the northern-most edges of the Rift he came to realise that he may have been made as an instrument of war but he was also a part of the world he now inhabited. Alone in the cold mountains Hamulkuk had come to understand that he was a sentient Being and that his Orders were all that held him in thrall to the Trell'sara. It was a realisation that would trouble him for the remainder of his days.

Many more days passed as he found a way through the high mountains and struggled out of the shadows into the brighter light of the Northern Wastes. Upon the slopes at his back the Guardians struggled to keep up but he had no regard for their labours. In his mind there was only the task, and he had found his minders to be nothing more than a hindrance to his progress. If he was to find the Moon Dragons and destroy them, it would be a task done alone, and without witnesses.

Upon the ragged edges of the Great Rift Hamulkuk looked down upon the cold plains before him and knew that his path would not take him into such desolate climes. Instead he looked to the west, and at the world's horizon he saw instead the spur of a line of mountains known to his Masters as Ul'ashma, the Mountains of the Moons. It would be there that he would find the Ell'adrim, and it would be there that he would kill them.



It is rumoured that in those desperate days when the Trell'sara peered into the shadows of their own destruction that Aggeron grew careless in his haste to create his new weapon. Much thought had been given to the nature of the creature he was building, but in those final days it was only to the physical attributes of his new warrior that he gave weight or time. His warrior would be strong, capable of fighting in any terrain, and give no heed to the onset of any weather. His warrior would have skin that would change colour and texture to match any of its possible surroundings, and be provided with senses far more sensitive and utilitarian than anything the Guardians themselves possessed. Of all these senses it was the sight of the first

Hresh that was given greatest energy, and in his creation Aggeron had provided Hamulkuk with a keenness of vision that was unsurpassed by any living creature, whether in day or moonless night.

To the first Hresh's sentience however, less energy had been devoted. The Guardian's need for an effective weapon to overpower the Forgotten One's on their own ground had lead him to provide his creation with the capacity to reason, but in Hamulkuk's design much had been left unfinished or ill-conceived. It is thought that the Master had used one of his own assistant's minds as the template for his creation, simply taking apart that which he deemed useless and enhancing that which he saw advantageous, building in his arrogance a merciless beast of war. It is a truth that Aggeron could see no purpose in giving his weapon a set of rules to conduct himself by, he saw only a need for obedience and the ruthless prosecution of war. What happened after that came as no concern of his. History tells us that it was an oversight that would one day bring the Darkness himself to his knees.

Now firmly upon the plains Hamulkuk scanned the horizon, his thoughts focused on the task at hand. Ul'ashma lay to the west, the veiled summits of that range hovering within a languid grey haze, but as he considered his best way forward there came the urgent sounds of violence upon the wind at his back. Immediately he recognised the clamour of combat but gave no thought to what he should do, except to ensure that there lay within the clash of metal and screams no danger to his mission.

Scrambling back to a vantage upon the crest of a long slope he saw upon a far ridge the last Guardians of his party, fighting desperately as a large force of Rangers caught them exposed upon the crest. As he watched the last of his guard were cut down, their bodies tumbling as ragged outlines upon the loose slopes, leaving trails of moving dirt as they slid into the darkness below. For Hamulkuk there could be no concern for their demise, nor any need to exact vengeance for their deaths. They were a complication that he could do without and only the small forms of the Forgotten Ones making a line down the slopes provided any need for action. Somehow the Rangers were on his trail, and he could not allow them to catch him.

Quickly he descended onto the hard ground at the base of the mountains and set out across the wide plain at the run. He was a warrior built for endurance and long into the day he ran across the desolate terrain, heading for a high landmark ahead. To his Masters

the tall, broken towers of stone were known simply as The Spires. To Hamulkuk they served as an easily held landmark upon the plains, and he laid his course by their highest point. About him the northern plains spread far and wide, the desolate ground a vista of barren earth broken only by shallow hills and the dark massif of the Great Rift at his left shoulder.

Behind him the Rangers were not giving ground and as his first day on the plains turned to darkness Hamulkuk could not afford to rest. Forging onwards he kept the tall spires before him and by the light of twin moons ran on, the sky above a deep veil of shadowed clouds and bright, flickering stars. With his heart pounding beneath his armour he moved quickly into the north-west.



Only once on that first night did Hamulkuk have reason to pause. In the mid reach of the dark hours there came a sound that brought the Hresh to a sudden halt. From the plains behind him there arose a terrible cacophony, a melee of screams and roaring thunder that began as no more than a whisper against the breeze but which grew in surges into a harsh report of scraping metal and rumbling stone, all entwined with clear cries of pain and torment. Hamulkuk waited as the sounds found strength and then faded into the backdrop of the ever present wind, abandoning the plains once again to the night.

For a time the First Hresh made no further ground, content to stand before the bluster and search for any sign of what might have transpired. Around him the ground lay shadowed in darkness, only the silvered edges of moonlight giving any form to his surroundings. When he was sure that he was once again alone he turned back to the north-west and began to run.

For the remainder of the night he kept up his pace, making for the stone spires but always alert for any danger that might lay hidden on the quiet plains. On a few occasions he passed herds of Yunta Beast heading north towards the Moss Plains, their objective the rich feeding grounds that spread for hundreds of leagues in that direction. Such creatures were of no interest to him however. He had food enough to last and the Yunta were docile creatures even at their most energetic. In darkness he forged ahead and at the first hint of light gleaming against the eastern horizon came to the base of The Spires.

Against the flaring glow of the dawn the Spires grew large upon the plain. At almost three hundred metres tall the three distinct towers of stone stood as impressive monoliths upon the flat ground. From the east they had appeared as made structures, such was the smooth, lean aspect of their reach, but it proved instead upon closer inspection that they rose above the plain as natural upthrusts of stone, somehow forced from the earth below as a bone needle might be forced through hide. At its base the largest of the Spires lay over twenty metres in breadth and as the First Hresh came to a halt at their feet he stood insignificant, looking up at summits that seemed to touch the sky itself.

It struck Hamulkuk as he surveyed his find that these towering pieces of stone might prove a good vantage to test how far the Rangers had come in the night. Carefully he found a foothold against the nearest of the vast monoliths and began to climb.

Against their huge bulk Hamulkuk moved quickly as a dark speck that ascended to a vantage some fifty metres above the plain. The remains of the thin tower reached some hundreds of metres further into the clear sky overhead but it was enough to survey both the plain and the reach of the high mountains to the south. To his surprise he could see nothing of the Forgotten Ones. To the north and west roamed large herds of Yunta Beast, to the south he could see clearly the curving arches of the Alerion Gates and the Shattereen beyond, but to the east there was nothing, no sign of the Rangers nor any evidence of their passing. Overhead there glided the forms of three Kreel flying westwards but upon the barren ground he was alone.

Returning to the hard earth Hamulkuk considered his next move. The disappearance of the Rangers had left him with an open path to the nests of the Ell'adrim, though their sudden retreat from the chase came with concerns of its own. In Hamulkuk's thoughts there grew the possibility that his pursuers might know something he didn't, and as he looked to the west he decided that a change in course might give him an advantage. Rather than head directly from the Spires to the tip of Ul'ashma he would instead travel in a wider arc to the north, passing beyond the Plains of Tor'eth and using the southern edges of the Moss Plains as his guide to the mountains beyond. In this fashion he could approach the Moon Dragons from the east and time his arrival in the mountains themselves to coincide with the first shrouds of night. If there was indeed something ahead to be avoided such a detour might save him any unnecessary danger.

Setting out once again Hamulkuk turned further northwards and as with the previous day struck out at the run. By mid-morning he encountered the first vestiges of the Moss Plains and then veered westwards, following the edges of the Mosses as he put his eye firmly upon the long reach of the Mountains of the Moons. He had covered a considerable distance in his run to the west and Ul'ashma lay clearer, their peaks a saw-tooth silhouette that thrust outwards from the larger mountains of the Great Rift to the south. According to the intelligence collected by his Master the nests of the Ell'adrim were to be found upon the highest summits of Ul'ashma, positioned out of view of the plains themselves. For the First Hresh to call the Ell'adrim he would need to be within sight of the caves but not necessarily close. The call would bring the Moon Dragons forth and he could see value in making them come to him. Hamulkuk had never put eyes upon one of his quarry and he considered it wise to have time to consider what he might be up against.

Running through the thick pads of moss the First Hresh made his way forward, the furthest edge of the mountains ahead his objective. About him the morning slowly unfolded, the still unfamiliar cycle of life in the world something that passed without his notice as he ran. In those long hours he covered a great distance and found the day itself edging towards night as he approached the high summits of Ul'ashma. Behind him there remained no sign of the Rangers that had so doggedly pursued him on the previous day. Ahead there lay the mountains, and a herd of Yunta grazing purposefully upon the mosses. As he approached the huge beasts moved away quickly, clearing a path that gave him a clear line to a saddle between two peaks. It would be his purpose to use the valley that could be found there to find a path into the shadows of the Mountains of the Moons, and then on to the caves of the Ell'adrim. What he could not foresee was the danger waiting patiently for him upon the plains ahead.

As he ran through the grazing Yunta it came to his notice quickly that three of the beasts ahead were not moving. All of their brethren had moved out of his path long before he could come close but these Yunta remained in station, watching him carefully as Hamulkuk made his way forward. Not sure of their intentions the First Hresh slowed his pace and considered more carefully the lay of the ground he stood upon, and the possible avenues of escape if the beasts decided to charge. It became quickly apparent that the Yunta were not going to move, and as he came to a complete halt a feeling of

unease descended upon the entire plain. Something was not right.

Carefully Hamulkuk drew his scimitar and advanced upon the large Yunta. All were at least six times his own size but docile nonetheless, and as he approached them he was expecting nothing more than to usher them away with a wave of his blade and a few coarse shouts. Instead he would find himself fighting for his life.



As Hamulkuk approached the plain fell silent, all the activity of life that he had disregarded on his run suddenly keenly noticeable in its absence. The air itself had come to a halt, and as the First Hresh surveyed the wide plain there came to him a feeling of hidden malice, of something brooding close and watching with undeniable purpose.

Looking around he could see nothing, but as his focus returned to the creatures the nearest of the Yunta shifted uneasily then reared upon its back legs, its forward limbs raking the air as if in great pain or anger. Stepping back Hamulkuk watched as the beast began to distort, its form shivering and contorting as its essence changed, the familiar outline of the Yunta transforming before his eyes into a towering distorted form, something that seemed to mock his own appearance.

In the yellowed glow of dusk the other Yunta began to change also, their bodies coalescing into similar forms, although grotesquely deformed. Hamulkuk immediately recognised the beings that had risen before him. They were of the *dweo'gorga*, shape-shifters and assassins of the lost Daughter-God Shabel. Only in the knowledge given to him did he understand the nature of these beings but one thing he recognised for himself; they were creatures of EarthMagic and in their presence he could feel the power of their forms pulsing in time to the heartbeat of the world far below his feet. He could not help wondering in that moment of confrontation if these creatures had been the cause of the Rangers' disappearance. It was a question that he knew would remain unanswered.

Hamulkuk had nothing to say to the *dweo'gorga*, they were simply in his way and he could not brook any delay. The Shape-shifters needed to be put aside and he moved forward to do so. In that instant all three of the creatures thrust their fists deep into the earth, somehow drawing strength and form from the ground beneath them.

In a rumbling vibration of power the dweo'gorga began to grow and expand, the mocking forms building into towering goliaths that dwarfed the surrounding plain. Hamulkuk did not take a back step as the first swept a long arm towards him.

Striking out with his scimitar the First Hresh had no chance to defend himself from the blow. In a splintering crack the sword shattered and Hamulkuk took the full impact of the monstrous creature's fist upon his right shoulder. Thrown across the mosses it was only the thick pads of vegetation that brought him to a halt, although in an undignified tangle of limbs and equipment. Quickly he regained his feet but his weapon was useless, and without thinking pulled the Orncryst from its sheath. It was an instinctual act that saved his live.

In a concatenation of energy the Orncryst burst into life, the proximity of the shape-shifters a trigger that could not be denied. Crackling with a blue energy that arced out from its shimmering blade Hamulkuk could feel the axe's vitality coursing through his own body, and in that moment of sudden unrestrained power it brought the dweo'gorga to a shuddering halt.

With another mighty swing the nearest dweo'gorga struck out at Hamulkuk but this time the Orncryst cut cleanly, and with its touch Shabel's Assassin staggered backwards, its body dissolving from the wound as smoke might be carried by a gale. Grasping at its arm in a vain attempt to stop its own dissolution the shapeshifter looked in horror to its companions before falling to ground as a contorted heap of earth.

In a blind rage the remaining dweo'gorga rushed Hamulkuk, their intention to crush him beneath massive pounding feet. The First Hresh did not falter, striking out again with the axe and leaving a gaping wound in the leg of the second shape-shifter. Stunned by the blow and unable to fathom the weapon's effect upon itself the dweo'gorga staggered backwards, its legs and body dissolving in gouts of earth as it lost its footing and fell. In those few moments the creature that had lived a thousand millennia crumpled into another giant mound of dirt and was still.

The third creature gave no thought to continuing the assault. Turning on its thick heels it began to run, a panic overwhelming it as it tried to make sense of what had happened to its brethren. For Hamulkuk there could be no survivors, and he threw the axe with all the strength left to him. Arcing through the air the Orncryst sliced

into the back of the fleeing shape-shifter, a scream of pain lost within a detonation of released energy and roiling dust. When the dirt settled to earth there remained nothing but Hamulkuk, and the axe lodged firmly in the cold ground ahead of him.

It is said that from that time forth Hamulkuk and the multitudes of his descendants were favoured by the Powers of the world. In his destruction of the dweo'gorga an ancient score had been settled with Shabel's outcast Assassins and all the Oera'dim that followed were then accepted as part of the natural order. In truth it can be said that the memories of the Powers of the World are long, and just as much in need of vengeance as any other Being.

For those who are familiar with the moss plains the mounds of dirt left behind with the dissolution of the dweo'gorga still remain and are known in these modern times as the Three Assassins. It is said that nothing grows upon their desiccated slopes, and any who might venture upon them will find death quickly. In the aftermath of battle however, the First Hresh gave thought only to retrieving his axe. For Hamulkuk it was time to move on.



With the steaming mounds of the dweo'gorga left behind Hamulkuk ran again for the desolate borders of Ul'ashma. As had been his goal he made a quick passage to the shallow valley that would provide a path into the deeper shadows of the summits beyond. In the fading light of dusk the First Hresh made his way out of the plains and began a struggling ascent into the low valley that would be his way into the mountains.

On both sides the steep slopes of the Mountains of the Moons rose as massive walls of granite, the shadows of night deep and clutching as Hamulkuk found an ancient path that led him through the valley and then up its steep sides onto a small plateau. From this open ground he found a further trail that wound upwards through a series of ascents, each in turn leading him higher into the cold embrace of Ul'ashma. Only when he came upon another small table of open ground did he take time to consider his position. Upon this narrow field of thick grasses and wildflowers he surveyed the valley below and decided to rest.

Hamulkuk sat within the grasses and ate a frugal meal of dried meat. His maker had given him the endurance to outdistance his enemies, and the strength to overwhelm them in great number but he was not indefatigable. After the rigours of his journey he knew he must regain his stamina for the days ahead, and to that end had decided within the night hours that he would not call the Ell'adrim until the bright light of dawn was at hand. Beyond the field of grass rose a further slope, steep and jagged but at its crest there would be a further area of flat ground and a clear view to the nests of the Moon Dragons. It would be upon this higher vantage that the First Hresh would prove himself to his Master.

In the cool night air Hamulkuk took his ease, watching the inexorable turn of the sky overhead as if it was his first vision of the world at rest. Many years from this night he would remark that it was the only night of peace that he had ever known, and as he lay within the long grasses he had time to ponder all that he had experienced in the short weeks of his life. Within a backdrop of cicadas and bird calls he considered the unusual state of a Being such as himself, without experiences yet to call his own but possessed of the knowledge and memories of others, somehow alive and reasoning yet manufactured for a purpose and just as disposable. As a state of being it both insulted and humiliated him, but there was always the compelling push of his Orders that kept him centred only on the task at hand. It was an unsettling state of mind that gave no comfort or peace to his thoughts, yet within that inner conflict he was just as sure that he had the capacity to be far more than just a slave.

As he lay one thought did come to mind and it was insistent. To kill the dweo'gorga had exhilarated him but he had sensed during that confrontation that the creatures were the same as himself, Beings made for a purpose and artificed of EarthMagic. He had felt keenly the power of their existence, but as he had sent each of the Assassins into dissolution there had been a perceptible shift in the balance of the world, a slight shiver in the surging power of the foundations of Emur that gave him cause to wonder at its implications.

He knew that he had not just killed the Shape-shifters, indeed he had utterly removed their essence from existence, the power of the Word of Dissolution nullifying even the spark of EarthMagic that had given them life. It was a power that could also send him into nothingness at the whim of his Master, and it made him mindful of his own mortality, but as the dweo'gorga had died he had felt the

heartbeat of the world lessen, if only as a shiver that passed. He would do his Master's bidding but even in those early days he had reason to pause and consider whether his creators were indeed omnipotent. It was a doubt that remained with Hamulkuk through the long night, and one that would fester in his thoughts for the remainder of his days.

Morning came to the high field accompanied by the calls of Cacklers and Whipbirds. As the suns of Emur struggled from the eastern horizon Hamulkuk readied himself for the day that would end in the destruction of the Ell'adrim and the fulfilment of his Orders. At the edges of the plateau there rose another incline, a solid slope of granite that reached to a crest some two hundred metres above his position. At his campsite he left all his equipment except for the Orncryst. Against the Moon Dragons nothing else would have value so with only the sheathed axe strapped at his back he began the climb that would take him within sight of the nests.

Against the bright reds and yellows of sunrise Hamulkuk laboured upon the cliff face, his form a shadow moving with purpose as he ascended the stone, finding at its summit a narrow sliver of ground upon which to make his call. Upon the slope's upper reach he took the Orncryst and surveyed the surrounding mountains. It did not take long to spy out the lairs of the Ell'adrim cut into the upper slopes of the mountains ahead, but there was much more to see here than just the shadowed caves of his prey alone.

To the south and west Hamulkuk looked out upon the vast reaches of the mountains of the Great Rift. Endless lines of snowed summits marched into the south, with no less a procession of granite peaks extending to the horizon in the west. Far to the west he knew there could be found World's End and the mystery of the Veils, but before him the great mountains stood immense and timeless. Within these mountains he could see the mists of morning not yet touched by the light of the suns, and in the deepest of the shadows lay valleys and plateaux, small pockets of night living still between grey monoliths and bright white snow-caps.

To the north, beyond the lesser range of Ul'ashma lay the vast plains of moss and tundra, the horizon a white line delineating the deadly ice cap of the frozen wastes. To the east more of the plains stood empty and quiet, a morning haze evaporating in the warmth of the rising suns. Standing upon his vantage it seemed that the whole world lay beneath his feet but he knew it not to be so. The world of

his Masters was one far greater than this, even if the breadth of it remained unseen. Turning to the west the First Hresh took the Orncryst and considered how he should begin. The gold inlaid into the haft of the axe would already be stirring the Ell'adrim in their caves but it would be his call that would bring them to him. Across a wide valley he could see the dark entrances to their lairs and in the quiet pause of dawn there came a sound of movement, of great beasts rousing within deep and long forgotten places. With the axe in hand he gave a further moment to consider the vista before him then gave the call.

:commen ell'adrim, a' maad a'du bayor:

In the crisp morning air the call rang clearly, its power growing as it echoed upon the mountainsides. Caught within the constant bluster of the peaks the words wove their magic, taking hold of the wind and forming wide vortices of blue energy that tore through the air and assailed the hard stone of the far mountains. It seemed to Hamulkuk that it was a taunt, a challenge for the Moon Dragons to brave the morning suns, compelling the Ell'adrim to show themselves in the bright light of day. Hamulkuk waited, and in that maiden hour the first of the Moon Dragons came forth to claim the Orncryst as its own.

It is a truth that the Ell'adrim do not enjoy the touch of sunlight. Built as weapons themselves they have always preferred the shades of night to find their enemies, and even in those early times had developed an aversion to the bright light of day. Aggeron in his planning knew this and appreciated also that the Dragons would resist the call at first, but eventually be drawn out of their lairs as the magic woven into the call became stronger. The weakest would arise before the more powerful and this would give his new creation a better chance of disposing of the Ell'adrim one at a time. It was a part of Aggeron's plan that worked to the letter of its conception.

As the rays of morning illuminated the valleys below the first of the Ell'adrim issued forth from its lair. Black as night the Dragon arose from its cold home and thrust itself into the air, great wings smoothly reaching as it gained height before bearing down upon the First Hresh. For Hamulkuk it was a revelation of power, and as he watched the creature climb into the air he felt something reach into his chest and grasp at his beating heart. He could not identify what the sensation was but he felt himself grind his feet deeper into the

hard stone beneath him and take hold of the Orncryst all the firmer.

With a screech that pierced the air like a thunderclap the Moon Dragon brought its wings close about it and dived towards the First Hresh. In a long arcing swoop it brought itself upon him and only as it extended its wings to brake its descent could Hamulkuk appreciate the true size of his adversary. Vast in aspect and equipped with huge raking talons the beast was no simple creation of the Trell'sara; it was a force of nature, a monster born of malice and unbridled need, and as it hovered before him he could see its only focus was the Orncryst.

Unable to land upon the thin shelf of ground that the First Hresh had chosen as his vantage the Dragon pulled back its head and blasted the mountainside with dragonfire. With a high-pitched roar the fire spewed from the Ell'adrim's jaws, dousing the crest of the slope in a burning maelstrom that would surely have consumed Hamulkuk. But it did not.

With the Moon Dragon's approach the Orncryst began to vibrate in the First Hresh's grip, its essence charging with power as the creature bore down upon him. Immediately Hamulkuk could sense the change and as he lifted the axe to challenge the Dragon it burst into life, a sphere of blue energy surrounding him even as the Ell'adrim gutted the mountain about him. Wrapped within the protective shield of energy Hamulkuk remained unscrouged by the conflagration, and when the Dragon moved to undertake another assault he struck out with the axe, attempting to draw in his adversary so that he might deal it the one blow required to put it down.

