

Stephen Huff's

Chronicles of War

Saga First

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Stephen Huff

The Warfarer's Exodus



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1

Before the Wall

The ritual of Alcorde was but a moldering ember of memory in his mind. It would soon die, and with it his last hopes. Already its warmth was so dim as to be nothing more than a soft glow in the ashes of his thoughts.

They had praised him. They had showered him with riches he could never spend. They had sung of his courage from dusk to dawn, and virgins had thrown themselves at his feet, yearning to be spent at his pleasure. All the land's male children fortunate (or hapless) enough to be born on that bright day had been given his name. And for a moment, a mad, illustrious moment, all the eyes of the world had seemed to be turned in his direction. Every mouth had blessed him at once. All the peoples of the scattered lands had come to escort him triumphantly through the city walls. Now...

Now, where were they?

Epsilon glowered fiercely and swept his stern gaze about the room. He was sitting on a bench in a corner, a window at his right hand. No table squatted between his legs, leaving his range of movement clear and unobstructed. A great horn of ale reclined on the windowsill, but the drink was long forgotten. He hadn't ordered it and had no interest in its assets. Instead, he fished a wad of jillroot from a hide pouch on his belt and bit off a mouthful of the powerful stimulant. Masticating slowly, Epsilon glowered more deeply still and watched as a small throng of babbling locals gathered at the opposite end of the room.

Their conversation was hushed and secretive. Epsilon could not hear their words, but heads often popped up above the pack to glance in his direction, so he knew what they were discussing.

It will come soon enough, now, sighed the sacrificial hero. I had hoped to find peace here, at the end of the road... one last night as a human being. Here, at the gods' forsaken toenails of Empire, here, a half a thousand leagues from Capitol Tesla, here I had hoped to find ignorance and anonymity.

But this was not to be. The livery of the Emperor's Warfarer was subtle and somber, of dark colors and bland silhouette, but it was nearly as well known as that of the Emperor's own House. This despite the fact that there never had been and never could be more than a single Warfarer to serve all of Empire at any one time.

Epsilon's dubious powers were not a birthright, and neither had they been casually bestowed. He had maimed or slain a hundred men on Tesla's bloody court fields to win the right

to wear the Warfarer's colors. Such was the nature of the Ritual of Alcorde. Many were called to combat, but only one could prevail. And that one was as surely doomed by winning as he might have been damned for losing. For winning was a death, of itself. But a much slower, more brutal death than any single sword stroke could ever be. Though he was only four months the outcast from Tesla, Epsilon had found himself regretting his fate many times over, almost nightly in fact.

Indeed, he was regretting it even now. As a big man separated from the suddenly hushed congregation in the far corner, Epsilon bit off another thick wad of jillroot and stowed the remainder of the cake in its pouch. His right hand came to rest on the pommel of the Warfarer's immaculate broadsword, while his left found the comforting support of a long dagger's jutting haft. Epsilon slid his feet beneath the bench warily, ready to spring into battle at a heart's beat notice.

The big man approached cautiously, his hands emptily clutching air, a sure sign of nerves. Though his own sword dangled readily from a worn belt that crossed his chest, the local didn't seem inclined to fight. Epsilon relaxed a bit, but only a very tiny little bit.

"Hail, Holy Warrior. Gods save the Emperor and His Holy Empire!"

Epsilon frowned and farted in the same instant. "There's nothing holy about me or the bloody empire. Or the Emperor, for that matter."

Hushed expectantly to witness the big man's attempt, the throng gasped in unison and covered their ears. Even their spokesman seemed aghast by Epsilon's words. He stood there uncertainly, his face blanched pale, his mouth working open and closed, open and closed.

The sacrificial hero spat a wad of spent jill to the wooden floor and wiped the back of his left hand across his mouth. His right remained still and firm. "What would you have of me, citizen? I am not long for this world, and do not like to waste my breath pattering."

After but a moment's further hesitation (which earned Epsilon's praise of the big peasant's courage), the spokesman made a sign of penance to an unannounced god and stammered, "Forgive me, Warfarer, but your oath was black enough to curl a drunken friar's whiskers. No other man would dare say such things!"

"Aye, no other man. But many truths are left long unspoken. Save for the Emperor, Himself, I alone need not fear my head for such paltry crimes. Just as I might deem your own head a trophy and take it without fear of recrimination. From man or god. Or emperor. Now again, good citizen, what would you have of me? And I warn you to speak surely this time, ere my patience wanes."

"Of course." The big man cleared his throat. "I am Deldric of the Farther Heights. I--er, that is, We would have nothing of you, sire, save your good cheer. Pardon my blunt tongue. I know nothing of courtly ways and gestures, but I do know something of black brows. And yours seems the blackest I have ever seen..." Deldric's voice trailed off into a mumble. As a bird hobbling before the serpent, the peasant found himself enthralled in the Warfarer's deep green eyes. The depths of that steely gaze were unfathomable. Unfathomable like the deepest of seas. And, like the seas, the cool, potent restlessness of Epsilon's gaze seemed to promise death and harbor corpses deep down inside.

To save time, Epsilon glanced quickly away and reached for his forgotten ale. Rinsing his mouth, the Warfarer spat a blackened offal to the floor and took another sip of the heady liquid to wash his jill-numbed throat.

Deldric quickly found his tongue and continued, "I--We thought to offer you meat and drink and... and women... to afford you good cheer this night. The Great Barricade lies only half a league to southward, an hour's walk, no more. And, though the Roaring Lion isn't much of an inn and even less so a public hall, you will find nothing like her in the Wilderlands." The big man stopped speaking a moment, both to catch his breath and to listen. When Epsilon made no immediate move to accept, he started up again, less confident than before. "And if you would shun our company, then this also will we allow you graciously. We will all go in peace early to our blankets and leave you to yourself... but..."

Epsilon sighed and sipped at his beer again. It was shockingly good. He enjoyed another, longer quaff and set the horn back on the sill. "But you desire a favor of me, no? A bauble, a bead, something to remember the Emperor's Warfarer by, when you are old and your grandchildren pester you for firelight's tales?"