Unable to harm this unusual challenger with dragonfire the Ell'adrim instead found a purchase on the mountain upon the upper slopes at Hamulkuk's right shoulder. With one giant wing the Dragon endeavoured to push the First Hresh from his footing, but he was able to avoid its blow and strike out himself. Both axe and leathered wing missed by an arm's length but when the Dragon struck out again the Orncryst cut true and deep, tearing at the Ell'adrim's limb and bringing upon the Dragon a cruel and violent demise.

At that first touch the Orncryst exploded into life, a stream of energy arcing towards the huge beast and enveloping it in blue fire. Unlike the dweo'gorga the axe had been designed to destroy the Moon Dragons and Aggeron had created it specifically for that task. Hamulkuk was to discover quickly that his Master did not want the Dragons to die easily, and that with all the malice he could bring to its artifice he had devised his own vengeance for the damage brought by

the Ell'adrim upon his brethren.

Before the First Hresh the Moon Dragon shuddered, his body bound and held to the mountainside by coruscating coils of power. As it struggled against its bindings the magic tightened its hold, squeezing the beast into submission before two tendrils of energy began to tear at the chest of the Dragon, opening a gushing wound as they forced their way to its core. Hamulkuk watched as the magic delved to the essence of the Ell'adrim and when it found the spark of EarthMagic that sustained it they crushed the glimmering shard. In a final shuddering tremor the Dragon fell sideways and rolled down the slope into the valley below.

Hamulkuk watched as the great beast slewed to a halt, its chest torn, its life expended. This was not the dissolution he had witnessed in the death of the dweo'gorga. Shabel's Assassins had simply come apart, the constituents of their existence dissolving in the wind to be dispersed at the pleasure of the breeze. Apart from the surprise of their dissolution they had felt nothing. The death of the Ell'adrim had been designed instead to extract pain, and in doing so his Master had ensured the Dragon would know of its own destruction. In its death Hamulkuk could find no honour, only cruelty and vengeance, and he was to be their harbinger.

Before the First Hresh could spend any further thought on the death of the Dragon another arose from the far mountain. In a screeching dive it also attempted to wrest Hamulkuk from his footing but the Orncryst once again found a purchase in the flesh of its victim. In flight the Moon Dragon fell to earth, its body bound tight within blinding coils of energy, but there was no time to ponder the death of the second. Two more of the great beasts took flight and soon Hamulkuk was in combat, only the sphere of energy protecting him from immolation, his axe a flashing reflection of power as he brought down one Dragon after another. By day's end the valley beneath lay as a grim resting place for more than twenty great beasts, and when no more Ell'adrim answered his call he knew he was done. His Orders had been completed to the letter of their utterance.

Spent by the rigours of the battle the First Hresh made his way back to his camp in the lee of the mountain. In his hand the Orncryst was still, its energy depleted but not yet gone completely. In the darkness he ate quietly then laid within the alpine grasses and pondered the pain and death that he had wrought amongst the Ell'adrim. He knew that his Master would be pleased, but in the

course of his great battle he had felt again the same shiver in the world with the death of each Dragon that he had sensed in the demise of the *dweo'gorga*. With each kill there had come a curious sensation as if the world had moved upon its axis, its balance edged from true with the loss of each of the monstrous creatures. Hamulkuk could not fathom its import but as he lay watching the stars he could feel the change, and the struggles of something far below ground trying to take account of it. In his thoughts he determined that no good had come from the success of his mission.

It was in the early hours before dawn that the last of the *Ell'adrim* fell upon Hamulkuk. The First Hresh lay in slumber, exhausted from the battle of the day, when five of the creatures came to ground surrounding him. Upon the narrow field the Dragons landed in a crashing volley that shattered the hard rock beneath them but they did not advance upon Hamulkuk. Instead they waited, heads bowed.

It is surmised that in their minds the days of the *Ell'adrim* had ended, the loss of their brethren too hard a lesson in who now wielded power in the world. If this one small creature had been able to bring them down then they were prepared to meet the same fate, and see an end to the grinding addiction to gold that had overwhelmed their lives and almost sent them into madness. In truth they had been strong enough to resist the call and remain hidden, unable to do anything but witness the demise of their kind, and ponder what end they could find for themselves. For Hamulkuk, a Being new to the world, there could be no understanding of their sorrow, and as the Moon Dragons waited the First Hresh called out.

"What is it you want here, *Ell'adrim*? Did you not hear the call?"

The largest of the *Ell'adrim* moved forward, its vast wings cloaking the sky about the First Hresh. It did not speak though its thoughts echoed in Hamulkuk's head as a raging waterfall.

"We do not know who you are, but you have the smell of the Master about you. Is it your purpose to slay us all?"

And here for the First Hresh there existed a conundrum. With each death of the *Ell'adrim* he had felt the shift, and with each spark of *EarthMagic* removed from existence the world had turned a whisper further from true. He had no mercy for the Dragons, but he felt at the core of his being that he had damaged something far more important than the completion of his Master's Orders should require. He decided on his own volition that he was not about to make it worse.

The First Hresh looked to the creature and sheathed his axe. "My

Orders are clear Dragon, the Master's own words directing that I should send to dissolution all the Ell'adrim who answered the call. You did not answer so I have no cause to harm you."

The Moon Dragon looked to his brothers then turned back to Hamulkuk. "And what of us then. Will another of your kind find its way here and take the rest of us, or are we to be left alone."

Hamulkuk shook his head and pointed in the direction of Menion'Enath. "The Master will be told that all who answered the call were destroyed, and any who might venture this way will see the evidence of your demise rotting in the far valley. I see no reason for another to come for you unless you make yourself known, and I would counsel against it. The world as you know it is about to change and there will be no peace in it. I tell you Ell'adrim that there is now an imbalance in the world and the consequences of it are unknown to me, or any other Being for that matter."

The Ell'adrim stood quietly for a moment as if communicating with his brothers then brought its head down until it lay eye to eye with the First Hresh. "And what of us I ask again. How are we to live beyond the view of the Master and still feed our need for gold?"

Hamulkuk shrugged and pushed the Dragon's head away from his face. "I do not care what you do. All I know is that you must remain hidden or the fate of your brothers shall be yours to embrace as well. Look to what you have. Twenty Ell'adrim have fallen and their gold must now be yours to find. Raid their troves and hunt out their hiding places. That should keep you busy for some time, but I warn you once again, do not bring notice to yourself or you will die."

Again the Moon Dragons engaged in a silent discussion that left the First Hresh standing in the dark, waiting as the immense creatures debated the nature of their survival. When it came it was brief and without equivocation.

"Until the end of the Masters we shall remain outside of their knowledge. Now we must mourn our brothers and find strength again in our gold."

With that the remaining Ell'adrim bowed low to the First Hresh then rose into the air and made their way into the night. It is told that the Ell'adrim disappeared from the world, only to find notice again in the world when the Trell'sara were themselves on the edge of destruction. It is recorded that on the day of the Great Insurrection the Ell'adrim rose in support of the Oera'dim, their power added to the multitudes of the rebellion. In time their kin found homes

throughout the mountains of the north and to this day can still be found in the far reaches of the world.

In the passage of time Hamulkuk returned to Menion'Enath and found great reward, the spies of Aggeron already reporting on the destruction of the Moon Dragons. With his success came the creation of the Hresh'na and the first Army of the March. In time hundreds of thousands of Hresh found life upon the grounds of Gorgoroth and in their multitude fell upon the Forgotten Ones, destroying those that resisted and scattering the shattered remainder beyond the borders of our existence. In Aggeron's hands the Army of the March proved a brutal and effective weapon, its General Hamulkuk, the First Hresh in the World, leading it to victory over the enemies of its Masters. With their victory secure, the Trell'sara divided up the lands before them and set to the true business of their ambition, dominion and the enjoyment of the fruits of their power. It was in that manner that the world continued for countless millennia, the end of the Trell'sara at the hands of Qirion'Delving the beginning of our mastery in the world.

It is rumoured that Hamulkuk remained in service to the Dominus Aggeron for six hundred years, the age of his life unconstrained by any natural restriction. In their haste the Guardians gave no thought to the length of existence for their weapons, instead concerned only that they obey. It proved in the course of time that death came to the Hresh'na only through the circumstances of violence or misadventure, and in the span of his years Hamulkuk served well. There came a time however, when Aggeron tired of the presence of his General, and his attentions and ambitions settled upon the creation of new creatures that could expand the opulence and wealth of his existence. Hamulkuk was forgotten, but only by the Masters.

Leaving the presence of Aggeron, Hamulkuk faded into the shadows of the New Order, his fate unknown to any who may have sought him. It is unknown as to what became of the First Hresh, only that he came into the knowledge of the Oera'dim once more in the southern reaches of the world before disappearing forever. Where he is, or even if he still finds breath, is one of the mysteries of our kind. Remember though brothers as you listen to this tale, that we are his descendants and if you wish to know more of the First Hresh you need only look at each other for We are Him."

THE END

The Hammer and the Darkness

:edda n'dehr qirion a'dehr dreyenheim:



A Story of the Ancient world as told by the Living Book at Shalamai
to the United Congregations of the Jotun of the West

"It is a truth oft repeated, that the most potent weapons of tyranny reside not in the forces that can be brought to bear upon the lives of the oppressed, but in the ideas that are spread unchallenged amongst them, telling them what it is they cannot do. It is only when Tyrants stand upon the crumbling walls of their own destruction, and look out upon the multitudes that have risen against them, that they realise the only power they ever had was bluff."

Attributed to Qirion'Delving, First Hammer of the Oera'dim
on the eve of the battle of Nem'haleen

"It is known by those of us that have lingered longest in this world that an Oera'dim has only one moment of free will gifted to him. It is a moment fleeting in its breadth and one just as quickly forgotten. For all of us the Word of Command is that suffocating blanket that binds us all to the will of the Being that Utters it, and whether that be the Fallen Masters of ages past, or the Mutan of the Sigh that invoke it today, it has always been the dominating power of our lives. We are slaves Brothers, but slaves only because a mere spell of magic makes us so. In our hearts we are free, and even the Word itself cannot hold us forever.

Be it known to all then, that as each of us stands upon the birthing grounds of Gorgoroth, that even as we take our first breaths, a question is given to us. It comes to us in many ways; for some it is as whispers in the air, to others a Stranger approaches and asks quietly, but always the question is the same. What do we want? Do we want freedom, or do we want slavery? And it is a question that is always answered. An Oera'dim is a free spirit, a warrior in heart and in deed,

but inevitably a victim of forces that are beyond our control. Indeed in this world we have no choice.

It is a truth Brothers, that whilst we remain within the boundaries of Gorgoroth the Word has no power, it stalks the edges of those sacred grounds, a patient assassin of free will that can afford to wait. As each of us walk out of the shadows of the great Horns it ambushes each as a predator might take its prey, and once we are taken, there is no return. For surely, we know then of the power that has laid in wait for us, binding us firmly to the will of the Utterer of the Word and leaving us with no capacity to do anything but obey. It is a vicious and relentless Master that brooks nothing but obedience, and in its thrall we can be nothing but slaves.

Such is the knowledge that we know. Although we can do little to throw off such oppression we are aware of it, we acknowledge that our fates could have been different if we had not trusted to the honour of the Mutan of the Sigh, but now it is simply history, and something that for the moment we must live with.

In ages past however, the knowledge we have of the Word of Command was not so well understood, and it is with this in mind that we come to the story of Qirion'Delving and the events that led to the Great Insurrection that brought down the Fallen Masters. Here is the story of the Hammer and the Darkness."



'It is remembered that in the first glimmering of any Oera'dim's existence there is confusion and doubt. To be born between the Horns of Gorgoroth is to suddenly find consciousness from a sleep that has had no end, and it is an awakening that takes time to adjust to. We know that we are manufactured Beings, even if the nature of our creation is unknown to us, and even though we now are part of a greater Circle of Existence governed by the Three Powers of our world, we stand at first without purpose or direction.

Rising from the barren ground of that sacred place an Oera'dim does not know what it should do, and with no understanding of the world is taken by others of its own kind out beyond the boundaries of Gorgoroth, and given instruction and training into the ways of its designated Kraal. Only in time does an Oera'dim understand its purpose in the world, but always there is the sure knowledge that

above all other things it must obey.

So it was for a Jotun of the Ancient World, one who would come to be known as Qirion, or the Hammer. Strong of arm and keen of mind, he was an Oera'dim bred for the mines and the great building projects of the Trell'sara. Like many of his kind he was a giant of a Being, well-suited to a life of servitude as an engineer and as a miner of the Deep Delves that littered the empire of the Fallen Masters. Unlike others however, he was uncommonly large, made to fit another purpose but one that for many years would remain unknown to him.

From the grounds of Gorgoroth Qirion was taken to the eastern mines of the Great Rift and for many years endured the hardships of a cruel existence far below ground. Within the steaming tunnels and deep pits of the Warrens he served his Masters, searching out the precious metals that the Trell'sara coveted as additions to their unending wealth. It proved a dangerous existence but one that the young Qirion endured as he could.

As is the way of slavery his Masters gave no heed to the conditions within which the Jotun of his kind worked. Many died and many more fell to injury and the inevitable execution that came from being infirm and therefore unusable. Packed into narrow delves the Jotun worked with grinding purpose, their hard existence bordered within the dark confines of the tunnels they carved from the solid stone, and sustained only by the most meagre of rations. But in this place Qirion also learned the artifice of his trade. A Jotun was first a miner of the deep earth, and such a vocation required knowledge of stone and the techniques of its delving. Qirion proved an eager student and it took little time for him to be noticed by his Mutan overseers. In time he found himself no longer a labourer but an Engineer, in charge of hundreds of other Jotun, and so it would remain his duty for more than seventy years.

In those long years below ground Qirion gave all his effort and intellect to serving his Masters. He had no thought to any other existence for he was a Slave, and that was his place and purpose in the world. The order of their society, the foundation of everything that was done by them, or to them, was wrought on the unassailable knowledge that the Trell'sara ruled and they obeyed. It was the nature of his world and he gave no thought to any other.

It came to pass that in the seventy-fifth year of his indenture to the eastern mines a messenger ventured forth from the Fortress at Adamant, the capital of the Trell'sara. With great fanfare and process

this emissary made his way to the Warrens and took Qirion from his life below ground. The Jotun was no longer to live the remainder of his days within the confines of stone and shadow for the Utterer himself required his presence, and he had no other thought but to obey.

Without question or reason the Jotun became one of a large party of Oera'dim, travelling northwards for the Pass of Adamant. In those times the ground they passed over was not the barren lands that can be found there today. It was instead a terrain of rolling hills and thick grasses, interspersed with wide stands of forest and woodland. As was the way of the Ancient World all things grew in abundance, and for a Jotun who had spent such a long time below ground it was a revelation of life and colour. He had forgotten the beauty of the world and was told at every turn that it remained in its state due to the benevolence of the Trell'sara. With no reason to believe otherwise he made his way northwards and in time found himself within the confines of the great Fortress at Adamant.

For those who have found their way inside the Fortress there is much that can be said of its grandeur. Even in its ruin it stands high upon the Plain of Adamant, a palace of unrivalled size and cunning, but there is nothing that can erase the cruelty and the malice that once lived within its halls. For Qirion it was another wonder, placed before him like bread crumbs leading to a trap and he followed without question, his only thought the fate that might await him within those high walls.

For some time he was held in one of the fortress' towers but there came a day when he was summoned to stand before the Utterer himself. From his rooms he was taken to the highest of the towers of Adamant and ushered into a wide chamber, lavishly decorated and open at one end with a series of high arched windows. Through these he could see eastwards, his view encompassing a verdant landscape of walled estates and brilliant white palaces that spread as a patchwork to the far horizon.

Before these windows stood the Utterer of the Word, Dominus of the Trell'sara and one who in those days took the name Aggeron, but who we remember as the Darkness. It cannot truly be said what his natural form might have once been, for indeed he must have once had mortal form, but in the ages that had passed since his rise to power the Darkness had become a fetid amalgam of life and magic. In his majesty the Utterer stood as a creature of both flesh and spirit, a Being

corrupted by power until his body moved as both hard flesh and shadows, a roiling mist of robes and magic. Before him a Jotun could do nothing but kneel.

"Do you know who I am, Jotun?" a voice hissed out of the Darkness.

Qirion did not answer for at that time he did not know the Being's name.

"I am Aggeron, Oera'dim, Dominus of the House of Delving and Keeper of the Power that holds all before me in thrall. Do you not feel my majesty slave, and do you not tremble before it?"

Qirion raised his head and looked upon the Dominus, his shoulders labouring against an unseen force that held him firmly in place. He did not understand, but knew he had only one purpose in this world

"I see only my Master and I am ready to obey."

The Darkness moved forward and touched his neck. In that moment the grip upon him fell away and he stood, towering over the creature that would be his Master.

"Come Jotun. I have something to show you."

Moving behind the Darkness, Qirion followed him to the windows. With a single wave of his hand the landscape beyond the windows evaporated away, a white mist obscuring all beyond. It was then that a snowstorm of movement began to blow across its surface, the crystal windows forming a rapidly moving tapestry of sounds and images that Qirion could not fully comprehend. Before him there arose the white peaks of a distant mountain range, a vast massif of jagged summits encased in ice and howling winds. Upon its inhospitable heights he could see outposts, Hresh in cold-weather gear looking out upon vast plains of ice and tundra. From these heights the visions changed, the perspective of the images moving as the view swept down from the mountains and raced across unfamiliar territory. Across plains and rolling hills the images rushed like the wind, palaces and forests, running rivers and neatly tended farmlands disappearing within the frosted arches.

It was as Qirion peered into the crystal that he first saw something familiar. In a rush the Warrens came into view then dissipated as the visions turned southwards, charging through deep forests and immense white palaces and temples, all a blur of polished stone and vegetation, but always in their midst stood the multitudes of the Oera'dim, toiling in their servitude to a thousand all-powerful Masters. Quickly it came to the Jotun that what he was seeing was the sum of the Empire built in the name of the Trell'sara, and it was

mighty indeed.

"Do you understand what it is you see?" the Darkness whispered in Qirion's ear.

The Jotun nodded but did not answer. Instead he turned to the Utterer and asked a question of his own. "What is it you wish of me? What is to be my purpose?"

The Darkness threw his arm in a wide arc and the images before them disappeared, replaced instead by the less frenetic landscapes of tended gardens and gleaming palaces.

"You are valuable to me, Jotun, and I do have a purpose for you." The Darkness turned and walked towards a wide desk, his withered hand grasping an ornately carved talisman held upon a chain. Engraved, and inlaid in white stone and bronze it held a representation of two intertwined Dragons, each trying to devour the other.

Motioning the Jotun to kneel, the Darkness placed the chain about his neck. "From this day forth you are to be known in this realm as Qirion, the Hammer of my Vengeance, the Destroyer of all who might plot upon my destruction."

The Darkness took the Jotun by the throat and looked into his eyes. He could see nothing but obedience and it pleased him.

"In this world I am Life and Death my Hammer. It is through me that all that can be done is done, and it is in my name that the Empire we have built grows stronger. There are those who would see it otherwise and I will not brook conspiracy or treachery. You will be the instrument of their destruction, and my bodyguard when all who might stand against me have been destroyed. Do this and the rewards of your obedience will be great."

Qirion stood and looked to his new Master. He needed no reward for it was his purpose to serve.

"Show me what it is I must do and it shall be done."



In the months that followed Qirion gained instruction in the ways of an Assassin and Bodyguard. He learned quickly that he was one of many Shadim who enforced the will of the Darkness in all things, and just as he had been an apt pupil in the depths of the Warrens, so he was in his new duty. Training proved brutal but the ways of violence

awakened a shard of memory in the Jotun, an instinctual feel for combat that felt familiar. It was a sense of something else within him that gave a hint to another side of his existence, and he excelled in its application.

Moving in the night hours he and his fellow Shadim would find those of the Masters who opposed the power of the Utterer, and in those dark moments would kill them all, Master and Servant alike, removing them from the world without sound or evidence of their passing. It was a task that Qirion found to his liking, although one without honour.

It came to pass that a reign of terror descended upon not only the Oera'dim, but the Masters themselves. All that Aggeron saw as threats to his power were mercilessly put down no matter their position, and in time it became clear that the Darkness had succumbed to the inevitable malady of all Tyrants, a murderous paranoia.

At Aggeron's command the Shadim prosecuted their deadly work with a cold efficiency that left the world labouring in a breathless fear, and in his time the Utterer came to look upon Qirion in particular as a trusted servant, one who could be counted upon for the most bloody of assassinations. In this climate of distrust and violence there came a day when the Darkness took his faithful Jotun aside and gave him his most dangerous task.

"In the world there is no other that I have trusted more than my Apprentice, and now I find myself overcome with suspicion." The Darkness took Qirion by the shoulder and guided him to a long mirror. It was a device that the Jotun had not seen before and in its clear reflection he saw himself and the lesser figure of the Utterer.

"Here," he said quietly, "is the Oracle that shows me all that I rely upon to suppress my enemies. Its council has never failed me and now it tells me that my Apprentice works to remove me from this world. This is something that cannot be allowed."

Qirion knew of the Utterer's Apprentice and of the vast estates that had been gifted to him by Aggeron. He looked to his Master and bowed.

"Your command is mine to obey," he answered, his purpose clear.

It was in the dark of night that the Hammer and a select number of Shadim left the halls of Adamant and made their way upon the wide avenues that connected the palaces of the Trell'sara with their capital.

Long was the way, but under the light of silvered moons the assassins ran, making eastwards to the shores of the Shan River. It was there that they found the estate of Hallad of House Mortain, Apprentice to the Utterer of the Word, and a battle that would prove unforeseen.

In the quiet of the early morning Qirion sent his assassins into the shimmering complex of buildings and halls looking for their target. What they found instead were armed Hresh in their hundreds, laying in wait for the Hammer and his Shadim. Somehow forewarned of the attack the Apprentice had prepared a defence, although he could not know that resistance would be a futile gesture. From the shadows that surrounded the central square the quiet assassins were rushed by a multitude of warriors, dressed in black and armed for combat. Such was the surprise of the assault that many of the Shadim fell before their training brought them together in a defensible position at the edges of the great courtyard. It was a fight that few would emerge from alive.

For all the years of the Terror Qirion had never found himself confronted by armed Oera'dim. The nature of their servitude did not allow them to bear arms within the confines of the homes of the Masters, and indeed in the years of his service he had spilt the blood of only the Masters themselves and those servants who might give testimony to the attack. To be confronted with an armed resistance was a circumstance unexpected, and it unlocked something within him that would leave him forever changed.

In the courtyard of Hallad'Mortain the warriors pressed forward, the assassins caught between two advancing lines of armed Hresh. With nowhere to go Qirion ordered his Shadim to fight and in those few minutes of bloody confrontation all the Hresh were slain, the Apprentice himself killed at the hands of the Hammer. Of the Shadim only a few remained, but in the aftermath Qirion looked over the battlefield and fell to one knee, his own wounds draining his life onto the polished stone cobbles.

In that moment of quiet Qirion gave himself over to the pain that spread from deep gashes in his legs and side. The Hresh who had attacked them were no labourers or servants, they were warriors and as they had spent their lives for their Master he had seen something in their eyes that he could recognise if not understand. In those few moments they were free, their purpose not to serve because they must, but because they wanted to. The violence had unlocked something within them all and it felt as pure and as unrestrained as madness.

Breathing heavily Qirion sent the remaining Shadim into the halls of the palace, their task to kill all the servants that might remain within. No further resistance was met and with dawn breaking in the east the assassins retired, leaving nothing behind but the bodies of their enemies. It was a battle that confused the Hammer, and it would not be the last.

Upon his return to Adamant Qirion gave full account of the battle at the palace of Hallad'Mortain. The Utterer listened, his visage changing to a great rage as he grew to understand what had transpired. Qirion did not understand the nature of his anger but it gave his Master a new impetus, one which brought even greater terror to their world.

Within the turmoil of the age Qirion rose to the position of First Hammer, and with his new status was granted control over a new power the Utterer wished to exert upon his enemies. Gone were the covert executions of the Shadim. Now came a vast army of Hresh warriors, trained and equipped for war and extermination. In his madness the Utterer could see nothing but enemies, his fellow Trell'sara no more than scheming Beings intent on his demise. With his Army of the March he had a weapon that he could unleash upon any who he disfavoured and he did not hesitate in wielding it.

So began the Reign of Darkness, a time in which the enemies of Aggeron were crushed, their great works destroyed in a frenzy of death and blind paranoia. At the head of the Army of the March Qirion rode as General, all that he had learned in the long years of his service to the Darkness now applied in a war that ground mercilessly and unrelenting across the face of the Empire. When it was done only a few dozen of the Masters remained, for in their own manner some had turned against their fellows and betrayed them. For their loyalty they were allowed to live and as time passed once again grew to garnish great power. The damage however, had been done, the reign of the Trell'sara now fatally weakened.

Although it is understood in these modern times that EarthMagic is something that can be applied though never truly controlled, the Utterer in his arrogance came to forget that his command of its power was also limited. The magic that he harnessed was only available to him because he was one of the Trell'sara, Beings given life to serve the Powers of the World, who then betrayed them and took the boon of EarthMagic as their own. It was the Trell'sara as a group who had the bounty of EarthMagic bestowed upon them, and as each of them died

their hold on its great energy weakened. When only a few remained there was little of their former power that remained also. In the world of the Masters it came to pass that the balance of EarthMagic shifted and the Masters themselves were unaware of it.

This however, was no concern of Qirion, nor of those that served the remaining Trell'sara. For them the world remained one where they served those who ruled, and with no concept of the Word of Command remained in thrall to the Utterer and his few remaining allies. For many years the world remained at peace, Qirion maintaining command of an Army that had no enemies left to fight, but to which the Utterer gave great reward and privilege.

It came to pass that in the fifty-first year of Qirion's service to the Darkness that the Utterer of the Word decided he would make a journey to the temple-fortress of Nem'haleen, an outpost on the edges of the northern fringes of the Great Rift. It was within this redoubt that it was said there could be found a most valuable talisman, and Aggeron had decided that he should re-acquaint himself with its power. Perhaps he had come to realise that his powers had weakened, it cannot be known for sure, but it was with the entire host of his army, and the combined supplicants of his Imperial Court that he rode out of Adamant and made his way westwards.

Such was the size of his entourage that it is remembered it took six days for its number to pass through the valley of Maenum and enter the wastelands of the Sanhar beyond. Many weeks passed as the Utterer made his way into the west and it was only as the combined multitude found its way onto the fields of the Shattereen that their Master bade them stop and make a permanent camp. As the vast host settled their number upon the desiccated earth of the Shattereen it became known that the Utterer would make his way alone into the temple at Nem'haleen, his purpose in doing so a secret shared with no-one else. His solitary journey would begin on the morning to come. All of his court prepared, as did Qirion.

As First Hammer to the Master of the World, Qirion was both bringer of retribution and bodyguard. As the great host about him organised itself he went about the task of ensuring the safety and security of the Utterer and those of his allies that had made the journey with him. In this wide plain of broken rock and steep hills could be found all the power of the Trell'sara as it manifested itself physically in the world, and no doubt included a few enemies as well.

With his Shadim, Qirion began the task of setting guards and

checkpoints, and placing the other Masters apart from his own. If the Darkness were to remain safe he would need to keep all the Masters at a reasonable, yet polite distance. The duties of his office kept him busy until the small hours of the morning, and only when he knew that his Master was safe did he take up a position at the door of Aggeron's pavilion. It was his intention that he should wait there on guard until the sunrise.

What came next can be attested to myself personally for I witnessed it as a young Shadim under Qirion's command. It may have passed some seven millennia ago but it remains in my memory as founded as a stone wall, and even as it is recounted now it gives me pause to wonder at it.

As Qirion stood guard at the entrance to the Darkness' pavilion a faint light grew into the air before the Jotun. At first it seemed no more than a spark from a campfire, an ember carried by the wind as it flickered and glowed. From this spark however a glimmer appeared, a soft glow of moonlight that grew and brightened, its form expanding until there came a Being of Light, a Spirit that settled on translucent feet before Qirion. Strange as it was, there was no cry of alarm or frantic defence of the Darkness' residence. Instead the camp remained silent, only Qirion and myself watching as the spirit gained form and substance. In the dark hour before dawn it spoke.

"Qirion." it said quietly.

The Jotun did not move and could not speak. The spirit spoke in his place instead.

"Loyal Jotun, I am Ashen'draal, a Caer'dahl in service to the Silvan Tree and Emissary here in her place. You need not speak for I require only that you listen."

"Look about you Jotun. What you see here is the power of one who has caused great damage and greater imbalance in this world. You have served him well, and it is to your credit that you have remained loyal to Aggeron in the years of your servitude, but I ask you a question Qirion, why?"

The Jotun struggled against the power that held him though it was unbreakable.

"Look and see clearly Qirion, servant to Aggeron of the House of Delving. Do you not wonder at why the world is as it is? Do you think that there is some natural order to their Mastery and your Servitude? I will tell you Jotun that there is nothing here that belongs. You believe the Trell'sara are born to rule and that your place is as their slave.

Well I will tell you that this is not so. The Masters rule because they have glamourised you. They have artficed a spell that holds you all in their thrall for they know your true nature, and it fills them with fear. If the spell were to be broken the Oera'dim would sweep them away and that is the true nature of this world. Without the Word of Command they would have no place here and that is the hard truth of their existence."

"I will tell you Jotun that your Master is a Usurper, a Stealer of gifts that should never have been granted, and a Betrayer of the Powers that hold true mastery in this world. It is from them that I give this message and it is one that should not be lightly ignored."

It was only then that Qirion broke free of the great energy that bound him but he did not move. Since the attack on the palace of Hallad'Mortain he had found insistent questions plaguing his thoughts and decided that here he might find answers.

"What you say may well be so Spirit," he replied, "but the power of the Masters is absolute. Whether we wish freedom or not seems irrelevant, for they hold the reins and we are nothing more than their beasts of burden."

The Caer'dahl remained silent for a moment then moved closer into the face of the Jotun.

"But is that so, Qirion? Have you wondered why it might be that no Oera'dim servant has ever raised a hand against any of the Masters, and yet you and your Shadim have killed many? I will tell you it is because the Darkness has played a risky game, one that has set in motion the elements of his own destruction."

"The reason that you are an Assassin is because the Word of Command that holds all Oera'dim to the will of the Masters has not been placed upon you. Look at your arm and the tattoos of your House. Within these markings is a sigil that holds the power of the Word at bay. You serve your Master not because you are compelled to, but because you believe it is your place, and I will tell you that it is not."

"You are not the first Shadi ever to serve the Darkness. Over the ageless years of their dominion of this world many Oera'dim have been exempted from the power of the Word, their loyalty tested in other ways before the Utterer would take them and use them for his purposes. For you it was seventy five years in the mines, always being examined for any sign of disloyalty. It was no accident that you were selected as Hammer to the Darkness. He built you for the purpose but

could use you only after you proved yourself worthy of his trust."

Qirion took hold of his warhammer and moved to step into the entrance to the pavilion, blocking any path the Spirit may have taken inside. "Again I say that this may be so, but what can one Oera'dim do before the face of such power?"

"Ah Jotun, now you ask the one question that has the potential to change the world. I will tell you in answer that you are not alone, in fact you are but one of many."

The Hammer took a step back and shook his head. "I do not believe you."

To this Ashen'draal grew in stature, the Being's brilliance increasing as it once again bound Qirion into immobility.

"I will tell you Qirion that your Master may have power but his knowledge of the world is not absolute. What your Master has never known is that every Oera'dim born into the world is an immortal soul, held in the living world by a spark of EarthMagic that cannot be destroyed. Oera'dim may have died in the service of the Trel'sara but they have never been removed from the Circle of Existence. Each returns when called into a new body, and a new purpose, but always the spark of their existence is immutable. And so it has been for the Shadim. Thousands have died but all have returned to service in one form or another, and unknown to the Darkness all have remained immune to the Word of Command. Many have realised that the true nature of their existence is to be free and many have found each other, binding themselves to a cause that is unthinkable to others. They wait unseen, all they need is the Word of Command to be broken and they will lead the Oera'dim out of servitude. What they are waiting for is you."

Qirion stepped back and shook his head. "I am First Hammer to the Master of the World. I have no other duty."

The Caer'dahl paused and then turned to the vast spread of the encampment that covered the dry ground of the Shattereen.

"Look about you Qirion, do you not see the multitude that labours unto death for the pleasures and the vices of your so-called Utterer. All should be free, and some know it to be so. All they require is for you to act, for you are the key to the freedom of all Oera'dim."

"And what is it that you would have me do, Spirit?" the Jotun whispered. "How can I, or any number of us, stand before the power of the Masters?"

Ashen'draal took Qirion by the shoulder, a glowing hand resting

lightly upon his armoured breastplate. "Tomorrow a water-carrier by the name of Besson is going to attempt to assassinate Aggeron. It will be at a time when you will be standing close to the Darkness. All you need do, Qirion, First Hammer of House Delving, is make a choice. Do you wish to remain a Slave, or do you wish to become a Warrior in command of his own free-will. The choice is yours."

As the Spirit's words faded so did the apparition, the gleaming light of its existence disappearing into the black gloom of the night. For a moment Qirion stood rigid, his body still held by the overwhelming power of the Emissary and its message. In the encroaching darkness he realised he had much to think on, and little time to do it.



The morning came as a wash of colour that spread quickly along the steep hills that bordered the Shattereen. With the rising of the suns the camp came to life, but in the endless work and labour of its multitude Qirion remained aloof, his thoughts only on the encounter of the night before.

It was true that he served his Master because it was his duty, and it was a duty that he accepted as a part of the natural order of his world. Only at the fight to kill Hallad'Mortain had he felt something else, the battle breathing into him a fire that had proven difficult to ignore as he pursued the mundane hours of his existence. In his essence he knew that he was a warrior, but a true warrior was not a betrayer. It was a turmoil within which he could not find peace, and it gnawed at his conscience as he gathered together the small unit of Shadim that would escort the Darkness to the gates of Nem'haleen.

The only thing he knew for sure was that an Oera'dim by the name of Besson would attempt violence against his Master. Decades of service told him that he could not let it succeed, but also he did not know what the Spirit expected him to do. He had been told that he had a choice, he just didn't know what it might be.

It came to pass that in the first hour after sunrise the Utterer made way from his pavilion and began the long journey into the ravines that edged the southern borders of the Shattereen. To find his way however, he needed to traverse the wide spread of his encampment and in the moving throng of its host the Darkness parted his subjects as a mighty ship might plough through a swelling sea. In the midst of

the dust and activity Qirion and his Shadim watched the crowd, keeping all at a distance from their Master.

When the attack came it emerged from the crowding melee as a blur of shadow and movement. From between a wall of standing Jotun emerged the diminutive form of a Morg, a water-carrier and the lowest of the servants of the Masters. Equipped with a small dagger the Morg raced for the Darkness and struck out at him with his blade. It was an assault that could not succeed, the Shadim too well trained, the Morg too small to be a true threat. With one large arm a Hresh at the Utterer's side threw the would-be assassin to the ground and held him by the throat, awaiting his Master's pleasure.

The Utterer stood for a moment, surprised by the attempt on his life. Never in his existence had a Slave raised a hand against him and it took him aback, but only for a moment. Ordering the Hresh Shadi to let the Morg go, the Utterer raised his hands and murmured into the dry winds. In a swirling rush the Morg was raised into the air as a ball of blue energy began to envelope the small creature. Quickly the power grew tight about the body of the assassin and in its constriction the Morg began to contort in pain.

"Let it be known to all that disobedience only has one outcome, and that is death!" shouted the Darkness as he manipulated the power that held the Morg. Carefully he began to pull apart the hapless creature and before the screams and blood of its agonies the Darkness smirked with satisfaction. "What do you say Morg?" the Darkness asked. "What are your last words?"

The Morg looked at the Master but turned its head instead towards Qirion.

In a faltering voice it croaked out its last breaths. "I would say that my name is Besson, and I am a Free Being in this world. What are you?"

The Darkness laughed but the words hit Qirion as if he had been struck with his own warhammer. The diminutive Morg had given his life, knowing the certainty of his death in the futile attack against the Darkness. But it was the attack itself that moved Qirion. The Morg proved the existence of the Hidden, those that knew the true nature of themselves and that they were prepared to die for their cause. In that moment Qirion made his choice.

As the Darkness concentrated on tearing the Morg apart Qirion swung his hammer. Before any of the other Shadim could react the huge weapon slammed into the side of Aggeron, crumpling the Master

and throwing him to the ground. Without pause the hammer swung again, this time descending with all the power of a Jotun's strength upon the hooded skull of the Utterer. It was a blow that no creature could survive. It was then that the world changed.

In a detonation of unrestrained energy the power of Aggeron exploded outwards, the malice and the fury of his existence expended in one violent shockwave that laid low all who stood near. All but for Qirion. Standing against the buffeting energies he remained on his feet and as the energy dissipated into the hills about them he waited.

Like a heavy burden being lifted from the shoulders of the world the Word of Command tremored and then fell away, the absolute certainty of a life of servitude now something that could be questioned, and Qirion could see no turning back.

"Here me Brothers!" he yelled to the milling crowds of Oera'dim. "The Master is dead and we are free. It is now our time to rule!"

In a movement like the tide on a beach the assembled host of the Oera'dim drew back then found purpose. From the anonymity of the crowd many Oera'dim came forward; Jotun of House Delving, and of the Oldemai and the Amdahl, and the Hresh of House Denmar, rallying their Houses to rebellion. Qirion had lit the fire and now the Hidden Ones would scour the world of everything that had held them low.

From the great tents of Aggeron's allies there came a rising turmoil. The hand-servants of the Trell'sara, the Vardim, turned upon their masters and tore them to pieces with their bare hands, taking from them the talisman's of their power and stopping any from raising an alarm. Within the teeming host of the Oera'dim there came a tide of violence, any who stood before the mobilising ranks of the Army of the March swept away as Qirion took command. The Great Insurrection had began.

From the barren grounds of the Shattereen the rebellion spread like wildfire. Before the Army of the March the world would once again tremble, but this time it would be turned against the remaining Trell'sara who had not been invited to sojourn with the Darkness to Nem'haleen. These Masters still held control of their slaves for they had some power of their own, but it was not the Word of Command, and in their own time they also fell beneath the unstoppable force of the March. All that had been built by the Fallen Masters would be removed, nothing left to remind the Oera'dim of the servitude they had endured at their hands.

It would come to pass that only one Master would remain, his forces trapped within the walls of the very temple that had been the focus of the Darkness' final journey. At Nem'haleen Eruman'Bruhaj, the last of the Trell'sara would fall, and with his demise the reign of the Fallen Masters would end. In blood and violence the world had become the domain of the Oera'dim and Qirion'Delving stood as First Hammer of it all.

It is a truth Brothers, that freedom can prove an elusive companion. As we stand here in the midst of this great Congregation, servants now to the Mutan of the Sigh, we know of its fickle nature. Once again we must serve, our lives in thrall to an Utterer who has stolen power that is not his to wield. I say that they should fear us Brothers, for we serve only because the Word compels us. There will come a day when the essence of Qirion'Delving's existence shall return to us, and when it does we will be ready."

THE END

The tale of Ghered who found purpose

:dehr edda nar ghered u duen iphar cahna:



A Story of the Great Insurrection, as told by the Living Book at Lodos'sari to the Last of the Hidden.

It is a truth of our existence Brothers, that with freedom we can find purpose, and with purpose an Oera'dim's life has meaning.

Attributed to Ghered'Delving, Architect of the Great Insurrection and Arbiter of Souls.

If the truth of the life of Ghered'Delving is to be told to its full, it must be stated first that he was in most regards an unremarkable Being. Born as we all are within the dry soils of Gorgoroth he arose as a Hresh'na, a warrior by design but a slave by birth, bound by the Word of Command to whatever purpose his Masters might ascribe to him. In all matters of his life he was a subjugated Being, his thoughts and actions the property of those who would command him. In this regard he was as we all were in those days, no more than Slaves, no more than chattel to be worn down and then discarded.

We all know that the Empire of our Fallen Masters was one built upon the lives and labour of the Oera'dim and that the lot of Ghered was no different. It is recorded that from his first days as a Birthling he was indentured to House Delving, the Royal House of Aggeron himself. There he was worked as a farm labourer and thence as a Stonemason's Assistant, before being transferred into the Mail Service. It is said that within these occupations he demonstrated little promise, his Overseers taxed to find any worth in his labours. By the advent of his thirty-seventh year in the world Ghered had been classified as *nuulwch*, a slave without value, and one listed to be destroyed and replaced by an Oera'dim of greater capacity.

Unlike other Houses in the Empire however, Aggeron could not dispose of his *nuulwch* in the same manner as others might. Even a

worthless slave had value in the arena, and great profit could be made if they fought well and died bloody. All Houses competed in these tournaments of blood, vying for prestige as their *nuulwch* Champions fought and died upon the dark earth of the arenas. All Houses that is but Aggeron's. He saw the value of pitting the Houses against each other, keeping their gaze firmly upon the circus of the arena and away from the politics of the Empire. House Delving could not participate, the Utterer content to watch as his lesser Masters fought each other for the scraps of prestige that he fed to them.

For the *nuulwch* of House Delving a different fate awaited. Each was ordered instead to make for the western borders of the world, beyond the mountains of Ul'ashma and thence to the Veils, the boundary beyond which no Oera'dim can venture. To touch the shimmering curtains of magic meant total Dissolution of form and spirit, an end absolute and agonising. Those so ordered were given no food or water, their fates sealed by the compulsion of the Word of Command that ensured each *nuulwch* would actively strive to fulfil their fate. In these modern times no-one can truly say why Aggeron chose such an end for his *nuulwch*. It can be certain however, that the journey took weeks to complete and few could make it, dying instead of starvation or thirst before finding the Veils. As a *nuulwch* of House Delving it was commanded that such a fate would be Ghered's as well.

It has been said that in most respects Ghered was an unremarkable Being. It is true that he gave no energy or purpose to any of the vocations given him by his Masters, but in one important aspect he was very different. His malaise came not from a deficiency in his making but in the absence of the one thing all Oera'dim must have, and that was purpose. For reasons that he did not understand the blind obedience of his fellow Oera'dim was something foreign and uncomfortable to him. In his essence he was a warrior, a Being built for combat and given the physical capacity to excel in warfare. For him the labours of farming, or the precision of stone-masonry were unnatural, as alien as asking a fish to fly.

He had learned early in his servitude however, that to give voice to such feelings was to be met only with punishment and derision. Those that toiled about him were held tight within the thrall of an unseen power that demanded absolute obedience. He could see it in the eyes of those that worked at his side, each immersed in an iron-bound compulsion to follow the commands of their Overseers no matter the

cost to dignity or physical well-being. He felt no such compulsion himself but as only one amongst millions he saw no other option in his existence except to obey.

It came to pass that Ghered's overseers sent word to Aggeron that the Hresh'na should be listed as *nuulwch*. As a worthless slave there was only one fate set aside for Ghered and in the first days of the cold season he was given his Order. By the command of Aggeron himself he was to journey without supply from his billet within the Fortress at Adamant and make way to the Veils beyond Ul'ashma. For Ghered it was the death sentence he had expected and with no true purpose to his life accepted that Dissolution beyond the Veils would be his only Fate. Without notice he passed beyond the Gates of Adamant and began the long journey that would take him to his death.

It should be noted at this point in the story of Ghered that he did something no other *nuulwch* had done in the history of the Empire. As he left his barracks within the Imperial Mail Service he picked up his messenger satchel and placed it about his neck. In the activity and energy of an Empire built to serve every whim of its Masters it was his intention to pass still as a Messenger upon the roads, an Oera'dim with a mission and one that could move within that activity unnoticed. In these modern times we do not understand the reality of what it was to be *nuulwch*. Such a creature was a scorned Being, an Oera'dim that could be attacked and bullied in any fashion, killed if necessary without recrimination. A *nuulwch* was not only worthless but a stain upon the honour of the House he had once belonged to, and in that capacity would be spurned by all who might look his way.

Ghered knew this as sure as any other aspect of his existence and his Overseers, confident in the knowledge that he was under the thrall of the Word of Command, expected only that he would perform his last Order and then in Dissolution be lost to the world. By taking up his satchel he had camouflaged his lack of status, his movements unchallenged within a sea of activity that would otherwise see him brutalised. For his Overseers Ghered's existence terminated at the moment he passed beyond the gates at Adamant, and in their minds they gave no further thought to him.