"Well, uhm, yes, forgive me, lord. Forgive us all." Deldric cleared his throat again and shuffled about hesitantly. "But this is a small, forgotten outpost town. The highway is nothing more than a cart track out here, and nothing wondrous and no one great passes this way. Indeed, you would be remembered unto our grandchildren's grandchildren even were you to do nothing more than urinate against the great oak at the town's center. So we are understandably weak in

your presence. Weak and timid and yet eager to share your holy quest in even the slightest regard. And, yes, I am sent to beg for favors." The peasant made that same curious motion of piety with his hands and dropped halfway to his knee in a passable imitation of a bow.

"Favors," scoffed the hero. "I also would have favors. I would have the simple favor of knowing a dawn un-coveted, a night un-feared. I would have the simple favor of being a thousand leagues from the Wilderlands and walking in the opposite direction." The jillroot had mixed with the ale in his empty gut, suddenly loosening his normally reticent tongue and washing his body with successive tides of euphoria. Epsilon rode them out, declaring, "You said mine was the blackest brow you had ever seen. Is this so surprising? It is black with hate, for I am filled up to overflowing with the Emperor's savage hates! My veins do not run with blood, but with blood lusts! BEHOLD!" he bellowed at the top of his throat, jerking roughly to his feet. "The sword unsheathed! Death, cold and unyielding!" The Warfarer drew his great blade, its upward swing only just clearing the high, sooty ceiling. It whipped around and around his head, a silver blur of highly polished steel that moaned and sang a morbid, sanguine song. Epsilon laughed cruelly to see their fear. Deldric stumbled backward, falling, his eyes wide and full of his own short destiny. The sacrificial hero took a decisive step forward and let his blade fall in a blinding flash of lamplight, crying, "You desire of death favors? FAVORS?"

With a crisp smack of parting leather, Epsilon cut away the big man's leathern braces and belt. His blade was back in the air again in an instant, dancing psychotically about. "What favor would you have to remember death by, my friend?" he cried out, letting the blade fall yet again.

This time Deldric's tunic fell prey, and parted in a slash across the breast. The Warfarer's sword soared and danced above his head again, while he took another step forward to follow the scrambling peasant. "A mere stump? Hmm? Would you lose an eye?" the blade fell again, slicing the big man's thick tunic once more, this time across the back of the shoulders. And twice again in rapid succession along both sleeves as Deldric vainly raised his arms to ward off murder. His outer garment in rags so they tangled his crawling limbs, the hapless victim tore the rest of the jacket away in the course of his mad flight. "Such are the favors of a death un-dealt, Deldric of the Farther Heights!" Epsilon sliced off the man's pantaloons, which was no easy task and which required many slashing flashes of his dancing blade. "Or I might run you through, just there, in the meaty portion of your thigh!" Another sweep of steel severed a second waist belt that held up Deldric's underpants. "You would not die, but, by the gods of war, you would have gained something to remember." Now the swordsman scooped up the peasant's linen hat with the point of his sadistic blade and tossed it high in the air. Epsilon hurled himself into a gyration of motion that sent his weapon back and forth before him in a deadly hail of blows. "And you would remember it with every step for the rest of your life!"

The remains of Deldric's diced hat settled to the floor in a snowfall of pieces, and the Warfarer's sword screamed out in impotent rage as he sheathed it once more, laughing. With a flourish and pass of his left hand, Epsilon indicated the big man's scattered clothing. "Behold, your favors! Fourteen pieces for fourteen would-be grandfathers. And for you, Citizen Deldric,"

Epsilon extended his mailed hand to help the forester to his feet, "For you, the tale, and no need to exaggerate its terror!"

Fourteen throats erupted with laughter and twenty eight feet (actually, twenty seven feet and one wooden peg) made a noisy dash for the souvenirs. Deldric grinned, abashed, and wrapped his stained under garments as he stood. Nothing delicate fell out, so he was at least spared that embarrassment.

Holding his wrap with one hand and scratching his balding pate with the other, the big forester grinned and worked his mouth open and shut a few times ineffectually. Somebody in the crowd saved him the trouble of speaking with a shout of, "Gods save the Emperor! Gods save His Warfarer!" Deldric had a horn of ale thrust into his big, beefy palms and joined in a second and third chorus of this toast.

But Epsilon turned his back to the crowd to resume his place in the corner. The effects of the jillroot were wearing off, and he was suddenly sorry to have stirred up the crowd.

Now they'll want to drink and talk all the night long. He sighed wearily and rubbed his temples underneath the padding of his heavy helm. Another cheer was raised, this time to the Wayfarer's renowned and holy sword. With that, Epsilon felt he'd had enough, and he bellowed, "BE SILENT!" Which effect was instantly achieved.

"You have been most gracious hosts," he added after the squirming eels in his guts were stilled. "It is not often that a man is offered that which he most desires. And I desire this night the shelter of your Roaring Lion, void of its noisy patrons. Tomorrow I will open the Barricade's

ponderous gates and journey into the Wilderlands beyond. Tonight I would eat and drink and rest in peace with a roof over my head and a thick wall at my back. Will you serve me so, or were your enticing words as empty as my angry stomach?"

"No, indeed," declared Deldric as he herded the others toward the open door. Many had in fact already turned and walked out into the night, secretly grateful to escape so obvious and frightening a madman. "You will have all as promised. Food and drink and isolation in which to enjoy it. We are much in your debt, lord, much in your debt." The half naked peasant paused in the doorway to pull a thick hide curtain into place to keep out the night noises. Turning back, he indicated another curtained doorway, presumably the kitchen. "M'selle Crow is an ugly wench, but a fine cook and malter of ale. Eh, Mary?" he called to the woman, unseen. "She'll tend you well. Just knock your mug or fork on the table. Well," he hedged, reluctant to so quickly part from the presence of greatness. "Oh! And if it is girls you want... or boys... just you let Mary know about that, too, she'll-"

"I won't," interrupted the Warfarer. The Ritual of Alcorde demanded celibacy while away on Exodus. "But I am suddenly in desire of good company. Your courage and manner of speech have earned you a place at my table if you would have it."

"I would be honored, sire!" belched Deldric, suddenly animated. But he caught himself halfway across the floor, remembering his nakedness. A nasty thought seemed to have struck him squarely between the eyes. "Beg pardon, sir, but if it is your intention to cut off more of my

clothing, maybe I should hurry home to robe myself. I have not much more than flesh left to pleasure you."