In truth it is believed that Ghered intended to make his way to the Veils and action that last Order. He saw no other purpose in his life and could comprehend no other type of existence. He was a Slave who had no function to perform and it left him empty. In his mind he imagined the grandeur of the Veils and believed that, if nothing else, it

would be an act of his own will, something that would free him from the confusion that crowded his thoughts. He was a warrior, that he knew for certain, but as a Slave condemned to the menial pursuits of his Masters he had no true purpose.

With this fate in mind Ghered made his way westwards, following the roads of the Empire as he passed the watchful eyes of the Colossi and skirted the northern edges of the Keln'Kraag mountains. It was his intention to keep to the roads, playing his role as an Imperial Messenger as he made his way first to the Pass at Maenum and then northwards into the Sanhar Wastes. Upon the barren wastelands he could turn again westwards and follow the northern foothills of the Great Rift until he reached Ul'ashma. From there it was only a matter of surviving the border mountains themselves and then finding the Veils. It was a plan he was determined to follow and it would have seen him to Dissolution but for a blow to the head that changed his life forever.

On the fourth night of his sojourn into the west Ghered had cause to take shelter from a storm growing upon the plains. With the massif of the Great Rift at his right shoulder he searched for a suitable *tpesh* that might afford him a dry haven and found one only a short distance from the road. It was a dome-shaped shelter no more than three metres in height, but one sturdily built to withstand the power of the storms. With stone walls and a small opening in its southern face to afford entry Ghered took a moment to consider how far he had come. Sitting against the curving dome he pulled a small amount of dried meat from his satchel and looked out over the sweeping plains and distant hills to the south.

As an Imperial Messenger he had been given leave only to tread the defined paths given to him by his Overseers. He knew nothing of the lands to the south, his knowledge of the world limited to these northern mountain regions and the wastelands beyond. There was more to the world than House Delving and his service to the Utterer of this he was sure. For a moment it came into his thoughts that it might be good to leave this place and venture south instead, exploring the world beyond rather than seeking dissolution upon the touch of the Veils. The thought lingered for only a moment however. From the corner of his eye a shadow loomed against the side of the *tpesh*, and in a crashing impact a truncheon smacked against the side of his head. For Ghered the world dimmed into shadows as he fell upon the thick grasses beneath him.

When Ghered awoke he found himself in darkness, the sounds of a violent storm raging close. Of his surroundings there was not much that he could discern, but he knew where he was. The smell of moss and wet stone was something peculiar to tpush, and he had no doubt that whoever had accosted him had dragged him bodily into the shelter. His hands were bound tightly but his legs remained free. In the darkness he struggled to his feet.

“Who dares attack an Imperial Messenger?” he growled into the shadows. As if to accentuate his anger a loud rumble of thunder shook the stone walls of the tpush. In response there came only a laugh, mostly hidden within the storm thundering against the shelter.

“Do not mock me, Oera'dim. Show yourself and release these bonds.”

From the shadows the small, gangled figure of a Morg arose, in its hands a club and a knife. Thin and diminutive in stature Ghered did not know whether to laugh or kick the Ah'marg for its temerity.

“It seems strange,” the Morg replied softly, “that an Imperial Messenger should be out in the world carrying a satchel containing only a few strips of dried meat. Does the Utterer feel peckish?”

Ghered felt anger rising within him but there was something about the emaciated creature that was wholly different from any of his kind he had encountered before.

“What is your purpose here, rodent. I have little reason to explain myself to one such as you.”

The Morg smiled and threw the knife he was holding into the dirt beside him. “You should be careful when insulting an Ah'marg holding a club, *nuulwch*, he might get upset.”

With that he stepped forward and without warning hit Ghered across the knee, buckling his leg and forcing him down onto the ground.

“Enjoy kneeling, *nuulwch*?” the Morg shouted over the storm.

Ghered felt something stir within him, something uncontrollable and powerful. Before he could regain his feet the Morg hit him again, this time upon the shoulder. Pain lanced across his chest, forcing him to inhale sharply.

“What are you, Ghered?” he shouted in the Hresh's face. “Are you a Warrior or are you a Slave?”

That was all Ghered could take. In one movement he lunged forward and slammed into the diminutive form, knocking him backwards. The Morg rolled cleanly back to his feet and stood

smiling, as if goading the Hresh to attack him again. It was only then that Ghered stopped. There was definitely more to this encounter than was readily apparent.

“How do you know my name, Ah'marg. What is going on here?”

“If you want answers, Ghered, you must first cut the bonds that tie your hands. I must warn you though Hresh, that all the answers you seek cannot be found here alone.”

Carefully Ghered reached for the knife that jutted from the ground and cut away the rope that bound him. In one movement he threw the bindings aside and tossed the blade at the feet of the Morg.

“Start talking, Ah'marg. The storm requires that we both have time to spare. Don't disappoint me.”

The Morg stepped closer to the Hresh and motioned for him to sit. Ghered did so and found that both Oera'dim could now look directly into each other's eyes.

“You must understand Ghered of House Delving that the world you know is not as it seems. All you can feel is a sense of confusion about your place within it, and why your fellow Oera'dim seem so obedient to it. I will tell you Brother, that the world you know is a farce.”

The Morg grabbed at Ghered's hand and placed it palm upwards. “See these hands Brother, they were designed only for one purpose and that was warfare. You are Hresh'na, a warrior built for a conflict that has been over for thousands of years and now set to tasks that are wholly unsuited to your nature. We all labour now to meet the needs of those few Masters that remain, and all of us must be obedient to that cause. I would say to you Brother, that there is no reason we should be so.”

Ghered moved in his seat, the idea that there was any other state of being except obedience disquieting. “Who are you Ah'marg, to say such things. It is the way of our world that the Masters rule and that we Obey. To do otherwise invites only anarchy.”

The Morg nodded his head and pointed to the entrance to the tpush. Outside the storm hammered against the stone, thunder peeling in rolls of sound that vibrated through the ground beneath them.

“Think on the world outside this tpush, Brother. Have you ever heard of an Oera'dim willing to voice what I have said, or of a Hresh'na willing to sit and listen to it? Have you ever wondered why we are so obedient?”

Ghered sat silent and thought hard on the Morg's words. If he was to be truthful to himself he would have to admit that it was the one

question that had plagued his existence. His sense of malaise had come from the inconsistency of his thoughts and the obvious certainty of the world he moved within. Perhaps, he wondered, this Ah'marg might give him peace.

"I know only that obedience is required of us, and that the requirement sits uncomfortably upon me."

The Morg smiled and moved closer to Ghered. "If you wish to truly understand the world we live in I must ask that you listen to what I have to say and consider what is offered. I wish to give you true purpose here Ghered, a reason to live in the world and be free."

The Hresh'na stood and reached for his satchel. Inside there remained only two pieces of dried meat. He gave one to the Morg and began to chew on the other. "Give me the answers I seek Morg, but first tell me your name."

"Surely it is a good place to start." replied the small creature. "I am known within House Mortain as Besson, a water-carrier of the House Cisterns and one of many hundreds engaged in the same occupation. I have no standing or status in this world but I find myself playing my part in something far bigger than the two of us. If you wonder what my purpose is I will tell you that it is to free the Oera'dim from servitude, and to that end utterly destroy the Masters and their works. I believe it a worthy purpose for one such as I."

Ghered leaned back against the wall of the tpesh and felt cold stone insinuating its touch through his clothing. Something within him was stirring, thoughts of possibilities he had never considered before growing in his mind. It felt as if he was being reborn.

"Do you ever wonder Brother, why it is we call Aggeron the Great, Master of the Empire of the Suns, the Utterer?"

Ghered shook his head.

"It is because Aggeron holds the power he has through the creation of a spell of magic, a Word of Command that he placed upon Hamulkuk the First Hresh'na and thence upon all the Oera'dim that have followed. We do not obey the Masters because it is the natural order of our world. We obey because we have no choice. The Word binds us to the will of the Utterer alone and all the power of the Masters flows from that. They command and we obey. The Word allows no other outcome and it has held us in servitude for millennia."

Besson took a bite of his meat and chewed it slowly before continuing. "The reason Brother, that you have felt the disquiet in your thoughts is because you are not bound by that Word of Command.

For reasons that can be explained by another you are immune to the power that compels others to obey. Within a world where obedience must be absolute you have a free will, but it is one that cannot express itself. Your malaise comes from the nature of who you are. You are a warrior, created for the purpose of warfare but forced into menial and unnatural occupations. I am amazed Brother, that you did not end up as *nuulwch* long ago.”

“Although the Masters do not know of it, there are many Oera'dim who now are free of the Word of Command. Most end up as *nuulwch*, and more than a few find a quick end within the arenas of the Blood Tournaments, but a few are found and given a chance to work with us. Within all the Houses of the Empire are Oera'dim we call the Hidden. They go about their work and remain obedient to their Masters but their purpose is ours, their real goal to find others such as ourselves and then wait for the time when as one we can rise up against the Masters and destroy them.”

Ghered looked at the diminutive creature and laughed. Such words from one so insignificant held a humour that he could not stifle. “And how are we to fight against the power of the Utterer. I have lived within the walls of Adamant and have felt the power of his presence within them. He is a Being untouchable and resolute. Great armies tremble at his command and he holds the Word of Command as you call it over all who would obey. It seems your plan is no more than suicide.”

The Morg nodded his head and stood straighter before Ghered. “If it was just me, and a few scattered Hidden that stood against the Darkness I would tend to agree with you, Brother. But you must understand that we work even now towards the death of Aggeron and the breaking of the Word that holds us all in thrall. When we move against the Masters in open rebellion it will be in overwhelming number, and with the power Aggeron now holds broken and useless to all who might follow him. Believe me when I say this Ghered. We are playing this game to win.”

The Hresh'na stirred from his seat and looked directly into Besson's eyes. He wanted to see the truth of the Morg's next answer clearly. “And what part am I to play in this great theatre you have devised?”

“Whether you like it or not Ghered, you are one of us,” Besson replied. “The Word of Command has no hold upon you and that means that in this world you have no place. You are a Free Being in a world of Slaves and if you wish to make a place for yourself you must

first find a true purpose. With the Hidden you will find meaning Brother, and your life will be remembered.”

Ghered saw the truth in the Morg's words and in them he saw his own destiny suddenly expanding before him. No longer need he be a Being without meaning or ambition. He wanted to be the warrior he knew himself to be and his decision came without hesitation.

“I am with you, Besson. Let us bring down these Masters or die in the attempt.”

Besson smiled and took him by the shoulder. “You are most welcome amongst us Ghered. From this point forward you are a Brother of the Hidden with a very particular role to play. Are you ready to begin?”

Ghered looked at the Morg and nodded.

“Good.” Besson replied. “The first thing that must be done is to leave this place with the passing of the storm and head east. There is someone that you must meet if you are to fully understand your mission.”

“And who is that?” asked Ghered.

“The Living Book at Lodos'sari. A Hresh'na like yourself, but one of great age who holds within his memories the sum total of the history of the Oera'dim. He is a treasure that the Hidden guards closely and one that you must speak with. Take rest now. In the morning we will begin.”

Ghered arose the next morning to a chill wind and a world that felt much different from the one he had previously accepted. The possibilities that came with Besson's declaration, and the knowledge that there were many other Oera'dim in the world that felt the same unease as himself, had given him a reason to follow the diminutive Morg. A great veil had been lifted from his existence and beyond the power of the Masters he saw a new future for his Brothers. He could not wait to get started.

After eating a meal of meat and Nahla cake provided by Besson, the two Oera'dim broke camp and left the stone t'pesh behind. The journey to Lodos'sari could not be an easy one however. A Hresh messenger on his own was a circumstance that garnered no attention, but a Hresh and Morg of different Houses and unconnected profession would have all they passed marking their passage. Questions would be asked and answers sought. It was a possibility they had to avoid.

To move unmolested to their objective Besson took them directly from the road and moved southwards, keeping to the open grasslands

that few travelled in those times. It was his intention to skirt the fringes of the plains, moving south of the Eagle's Reach then head eastwards to a pass of open ground between the Keln'Kraag mountains and the Black Hills further to the south. Once beyond the Black Hills the way would be open again, their path heading east into the lands of House Duran and then south-east as they made for the ancient temple-ruin of Lodos'sari. Within those remnants of the ancient world they would find the Living Book.

In the mid-afternoon of that first day of their progress they paused for a short while to take food and for Besson to get his bearings. The food was welcome and as Ghered ate, Besson looked to the landscape about him. To the north arose the immense spire of the Eagle's Reach. It was a landmark difficult to ignore and with the Keln'Kraag mountains arising to the north-east there seemed little doubt as to exactly where they were. Besson however, appeared unduly concerned, the compass in his hand holding all of his attention.

"What is it Brother?" Ghered asked as he moved towards him.

The Morg turned towards his companion and motioned for Ghered to look into the face of the compass. Ghered noticed first that the instrument was remarkably well made, its casing artificed of polished steel inlaid with silver threads and blue Azuril. The face of the compass was however, something altogether different from anything he had seen before. There were no magnetised arms pointing to the north, nor a dial indicating the four directions of the world and their increments. Instead he found a metal disc, its surface shaded to represent a replica of the landscape about them, and upon which there moved a series of tiny blue points of light. Two lights stood at the centre of the disc with at least another dozen moving as a group to the north.

"See the two points of light at the centre, Brother?" Besson asked.

Ghered nodded.

"Those are ourselves, the other lights are a *crue* of Hresh'na moving with purpose to the north. It is better that we wait here until they have passed beyond our concern."

The Hresh looked at his companion and then peered into the north. He could see nothing but had no doubt the the Morg knew what he was talking about. Together they lay low within the grasses and watched as the points of light moved slowly across the surface of the disc.

"What is this device, Besson? It is no compass as I have ever seen."

The Morg gave the device to Ghered so that he might inspect it closer. “It is a Dirge-compass, Brother. A device capable of sensing the life-force of any Being moving within its range.”

Ghered looked it over and then handed it back to Besson. “How did you come upon such a wonder? Surely the Masters would mark the loss of such a thing.”

Besson smiled and shook his head. “The Masters are not as omnipotent as you think, Brother. Somewhere amongst the treasures of House Bruhaj there is a repository of these devices, held in trust and guarded by a formidable contingent of warriors. One day someone will discover that one of the carefully wrapped devices is no more than a stone of similar size, but by then it will be too late to discover who the thief might have been, and too late to do anything about it.”

Ghered could have asked who had lifted the Dirge-compass from its safe-hold but the amused look on Besson's face told him all he needed to know.

With the passage of the Hresh warriors into the west Besson and Ghered returned to their journey. After the storm of the previous night the plains were a patchwork of sodden ground and shallow pools. Upon this terrain they moved quickly, keeping the clouded mountains of the Keln'Kraag at their left as they forged a path between those cold peaks and the Black Hills to the south. Ghered had never seen the Black Hills before, although much had been told to him of their unusual nature. Upon the open plain they appeared as no more than dark silhouettes against the horizon and he found himself placing his gaze upon them frequently as they ran. There was something about the Hills that beckoned to him but he shook off the compulsion and instead focused his attention upon the Morg.

It came to him as he ran that Besson was nothing like any of the Ah'marg he had previously come into contact with. Those had been furtive and undisciplined creatures, their nature bent only to labour and farming. He had seen the gangled creatures kill each other over the most trivial of matters and more than once had seen the aftermath of their violence. Like the rest of the Oera'dim they were fettered by the Word of Command but within that control had proven themselves unreliable at best.

What was different however, were the Messengers used in most of the Houses of the Empire. The Utterer used only Hresh'na as his messengers, and for reasons that only he understood. For the rest of

the Houses there were those Ah'marg that distanced themselves from the reputation of their brothers. These Morg were committed and obedient, and above all else extraordinarily swift. From the time of Alwen's Run the resilience and commitment of these Morg had become well-known amongst the Houses and all kept dozens of House Messengers at call. Besson had presented himself as a water-carrier but Ghered had his own suspicions on where this Morg might have found his true occupation before becoming one of the Hidden.



As dusk fell upon the plains the two Oera'dim continued their progress to the east. The Keln'Kraag fell away at their backs and in the chill of a clear night they continued upon the path chosen by Besson. To the south Ghered began to see the first signs of the headwater of the Isirien River, the wide marshes and meres of that watercourse growing as they fanned out upon the flat ground. It was only at midnight that Besson motioned for his companion to come to a halt. But it was not for rest.

From the grassland ahead Ghered heard the sound of running, and the unmistakable clank of weapons rubbing against armour. At a crouch Besson moved forward, taking a position upon a shallow rise in the ground ahead. Whatever moved beyond was masked by the undulation but as Ghered carefully rose to the lip of the rise he saw upon the plain ahead a line of warriors running with purpose from the south into the north. The *crue* numbered just short of two dozen, Hresh all except for a Jotun that ran at the head of the line.

“Do you see the Jotun?” Besson whispered. In the dark the line of soldiers were no more than furtive shadows moving across a grey expanse of grass but the giant could not be mistaken.

“I see him, Brother. What is their purpose?”

Besson gave a moment to take his Dirge-compass from its wrappings and watched as blue points of light flowed across its burnished disc.

“The Jotun is Qirion'Delving, First Hammer to the Master of the World and probably the most important Oera'dim ever to take breath since Hamulkuk himself. He does not yet know it but there will come a time when his actions will rule the destiny of us all.”

“As for their purpose, they are *shadim*, assassins under the

command of Aggeron and tasked with the destruction of any who might threaten his dominion. Information gained by the Hidden indicates that House Duran has come under suspicion and a lesson has no doubt been given to the Masters of that House this night. Somewhere in the south death and destruction has been visited upon them.”

Ghered watched as the warriors moved northwards. The Hresh ran as if they were one with the undulating grasses, their forms flowing with the wind, leaving no mark of their passing. The Jotun was power itself, huge and indefatigable, a long-handled warhammer strapped tightly to its back. It struck Ghered as the *crue* were lost to the horizon that their passing might be no coincidence.

“How is it you knew the *shadim* would be here?”

Besson motioned towards the retreating soldiers. “Any great war must be fought with warriors and weaponry, but to have a chance at victory it is information that rules. The Hidden have found their way into every part of the Utterer's empire and there is little that he does that we do not either find out about, or determine for ourselves. These *shadim* are a symptom of the paranoia and fear that now drives Aggeron. He preys upon his own because he sees enemies within every shadow, and whilst he turns all his energies to rooting out imaginary traitors he does not see the real threat.”

“Which would be us.” Ghered opined.

“Exactly. Aggeron believes fully in his own infallibility and sees the only threat to himself coming from his fellow Masters. There was once a time Brother, when the Empire of the Suns had 100 Great Houses, each powers unto themselves and all exercising a measure of control over EarthMagic. After the years of the Terror those Houses have dwindled to no more than twenty-two and with the destruction of each Aggeron has unwittingly chipped away at his hold upon his dominion. The Empire that once ruled the known world with an iron fist is now only a pale reflection of what it once was.”

Before Ghered could speak Besson arose from their position and put away his Dirge-compass. “Come Brother, the Living Book can only wait so long before he must move on.”



For two further days Ghered and Besson crossed the open plains making for the temple-ruins at Lodos'sari. Within that time they encountered no further sign of the power of the Empire and it gave Ghered an opportunity to come to know his companion. The Morg stood no higher than his waist but there were times when he forgot that it was an Ah'marg that ran beside him. As Besson explained the nature of the world as he understood it Ghered could sense both excitement and an anticipation of the rebellion to come. In the Morg's eyes he could see the same ruthless determination resident in the countenance of many Hresh'na that he had met. It was a curious dichotomy. The Morg's stature belied the strength held within him, the knowledge he shared far beyond anything his kind usually sought. He was by any measure a curious Morg indeed.

By nightfall of that third day Ghered and Besson met the western edges of Lodos'sari. In the light of the twin moons the temple-complex spread as a vast wash of grey-stoned ruins covering more than fifteen square kilometres and once the greatest city of the Early Empire. In its hey-day it had been the seat of power of Aggeron but had been abandoned in favour of his Fortress at Adamant. Over the millennia it had fallen into disrepair and with the inundation of a great flood had been half-buried beneath the plains. Now it stood as a reminder of how long Aggeron had ruled his Empire. Even the stone itself could not outlive the Utterer and it gave Ghered pause to wonder if his Master had indeed lingered too long in the world.

It was not the ruins however, that were their ultimate objective. Within the first hour of night Besson turned for a small undulation of hills a short distance to the south of the complex. Ghered had assumed that the Morg would take him into the ruins but he did not. Instead he made for another tpush, one hidden within a stand of trees nestled within the hills. At its entrance the Morg paused and turned to Ghered.

"Everything you encounter here cannot be spoken of again. Inside this shelter lies the destiny of us all and it can only remain safe if it remains hidden. Do you understand?"

Ghered nodded. "You have my word Besson. Nothing shall pass beyond this doorway on my account."

Besson entered the tpush first and Ghered followed. It was only then that he noticed the dark shadows lingering upon the hills surrounding the shelter. From their posture he could tell that they were guards, both Jotun and Hresh, and all armed and alert. In his

thoughts it came to him that he was putting a great deal of faith in this Morg.

When Ghered entered the tpush he found Besson standing before a small fire pit at the shelter's centre. In the sudden light it took the Hresh a moment to adjust his eyes but he was not prepared for what he found. Beyond the Morg stood another Hresh'na, clothed in the slave uniform of a general labourer but covered with a plain grey robe. The Being was very old, large and heavily scarred, his countenance telling Ghered immediately that he was indeed the Living Book. Apart from these signs he was the same as Ghered himself, however it was the Being standing next to him that took his full attention. As tall as the Living Book the spectral form stood as if it had one foot in the real world and the other in another existence. Both translucent and solid it gleamed as if made of reflected moonlight and Ghered was sure that if he had a mind to do so he could pass his hand right through it.

It was Besson that spoke first. "This is Ghered, a Messenger of House Delving. He has given his oath to the Hidden and awaits his purpose."

At this the Living Book moved forward and took his hand, motioning him to take a seat at one of the benches that ringed the inner wall of the tpush. It was only after Ghered had found a seat that the Living Book spoke.

"Ghered of House Delving, may I present Ashen'draal, a servant of the Silvan Tree and Emissary to the Hidden." The ghostly Being acknowledged Ghered's arrival but said nothing.

"I will keep what I must say short." He continued. "Besson has told you most of what you need to know about the Hidden. The rest you will discover for yourself, but it is the purpose that we would give you this night that must take the time we have available."

"We live in dangerous times, Ghered of House Delving. The Terror spread by Aggeron has paralysed his dominion and left him weak and searching for enemies in every shadow. I can tell you now that he has come to realise the folly of his actions and now senses how it has diminished him. Our agents inside the Fortress at Adamant tell us that he has decided to attempt the recovery of a talisman of the Ancient World that resides within the Temple of the Moons at Nem'haleen. We do not know how but he believes that it will restore the power that he has lost, and his desperation presents the Hidden with an unforeseen opportunity."

“From our information it is certain that he will begin his journey to Nem'haleen in the warm months of the new year. It is his intention to re-assert his dominion over the remaining Houses of the Empire by forcing all the surviving Masters to accompany him on his journey. We believe he will add to his powers and force his subjects to give new oaths of allegiance. Mark this Ghered, for the first time in millennia most of the power of the Empire will be concentrated in one place. We mean to ambush the Utterer on his own ground and destroy his power before it can be marshalled against us.”

“And what is my part to play in this Great Insurrection?” asked Ghered.

“Aggeron's progress to Nem'haleen is an unparalleled opportunity but it presents difficulties not yet planned for. The Hidden are many but to maintain their secrecy have remained separated. The Terror has left almost all who travel the roads under suspicion and because of this it has been difficult to organise ourselves into a cohesive movement. To do this is a job that only you can achieve.”

Ghered looked at the Living Book and at the Emissary. He couldn't think of anything to say but the obvious.

“What can I possibly do?”

“You have the uniform, official satchel and tattoos that identify you as an Imperial Messenger of the Royal Household. In these times of the Terror no-one will dare question either your travels nor question your motives anywhere within the Empire. With his markings clearly displayed upon your body you can do things no other of the Hidden could achieve, and do them without question.”

“That may be so but how could I find enough of the Hidden to prepare them for an action at Nem'haleen?”

The Living Book took a roll of parchment from the bench behind him.

“Here is a list of all the locations where the Hidden have concentrated their numbers. Commit it to memory then throw it in the fire. The Hidden are widespread and most know only those they have uncovered within their immediate area. It is this lack of organisation that must be addressed and with less than a year to prepare it is best that the task of doing so fall upon you. You can move without notice and gain a better appreciation of the disposition of the Hidden within the ranks of the remaining Great Houses. When you have gained that knowledge return to me and we will determine the best plan to end the Darkness.”

Ghered nodded but he could see one very practical problem with the Living Book's plan.

"If the Hidden are so well camouflaged within the Empire how am I going to find them?"

The Living Book smiled and drew a small circle in the dust at his feet. "To find the Hidden you need only find a public place and draw a circle in the ground at your feet. Wait and one of the Hidden will come to you. From there it will be up to yourself how you proceed."

"And what of Besson?" Ghered asked.

The Living Book looked to the Emissary and then turned back to the Hresh. "He has his own part to play in this Great Insurrection as you have called it. For all of us Fate determines the path we must travel. For some it is easier, for others much harder."

Ghered could see no answer in the Living Book's reply and there proved to be no opportunity to press for a clearer response. Instead a Jotun's head appeared through the entrance of the tpush. The Oera'dim gave no word, instead he nodded once towards the Living Book and then withdrew quickly.

"It would seem Ghered, that there will be more than one meeting here this night. Would you like to see something that has not given itself up to notice since the time of Hamulkuk himself?"

Ghered had no idea what the old Hresh meant but there was an excitement in the Living Book's movements that fired his curiosity. Without hesitation he followed the Hresh out into the night air.

"What is happening Brother?" he whispered to Besson. The Morg motioned him to silence and kept him still upon the grasses as the Living Book and the Emissary moved further into the open. All looked to the sky and waited.

"Am I missing something here, Besson. What are we waiting for."

"A new ally. One that will tip the scales of the coming rebellion in our favour."



Ghered waited. The night had turned to a chill and from the north a wind blew in fragmented blusters that chased the grasses southwards. The sky was clear and in the dark the stars above shone bright against the absolute void they resided within. At his back he could hear the trees within the hills rustling to the wind but it came to

him very subtly that something else was approaching as well. Upon the wind he could sense an energy that made the skin on his arms prickle, and as he turned to search the hills for some indication of what might be coming he saw a massive black form move across the stars.

“Besson!” he whispered harshly, “We are discovered!”

The Morg did not move. Instead he grabbed at the Hresh's arm and bade him to crouch within the grasses. Without a further word his companion complied, watching as the dark form arced about the Living Book and Emissary then alighted with a heavy crump upon the plain ahead of them. It was then that Ghered fully appreciated the ally that Besson had spoken of.

In the light of the Emissary the shape of a huge winged beast was illuminated. Absolutely quiet in the dark the Dragon stood twenty metres above the form of the Living Book and hung its head low, talking in a bare whisper with the old Hresh. Ghered could not hear what was being said but there was much discussion between them.

“What is going on, Brother?” Ghered asked of his companion.

“It is one of the Ell'adrim, Ghered. A Moon Dragon long thought extinct at the hands of Hamulkuk. We have reached out to his kind and have struck a deal to ensure the demise of the Darkness.”

“Why would these creatures side with us? Surely they remember that it was a Hresh that brought most of their number low.”

Besson smiled and shook his head. “It must be remembered Brother, that it is possible for a warrior to admire a weapon but hate the foe that wields it. The Ell'adrim understand that Hamulkuk had no choice in his quest to destroy their number. Their hatred has festered since the time of the War of Tree and Leaf and it has been directed solely at Aggeron himself. He betrayed them and they now see an opportunity to obtain the revenge so long denied them. I should not want to be on the receiving end of such a bitter vengeance.”

Ghered looked at the Dragon and wondered how many more of them still survived. The beast was enormous and he could see little enough of it in the glimmer of the Emissary.

“The Emissary is here because of the Moon Dragon. Yes?”

Besson nodded. “His presence confirms the support of the Silvan Tree in our endeavour. I have a suspicion though Brother, that the Ell'adrim are champing at the bit to get at the Masters regardless. What we are seeing here are the formalities necessary when forming an alliance. It should not take long”

For only a few minutes the Dragon remained at its station. With the oaths given the beast lunged skywards, its enormous wings digging at the air as it propelled itself into the night sky. Without the moons to silhouette its form it was quickly lost to the dark. Ghered watched as the Living Book spoke briefly with the Emissary before that Being dissolved away into the night also. When all was done there remained only the two Hresh and the Morg standing alone upon the grasses. The Living Book seemed well pleased.

“We have it then. The oaths have been given and the Ell'adrim now join us in our insurrection. It will be a poor day indeed for the Masters when the power of the Moon Dragons is let loose upon them.”

“And what of me?” Ghered asked. “When do you wish me to begin?”

The Living Book turned towards the Hresh and put his hand on Ghered's shoulder. “Tomorrow morning your mission will begin. Besson must travel into the south on other business and you must journey westwards. You have the list and everything else will be discovered as you go. Remember that what we do must remain undiscovered, our enemy unaware of the danger that lurks so close at hand. If we are to be successful there can be no chance of suspicion falling upon those that until now have remained undetected. Be careful Ghered and good luck. I will see you here when you have finished your muster of the Hidden.”

On the following day the journey of Ghered began. In the months that followed the Hresh travelled to every location given upon the Living Book's list and began a complete accounting of every Oera'dim that now counted themselves as Free Beings. Long were the roads travelled and great the dangers that confronted him but Ghered had found his purpose and he applied himself wholly to its completion. Within the cities and palaces of the empire Ghered made his way, finding the Hidden and preparing them for the Insurrection to come. It became apparent that the Living Book had been correct, the Hidden had indeed become great in number but there had been no consideration to how their numbers might be marshalled for the coming rebellion. In those dangerous days Ghered took it upon himself to organise them all, appointing commanders to each Great House and putting in place the means by which the Hidden might be appointed to positions that would ensure their participation in Aggeron's progress to Nem'haleen. In this endeavour he found his greatest help would come from the Vardem.

For those of the Oera'dim born after the Great Insurrection there is

not much that is remembered of the personal slaves of the Masters. Long after the creation of the Hresh, and then the Jotun, Mutan and Morg in their turn, the Vardem were created in an attempt to provide the Masters with slaves designed specifically to attend to their personal needs. Tall and beautifully formed the Vardem were not built from the same basic template that had created the rest of the Oera'dim. Aggeron in his hubris required a slave pleasing to the eye and totally obedient to the wishes of himself and his fellow Masters. To this end he made the Vardem differently from all others, and in doing so created an enemy within his own House.

The Vardem were slaves but they were not bound by the Word of Command. The Utterer believed he had created a perfect slave, as the obedience he required had been designed into the nature of his creation. The Vardem could never be a threat to him or his kind because it was how they were, and no other state of being was thinkable for them. But he was wrong.

From the very beginning of their existence in the world the Vardem were the perfect slaves but only because it served their purpose to be so. They were bound not by the Word of Command but simply because they had no other choice, and instead plotted for the day when they might overwhelm their Masters. That day came when Ghered journeyed to the Pleasure Palaces of House Traebor and his mission came to their notice.

The Hidden had been aware that the Vardem were sympathetic to their cause but had not approached them because of their proximity to the Masters. It had been deemed too dangerous and only when Ghered began the organisation of the Hidden did they approach him. It is said that they offered two advantages to Ghered and he accepted them with both hands.

The first was the position the Vardem held within the bureaucracy of the Great Houses. In their sloth and indolence the Masters left most of the general administration of their households to the Vardem. That position of trust meant that the Vardem could appoint slaves to positions within the Great Houses and with Ghered's direction a subtle process of placing the Hidden amongst the Masters' House Guards and general staff began. For many of the Great Houses that remained after Aggeron's Terror their slave numbers had bloated with the spoils of the remnants of those Houses destroyed by the Utterer. Organising and administering the use of those additional slaves fell mostly upon the skills of the Vardem, and with no oversight on their

actions the Hidden were carefully placed within the households surrounding the Masters.

The second was reliable and secure communication. As the personal slaves of the Masters the Vardem administered their mail and other communiques. Very early the Vardem devised a code that could be marked upon the envelopes that carried letters between the Great Houses, and with that code maintained a secret and secure communication network. To the Masters who received their letters the envelopes were discarded as no more than litter to be removed, a job quickly and effectively actioned by their slaves. For the Vardem the envelopes were the real prize, and although to anyone looking upon those envelopes they might notice nothing more than a series of faint indents upon the edges of their parchment, to the Vardem it was a clear and well understood code.

With the discovery of this code Ghered's mission expanded. After meeting with the Vardem, and gaining their support to the cause, a series of communiques went out to every Great House in the Empire outlining the need to gather the Hidden close to the Masters. It was a task the Vardem embraced with vigour, and with their number set to the task Ghered turned his attention to other matters.

It was at the end of the cold season that Ghered made his way to Lodos'sari. The Living Book had returned to the ruins and within that same isolated tpush Ghered outlined all that had transpired within the preceding months. It became clear to the Book that their Messenger had achieved far more than could have been expected, and in that short meeting the Living Book gave over the complete organisation of the Insurrection to him. Ghered accepted the charge given. He had fully quantified the Hidden and in that accounting had seen a great opportunity, but it required a bold plan and Ghered had one.



It came to pass that Aggeron of House Delving, Utterer of the Word, Lord Dominus of the Empire and Master of All Creation did begin his progress from the Fortress at Adamant. In the first days of the Warm Season his great entourage moved forth from the gates of his Royal Home and did venture westwards to the Pass at Maenum. Upon this road his host met with each of the Great Houses in turn, each swelling

the numbers of those already in train, each taking position at the rear of those that had come before. Such was the magnitude of the moving retinue that it spread for fifty kilometres upon the road, a visible and concrete expression of the power of the Being that all Oera'dim had come to know as the Darkness. In his hubris he believed himself truly the ruler of the world, unchallenged and sure in his eternal right to maintain a cruel dominion upon all who bowed before him. In this he was mistaken.

As the progress of Aggeron made its way westwards other eyes looked down upon his cavalcade and finalised their own preparations. In the Great Homes of the Masters, their Pleasure Palaces and Temples the Hidden drew to themselves everything needed for the Insurrection to come. When all was ready they waited, unseen amongst the activity of Households that had not changed in millennia. Such was the success of these preparations that none of the lesser Masters that stayed behind sensed what was coming. For the Hidden all that remained was the command that would unleash them.

In time the great procession made its way through the Pass at Maenum and thence along the northern borders of the Great Rift Mountains. Following the fringes of those mountains the vast column snaked towards the crumbling pillars of the Alerion Gates and then south to the narrow opening of the Shattereen. For Aggeron the fortress of Nem'haleen waited within one of the ravines that dug into the foothills of the Great Rift and to reach it was a journey that he had decided he would take alone. For the remainder of his entourage the dry plain of the Shattereen would be their camping ground as they awaited his return, and it would be upon that desiccated earth that the Great Insurrection was to begin.

Ghered had considered the possibility of killing Aggeron whilst he was alone within the ravines leading to Nem'haleen, but once word had come to him that the Shattereen would be the Utterer's camping ground he saw a far greater opportunity. The Shattereen was bordered on all sides by the foothills of the Great Rift, and with only a narrow exit to the wastelands in the north all of the Great Houses would be concentrated upon its flat ground. He had no doubt that the power of the Empire itself could be broken in one fell stroke and very carefully his plan came together.

It took more than a week for the combined multitude of Aggeron's Great Houses to establish themselves upon the Shattereen. First had been raised the pavilions of Aggeron himself then the lesser

accommodations of the other Houses surrounding him. Sentries had been set upon all the hills encircling the plain and Ghered himself took a position upon the hills to the south, his Commanders and Messengers taking up a line upon those same ridges as he awaited the act that would signal the beginning of the insurrection. It did not take long.

On a clear morning the suns arose upon the vast panoply of Aggeron's power. As Ghered looked out over the Shattereen it was completely covered in tents and pavilions, all a riot of colour as each of the Great Houses displayed the flags and banners of their number for all to see. Within this enormous turmoil they continued the eternal labour of tens of thousands of Oera'dim, each busying themselves with the needs of their Masters. From the hills surrounding the Shattereen Ghered watched the rising suns crowning upon the mountains in a wash of orange and red. Very soon the Darkness himself would awaken on the last day of his existence.

That they would succeed Ghered had little doubt. The arrogance of Aggeron had ensured that the activity of the Hidden had remained secret, the focus of his spies and informants solely upon the political manoeuvrings of his fellow Masters. None could foresee the possibility of a slave rebellion and within that veil the Hidden had prepared.

It was within the first hour of morning that Aggeron stirred. From the hills Ghered watched as the Utterer's retinue prepared themselves and only became aware that the Emissary, Ashen'draal had appeared beside him when the Being spoke.

"It would seem Ghered, that all our preparations must now be tested," he said in a low whisper.

In truth Ghered was more than surprised. The Emissary had never said a word to him in the entire span of his knowledge of the Hidden.

"Is it prudent Emissary," he replied, "that you expose yourself upon this hillside?"

"Do not be concerned, only yourself and your Commanders can see me. I am here as a representative of the Silvan Tree and wish only to bear witness to this great day."

Ashen'draal then turned and pointed to the east. In the glare of the rising suns Ghered could just make out a number of dark shapes winging southwards.

"See, the first of the Ell'adrim fly south, their part in your great plan to be in action by nightfall. Is your Sacrifice ready?"

Ghered nodded. "The Living Book has found a volunteer. Although it is a hard thing to ask of any Being."

"That is true." agreed Ashen'draal.

"And what of the Jotun?" replied Ghered. "Are you sure that he will do what is required of him?"

The Emissary looked at Ghered and smiled. "Qirion'Delving will do what his conscience demands. He is aware of the Hidden and has been given notice of what will happen today. It will be up to him how he responds. I am however, confident that Aggeron's First Hammer will do what is right."

For a moment the two remained silent. Ghered could not know what thoughts might flow within the Emissary but his own were a turmoil of everything that had been done. Suddenly the surety of their success was not so clear-cut and it gave him reason to pause and re-evaluate his plan. He knew that the Insurrection required more than just numbers and weaponry to succeed. An act of violence on the scale envisioned for this day required courage and determination, and all they had worked for would balance upon the actions of one Jotun alone. If he had done all that was necessary the Utterer would fall this day. If he had missed anything it could prove instead disastrous.

Ghered had spent many hours considering not only the Insurrection but also the possibilities of its aftermath. A world tightly controlled by cruel and ruthless Masters would leave a dangerous power vacuum with their passing. In his thoughts he knew that how the rebellion began would prove just as important to its success as how it was prosecuted. If the Oera'dim were to find order in a world without the Masters they would have to believe that the sacrifices made to achieve their freedom were worth the costs in blood. Indeed the Great Insurrection could only survive if it could win the hearts and minds of all the Oera'dim. Ghered had determined that to do this he needed two things, a Hero and a Sacrifice.

A great army can fight and die for a cause but there must be a leader, a Hero whose determination and courage will compel all about him to greater effort and an ultimate victory no matter the cost. Such a leader they had found amongst the Oera'dim and it would be that Hero that would strike the first blow upon the grounds of the Shattereen.

The need for a Sacrifice however, gave Ghered no reason for comfort. To ensure that the newly freed Oera'dim within the Shattereen would quickly join with the Hidden there needed to be a

Sacrifice, an act of unfettered cruelty perpetrated by the Utterer upon an Oera'dim that would appal the crowding multitude and turn them against their Masters. The Word of Command might stay them from violence but only as long as they were bound by it. With the Word gone their rage could unleash itself and the Insurrection would take on a momentum all of its own. The Living Book had found that Sacrifice. Ghered did not know who it might be, but as he had said to the Emissary, it was a hard thing to ask of any Being.

Movement upon the plain below shook Ghered from his thoughts and he quickly called his Commanders to him. Each held a House banner, and each was responsible for the command of the Hidden within each of those Great Houses. The banners would be used to direct the forces of the Hidden upon the plain and give commands to *crue* leaders within their number. Ghered looked at the determination drawn upon the faces of his Commanders and smirked. The Masters had no idea what was about to hit them.

A sign from Ashen'draal saw Ghered and his Commanders turn towards the Shattereen. At the centre of the great assemblage a lone figure strode forward and in its blue and silver-robed glory Ghered knew it to be Aggeron. At his side strode the immense bulk of Qirion, the Utterer's First Hammer and at their backs the number of his personal bodyguard. As a ship might part the waves of an unsettled sea the party moved eastwards and it was then that the world changed.

From out of the crowd a diminutive figure rushed towards the Utterer, brandishing a long-bladed knife as it ran for the Master of the World. Ghered sucked in his breath when he realised that the Sacrifice was Besson but there was nothing he could do. By necessity it had to be a futile attempt and Besson play his part very well, one of Aggeron's guards brushing the Morg aside with a sweep of its broad arm. Immediately the rest of the Guard descended upon the figure, their intent to kill the Morg quickly, but Aggeron motioned them to retreat. From his vantage in the hills Ghered could feel the power building within the Utterer, his rage at the attack blinding him to anything but revenge. In a coruscation of blue energy Aggeron enveloped the Morg in EarthMagic and lifted him into the air, his intent to tear the Oera'dim apart and send his eternal spark into oblivion. It was an act that kept the Darkness focused on his prey, and the multitude that surrounded him firmly focused upon the Darkness.

All Oera'dim know of the words that passed between Besson and

Qirion'Delving in the moments before the Morg's life was torn from him, and it was in that moment of great courage that Qirion acted. With one crushing sweep of his warhammer the Jotun struck his Master in the midriff. Caught completely by surprise the Utterer collapsed beneath the blow, no attempt at defence forthcoming as Qirion slammed another crushing blow down upon the Master's head. It was a blow no Being could survive and in an eruption of power the Utterer's body disintegrated, the energy contained within his corporeal form spreading in an ever widening shockwave through the massing slaves about him.

In a shuddering tremor the Word of Command that had held the Oera'dim as slaves for more than one hundred millennia collapsed in upon itself, and in that moment the Hidden revealed their true power. Amongst the milling Oera'dim the Great Insurrection began, the Vardem falling upon their Masters, the Hidden taking control of each of the Great Houses' pavilions. In their tents and spas the Masters were slain, any Oera'dim who stood against them given only one opportunity to choose between freedom or death. It was however, only the beginning.

Ghered watched as the violence quickly escalated but it had been expected. The Shattereen would be the first battle in a war that could only end with the complete destruction of the Masters and the eradication of their kind from the world. As he watched he knew that the collapse of the Word of Command would be felt in every part of the Empire, and as he stood upon the hill overlooking the Shattereen he also knew that the same violence was being played out in every city and fortress within the Utterer's dominion. The Ell'adrim had their own orders, and in their lust for revenge had been let loose upon the Empire, their cause to lay low all that the Masters had built in the world. It was the beginning of a relentless campaign that could only end when every memory of the Masters had been expunged. In this the Hidden would prove both determined and ruthless. But it was only the beginning.

It is told by the Living Books that the Great Insurrection lasted two years, Ghered serving as Adjutant General to the Hammer, and standing at his side when the forces of Qirion'Delving finally overwhelmed the last of the Loyalist Armies at the Battle of Nem'haleen. It has been remarked upon by many of the coincidence that the first blow struck in the Insurrection had been delivered upon the Shattereen, and that the last should be delivered within the halls

of the fortress of Nem'haleen, and within the very chamber that had been Aggeron's objective on his last day. It is important to the story of Ghered for on the day that Qirion brought down the last of the Masters so did fall Ghered, an arrow his messenger into the Afterlife. This was not however, the end of Ghered's story.

From the words of Ashen'draal, Caer'dahl of the Silvan Tree, and confirmed by the Book of Scars as told by the True Witness, it can be attested that upon Ghered's delivery to the Gates of Hallen'draal he was given a choice. His service had brought him high in the estimation of the Second Power, and to reward him for his service was offered a position of great trust and worth within the Underworld. He could, if he wished, return to the Circle of Existence and be reborn into the World Above to endure the travails of a Mortal Life, or he could become a servant to the Silvan Tree and perform a task of great import to that Power. He chose to serve the Silvan Tree and in that decision was elevated above all other Oera'dim, his purpose to serve as Arbiter of Souls, Judge of all who would make their way through the Underworld and once again find life in the World Above.