Epsilon smiled slightly, a mere twitch at the corners of his pursed lips. He reached for the cake of jill root again. It helped to ease the constant ache of an old wound, as well as the ache of an unsleeping conscience. "Have no fears, Deldric of the Farther Heights, my play is ended. Don that cloak, and tie it about your ample gut. That should keep you warm enough. You may eat at that table by the fire, and I will eat off the sill." As Deldric finished dressing and took his assigned seat, the Warfarer added, "Call the wench. We shall want bread and a joint, and some cheese, if it is not too stale. And more ale."

"Of course!" beamed the forester happily, "Mary, you heard the gentleman! And be quick about it!"

"Aaa," brayed a cackling, unsteady voice, "Be quick, yourself, Deldric Soldwin's son. This be my house you are in, do not forget!" A crashing sound of falling flatware punctuated her words.

Deldric smiled crookedly and ran his right hand through the weeds grown out of the sides of his head. As any balding man might, he seemed to regret the loss of his cap.

Epsilon had a sudden inspiration, and reached into his blouse through its hooked lapels. His hand squirmed about beneath the breast of his shirt like a mole searching among the dried roots of a winter's garden. Presently, it retrieved its prize and held it triumphantly aloft, a fluttering shadow. By way of explanation, the Warfarer offered, "A gift to me from one of the

countless maidens that appraised me on Alcorde's Day. It seems you might have more service of it than I."

The forester caught the cap as it was tossed through the lamplight shades. He opened it out immediately to fullness on his fist, that he might admire its lines and embroidery as it would appear atop his head. Deldric grunted. "You have my humble thanks, Warfarer. It is a gaudy bit of work, to be sure, but as it comes from you I will wear it proudly." Indeed, it was gaudy, so brightly stitched with so many radiant patterns that a man would seem a prime target were he fool enough to wear it into combat.

Oddly, it somehow suited the peasant's swarthy, craggy features, offset his stern countenance with a gaiety that was as surreal as it was comical. Epsilon grinned, despite himself.

"Ah," responded the peasant warmly, "You see, the blackness of your brow grays already. You might think me the fool for accepting your gift, sire, and smile to see me wear it, but from this moment forth I may walk the streets of Farther Heights like a prince. For you have crowned me so. No other man's head will pass so richly adorned. And again, I thank you humbly."

"No need, citizen," returned the Warfarer gruffly, "You were in need of a head cover, and I had one to spare. I could never wear it where I am bound."

Deldric's warm face dropped away instantly, and was replaced by a mask of shame. His trembling left was raised to slowly pull his new hat down over his eyes, across his face, and into his lap.

"Pardon, sire. I had not realized the impetus of your gift. I had forgotten that you are so soon bound into the Wilderlands, never to return. I could not wear it now. Not now or ever again. Beg pardon, sire."

Epsilon made a derisive noise with his mouth and a dismissive gesture with his shoulders. "Now you seem the fool, Soldwin's son. Your head grows cold, but you will not cover it. Will you die in the snows this winter for want of something in your possession? No, you do not honor me in this manner. Wear the hat. Remember me every morning when you remove it from its peg, and every night when you once more hang it there to rest. This will serve me."

But the forester was shaking his head demurely. "I could not, sir. It is too great an honor, too rich a prize. I have not earned it."

"Earn it, then. Tell me news of these parts. Impart to me any lore you might know regarding the 'lands and its wraiths. I shall want to hear all, ere I cast open the Gates and go forth to my doom."

Deldric's smile returned, but only slightly and timidly so. "Very well, my lord. This, at the least, can I do." He replaced the glaring cap atop his pate and settled back into his rough hewn chair, chewing his thoughts, ordering his knowledge, and sorting all the many rumors and anecdotes he had most recently heard.

Before he could begin his recital, Mary pushed aside the curtain covering the kitchen's doorway and delivered a platter of horns sloshing with drink. A heady swell of steam followed her away from the cook fires, which reeked deliciously of roasting beef and stewing potatoes.

The old wench was grumbling about being compensated for the absence of her patrons, about the bravado of dark strangers that seem ill endowed to pay for their bravery, about the Emperor's business, which she apparently deemed had strayed too far from the confines of Tesla and its whoremaster's kingdoms.

As the curtain settled back into place at the old woman's back, Deldric offered apologetically, "Forgive Mary Horn's wife, Sir Warfarer, her tongue wanders to wayward places that a more patient woman's might not. But she has been these many years without a husband, without a man to show her discipline, and so, understandably, has come to believe that she owns herself, so to speak."

Deldric motioned Epsilon closer conspiratorially, and added in a soft voice, "Horn, her husband, died a score of years back when a horde of wilderbeasts found a gap in the Great Barricade. They never found his body, you see, just a finger. A finger that wore a ring everybody knew for Horn's. But Mary... she never believed he was dead. A man might live without a finger, you know, and that infernal wench will not be made to believe the obvious until somebody turns up with Old Horn's bones. That will never happen, on account of how they are long moldered in a beast's stale dung pile, I warrant.

"Anyway, she leaves a light burning in the window all night long for him, and still votes his right at the town meetings, as if he were gone away on business, and was expected to home any day." Deldric coughed up a wad of mucous and spat it to the floor in disgust. He reached for a horn of mead to wash the taste away, adding, "The council allows it, but not because they

participate in her deliriums. No, Mary was smart right away when Horn turned up missing. She ceded all her husband's land to the Farther Heights by proxy, all except this pub, with the proviso that it be returned in the event of Horn's turning up, with him but having to pay all due tariffs. Now, nobody believes Horn is doing well, and if he is, nobody believes he will be passing through these parts again any time soon. So it is merely a matter of waiting, you see, and the town will undoubtedly grow by a large deed." The forester choked down a quick gutful of his thick drink before he finished with, "In return, we all put up with Mary's... uhm, shall we say, forthright attitude, and allow her to vote out her man's right."

"Aaaa," gargled the old woman from her hidden lair, "You are such a mis-teller, Deldric Soldwin's son, it is a wonder you can pass along the scratching of a flea. You tolerate my miserable demeanor only because I make the best damned brew in all of Empire! An' you were to come take the Roaring Lion from me like any common widow, where would you go for your drink, eh? Where?" Mary cackled and expertly slid through the doorway, rearward first. "Into the Wilderlands! That be where! Because that be where I should go!" When she turned, it was to present a great plate of meats and potatoes and cheeses and breads. "I should go off to find Horn to tell HIM what you done! And would he like it? No, he would not. He would not like it at all, and you, Deldric, you and your whole damned council would have the devil to pay and no denying the toll!"

She dropped the food in front of them, and followed it with a pair of wooden bowls and spoons. Wiping her hands upon her much stained apron, Mary leaned closer and whispered at

Epsilon. "See, if they had stripped me like the childless widow that I was, then Horn's property would have been forfeited back along to his family, which hails from over by Harley, near a score of leagues westward along the Wall. Nobody wants that. Especially not when they can lay their miserable, covetous hands so easily on it all." She winked slyly, "Or so they think. They do not know Horn like I do." Her ample bosom swelled with pride and her eyes sparkled with a fierce, admiring love. "He was a great, big man. Bigger than Deldric, almost as big as you, M'sieur Warfarer. Big and strong. And when he got angry, oh, me, oh my! Light the candle quick, for the sun is going down!" She cackled and slapped her hip.

Deldric reached for a thick slab of beef. A long, gravy smeared spoon streaked out of the reeking half-light, and impacted painfully with the forester's knuckles.

"Impetuous child! Motherless and no manners learned!"

For the first time, Epsilon addressed the wretched, dirty woman directly. He hesitated to examine her face too closely as he spoke, for it was blemished and disfigured with age and an excess of ale. So he stared over her shoulder instead, his attention drawn to a rusting shield dangling above the kitchen entrance. He said, "There is a matter of payment, I believe, M'selle Horn's Wife? Then payment you shall have."

As Epsilon reached to his side, the spoon arced across the room to almost, but not quite, touch his moving arm. "And no favors, mind you, lord. I am not so simple minded as my addled patrons, so silly with drink that they would abandon their suppers already cooked for the sake of a

madman handing out scraps of Deldric's rent tunic! No, I will have no scraps tonight, nor tomorrow night after you are long gone to your short fate beyond the Wall."

"No favors, M'selle."

The spoon eased away to be tucked once more beneath her arm. "Good enough, then. It is more than me, you understand. I cannot forget Horn. He would doubtless give you drink and meat for no gain at all, but I am not so endowed with authority. When he gets back, he will want to know every little thing that I done, he will want an accounting down to the farthing. And I be damned to hell if I do not give it to him, honest and forthright and begging no one's pardon."

Epsilon drew a thick leather purse from his belt and hefted it in his right hand, as though testing its weight. "No need to beg my pardon. There is enough coin here to purchase the Roaring Lion ten times over, M'selle, with a healthy profit left to ease your elder years." The Warfarer delved into the purse and withdrew a few coins, enough to pay for their meal. These he tossed onto the table. "There, for the bountiful fare you have so cheerfully afforded me this night." His tone was not sarcastic, but gently chiding, for he felt an instant kinship with this irascible old woman. She neither cowered nor fawned nor fumbled in his presence. She did not pretend to be anything other than that which she naturally was, for good or ill. Here, at last, was the anonymity, the peace he had sought. For here, in front of the old woman, he did not have to be the sacrificial hero, the Warfarer. He could simply be Epsilon of the Rite, a fatherless orphan born into a martial destiny that was as frightening as it was violent. And just now he was frightened, more so than ever he had been in his entire lifetime of fear. For tomorrow he would

face the Gates and that teeming wasteland of unspeakable horrors beyond. Tomorrow he would face the Wilderlands.

Epsilon's gaze shifted to find Mary's own crazily flaming orbs. There he found kinship, to be sure, for she was also terribly frightened, and of many of the same things, it seemed. Only she hid her terror beneath a thick, horny facade of gruff defiance and animosity.

To break the spell of his own revolving, defeatist thoughts, Epsilon shook his head and cleared his throat. "And this," he said, hefting the remainder of the purse, "This I leave with you." And he made a motion to toss it in her direction.

But the spoon was back, and Mary was shaking her head. "No, Sire. I could not accept. Either you be paying me for a whore, or offering to me out of charity. And I am in neither regard."

"I see." Epsilon smiled secretly, as he had doubted that she would accept at the first offer. "Very well, then. I will give you half the purse's contents, but only half. You may consider it payment for holding the rest until my return to these Farther Heights. I will expect to claim it then, after my return from the Wilderlands. It is no small thing to be appointed the guardian of another man's treasures, and so you should be paid well for your troubles." He made another motion to toss it, and this time the spoon stayed where it was. "Will you take it now?"

"Aye, I will take your coin on those terms." She caught the purse and deftly wiggled it down between her jiggling, grimy breasts. "But what makes you think you could trust me?"

"M'sieur Horn has trusted you, M'selle, and you have not betrayed or forsaken him as I am aware of it. Though I am not your husband, I think you could be trusted to do this thing for me, and gratefully so were I to make a further pledge to you."

"Oh? What sort of pledge?"

"I will pledge, no... I will vow to search for your lost husband along the way. Perhaps I will return to you with word from him. Would this secure your honesty?"

Mary fairly beamed with pleasure and a hope renewed. Epsilon might have felt guilty for stirring so ancient a bed of dying embers, but he somehow sensed that this vain hope was all that remained Mary Horn's wife. Thus, he felt, a renewal of it, no matter how slight or temporary, could only serve to brighten the old lady's life. Nobody could ever dissuade the wench of her belief, and Epsilon thought it had probably been a long time indeed since anybody had ever encouraged it. The rewards of doing so were immediate and soul-filling. Mary's face sloughed off the burden of twenty lonely years to glow with the vigor she must have known in her youth, and Epsilon was suddenly convinced that Horn's wife had once been most beautiful.

She cackled, "May you will, Sire. May you will." Mary was turning back to the kitchen as she tossed over her shoulder, "And if you run across that man of mine, you give him a message from his Mary. Tell him I am waiting. Tell him I will always be waiting."

"Aye, that I shall do." Epsilon stood to get a pint of brew and a bowl of food. Back at the sill, he ate ravenously, without regard for courtly mannerisms. It had been many days along

the road since the last town and hot meal. Many long, hungry days, and the Warfarer's belly was anxious to be filled.

After many a belch and much smacking of lips, the beef and bread were all gone, and Deldric was supping at the last of the gravy with a tilt of the platter. Epsilon munched the last of the cheese and thoughtfully sipped at his third horn of beer.