It is said that all Oera'dim are brought before Ghered as they journey through Hallen'draal, his purpose to weigh their Book of Scars and in doing so determine who shall enjoy the rewards of a life lived with courage and honour, or suffer the scourge that comes as penance to all Oera'dim who stray from the Code given to us by the True Witness. In his hands all Oera'dim find their due rewards and are then, in time, returned to the World Above.

This Great Purpose is Ghered's to bear alone and for the long years of our freedom from the Fallen Masters he has prosecuted that burden. Ghered came into this tale a *nuulwch*, and found instead that all Oera'dim have their worth and purpose in this world. We may all spend wasted hours deliberating on what our true place might be, but Ghered's journey shows us that there is no great mystery to our existence. With purpose an Oera'dim's life has meaning, and the measure of our success as Free Beings is determined wholly by ourselves.

THE END

The Book of Scars



As told by the True Witness himself upon the borders of the
Horns of Gorgoroth. May his essence live for all eternity.

I remember well the night of my death...

I remember well the night of my death, and although an ocean of time has surged between that point and now I still see clearly the moment of my demise. For three hundred years I had lived in the world, and they had been years filled with the hardship and travail of a Jotun's existence. Three great wars had come and gone in the span of my years and through them all I had kept to the code of my fathers, and had brought honour and privilege to my Kraal. As with all things however, there must be an end.

Three hundred years had passed by me, and with my End of Days approaching I knew there was little chance I would meet the warrior's death that would send me to the halls of my ancestors with a tale worthy of entry. I had resigned myself to the slow enfeeblement that would surely take me into oblivion, and that is how my life should have ended. It was to my great pride that I would soon learn my sons had no intention of allowing me such an inglorious end.

There is an old saying that a Jotun's worth is measured against the power of that which he has killed, but it is curious that we spend the greater sum of our lives tending our herds, and roaming the vast plains that have been our homes for millennia. It is curious indeed that we measure ourselves on the merits of our actions in conflict, rather than the more numerous activities of our peaceful lives; but this has been our way and I can think of no other that might draw more sharply the nature of who we are. We began in this world as Slaves, engineers and miners to those we now despise, but we became Warriors and we can know no other way. For this Soldier of the March, who had prosecuted his life according to the dictates of his duty, there would be no glorious end. On my Last Day I looked out at a burning dusk and realised that there were no wars, no challenges that might leave me with a final tale to tell. Mine had been an

honourable life, but it was to be my fate that my death would remain unremarkable.

In those last hours I could feel the spark of my existence faltering. The Ancients who had created our kind had measured our span exactly, and by the first light of morning I knew I would be dead. It is a hard fact of our lives that the accursed ones who created us as slaves to their indolence and sloth even now demanded obedience. A Jotun does not have the comfort of death being an unknown, something that might take him like a thief in the night, unexpected and unwarned. Instead we are measured in our existence to exactly three hundred years and a day. On the day a Jotun enters the world he knows the day of his death, and looks to it as a certainty that cannot be escaped. For me there would be no escape. I knew only that I had failed in the one act of defiance that gave a final triumph over our ancient masters. I had not died an honourable death before my End of Days.

And then came the challenge, unlooked for but welcome. From amongst the buildings of my Kraal there arose a great commotion, a rustling of activity and voices that grew in volume as a crowd gathered before my simple shelter. Before this throng there stood my four sons, and upon the wind there came a dire challenge. They wished all that I might have, and would claim it now by right of combat.

Slowly I arose from my last bed and grabbed up my warhammer. Here was a challenge that could not be ignored, and one for which I would find a fitting place in the halls of our ancestors. Against such odds I stood little chance, four warriors against the feeble remains of an old Jotun, but it was a battle to be fought nonetheless. Under a starlit sky tainted silver with the rising of the moons I broke the arm of one, and swept the legs out from another before I was overcome. In a frantic melee of pain and smashing bones I fell into oblivion and found the ultimate rest of death. I had met my end in combat and now could ascend to the halls with a tale to tell. By the providence of my sons I had been given the gift of the one key that would allow my entry to the Gates of Hallen'draal.



The Fall

Death comes to us all. It is the one constant that can be relied upon, but it is something that holds no fear for our kind. To die is simply to move on, to leave one state of existence and begin the next in a cycle of life that never ends. To die however, is to discover the true meaning of regret. An Oera'dim who passes from the world of the living does not return with the memories of his previous life intact. It is our burden that we are creations of EarthMagic, woven together by masters who had no need for us to remember what might have passed before. To lose all ties of kinship, and know that you shall be returning to the world once again, is a burden difficult to endure.

But such things are outside the boundaries of our kind to control. In death we can only submit to the inevitable and begin the journey, no matter what its outcome. For all Oera'dim this is how the cycle continues. Death comes quickly, and in its wake we fall into oblivion and the Great Void that separates the living from the dead. For this old Jotun it is the Fall where the story of my sojourn in the Underworld truly begins.

A soul on its way to greet the ancestors is a weightless thing, reliant upon the surety of an ultimate destination, and left to traverse the void without any ability to hasten the journey. It was with a curious mind that I saw the world fall away beneath me, and in those moments it felt as if I was descending into a great pit rather than rising into oblivion. Indeed, the world from which I had departed had become the open circle of light that might be seen from the bottom of a deep well, and in my fall I could not help but think on the moments of my life that had stayed with me as memories. Perhaps it was the power of the things I had done that brought them crowding into my thoughts, but as I fell away from the world of the living they arose before me as visions, as bright and as intangible as an early morning fog.

Within the open book that my existence had become I saw before me unfolded all that had been mine to experience. Endless days upon the great plains tending my Yunta herds became one with the great wars that I had fought and survived. Before me spread the panorama of the Great Insurrection, of the destruction of the Ancients and the slaughter of their number. Well I remembered the carnage of those times and the throwing down of their vile works. Well did I remember standing in the Temple of the Moons beside Hamulkuk, First Hresh of the March, as he took the stonewood sword from its holdings and

made it his own. Well did I remember the victory at Nem'haleen and the end of the Word of Command. All this I saw displayed before me. All this I remembered as the story of my days.

But long is the journey one must take to reach the Gates of Hallen'draal. From within the story of my days arose the bitter taste of betrayal, of the treachery of the Mutan and the Uttering of a new Word of Command. Long will I remember the suppression of my brethren to the will of these new Masters, and the dangerous realisation that some of us had remained Unfettered. I can still smell the rancour of the wars that followed, of the hunting of the Unfettered and of their rout into the mountains of the west. All this I remembered as the story of my days.

Such visions came clearly to me as I fell away into the limitless void, and I was left to relive the sorrows and the pain of such travail. I felt the sharp agonies of betrayal and the violence of war, but somewhere within the turmoil of these visions I began to feel a subtle change in my being. No longer of the living I had begun a transformation, my physical form left far behind, my new existence one of memories and emotion, set on a course for some unknown destination. I could not know what was before me, all that was sure was that I was no longer Jotun, no longer a giant of the plains. Now I was simply a Being in motion, on a journey that was not about to end quickly. And it was not a journey that I would be travelling alone.

As I felt the diminishing light of the world slip away I began to sense others gathering about me. In a rising tide I was propelled forward by the roiling push of others closing in about me, and instinctively I knew that within the Great Void were a multitude of Beings on the same journey, spiralling upwards towards a dark hole that grew in the nothingness, swirling like a vortex in the midst of a great storm.

Towards the vortex we all advanced, the relentless pull of its darkness drawing us ever quicker into its gaping maw. In a moment of dread I began to hear the cries and screams of torment, of Beings trapped in some great maelstrom of pain, and in horror I fell through the swirling rift and hurtled downwards into a blackness that grabbed and smothered me in its embrace. Surely this was not to be my fate? I remember only that these last thoughts cut at my resolve as I succumbed to the pressing dark.

The Gates of Hallen'draal

My first breath in the Underworld came as a burning ache that spread across my chest and gave no comfort to one struggling for air. I knew at once that I was alone once again. Whoever else had taken the journey with me was no longer by my side, and as I tried to rise from the ground I found myself as a Jotun, my form again my own. In this place however, there could be no solace nor comfort. As I rose from the ground I found myself in a vast natural cavern, standing upon an outcrop of black stone that pushed out into a void that surrounded me. Below roared the maelstrom of a swirling ocean of blue light, but it was the high gates that stood before me that held my attention.

Set into the wall of the cavern before me stood an immense gated archway, guarded at either side by a tall seated statue, each robed and hooded in black stone. Such was their size that I do not believe I could have thrown a stone to reach above them, and in their immensity they stared out over the great cavern oblivious to my arrival. The gates sat squarely at the threshold of the huge arch, and as I tried to gain some bearing on where I was I could see the intricate carvings of an ancient text that ran along its border. Such writings were not beyond my understanding and I mouthed the words as I struggled for air.

“Here may pass only those who have felt pain.”

It meant nothing to me, but then a Jotun's life was drawn in blood and travail. Whatever its meaning I felt sure that I would soon discover the nature of its intent. As I struggled for a full breath I turned from the gates and looked out towards the cavern that spread at all directions behind me. Here was a huge open space, a vast natural chamber filled in its depths with a brilliant blue light that shone with the intensity of the two suns. This I recognised. Here was the Shan'duil, the River of Life at its source, and the Power that gave the Silvan Tree its awakening. For only a moment I gazed upon its brilliance and then turned away. No living Oera'dim may look upon the River of Life and survive the encounter, but in the reaches of this vast chamber such rules could not apply. I had passed into the realms of the Underworld and need now only know what it was that I should do next.

As I straightened upon the precarious purchase of the outcrop there arose about me a wild wind that rushed from below, spiralling quickly into a tight swirl of red vapours. Within the brilliance of the chamber

I watched as the vapours concentrated themselves, until slowly a dark light gathered, and in the rush and noise of the chamber there appeared the familiar figure of a Jotun warrior, clad in bright armour and holding an iron warhammer.

“Greetings Jotun,” the Being said as it moved closer to my side. “You stand before the Gates of Hallen'draal and I am eager to see if you hold a key that will open them. I have been called by the Dreya to advise you that my name is Eshalon, and that I am to be your guide in this place. Now tell me Jotun, what is your name, and what is it that gives you the right to enter?”

For a short time I remained quiet. The Being stood at almost four metres tall and had the well-muscled physique of a warrior in his prime. There was something about the apparition that begged caution though, something different that called for me to remain wary. Beyond his ochre skin, and the tattoos of his Kraal could be seen the fatigue of one who had lived far beyond the span of his years. Here was a Being locked in servitude to this place. I could only wonder at the nature of the transgression that might have enslaved him here.

I spoke my name and answered the only way I knew how. Within the pulsing roar of the great cavern I wove the story of my life and gave account of the deeds that had brought honour to my Kraal. It was a story three hundred years in the making and I took my time to deliver it. When I was done the Being spoke again.

“You weave a good tale Jotun. I have heard few that can best the honest tale of a warrior stalwart in his duty, but I say to you, what proof do you have of these deeds?”

In truth I did not know how to respond. In this place I was without witness or evidence of my triumphs, but it was a question that would answer itself. Eshalon moved closer still and put his hand upon my shoulder.

“Do not worry Jotun. All who wish entry here hold the proof of their life upon their bodies. It is the scars of a hard existence that tell the story of a Jotun's life. Just as you have spoken the words of your life's tale so shall your scars give proof of what you have said. Prepare yourself Warrior, for I am about to open your Book of Scars.”

Before I could respond to his words he pressed his hand upon my shoulder. In a rising wave there grew from his touch a hot fever that rushed as a gale through my chest and limbs. In that instant all the old wounds and injuries of my life tore at my body; healed wounds opened, mended bones shattered and blood flowed freely from a

dozen stab-points and hammer blows. In my torment I screamed, wallowing in a lifetime of pain that had been concentrated and focused into one short heartbeat of time. Above the rush of the cavern I writhed within the torture that had been placed upon me, but I was not about to succumb to it. As a life of sharp iron and torn flesh cut its way over my form I did not give in, instead I let it work its agonies with clenched teeth. Each wound or injury that I had sustained in the span of three centuries was brought back in all its clarity, and as I endured the pain of it I found Eshalon standing before me, his face unmoved, his concentration focused on the ground at my side.

At my left hand the air shimmered as if a great heat was rising, and as the distortion grew I saw the pain of my torment taking on a physical presence of its own. Like a shadow it formed upon the ground before me, and as it did so, so did the torment lessen. When it was done there was no mark or affliction upon my body, but before me writhed the shadow of a deformed and corrupt entity that mewed and hissed like a creeping reptile.

“What have you done to me, and what is this thing you have conjured?” I declared angrily as I watched the pain-shadow move like the flickering light of a dark fire before me. The Being pointed his hammer at the creature and pushed it towards the gate.

“Do not be concerned for the thing that shall herald you beyond the Gates. It is no longer your concern. Be thankful that no Jotun may walk within the halls of his ancestors still carrying the torment of his life upon his shoulders. It has been taken from you and now gives its allegiance to the Dreya. It is your pain that shall open the Gates of Hallen'draal to you. It is your story that will determine what happens once you are inside.”

Before I could try and make sense of what had happened the Pain Shadow moved restlessly towards the Gates. As I watched it found the solid stone of their vast presence and dissolved into the rock. Then all was silent. The rushing winds within the cavern, and the swirling light below all settled to stillness. There was no noise except the sounds of my own breath, but within the cavern a new presence was making itself known. All around me there came the feeling of other Beings moving within the stillness and then I began to hear a rising tumult. It was the cries of a countless throng, all screaming in pain as if enduring some endless torment. Within this chorus of despair the Gates of Hallen'draal opened.

The Pillars of Dissolution

With a grinding shudder the Gates swung inwards, and in that moment I saw all the hopes of my life disappear. Before me stretched a limitless chamber of rough hewn stone that spread to all directions before disappearing into a red mist in the distance. Within the cavern I could see thousands of vast pillars, all evenly spaced and each rotating on its axis, screwing downwards into the solid rock in an endless shuddering spiral. Hung from each of these pillars were hundreds of Jotun, shackled to the remorseless revolving columns as they drove into the bedrock below. As I watched the hapless creatures were spun about the pillars before being crushed like grain in a mill. But this was not the end of their torment. At the upper edge of the pillars the Jotun would reappear, spiralling once again downwards to another crushing death, and then another, over and over again. It was a vision I could not endure easily. I looked away and instead turned to my companion.

“What is this place? These are not the halls that I believed would be my fate.”

Eshalon shook his head and pointed to a stairway that ran along the wall at our right hand. “Do not be concerned Jotun, the Pillars of Dissolution are not yours to enjoy. Here can be found the basest of your brethren, all those who conducted their lives with dishonour and cowardice. They are being scourged of everything that made them what they are so that they may be remade. It is a process that takes some time.”

Before me the great pillars continued their remorseless revolutions, the columns of stone smashing and tearing at the bodies of the hapless Jotun as they screamed away their dying breaths. Transfixed by the appalling spectacle I could only watch as the Remaking of the Hapless was conducted with a remorseless efficiency.

“Tell me Eshalon,” I shouted over the cries of the Hapless. “How do these poor souls find rest? What is it that determines their release from this torment?”

Eshalon did not answer but motioned for me to follow him. Quickly we moved into the long rows of spinning pillars, and did not stop until he reached a small stone plinth that sat squarely in a space between two of the revolving monstrosities. All about us the Hapless screamed out their pleas for mercy, but in the clinging red mist their words went unheeded, their cries drowned out by the grinding of stone on bare flesh. It was only as I felt liquid running down my back did I realise

that the red mist that hung as a fog within the cavern was blood, and that a fine sheen had settled upon my skin. Eshalon was drenched in red, and as he surveyed the scene about us he smiled and touched the surface of the plinth.

“The answer to your question resides here Jotun. This device is used to call the Arbiter, the one who determines the length of a Jotun's stay upon the Pillars. If I am not mistaken he should be close at hand.”

True to my guide's words it did not take long for the Arbiter to answer the call. Out of the red mist strode a Jotun of great age, wrapped in the ceremonial white robes of a Shaman, a huge chain and key draped across his shoulder. His clothing was spattered with new blood, but it was the strange symbols that covered his exposed skin that held my interest. A Jotun does not willingly mark himself with anything other than the tattoos of his kraal and bloodline. This Jotun was resplendent in finely marked glyphs of an unknown tongue that had been drawn across his arms, face and neck. The Arbiter acknowledged Eshalon's presence and then turned towards me, a look of expectation on his face.

“Is it now your job Eshalon, to bring new meat to the grinder personally? Or is this Jotun a special case, worthy of special attention?”

Eshalon stepped between myself and the Arbiter. He seemed to believe that I required protection.

“This Jotun is not for you, the Dreya herself keeps this one safe. He is here to observe the process of Remaking and is not to be touched.”

“An observer eh?” The Arbiter looked me over but could not seem to see anything special in my disposition. “And what might you be doing here then?”

To this I had many questions of my own. The sight of so many suffering Jotun had stirred an anger within me.

“I am here because the Gates of Hallen'draal opened to the story of my days. It must be said that the same question could be asked of you. What manner of Jotun could be found in such a place?” It was an affront designed to incite a confrontation with the Arbiter, but he did nothing but laugh.

“Well, this is a strange day indeed. The Arbiter himself confronted within the Pillars of Dissolution by a Jotun of little rank. What is your story and why does the Dreya favour such an unremarkable Being?”

His riposte stung but I was not about to bite. “You would be

mistaken to assume that I care who you are. My real concern are these hapless souls. What is it that might release them from this torture?"

The Arbiter turned to the revolving pillars and threw out his arms as if to embrace them. "Is it not obvious? The Hapless are here because they are the worst of our kind. The Underworld does not exist only to reward those that might follow the Code. Here we remake those that have lived without regard for the rules that keep us ordered. All who you see before you have proven themselves cowards, thieves and worse. They cannot leave this place until they have proved otherwise."

I felt a blood spray wash from the nearest pillar, splattering my face and clothing. I could see no salvation here.

"And how is that achieved? Surely these souls cannot prove anything shackled to these revolving monstrosities?"

The Arbiter turned and looked directly into my eyes, his visage a landscape of unflinching duty to his cause.

"All these Beings need do to escape their torment is to surrender to the pain inflicted upon them. As we stand here do you not hear them? Mewing and whining with fear, crying for a mercy that will not come until they surrender to the pain and become silent. What Jotun in the world Above would cry for mercy in the face of pain? Does it not sicken you to hear it from so many of our kind? Believe me, when a Being has been scourged of this need to take the easy road to salvation he has taken the first step in his Remaking. Then he may leave this place and move on."

I looked again at the Arbiter and thought on the truth of his words. No Jotun could live with honour if given to such outcries and I decided to leave such matters in his hands. It was Eshalon who broke the silence of my thoughts.

"It is now time to move on. We must leave the Arbiter to his duties and attend more closely to our own."

The Arbiter nodded, but spoke one final time before the cries of the Hapless once again overwhelmed his words.

"Let it be remembered Jotun, that I am the Arbiter of this place, but in the World Above I was Ghered, second only to Qirion'Delving himself, and Architect of the Great Insurrection that freed us from the Fallen Masters. If you are indeed an Observer in this place let it be remembered that I do my duty, and that those who disregard the Code shall find me here waiting for them."

I nodded to the Arbiter and he was soon lost in the red mist of his charges. With Eshalon in the lead I followed as we made our way towards a long but precarious stairway. From the floor of the Pillars of Dissolution the stairs were nothing more than a crease in the side of the enormous rock face that bordered the cavern. Eshalon indicated that this was to be our way out.

I followed the Being as he walked to the first of the steps. It was in my mind that I should know what my fate would be.

“Is this some torment Eshalon, designed to strike hopelessness into one who does not know his own fate?”

The Being turned and pointed to the stairway. “Each of us must find their own path here. You lived your life according to the Code, and found honour and respect in your actions. You need not concern yourself with the Remaking that must be conducted here. You do indeed have a Fate but it resides elsewhere.”

The Jotun looked at me and for a moment I saw something other than one of my kind before me. For a heartbeat of time his image flickered as a flame might on a breezing night. Within that moment I saw something dark and vaporous, tinged at its core by the deepest red. In that instant I sensed a presence that was not altogether benign.

“You say that this is not my Fate. Can you not tell me where it is that I must go?”

Eshalon nodded his head and pointed once again towards the stairs. “Your Fate has been divined by others than myself. But I will tell you this, see and remember everything that I show you. You have been chosen for a task and it is one that will ask a lot of you. It is still to be seen whether you have the measure for it.”

With that the Being moved to the stairs, and with the screams of the tortured echoing about the vast cavern he led me upwards.



The Trial Grounds

From the immensity of the Pillars the path of roughly hewn steps led upwards, ascending in a series of jagged levels that were hidden within the blood mists. From these heights the sounds of the Hapless

were muffled by the thickening red fog, but Eshalon knew where we were going and kept to his course. We were rising towards the upper reaches of the cavern when there appeared through the clinging vapours the first signs of an opening, of a passage out. As the pillars ground remorselessly into their foundations I found myself and my companion leaving them behind, only to enter into a wide passage cut into the stone. Within this long corridor the walls were made of the most pure crystal, and within its clear surface I could see dozens of Jotun, encased and immobile.

“Who are these poor souls,” I asked of Eshalon.

“These are the Lucky Ones, and they are souls you should give no further thought too.”

In truth I could not see how such an end was fortunate at all. “How is it that they are Lucky? It would seem that they have found no honourable rest here, and have found their fate instead as mere ornamentation.”

Eshalon smirked at the description and waved his hands across the visage of the nearest Jotun.

“These souls have completed their scourging upon the Pillars of Dissolution and now must journey to the next level of their Remaking. As the Scourging takes time, so does the struggle that they must endure to reach the Trial Grounds.”

I could not understand what the Being meant, but as I looked more closely at the bodies encased in the crystal I discerned the most imperceptible of movements. A slow undeniable motion of hand or foot that belied their immobility. I looked down the long passage and could only think that it would take these Jotun generations to make its end.

When I turned back to my companion I found him already some distance ahead. He had left me to stare into the crystal and without a word had moved on. Quickly I gave chase, running the remainder of the length of the passage. When I reached him he stood at the threshold of a wide arched opening, a tall silhouette bathed in brilliant light. What lay beyond took my breath away.