"Ahhh," sighed Deldric Soldwin's son, replacing the licked platter atop the table. "That was a most righteous belly full, Sir Warfarer. I thank you again."

"No need, citizen. Now give me the news of these parts. What have you to say?"

Deldric sat back, wiped at his greasy jowls with the hem of his borrowed cloak, and hefted his own ale to his shining lips. After draining the horn to its last drop, the forester belched and sat back to pat his bulging stomach. "What have I to say?" he repeated. And again, "What have I to say? Too much, it seems. More than you want to hear in full, but not enough to save you beyond the Great Barricade. And, though my mouth was busy with other work, you may be sure that my mind has mulled that very question many times this e'en."

The big forester smiled slyly and tapped a knowing finger against his temple. "Aye, you are a smart man, Sir Warrior. Smart or fortunate, for no other citizen in Farther Heights could offer you so quick a wit, nor so great a store of knowledge."

Epsilon reached for his jillroot, shrugging. "I know not how smart it was, Soldwin's son. You were elected as spokesman to address me for the room, which would indicate well the esteem of your opinion and ability in words."

"See? What but a smart man could think so finely?" Deldric laughed heartily, "Or it may be you are not so clever, after all. It may be I am so completely surrounded by oafs and dimwit buffoons as to be unaccustomed to thought of any kind. Somehow, though, I do not believe this to be the case. I cannot imagine the Emperor, holy or not, selecting an imbecile to serve as his Warfarer, Prefect of all the Wilderlands."

The sacrificial warrior scoffed. "Prefect," he spat the word. "I am prefect of nothing, commander of no one. And though I may be learned, I may also be the greatest fool you have ever known or will ever know, Deldric of the Farther Heights. Even this outpost's dullest brute no doubt has sense enough to stay away from the Barricade and its Wilderland keeps."

Deldric offered no return to these statements, but shook his head slowly in a sympathetic foreboding. "I would not go, of that you may be certain. Not for all the gold in the Empire. What good is gold, with no-" but the forester stopped himself, averting his eyes and tongue ashamedly.

Epsilon placated the disturbed man with a motion of his hand, and took a huge bite of jill. "Do not regret your uncouth speech, Deldric. I treasure it. Say what you will without regrets. You would have added, 'with no time to spend it'. Hmm? And so you see the reason for my gift to your fond Mary. What good gold, where I am going?"

"None, indeed, Sire. Gold will not save you, I fear."

"Good. For I am not to be saved."

"No, I suppose not. It is a strange fraternity, your Rite. To have been born and reared from infancy to serve as a holy warrior in the Emperor's own, personal command... I cannot imagine such glories even in my dreams."

The Warfarer chewed jillroot patiently, and spoke around the bolus. "Do not try. There have been no glories, and will never be. Mine is not a warm life, I can assure you. Instead, be happy that you have known your father. Revel in the remembrance of your saintly mother. If you have known these things, then I believe you have known more glories than I."

"Well, I have never been a coward, but I cannot pass within ten sticks of that damnable Wall without trembling like a girl child before the dogs. It is a frightful place, full of wondrous goings on and horrible, magical beasts.

"Just a fortnight past, a great, winged fright landed in the dell over to Underland. That being less than a league along the Barricade to eastward from here, sire, and all too close. A great screaming of women and crying of children was heard. All the tend animals were braying and coughing and screaming so it sounded all the world was falling into a hole. Somebody might have tipped a lamp, or it may be the fire was set of a purpose (those night monsters rarely love a naked flame, you know) but in some manner, the town was set alight. And from that meager spark, the forest might have burned entirely, if not for a fierce storm just before dawn. The fire line was snuffed less than two hundred sticks from my own back door!"

Epsilon chewed dreamily. "I remember that storm. It caught me in a low spot on the road just past a deserted hamlet that sat alongside a small river."

"Ah, that would have been Derryberg. It was abandoned last summer on account of a curse that struck there. A fever it was, that made all the people bleed out of there howler holes, if you understand what I am saying, sir."

"I do."

"Do not drink water from that river, if you return that way, and I hope you did not fill your skins there."

"No. I never drink from a forsaken well."

"That is a wise way. Neither will I."

"And what of the winged beast?"

"I come to that presently, sir. Are you hurried tonight?"

"No."

"Good, then. Sit back easy now, and let Deldric tell you the tale in his own time." The forester took a deep breath, followed it with a quaff from the last horn on the table, and started off. "Now, like I said, the town was set alight and burned nearly to the last home. By the time me and some of the other men from Farther Heights had arrived there, all was blackened and deserted. Many burned people and some children lay in the ruins, but they were not left alone in death.

"For there, near the center of town, I found the smoldering corpse of a great monstrous beast that never could have passed unknown on this side of the Wall. It had wings where its forelimbs should have been, wings like a bat, I guess, but somehow different. And though it was

burned to a crumbling ash, I could yet see how fierce its claws and savage maw must have been in life. The charred remains of Underlander arrows protruded from its flesh, maybe a score or more, but I do not believe those wounds were its undoing. A great portion of its hindquarters was missing, and seemed to have been bitten away by yet another, much larger and perhaps hungrier behemoth. This was, no doubt, its death wound, most likely received somewhere in the Wilderlands. Out of perversity, perhaps, or blind agony, the abomination had descended on Underland Town to die or be killed. I shudder to think what it might have done in absolute health, and doubt gravely that the Farther Heights would have long escaped the beast's deadly attentions.

"I thought you might like to hear of this monster first, since it has been the largest Wilderland transgressor I can recall in my clearest memories. Its wings might have stretched the span of five men or more in life, and its trunk was the size of a large pony. It had a long, serpentine tale that might have been barbed like a scorpion's. The Underlanders' presented us with varied accounts of what all had happened, but the one thing upon which they all agreed, warrior and elder alike, was the fact that the animal seemed ravenously violent. Its every move was a singularly potent threat of death. Five grown men were killed in battle with it, ere the fire set its hairy flesh alight. I still have not learned the final number of the slain, though it is sure to grow as the many wounded succumb to their poisoned injuries.

"I say this was the largest intruder in recent memory, but it has not been the first nor the last. Intrusions of this nature are common, but not so generally deadly. Just this e'en, near

sunset, I myself destroyed a small squirming thing of vile, unknown nature. It was digging in the dirt, and might have passed beneath the Wall in search of food.