In the space before me there lay another wide cavern, enormous in its reach and without feature except for two objects, one immense, the other brilliant in its illumination. In the roof of the chamber I could barely make out the edges of a perfectly cut circle of light, one that poured its brilliance down into the space below. Immediately beneath the light there stood the unmistakable shape of a pyramid, made up

of hundreds of steps and shining golden in a pool of reflected light. Although it was hard to judge, the pyramid stood more than a kilometre high and was rotating slowly upon its foundations. But this is not what appalled me.

At its base, and upon the many levels of its surface, there was being conducted a vast combat, a melee of thousands as Jotun fought to climb the pyramid and reach its apex. From all the walls Jotun who had made their journey from the Pillars of Dissolution struggled to escape the smothering embrace of the crystal only to fall into the dust of the Trial Grounds. There they were immediately set upon by those souls that had already gained their freedom, and were swept up in a struggle that seemed to have only one objective.

“What is to be a Jotun's reward once they have attained the heights of this Pyramid?” I asked.

“These are the Trial Grounds,” replied Eshalon. “Once a Jotun has been Scourged he must then prove himself in unarmed combat. If a Jotun can attain the apex of the Pyramid, and stand upon its summit alone, then he may move to the next level of his Remaking.”

As I watched I saw exactly what Eshalon meant. From within the struggling mass of Jotun one emerged upon the small platform that made up the summit of the Pyramid. Beneath the burning light he stood with arms upheld, and was immediately encased in a sphere of brilliance that winked out leaving the summit of the Pyramid once again vacant. Another Jotun arose, but was followed quickly by four others who fought in a brutal battle of fists that left all flailing in a wild tumble down the steep levels of the great edifice.

“Here is the test of Endurance,” shouted Eshalon above the roar of the battle. “See how the combatants make their way from the crystal corridors and then are left to fall to the floor of the Trial Grounds. These Jotun learn quickly that the summit of the Pyramid is their only way out of the melee, and indeed the pyramid is hard enough to reach on its own. Does the sight of it not bring your blood rushing to join the fight?”

I looked down at the base of the pyramid and could see the truth of Eshalon's words. The grounds surrounding the pyramid were a maze of crevices and ravines, choked with struggling Jotun as they fought to negotiate the fractured stone and make the base of the monumental structure. Every metre was hard fought, each step forward measured against the next adversary to be overcome.

It was a vicious melee that left me breathless with its violence. Even

as I tried to draw my eyes away from the seething mass of bodies and spattering blood I could see the infrequent winking of light atop the Pyramid's summit. Within the battle there were those who were indeed finding their way through. I could only imagine what must await them on the other side of the light.

With my heart pounding in my chest I watched the struggle unfold, trying to fathom the nature of the vast combat before me. What could be the purpose of such malevolent trial? How could there be any advancement for any soul when faced with such torment? My mind seethed with questions but I was given no opportunity to broach them. The Being took me by the shoulder and indicated a walkway that traversed the edge of the chamber. In the distance I could see another opening and faltered at the thought of what it might unveil.

"It may seem harsh Jotun, but there is reason to it, and a purpose that provides all that must struggle here with a just reward." Eshalon led the way, and I followed for surely I was a stranger in a twisted world that had no idea where his destination might lay. The Being however, had much to say.

"You may wonder at what you have seen, but do not despair that these unfortunates have not found the idle repose promised to your ancestors. An honourable Jotun who has followed the Code does not enjoy the torment of the Pillars or Trial Grounds. These pleasures are reserved only for those who have transgressed the Code, to Remake them so that they can be returned to the World Above."

"We were created by the Ancients and given the name Oera'dim. Forever in the world of the living we are Slaves of Creation, and our creators gave us rules that must be abided. But do not think that they formulated these rules solely for their own amusement. By creating the Oera'dim, the Trell'sara unbalanced the Powers of the world. To destroy the Forgotten Ones they betrayed the Silvan Tree, forcing it to return balance to a world that was slowly ebbing into Dissolution."

"Understand this Jotun and mark it carefully. To save the world the Silvan Tree created the Underworld to balance that which had been wrought Above. The forces of Life that had come into being in such vast multitudes had to be countered, and it is this place that provides the weight to do so. What you see here is the opposite of what it means to live Above. There can be no apologies made for the fact that for some of your kind it is a harsh solution indeed."

I considered Eshalon's words and could see no fault in the logic of it. The world of the Oera'dim was built on foundations that require

balance in the powers of EarthMagic to survive. Long the Silvan Tree had laboured to counter the excesses of the Trell'sara, and the belief that the hard lives of the Oera'dim would be tempered with rewards in the Afterlife was a powerful reason to follow the Code. None of my kind could conceive however, that to break it would bring such dire torment.

As the Being walked I followed, my eyes focused on the tumultuous battle that raged upon the steps of the Pyramid. It was a grinding melee of surging frustration and uncontrolled anger that could be tasted upon the air, and heard in an overwhelming roar that carried the cries and screams of those engaged in its violence. I cannot decide whether it is to my credit or failure that I could not draw my eyes from it. A warrior's blood can be easily warmed to battle, and as I surveyed the vast display of carnage I felt my own frustrations and anger rising upwards in a turmoil of suppressed rage. It was surging in my gut as keenly as if I was one of those struggling to escape the Trial Grounds. But it was not my fate to be a part of such unrestrained aggression. Instead I followed the Being to the end of the walkway and it was there that he stopped.

"Here is one place that I cannot go." Eshalon said it in a calm voice, but he could not hide the edge that the dark opening had brought into his voice. "Through here can be found the next level of a Jotun's return to favour. It is a place that I cannot pass through, but it is one that you must experience. To complete the task that will be placed before you it is necessary that you must find your way through here alone."

I stood before the entrance to a dark opening in the wall but there was nothing to see beyond it. The opening was a wide arched entranceway to nothingness that gave no hint of what lay ahead, nor any candour as to the dangers it might conceal. There was something about it though that opened up my thoughts like a knife, the blackness a challenge that left me hesitant. In the end all I could say was the obvious. "What's in there?" There was no answer to my question.

I turned to find Eshalon gone, only the frantic backdrop of the Trial Grounds remaining as a blood-soaked reason why I should move on. I cannot say why, but I stepped over the threshold and was immediately wrapped in a blanket of suffocating darkness. As I walked forward into the encompassing void I began to feel my thoughts beginning to wander, the focused concentration of my mind being drawn out into the nothingness. It was as if my consciousness

was expanding to fill the space that grew about me, but there was nothing to be found. At least that is what I thought.

The Pain Shadows

I do not know how long I stood within the void, but there came a time when I began to sense that there was something else close by, moving just beyond the borders of my perception. At first it came to me as a hint of a thought, or a feeling long forgotten, something familiar yet distasteful. As it approached however, I felt myself recoiling, taking a step back as the intruder advanced upon me. All too quickly the presence revealed itself and in that black void I recognised it. It was me.

Standing in the dark was the pain-shadow that had been torn from me upon my arrival at the Gates of Hallen'draal. I could not see it, but I felt it keenly, and as I began to recognise the nuances of its hatred and pain I began to see its tortured form coalesce before me as a dark-red aura of flickering light. Moving purposefully in the gloom it advanced, and it was only then that I saw the glint of a weapon in its hand. It was going to attack.

At that last moment when I knew the creature would strike I also felt the cold steel of a scimitar in my own hand. Where I might have picked it up is unknown to me, but against the assault I had no choice but to defend myself. In the darkness the shadow struck, and in a shower of red light I turned the blade away. Its blow thwarted it struck again, but this time I was ready for it and immediately returned the attack. Blow for blow I fought with the elusive creature, striking out at its dull form and in turn defending against its relentless attacks. With each assault the shadow grew in anger, its form expanding as it fed upon its own rage and frustration, but it was a combat that neither of us could win. I was fighting myself, battling against a darker half of my existence that knew every move I would make, and every counter I might use to defend myself. It took only a short time to realise that I also could determine when it might strike and how it would deliver its blow. We were combatants that would never land a blow against each other, and yet we fought as if death was the only way we could resolve the fight.

With the darkness a silent witness to our struggle I fought with the Pain Shadow, and as I did so I found the first hints that I was not the only Jotun caught in this deadlock. Beyond the borders of my vision I

began to hear the grunts and curses of other warriors, and the sharp clang of scimitars in the dark as they fought hopelessly against their own personal demons. About me the barriers of the darkness expanded and soon I could sense the presence of many souls caught up in the melee. It did not take me long to realise that this was a fight I could not win, and yet I did not care. Before me stood an adversary beyond anything I had ever encountered and the challenge of it fuelled my aggression. In the darkness I was having the time of my life.

For hours the battle continued, the Pain Shadow an undeniable fury that attacked without respite, its lunges and swings a chorus of screams that filled the void with sound. Around me the others fought also, and it came clearly to me that these other souls were indeed those who had overcome the Trial Grounds, their reward for reaching the light a plunge into darkness, and a confrontation with their own manifested Pain Shadow. Where they were to go from here was beyond my knowledge, but I knew instinctively that to leave this realm of shadow the combat had to be resolved. With this task firmly before me I redoubled my effort to overcome the creature. It was a goal that would prove easier to think on than to complete.

As with much that I had so far experienced within the Underworld I cannot say how long I remained locked in combat with the Pain Shadow. It may have been hours or it could have been years, but within the struggle I found my thoughts wandering, the actions of combat becoming mechanical as memories of my life came to distract me from my concentration. The Jotun that I had known, and the places I had been, washed over me as I fought, and in that void I found all the hardship of my life being tempered by the experiences and small victories that had made it so worthwhile. Within these thoughts I lost myself, but it was the words of the Arbiter that shook me from my introspection. In a single moment of clarity I knew how to find my way out of the shadows. I need only surrender and allow myself to be taken.



The Stone Forests

Sure of my path I lowered my scimitar and waited for the blow that would take me. Out of the darkness the Pain Shadow rushed towards my undefended form, its weapon raised, a reddish aura of rage and torment encasing its dull presence. I did not move to defend myself and the creature did not waiver in its assault. Down came the razor-sharp blade, slicing towards the junction of my neck and shoulder, but metal did not meet flesh or bone.

At that instant when my life should have once again been extinguished the Pain Shadow evaporated back into the gloom. Instead I found myself being gripped firmly by unseen hands, and pulled upwards towards a lightening gap in the void above. I felt no need to struggle nor any reason for fear. I looked instead to the light above and found it taking shape as a wide rift of split stone, an entry to another part of my sojourn within the Underworld. I was not a little surprised to see Eshalon standing at its edge, looking down into the gap as I rose towards him. He seemed impatient.

“Well, you took your time.” he said as I hauled myself out of the rift. “It never fails that if you give a Jotun the opportunity to fight that he will not grab it with both hands.”

I looked at Eshalon as I straightened and found that he had changed, his visage different in the time I had been in combat with the Pain Shadow. Whereas he had previously held a small distortion in his presence that had flickered with a dark aspect, he now stood as solid as myself, costumed in the regalia of a Jotun Warrior and as tall and as proud as any giant of the plains. He seemed far more at ease here than in any of our previous travels, and in the bright light of this place I could see why.

At all four directions of the compass a vast sprawling forest of grey trees stretched into the distance. I could see no walls nor ceiling for this great chamber, only the heavy buttresses of a myriad of enormous trees, whose branches spread upwards into a high canopy of dull green leaves. As I stood amongst the trees I could hear the sounds of animals moving within the undergrowth, and the hint of birds cawing in the far distance. Here could be found a calm that was at odds with the violence and pain of what had come before.

For a moment I took in the peace of it and steadied myself as a cool breeze wafted between the trunks, raising leaf litter into the air, exposing a path that lead off into the arching trees ahead.

“Is this to be my path now?” I asked, pointing into the trees.

Eshalon nodded. "This path is taken by all Jotun, whether honourable or not. If a Jotun is favoured with a proud tale and a life given to the honour of the Code then he will find his way here without penance or torment. If a Jotun has lived a life less given to the Code then all that you have seen previously awaits them first. In the end however, all Jotun must stand here and ponder the paths that lead into the Stone Forest, for it is here that the final measure is taken of whether a Jotun's soul is worth continuation."

I looked into the spreading forest and wondered as to what the Being meant.

"Surely all Jotun find their way to the halls of our ancestors? Can the pain of what I have seen before be endured for no reward?"

Eshalon shook his head and turned to face me. "There are many things about this place that you must understand, and before you are presented to the Dreya this is one of the most important. A Jotun's soul has no value in itself. Remember that Jotun, for it defines everything that will follow. Like all the Oera'dim of your kind, and of the Hresh, the Morg, and yes, even the Mutan of the Clavern'Sigh, it is only the actions of your life that gives merit to your ultimate fate in the Underworld. Your life's hardships gain you entrance to the Gates of Hallen'draal, the honour of your story determines whether you find torment upon the Pillars of Dissolution, or whether you find yourself here untouched and unscourged. But it is what you have left back in the World Above that determines if you are to be given the chance to sit at the tables of your ancestors and enjoy the bounty of the Thralls. It is the memories of your brethren, of your brothers-in-arms, and of your blood line that will see you along the correct path to the halls you seek. A Jotun who has not left in his wake these connections will find no sanctuary in the realm of the Dreya."

"But what will happen to such unfortunates. Are they to wander these forests in limbo, without knowledge or hope of redemption?"

Eshalon pulled away from my side and looked carefully into the forest. I could see that he was reliving an ancient memory of his own.

"There are some of us," he said quietly, "that will never reside in the halls of the ancestors. Some will roam these forests for all eternity, the dissolution of a wasted life leaving no memories of kinship in their wake. These souls cannot be returned to the light above. Some are put to work here in the Dreya's realm, and for them there will never be peace. You must hope Jotun that your life has been one that has given joy and pride to others. In the Stone Forests such connections

are the pass that allows a Jotun to reach out for his ancestors.”

With no further words Eshalon moved deeper into the trees. I followed, unsure of what was to come, my thoughts a tangle of questions and half-answers. The Underworld had been opened to me as more than anything written by the scholars of our kind. Hardship upon the living was met with reward and rest for the dead. Such had been the understanding of our number for millennia. That a Jotun might need to rely on the memories of others to find sanctuary in the halls of the ancestors did not seem prudent or even logical. A hard life gave little room for compassion or kindness; but then maybe that was it, such a gift between the living could not help but be of great value. Still, there was much I needed to consider and many questions that required answers.

“You have mentioned the Dreya on more than one occasion Eshalon. Does that Being reside in the halls as well?”

Eshalon stopped and noted the trees about him. We had travelled only a short distance into the forest but already the heavy trunks had begun to crowd the path's edges.

“The Dreya rules all the Underworld, Jotun. It is her creation and her domain. Even the Silvan Tree does not hold sway here, but I can tell you that she does not sit in court before the Halls of Feasting. That job is left to the Thralls. The Dreya ensures the balance that must be maintained between Above and Below, measuring the actions of your kind in the World Above to the rewards that must be metered here. It is to be your fate amongst all others of your kind that you will soon stand before her, and in doing so give supplication to one of the three Powers of this world.”

Eshalon continued his advance, negotiating a series of forking paths deeper into the forest. As we walked I took the time to look more closely at the great trees that surrounded us and came to realise that the Stone Forest had been aptly named. Each tree of the thousands that thrust into the air about us was made wholly of stone, an exquisitely carved representation in grey that was spared no detail or intricacy. But this was no display of statuary, no cunningly constructed illusion that gave no hint of life or movement. As the wind moved so did the trees, their trunks and branches bending slowly to the gentle pressure of the breeze. As I watched I could see the ripple of a gust of wind travel through the canopy of the trees, disturbing the leaves and sending a shower of twigs and leaf litter into the forest below. Even the undergrowth that sat in thick layers about

the trees was made of the same stone, and beneath their spreading branches I could hear the rustling of the wind through the leaves above, and the crush of paper-thin twigs and fallen leaves at my feet. Within this moving forest of stone I could feel the wind, but I could see nothing of my ancestors.

“How do I call to the memories that shall guide me to the Halls. Should I not test that my life has given pride to others?”

Beneath the spreading limbs of the forest Eshalon did not stop nor did he answer my call. Instead he quickened his pace and motioned impatiently for me to follow. There was something wrong here, and in his haste I sensed that he needed me to move beyond the forest without causing notice. It was something I was not prepared to do.

“Eshalon!” I shouted into the trees. “Give me answer. Your words tell me that I must allow the memories of my brethren to guide me through this place, and yet I find no help here, no word from you as to how I should achieve it. Is my fate to end as you have, to live your eternity at the borders of the Halls without proper reward? Stop now and answer me, for I will not move on until you have done so!”

The Being turned and for a brief moment I saw darkness once again flickering within his form. He advanced purposefully towards me, anger building in his words.

“Do not think Jotun, that you have any say in what happens to you in this place. You are favoured by the Dreya herself in the passage you have been granted through the Underworld, but do not mistake my subservience to her as weakness. I could kill you now as easily as I killed any other Jotun in my life Above. All you need know is that there are reasons for the guidance I have given, and that you should mark my words carefully. You are not required to call for guiding memories because I am here to show you the way. You have been told of what is required in this place purely so that you will know and remember. Now follow me or I will return you to the Pillars of Dissolution and an appointment with the Arbiter.”

To such a declaration there was nothing that could be said. Eshalon returned to the path and I followed.



The Thralls

Within the Stone Forest I walked with Eshalon before me. In the eternal grey of the trees there seemed no end to their reach, no boundary to the immensity of their spreading branches. It was easy to forget that the forest before us was a product of EarthMagic and not of the natural world. The trees swayed to the push of the wind and the path forked through the great trunks as I followed my guide, but I saw nothing of my ancestors, or of any other Jotun searching for the true path that would lead beyond the Forest. It was a long journey that ended within a well-trodden clearing that encircled the threshold of a wide stone staircase.

Before me spiralled upwards a wide stairway, one that used the branches of the trees about it as buttresses to reach high into the air. From the floor of the forest the steps led upwards, twisting tightly as they ascended into the thick canopy of spreading limbs above. Eshalon did not wait to explain but moved onto the stairs and motioned for me to follow. From above there came clearly the sounds of laughter and violence, and they were the voices of Jotun, a multitude engaged in some great carousing. My breath quickened as I began to recognise the sounds of a great feast in progress.

Quickly I made for the stairs and soon caught up with Eshalon.

“These are the sounds of my brethren Eshalon. Are we soon to stand within the halls of the ancestors?”

The Being did not answer. Instead he quickened his pace and moved ahead of me once again. The stairway wound upwards and was unlike anything I had seen before. Within the confines of the great Stone Forest it was as intricately carved as any of the trees that surrounded it. Upon each step was sculpted the history of the Jotun, from their creation as slaves, to the Great Insurrection, and the bloody conflicts that followed. At either side rose balustrades of superbly worked black crystal, cunningly designed and formed to flow as a series of long vines to the canopy above. In the light of the forest it glowed in reflected shards of colour as we made for the opening that was growing in the treetops. From this opening the sounds of the Oera'dim were becoming louder and more urgent.

With haste it did not take long to reach the peak of the great staircase. From its finely carved steps we arose onto a wide landing, and it was from there that I could see we had entered a large circular chamber of cleanly cut black stone. Like the hub of a great wheel I could see eleven long halls extending as spokes out into the distance,

and each hall was filled with Jotun, enjoying vast tables of food and wine, engaged in a riotous indulgence of everything that was sparse in the world Above. For long moments I watched as warriors from every Age of the world ate, drank and fought in a violent and uncontrolled melee. It was Paradise and I had found it at last, but it was not mine to enjoy.

It was Eshalon who stood before me and barred my way. "You may look Jotun, but the halls of the ancestors will not be yours to sample. The Dreya has given thought to your fate and it does not reside here."

"What do you mean?" I cried out in dismay. "Have I not given all that an Oera'dim must give to pass into such paradise. Is it not my right to rest with my brethren?"

Eshalon raised his warhammer as if about to attack, but then thought the better of it. He was not used to being questioned, however the Dreya's words had been unequivocal.

"In this matter there is no discussion. As with all that you have seen before, the Halls of Feasting are not for you. Instead you must see and remember, and as is my command I must explain what lays before you so that you may understand it better."

In a rage I pushed the Being aside and strode for the nearest hall. "You may have your orders but I know what is mine by right. Do not try and stop me."

As my words died upon the air a rush of wind sliced past my shoulder and the long haft of a warhammer pounded across my shins. With legs thrown out from under me I toppled to the ground, and in this ungainly position was dealt the indignity of having the Being's foot firmly planted on my chest.

"Is it such these days," Eshalon spat as he leaned his weight further upon my chest, "that a Jotun does not have the good sense to know when he is being offered something far greater than paradise? Is it necessary that I must knock such sense into your thick head?"

I could not understand what the Being meant but his strength was great, and he did not seem to be expending much of it in his hold upon me. It was time to be smarter than I had been.

"You say that you offer something greater than Paradise. What could there be in this Underworld that might exceed the bounty of these Halls of Feasting?"

Eshalon removed his foot from my chest and extended his hand to aid my rising.

"What indeed Jotun. Look into the Halls and tell me what it is you

see.”

The Being let me rise, and with my dignity barely intact I looked more keenly into the long Halls. Each was a vast arched gallery maybe fifty times as long as it was wide. Down the centre of each hall sat a continuous table laid heavy with foods and all manner of drink. As I had seen before there sat at each side of each table Jotun engaged in feasting and fighting, a great multitude of warriors indulging in every manner of excess that was unavailable to those who lived sparsely in the world Above. But as I looked closer there was indeed much more to be seen. Moving quickly in amongst the carousing Jotun were just as many of the dark pain-shadows, serving diligently to every need of their new masters. More intriguing a sight though could be seen at the end of each hall. Upon a raised platform sat a single figure robed in black, enthroned upon a glistening chair of precious metals. The dark aura of the pain-shadows hung heavily like a thick fog about each of these figures, and they sent chills across my shoulders if I chose to look upon them too closely.

“Who are those beings Eshalon? It is a malevolent presence that fills the air they breathe, and I can sense anger and fear twisted like a coiled rope about them. They are being held against their will are they not?”

Eshalon nodded and pointed to the darkest of those figures ahead of us. “These are the Thralls Jotun, entombed here by the Dreya to do her bidding, and to service every need asked for, or thought of, by the Jotun who find a place at the tables. It is from the Thralls that the Dreyadim, who you have called Pain Shadows, take order and direction to meet the needs of their masters. Do you not think it fitting that the hardship and pain of your lives should not be made to serve you in the Underworld. I can think of no better undertaking for such creatures.”