"We mostly get the flying or digging monsters here, as they seem the most able when it comes to surmounting the Barricade. There have been other kinds, though, and most of them infinitely more deadly, even than the flying terror that struck Underland.

"For an instance, I am reminded of a man named Kirby, Kirby Uril's son. He hailed from Farther Heights, living not more than a quarter league from my own house, just outside the township proper. Now Kirby was fond of wandering after dark, never a wise vise in these parts, but Kirby was a big, powerful man, cocksure of himself in a fight. He carried a great axe he had received as reward for enlisting in King Dane's Forsythe Campaigns, which actions had also served to train him soundly in all manner of physical combats. As far as I know of, Kirby feared nothing, neither man nor beast, and was not deterred from traveling right along the foot of the Great Barricade when a trail carried him there.

"One night Kirby felt the need to ramble, I guess, and found himself at the end of the road. There he was, standing beneath the Postern Arch, admiring the fancy words that are written there, he said, when all of a sudden came a rustling from the east. It was queer sort of movement, said Kirby (for he lived to tell his unfortunate story, but not much longer), and it was accompanied by the sound of a babe's cry. Now Kirby thought some forest hunter had gotten a hold on somebody's infant, you see, maybe a wolf or dappling hyena--like that, and decided he was just the man to go into the shades after it to affect a rescue.

"Like a fool, he hefted his great battleaxe and followed a narrow trail to the west as it led along the great lawn that skirts the Wall. The rustling ran ahead of him, and with it the babe's mewling, so Kirby was more convinced than ever that he was on the trail of some Empirical beast. He claims that it never crossed his mind this might have been a Wilderbeast. Now you and I might find this a curious sort of behavior, given that the wastelands are but a short ride away, but Kirby was ever odd in his ways. And so I do not doubt his profession of ignorance.

"You can imagine his surprise then, Sir Warfarer, when the trail opened upon a lair running beneath the green and the Wall's foundations, and there, instead of a helpless babe, he encountered a hulking terror of indescribable proportions. Like a spider, he said it was, but also like a lizard. Its head was tiny for its body, but still easily a match for any man's. Its mouth was strange and had many working parts. But it was from the stiffened spines of two hind legs that the babe's cry was sounding, in much the same way as a cricket might call for a mate.

"A mighty fight ensued, which I cannot describe because its description escaped even Kirby's telling. All he could say was that the battle was a blur of tangled limbs, gnashing mouth parts and his own flashing axe blade. Uril's son managed to somehow fight his way free, hewing away many claw-tipped arms during his retreat, only to be at the last bitten in the meaty portion of his shoulder. Away he stumbled, near delirious, to find his fumbling way back to Farther Heights, indeed back here, to the Roaring Lion. There I saw him for the last time, and he told me this tale, just as I have related to you now. The next day, we followed back along his trail to find the lair while the sun was yet shining. Every evidence of the struggle bore out Kirby's words to the letter,

of that I can attest, and many severed spider's legs were found lying on the ground. They were five sticks long and as thick as small trees, each tipped with a savage claw that oozed a vile, sticky substance. We buried Kirby's ghastly trophies with the lair and set heavy stones all around the opening to prevent another such creature from burrowing its way through there." Deldric sipped at his horn morosely. "We were forced to burn Kirby's body, as this is the law with anyone killed by beasts of the Otherside. Sometimes plagues ensue from these incidences, you see.

"As was the case with Murgold Ronwyn's daughter. She used to weave with her mother down by the square, and right pretty she was, too. Many a young man in this outpost town had his eye on one of Ronwyn's daughters or another. There were five in all, but Murgold was the fairest.

"She was a bit queer though, on akin to Kirby's queerness, in that she had such a fetish for mushrooms that nothing and no one would could dissuade her from picking them. I once with my own eyes saw her climb four sticks or more up the Barricade, itself, just to get her pink little hands on a parcel of 'shrooms growing out of a split in the stones. And this from a tiny little girl still frightened of the dark. On the day after her fourteenth birthday, and the year before she was to wed a cousin of mine named Eldon, Murgold went off in search of her favorite treat. Rumor has it that she was angry with her mother that day, all because the old woman had not prepared a traditional birthday dish of 'shrooms and greens for her. So she set off on a mushroom hunt alone, shirking her chores.

"It wasn't long before she found herself at the Wall, eyeing a giant peach of a mushroom that had sprouted just at its base. This she plucked and ate raw on the spot, stem and all.

"That night, she awoke in a terrible fever, only to find red spots had blossomed all over her body. The spots were like a rash, but they bled from the skin, a dark, viscous blood unlike any flow I had ever seen before. By dawn, she was bleeding from her eyes, ears, nose and gums. By next evening, she was dead.

"Nothing much happened for the next two sunsets, when Ronwyn fell ill and died in a similar fashion. And after her, all four of her remaining daughters, two sons, and lastly her husband. Next, their maternal grand dame succumbed. She lived with Ronwyn's eldest brother, but she had prepared the bodies of Bledsel Ronwyn's husband and those of two of her youngest daughters for their burial day. From there, the plague leapt like a bonfire catching its first breath, and within a week, five households were ill and many people had died.

"Only a ritual purging of flame saved the Farther Heights that summer, else our township might have gone the way of Derryberg and countless others." Deldric smacked his dry lips and finished the last of his ale.

Slamming the empty horn down hard several times against the tabletop, the big forester called for further to drink and waited patiently for it to come without speaking. Epsilon was content to wait silently, chewing jill and sometimes spitting to the floor. Presently he stood and urinated out the window, both to relieve himself and to reassure that his war mount, Helmcleaver,

was still tied securely to hand. When he sat back down, Deldric was throat-bobbing his way through another pint and Mary was strangely disappeared.

Gasping and belching, Deldric sprang out of his drink like a landed fish to continue his recital. "I know not what you may have heard regarding the Wilderlands, but much of it is bound to be somebody's much removed guesswork or outright lies. None that have passed far beyond the Wall have ever returned to tell what they saw or did not see. I myself have never opened the gates, nor has anyone else in these parts since the last time a Warfarer passed through, two hundred years back or more. Only the Emperor's Engineers dare so much as scale the Barricades, and only then at great need and with a large force of archers standing by. Not even they venture to the opposite side.

"Unfortunately, this renders lore of the Wilderlands a necessarily limited quantity. And though I, unlike the majority of my uneducated fellows, have received a passable education while away schooling in Capitol Tesla, nothing and no one has afforded me any formal education regarding the wastelands and all they contain. Most of what I know of its beasts stems from incidents similar to those I have described to you this night, but this knowledge is undoubtedly largely incomplete. For an instance, I could not say or begin to imagine what might have taken a bite out of that winged monster that nearly destroyed Underland. Whatever it was, I can only guess at its size and ferocity. Perhaps there are even larger things out there to take bites out of those monster-devouring beasts. Who knows where it all might end? I do not.

"Now I am reminded of a rhyme I have from my childhood. As with many things we are taught as children, there is much fanciful in its words, but much of truth also. I will sing you a little of it, though to rhyme properly it must be recited in its original Tetsian Language. In the common tongue, it runs like this:

Merrily the fool is feast upon
that fool enough is to traipse beyond
the King's Great Barricades
that keep the world
safe from what is magic.

Happily as hale, the hero calm
bravely declared and called upon
to breach the rusting Postern Gates
that keep the world
safe from all that is magic.

And so surely, his mail and helm last donned,
the Warfarer is to pass beyond
the Barrier Wall that stretches long

and keeps the world
safe from what would be magic.

For great things may be those things small,
and of little worth are many things large,
in that wild land beyond Barricades
long kept from a world
held safe in absence of magic.

"There is much more of it, but that is all I can clearly remember now. I thought you might like that bit about the Warfarer." Deldric sipped his drink. "The only other sure knowledge I have of Wilderland lore is a simple saying; 'Traveler take care to beware your head, sleep you not in your garland bed, but lay you down among the boughs, for up is under, there, and under be down.' Make what you will of it, I know not what it portends.

"Not much else is known of the Otherside, even in these parts, save the simple understanding that would come to you as common, obvious knowledge on your first moments passed in its clutches. In short, you may remember all that moves is deadly, all that flows is poisoned, all that grows is dangerous, and that not even the stones are safe. Long have those wastelands suffered 'neath the spells of countless curses. Curses cast by demons that no doubt procreate themselves even now, begetting their vile, bastard children relentlessly as a nest of

virulent rats, and so leading their children to feed from their evil new begotten until ten thousand curses swells a hundred fold to a thousand thousand, then to a thousand times more, so the horrors of that place do not diminish in time as the beauties of a holy place might, but grow and grow and grow... but grow until nothing less massive and enduring than the Great Wall might keep its terrors at bay.

"We of the Farther Heights and of Underland and of Derryberg and the like, we all live in the shadow of the Wall. And so we live in the shadow of the Wilderlands. We live day to day like the hare that runs ever before the hounds' gnashing fangs. Just barely are we tucked in safe, and every so often the beasts sneak in to take nips out of our arses. That keeps us moving just fast enough, I can assure you, and we are all wary of every shade here.

"The trouble is, like as not, what may stalk you from the Wilderlands will refuse to take a corporeal form. More dangerous to flesh than any beast of flesh are the terrors of the spirit world. You may scoff, Sire, but I can attest to truth of my own testimony in these matters. Bodiless demons stalk these regions, beasts void of sinew and bone that are not deterred by such paltries as Barricades and its Postern Gates. Nameless terrors have ever plagued the Farther Heights and all the villages in these parts.

"For the most part they seem benign, scarcely felt entities that are content to pass through without disturbance. A man might feel he is being watched from unfilled shadows, only to turn and find nothing and no one there. Yea, this happens even to me from time to time, sire, and I am no goose to go honking about at the merest ripple in calm waters.

"Should it happen to you, make no mistake; something will be lurking nearby, unseen, unformed, waiting... waiting for a casual footfall or a fatal mistake. Guard yourself surely. Like as not, the spirit will be dispelled by your vigilance and pass away. But should you wax unwary, should you ignore the hackles prickling at the back of your neck, should you choose to disregard these frights that are not seen, beware your own foolishness. Even nothing is something, lord, and merest, slightest regards have been known to conquer whole armies.

"That you might believe in unseen dangers, I will tell you of my own elder brother, Dembric. Dembric was a handsome if somewhat dull young man of twenty one seasons when he set off on a trip to far away Dunne. He left behind his wife and five children to buy tend stock from a well known dealer in that town, as all his animals had been slaughtered the year before by a monster nobody ever saw. As was his habit when walking, Dembric had carried with him a mouth harp for to play his favorite songs and fill his ears with bright music along the way. Which he did, starting with the first footstep in the morning, and ending with the last footstep at night, pausing only to take meat and drink and sometimes to sing out loud.

"Now, like I said before, Dembric was never considered to be the quickest rabbit in the warren, and it was a much practiced skill for him to have learned to walk and play in the same instant. It required nearly all his attention to keep from stumbling or missing a note, you see.

"And, as bad fortune would have it, my brother was waylaid on the road somewhere between here and Dunne by a dark spirit that had taken notice of Dembric's lacking vigilance. It followed behind him for uncounted leagues, perhaps, matching my brother's pace step by step,

cinching closer with each movement, warily nearing its prey like the stalking tomcat that has a mouse in its vision... closer, closer... until it was close enough to pounce. In all honesty, lord, I know not the truth of how it happened, but can imagine it well enough, you see, knowing as I do both my brother and the evil sprites that inhabit these outpost regions.

"At the least, I and my family have had the what of it all, for a man came down from Dunne not long afterward, bearing Dembric's possessions and the tale of his sad undoing. His body was burned, as the law requires of those slain by creatures of the Otherside. I may have mentioned this earlier." Deldric hefted a fresh vessel and toasted the heavens in his brother's memory. Then he drank long and hard, not pausing until every last drop was gone, as was his brother's habit when drinking Mary's fine ale. "At any rate, here is what happened;

"According to the wake bearer (his name was Elke Marshal's son--I have myself traveled to Dunne to verify the man's bona fides and pay claims of unlawful damages against Dembric's estate) my brother entered the gates of Dunne near dusk on what was the seventh day of his journey from the Farther Heights. Now Dunne lies many leagues from the Barricades, but that city's people are not unaccustomed to Wilderland beasts or the startling mayhem they may from time to time wreak. Right away the gate guards could see the demon infesting Dembric's body like an evil plague of worms, and called for him to make a halt outside the town wall. Dembric refused, and instead drew a bow and shot two of the men off of the battlements without speaking a word.