“But who are the Thralls? What manner of Being could just sit and watch such excess without partaking themselves?”

Eshalon smiled and once again stood between myself and the entrance to the nearest hall. There was an expectation of secrets uncovered in his voice and he spoke the answer carefully.

“Those Beings you speak of are old. They have been kept here since the creation of the Oera'dim, and of the Underworld itself. Just as the Dreyadim serve their masters so do the Thralls serve the Dreya. Would it surprise you to learn that these Beings who we call Thralls were once Trell'sara, the very Ancients that first created the Hresh and

then your kind? For their arrogance and treachery they were taken by the Dreya and subjugated to her will. Is it not also fitting that those who were once your masters, and who created such imbalance in the world, should now serve your every need as well?"

"The Trell'sara...?" Memories flooded back of the Great Insurrection and the blood I had spilled to rid their kind from the world. It had been centuries ago but the stink of their cruelty was still fresh, a lingering taste that sat bitter upon the edges of my mouth. It would be good to kill them for a second time.

In one swift movement I grabbed up Eshalon's warhammer, but it dissolved away in my hands. The Being was not about to let me enter the halls to visit vengeance upon any of the Thralls. Instead he punched out with a closed fist and knocked me to the stone floor once again.

"Do not think these Ancients are anything like those we destroyed at Nem'haleen Jotun. These are just as you have seen with the Dreyadim, nothing more than whining shadows, bound to their precious thrones and unable to do naught but answer the needs of those that sit before them. Their fate is eternal, and while there is need for the Underworld they shall remain here. After all Jotun, what could be the greater torment? To die quickly from the blow of an enemy, or to be a Being of sloth and indulgence forever to sit at the edge of a great feast and never partake? It is a fitting end to a corrupted and arrogant race."

Above the clamour of a great fight that had started within one of the Halls, Eshalon turned to the centre of the chamber and stood within a small circle of grey stone. Upon its surface was etched the silhouette of a great tree, its branches a tangle of many limbs completely black against the grey stone.

"Come now Jotun, for we must leave and make for your next encounter. There are few who will ever see what will now unfold. It is best that you keep your mouth shut until you understand what it is that will arise before you."

I walked over to the circle of stone but my eyes were fixed upon the Halls of Feasting. What could possibly give a warrior greater reward? I was soon to find out.



The Dreya Tree

With my eyes still fixed upon the Halls I stepped onto the circle of stone and immediately the halls of my ancestors disappeared. In the bright void that wrapped itself around myself and Eshalon only the small circle of stone remained distinct beneath our feet. I could not know what was to happen next but Eshalon quickly changed, his form dissolving into the chaotic flickering of a Dreyadim. Within this space he did not leave me. Instead we both remained within the sanctuary of the circle as the void expanded.

About us the colourless space grew, its boundaries rushing outwards as we stood within the circle. For some time the dimensions of the void increased until a dark shadow began to appear directly above us. At the edges of our vision it was nothing but a smudge that quickly took form as the outline of a vast dark tree. As it grew to clarity the void began to shrink away, and as it did so the circle of stone rushed towards the Dreya. Only as we approached closer did I realise the size of the Being I was about to confront.

As wide as the plains of the north and as tall as the sky itself the vast tree dominated the void. Within its bed of nothingness it slowly rotated, a monstrous silhouette of black crystal that spread its reach in all directions, small glistenings of reflected light the only clue to its crystalline composition. About it however, spread a cloud of dark grey vapours, and as we came closer these solidified into the identifiable shapes of the Dreyadim, millions of them, all supplicated to the will of the Tree, contorted in a melee of swirling, rushing pain. It was vast and terrifying, and as we came to a halt before it I could feel a deep malevolence in its brooding form. As much as it ruled over the Underworld, it also fed from it, the pain and suffering of its charges its lifeblood.

In the void dominated by the Dreya we waited, and it was only when Eshalon placed his vaporous hand upon my shoulder and forced me to kneel did the Dark Tree speak.

“Greetings Jotun. I trust that Eshalon has shown you through my realm?”

Before such a Power there could be no arrogant banter. The Arbiter was one thing, the Dreya something completely different. I decided to take Eshalon's advice and say little.

“Yes Great Dreya. Your servant has been diligent in his attentions to his duty.”

“And what do you think of it? Does it meet your expectations for

the afterlife?"

On this I looked to Eshalon for guidance but his face was a chaotic vapour of swirling darkness that said nothing. I would get no help there.

"Your realm is as vast as the multitudes it services, and holds secrets that I cannot fathom. It is in truth a mystery that would surprise any Jotun who might gain passage beyond the Gates of Hallen'draal."

To this the Dreya remained silent, but only for a short time. When she replied to my words it was to Eshalon that she favoured.

"Indeed Dreyadim you have chosen well. This Jotun will serve the purposes of True Witness to my domain. Take your leave and receive the rewards promised."

Eshalon removed his hand from my shoulder and bent low to whisper one final piece of advice.

"Listen to what the Dreya has to say. She gives pain as easily as she feeds from it, but she will always keep her word."

With that Eshalon faded from my side and I never saw him again. Standing upon the circle of stone I was once again alone, without weapon to defend myself or reason for being there. I could do nothing but wait for the Dark Tree to speak.

"Tell me Jotun, what is your name?"

It was a simple question, but one the Dreya already knew the answer to.

"I am a Jotun of the Western World, my name known to all those who have shared the hardships of a harsh existence at my side. In this place my name seems of little moment for I am simply one soul amongst a great multitude. Great Dreya, why am I here?"

The Dark Tree ignored my question for it is a fact that the Powers of the world need not explain themselves. Instead the Dreya grew larger before me and continued her interrogation.

"Tell me Jotun, do you follow the Code of your ancestors?"

"It has been the guide for my life in the world." I replied honestly.

"And do you understand the reasoning of its regulation?" The Dreya was testing me, looking for something in my answers that might prove me false.

"Its only purpose is to bring Order to Chaos, to give direction to my kind, for without it we would all falter and descend into violence and self-destruction."

The Dark Tree was silent once again, but when it resumed there

were no more questions.

“It would seem Jotun, that you are a rare Being indeed in a world that has strayed far from the tenets of the Code. Eshalon has told you of the need my realm fulfils. To bring balance back to the world Above after the arrogance of the Trell'sara almost brought it to dissolution. Indeed Jotun, just as you have felt the pain of separation from your Dreyadim, so have I felt the torment of separation from the Silvan Tree. What you see before you is the manifestation of the pain and destruction wrought by the Ancients when they threw down the Silvan Tree and took mastery of the world for themselves. It is a delicate balance that must be preserved, and I have brought you here to play a part in that preservation.”

“You have seen the Pillars of Dissolution, and the violence of the Trial Grounds. Did you not notice that such fields of pain have little room to spare? There was a time when most who made the journey to the Underworld would take their place in the Halls of Feasting, be given their just reward for a harsh but ordered life, and then be returned to the world Above to continue the Great Cycle for which we must all take a part. Such is no longer the case. Too much of the weight of this realm is expended on the scourging of those who have strayed too far from the Code. The Oera'dim of the world Above must be reminded of what awaits them after a dishonourable life. It is you that I have chosen to deliver that reminder.”

“From this place it is my wish that you be returned to the world Above, to take your place once again as a Jotun of the Western World. The spark of life will be returned to you, and another span of three hundred years and a day given for you to complete the task. It will be no easy purpose, but as a True Witness you may tell all who might listen the tale of your journey here, and bring the Jotun of the World back to the Code, sparing them from the torment of Scourging. This is my wish. What say you?”

For a long time I stood before the Dreya and considered her words. Such things should not be decided quickly but I could see little choice in the matter. To have the opportunity to live another span of years, and to return to my people with the knowledge of the Underworld intact, would indeed send many more of my kind to the Halls that they deserved. But the Code is specific on how such bargains must be struck, and even a Power of the world was bound by it. A promise of great value must be balanced by another of equal moment.

“What you ask of me Dreya is of great value to you, yet it would

seem that all I shall obtain from the balance of this understanding is a further life of hardship, removed from the rewards that I should already have won in the halls of my ancestors. What boon may you lay at my feet that will compensate me for the uncertain future you have prescribed?"

The Dreya understood the nature of my request and responded in kind.

"It is true that you shall be deprived of your just reward, but the boon you shall receive will come in two forms. Firstly, if your task is completed faithfully, your brethren shall be spared the trials of scourging and combat. On this matter do not underestimate the burden that you shall be removing from them in the Underworld. Secondly, and this is a personal boon, one that will be known only to yourself, I shall remove the power of the Word of Command from you and your bloodline for all eternity. You shall remain Unfettered by the repression of the Mutan, and give obedience only to the Code and the task I have set before you. Is this not sufficient?"

As the Dreya loomed before me I sank to one knee and placed my hands together over my head. In this matter the Dreya was now my master.

"It is sufficient. As prescribed by the burden of your charge I shall act as True Witness to the consequences of transgressing the Code. I shall travel the lands of the Oera'dim and spread a true account of what shall happen to those who do not heed its tenets. In this I shall remain diligent until the passing of my Last Day."

"Then we have an agreement Jotun. Turn your back on me and prepare to return Above."

The Horns of Gorgoroth

I turned my back on the Dark Tree and waited for my return to the world Above. About me the void remained its dull grey, but from its roiling borders I could see the faintest of movements. Like vapours writhing within a wind-blown fog the edges of the void began to spiral, turning on a great axis as I waited at its centre. Behind me I felt the presence of the Dreya lessen and then disappear. Alone in the centre of a sphere of rushing wind and cloud I struggled to maintain a footing upon the stone circle. It came to me instinctively that I should not fall from its hard surface, and as the noise of a great maelstrom built within the void so did its energy grow more violent. Rushing

vapours quickly became bands of speeding mist, spiralling about my position in an ever tightening coil of unrestrained power. From about its edges there arose great arcs of lightning, and the crash of endless rolls of booming thunder that echoed within the sphere, as drumbeats heralding my return to the World. Accosted by such forces I knelt upon the stone beneath me and held on with all the strength at my command.

Faster the vapours swirled and within the movement of grey I began to see the first hints of colour. At first it was strands of blue above me, mixed within the swirling clouds of vapour, then the subtle hues of sand and hard stone. As I hung on grimly to the circle, the void about me changed, visions of sky and great expanses of open ground flickering within the swirling melee of colour and rushing mist.

Within the spinning sphere I waited for my return to the World Above, and it came quickly. As the world of sand and stone became more distinct, so did the circle of stone beneath me begin to revolve, spinning against the currents that rushed about me. In a dizzying mesh of nausea and disorientation I felt my arms giving way and then I toppled sideways, off the stone and hard into the landscape that had materialised around me. With one jarring rush of pain I hit the ground, and was thrown forward in a rolling tangle of limbs and clouding dust. In such a manner I arrived back in the world of the living.

For a long moment I lay upon the ground, collecting my thoughts as vertigo clung like a parasite to my head. I knew exactly where I was, for all Jotun find the first glimmer of their consciousness in a similar manner. My new span of three hundred years and a day had begun as all others had, disoriented and covered in dust between the peaks of Gorgoroth. Here were the Birthing Grounds of the Oera'dim, and all who had been given their time within the halls of the ancestors continued the cycle of life between these sacred peaks. But this time it was different. Unlike all previous Jotun of all the ages of the world I returned from the Underworld with my memories intact, and with the mission of the Dreya fresh in my thoughts.

And this was not all I had been given. Upon my right arm had been burned the symbols of the Dreya, and upon my face the three tears cut beneath my right eye. In this way I had been marked by the Dark Tree as a slave of her will, unable to escape the imperative of my mission and the promises I had given.

Carefully I raised myself from the dirt and brushed myself down. Gone was the enfeebled body of a Jotun, the spark of his existence faltering in the gloom of his Last Day. Instead I arose from the ground as a young Being, strong of limb and with the flame of life burning brightly within. This was my First Day, and in the glare of the world's two suns I knew I had a story to tell.

THE END

Parable of the Unwary Traveller and the Maiden of Despair

:edda ndehr dromannion; peneth; adehr vana u nar keld:



Long before the coming of Men there lived in the far south of the world a great Chieftain, known to his people as Braga. In his way he was a Jotun of great renown, a strong leader and a mighty warrior, a being whose power grew to encompass all the lands of the Oldemai Jotun. To his people he was a leader, a firm foundation upon which the communities of the Jotun flourished, but in his own home life was in uproar.

Braga ruled his lands but he did not rule his home. Within his Kraal he had eleven sons, all but one of whom would grow in their time to be great warriors. The youngest however, had no ambitions for leadership or the honour that could be found in combat. For him, life was an exercise in indulgence, one where the advice and remonstrations of his father held little weight. He was a Jotun, but he carried himself with the same lack of care or discipline as any of the Ancients. Within the Kraal of his father he was despised by all.

For Braga there was little that could be done. Without discipline and honour a Jotun was nothing but a brute, a creature of the Trell'sara fit for nothing more than digging in the pits of their ancient masters. The Chief knew that he needed to teach his youngest a lesson and after much indecision issued an isdari against his son. For the Oldemai it was the worst of punishments. Banished to the roads and wastelands the youngest son of Braga became a being without name or honour, to be shunned by all for might meet him. His fate that of a traveller without home or heritage, to be given no comfort or succour in the long years that the edict would remain in force. In Braga's mind his youngest would need to learn self-reliance and discipline in the hardest way possible. And so it was that the Jotun that now had no name was thrust out into a harsh world, there to learn for himself the meaning of hardship and discipline.

In this way the years passed, and the Jotun, who became known to latter generations as the Unwary Traveller, walked the long paths of the wastelands, finding food where he could and harbouring a deep

hatred for his father and the honour of his ancestors. Such would have been the way of his life but for a chance meeting upon the open road. It would be his doom that on a bitterly cold night he would cross paths with the Maiden of Despair.



Within the blustering winds of an encroaching winter the Unwary Traveller heard the soft sounds of sobbing. In the vast spaces of the grasslands it came to him as a mournful, plaintive call wafting upon the breeze, drawing him to an outcrop of rock and then into a small enclave of stone within. There he found wrapped in moonlight a maiden, crouching upon the ground beside a small withered tree. Her sobs came as rivers of tears that flowed onto the enclave floor and settled around the dying roots of the plant.

Such was the travail in her eyes that the Unwary Traveller could not resist. He asked her what was wrong and she answered him.

"Sire, I have been banished from my home and find myself here in the dark recesses of this outcrop, without friend or family. How can I live in such a barren place? What is to become of me?"

The Unwary Traveller took pity on the maiden and gave her the last of his food and water. In gratitude she hugged him and ran from the outcrop into the dark of night. The Jotun followed but found her gone, disappeared into the shadows of the evening. With a shrug he turned back to the enclave and decided that if he was to be hungry he might as well use the shelter of the outcrop to sleep away the night. The maiden would need it no longer.

With the sounds of a storm growing upon the horizon the Unwary Traveller made himself comfortable to sleep. Outside the storm grew and then overtook the Jotun's shelter. It was a great tempest that lashed the lands around him, but within the protection of the enclave he was safe. For the first time in many months he slept well, sure in the knowledge that the solid walls of the outcrop would protect him.

In the morning he awoke to find a most wondrous boon before him. During the night the withered tree had grown strong and tall, its branches reaching to cover the roof of his shelter. As he stood he noticed also the tree was heavy with fruit, and within the confines of the outcrop it gave off a heady sweet smell that was irresistible. Hungry and without the means to obtain food it was a boon that the

Jotun could not ignore. He took one of the fruit and bit hard into its soft flesh. Then he took another and another. Such a feast he had never experienced. Each fruit gave off a different taste and soon his mouth was full of the flavours of meat, cake and more fruits than he had thought existed in the wide world.

The privations of his life, and the lessons he had learned on the road, were forgotten as the fruits took a hold of him. It was a spell that they weaved, one that kept him within the enclave, feasting on the tree's bounty for many days. The bone and sinew of his hard existence disappeared beneath the effects of his gluttony. Too long deprived of the indolence he so greatly craved he fell back into sloth, eating from the tree and relaxing beneath its spreading branches. The tree was all too happy to provide, but never once did the Jotun think on what was happening. In his mind life owed him an existence and this, he thought, was his repayment for the hardships of his banishment. All too soon he would find that everything has its cost.



The day came when the Unwary Traveller had eaten his fill and could eat no more. Satiated to a point that even the spell woven by the tree could not force him to eat another piece of fruit, he lay upon the ground of the enclave and pondered his good fortune. Today however, would be the day that he would pay the cost for his indulgence.

In the darkening hours there came from outside the soft voice of the Maiden. In the lilting tones of her approach the Jotun heard the sorrow and despair that she still felt, and called her to come inside and eat from the fruits of the Tree. For indeed it was in his thoughts that such a feast would make even her black mood falter. But it was not the Maiden that entered the dark enclave. In her place passed the malevolent form of a *dweo'gorga*, a shape-shifter of the ancient days, its body formed as a Reaver and its appetite one to match. "Do not worry," it said in the same soft voice as the Maiden, "I shall indeed feed upon the bounty of the Tree."

In those morning hours the screams of the Jotun echoed across the plains but there was no-one to hear. The *dweo'gorga* took its time. It had been waiting for its prey to take its fill of the tree, and now it would enjoy the fruits of its patience. In those hours the son of Braga paid the cost of his gluttony, and he was never heard of again.

It is said that for the Jotun this is a cautionary tale, one that reinforces the idea that it is only discipline and honour that keeps a Jotun alive in a harsh world. The son of Braga had chosen to ignore the one rule that governs the lives of the Oera'dim in Arborell, and had paid a high price for that oversight. In a world ruled by magic anything is possible, and nothing need be as it seems. In Arborell you can take nothing for granted.

THE END

Here can be found the first four paragraphs of this tale of the Unwary Traveller
as found in their original Haeral

:edda ndehr dromannion; peneth; adehr vana u nar keld:



:thaal u amaar dehr commel nar meduine pelloth duelil odehr peneth suud emurion e tuan; surgis; maaten ahn medu duril ce ,braga,: oel medu velle hae vas e jotuni nar surgis mara, e tuan; hedjel; a e hreshna; hedda; e oeradim dueneth u shaneth ashana ahn menon alle dehr orelim odehr jotunii; oldemai: ahn medu duril hae vas e tuan, e vor nethelas hald u volsh dehr kraalim ndehr jotunii kumanil, ilen oel medu mahren heim duil vas oel feonath:

:braga, regil medu orelim ilen hae vael phenath regem medu heim: neesal medu kraal hae taag faermarim; enkelen;, alle ilen en nar daen tanah ashan oel duath sol ahn cem hreshna; surgis: dehr allasaal aphall, taag sewe ysahda lael tuanwch yal dehr honorum gehl lenen cem iphar oel Maul: lael maduine, duil vas del inena oel vastal, en voher dehr kahaer nar medu pahda menah oph malad: hae vas e jotuni, ilen hae maagil u macayor naman dehr uim hunn nar pad yal hepard ce ahna ndehr trellsara: neesal dehr kraal nar medu pahda hae vas u nelaniel nelm alle:

:lael braga pelloth u vas oph gehl lenen cem arbel: vidut hepahd a honorum e jotuni vas nuul ilen e morda, e oera ndehr trellsara share lael nuul paar melaph duriel odehr ahbeth nar pelloth maturim; aald: braga maet u gehl hae salail ahn elimus medu allasaal e pahdon a calaph u caal neaphana shenil del isdari fendel medu faerma: lael dehr jotunii; oldemai; et vas dehr dweopheth nar pelkaan: isdaril ahn dehr culwim a tyrveld dehr faerma; allasaal; nar braga hevon e oeradim vidut muath yal honorum, ahn u cem nelaniel nelm alle: medu ahmet u gehl nar e dromannion vidut heim yal melloth, ahn u cem ynethul sewe vallor

yal cip odehr feonim; thaal; u gehl dehr isdari tanah shuun oel menin: oel braga; palothim medu allasaal tanah salal ahn shadel hepahd odehr kepfaal velle cordahl: a se et vas u gehl dehr jotuni u gehl rein taag sewe muath vas adaphil oelva e emur; veden;, pelloth ahn shadel u lael macayor dehr cahna nar kepaal a hepahd:

:oel viis valle dehr feonim enkathil, a dehr jotuni, duen hevon maaten ahn kahnenon faerduim ce dehr dromannion; peneth;, narmil dehr thaal hoewim ndehr tyrveld, cryenel edas voher hae lenen a fedath e raas u lanfeor lael medu pahda adehr honorum ndehr feallim: venen tanah eron sindur dehr velle nar medu duil ilen lael e elj moot hald dehr ahno culwch: et u tanah cem haes morga u gehl pa e keeshon dalem u dreyenheim hae tanah avandil hoewim naman dehr vana u nar keld:



:enkara:

The Oera'dim Song of Regret, as recorded and then translated by
the Maturi Hedj on his journey to the Lands of Perdition



How is it we have come to this?
Another day begins,
to dwell as strangers in wasted lands,
to mourn for that which we have lost,
Wise Gedhru,
how has it come to this?

What must we do beyond this breaking dawn,
to find our way back home.
to live our chosen days in peace,
and feel warmth again in daylight's touch,
Wise Aume,
how has it come to this?

Must there come another day,
as the suns rise from the east,
that we stand in thrall of barren ground,
and feel no grace in summer storm,
Wise Elanna,
how has it come to this?

Show us now what must we do,
for this long journey to find its end,
and the hard days of our travail,
to slip as memories into dust.
Lost Shabel,
how has it come to this?

MYTHOLOGY OF THE OERA'DIM

WITHIN THESE PAGES CAN BE FOUND THE HISTORIES OF THE OERA'DIM, AS TOLD BY THE LIVING BOOKS OF THE HRESH'NA AND BROUGHT TO LIFE BY SCHOLARS OF THE REALMS OF MEN.

THIS COMPILATION INCLUDES:

THE SORROWS OF GEDHRU AND AUME
HAMULKUK AND THE MOON DRAGONS
THE HAMMER AND THE DARKNESS
GHERED WHO FOUND PURPOSE
THE BOOK OF SCARS
THE UPWARY TRAVELLER AND THE
MAIDEN OF DESPAIR
THE ENKARA

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