"Where my brother found the bow, Sir Warfarer, I know not, for Dembric never carried such a weapon and rarely used one even to hunt. Snares were his killer of choice for eating, you see, as he was overly fond of rabbit stew."

Deldric paused to sigh forlornly and stir his horn about in a foam of suds gathered atop the much scarred table. "I suspect now that the spirit must have infested Dembric many days prior to his entering Dunne, leading him to do what all the gods only know. It is but a five day trip, even at a slow walk, which would mean my brother was already at the least two days over due at Dunne when he arrived. Possibly along the way, while in the grip of that devilish shade, he committed many other crimes that have as yet to be drawn into the light. For my part, I had no urge to seek them out, as Dembric's passing had already been most costly to us all, and the way of it so . . . disturbing.

"He killed many men that day. After the two he feathered atop the wall, a cry of murder went up over the town. Dembric ran through Dunne's gates even as they were slamming to shut, and shafted three more of the city's men on the inside, while missing many others. I can honestly say here that the demon had to have been leading the assault, because Deldric could scarcely hit a tree trunk at thirty paces, much less five men inside of two minutes. And more startling still, when all his arrows had been expended, Dembric discarded the bow for an already blooded long sword and charged a huddled mass of terror stricken citizens. A brace of city guards narrowly intervened to save the moment, but Elke Marshal's son insisted that my brother fought like a well trained hand, quickly dispatching the defenders with clean thrusts through their bellies. Here

again I add that this had to be the will of the shade and not that of my brother, for I had never known Dembric to be fond of sword play. He was stupid and naturally slow, and could not tolerate the cuts of practice. That day, however, he fought like the madman he most certainly was, and cries of murder were rapidly changing to cries of berserker. In a panic, people fled before Dembric like a mass of rats chased off a pile of grain. Screaming defiance, my brother chased after, hewing and slashing and hacking as he ran.

"Here it was that Marshal's son first encountered the berserker, and they fought savagely. Elke was not wounded, but two more of the city's guard fell as my brother sought an escape from so determined a defender. Elke chased after and they fought again. In this instance Marshal's son received a cut that came near to bleeding his life away, and Dembric was also sorely wounded."

Deldric suddenly stopped speaking to clear a lump from his throat, and stood abruptly, swaying. He made his way to the entranceway and urinated to one side of the doorstep, farting to punctuate the sounds of his running river. After both men had thus satisfied their primal needs, they were seated together and reached for further ale to recycle through their struggling livers.

"I pause now to offer an aside from Elke's firsthand account. It was he that best fought my brother, and he that would initially prove to be his killer, for the wound Dembric received in their second combat together was deep and mortal and no other man from Dunne touched him afterward. You must understand that Marshal's son is a big wiry man, as tall as yourself, but with longer limbs and less meat. He is tough and well trained, being the son of a knight errant and soon to be knighted himself. It was sheer serendipity that he happened upon Dembric that day,

and happened upon him with sword in hand. That very morning he had retrieved his blade from the armorer, who had ground out its nicks and honed its double edges. Elke was just returning home with it when the berserker charged at him from around a blind corner. I ask you, sir, what is the nature of fate? Eh? I know not, either, but sometimes I believe she is a fickle bitch dog that is fond of biting. That day she bit both men, for my brother was killed and Elke so seriously maimed that all his hopes of King's service were dispelled forever. And it was the demon that done it all, not my brother, not Dembric Soldwin's son. Elke understood this, at the least, as did most of the towns folk.

"He described the combat with my brother as a battle with one of the gods' bastard children. The blackness inside Dembric that day was real and manifest, grown so powerful from its parasitic feeding that it was clearly visible, even in the broad light of a declining sun. Elke said he could see the very shape and form of the beast overlying Dembric's flesh, imitating it in every detail, though it was much larger, infinitely more powerful. Again and again, the blood-ravenous beast attacked, all the time screaming senseless profanities in some fell devil's tongue that none could decipher, all the time slathering at the chops, drooling from the lip, raging from the eye. Brave Elke stood his ground from the first, matching that maddened beast's assaults blow for blow. A great ringing of steel and sparking of discordant parries echoed through every alleyway and street and flashed the shadows like lighting. Back and forth, round and round they fought, old insult chasing new, until Elke thought his opponent was at long last tiring. Not the beast, you understand, but the man inside the beast, my brother Dembric, who I have already said was not a

great swordsman and who did not have much of a fighting arm. It was at this moment that Dembric broke off the fight and ran, killing two guardsmen that had come running up the street behind. Elke said he was grateful for the respite, as he had been verging on exhaustion himself near the end, and had been staring down into the stark depths of his own mortality with more than a little trepidation. Nevertheless, he gave chase and caught my brother up further along the cobbles.

"They fought again, each wounding the other. But Dembric would not surrender. Though Elke's blade had run him through and through, Dembric would not be undone. Unbewitched and himself near fatally wounded, Elke could but stumble after the berserker as the demon propagated its tirade further along the city's streets. So he was a witness to the very end. My brother, or I should say the demon within, did not slay more that day, thanks to the courage of Marshal's Son, but a great many more were wounded in the declining fray. Bleeding heavily, weakening moment by moment, Dembric eventually fell to one knee before an encirclement of armed guards, and died before he could be hacked to pieces. What remained of him afterward was burned to ashes, and so we have nothing at all of his earthly self to honor come All Souls Day, merely his memory."

Epsilon spat a stream of jill juice onto the floor and cleared his throat to speak. "Are you certain a demon had infested your brother? Beg pardon, citizen, but could he have been simply mad? Deranged?"

Deldric shook his noggin dizzily, his face maudlin. "Oh, he was deranged alright, but it was not simply his head that had gone bad. That monster, that night shade, had sucked him dry, body and soul, right up until the end. In the end, my brother was reduced to an empty shell, his ethereal essence long since fled or pushed aside. In the end, the demon had come to rule Dembric's flesh as certainly as any puppet master might rule his puppet." The forester made a move to reach for another horn, thought better of it, smacked his lips noisily instead and scratched his head beneath the gaudy cap. "You can be certain I have the straight of it all, for I, myself, have traveled to Dunne with Elke to pay for the damages my brother's flesh had wrought. And not once in all the time I was there, though he had slain near a score of men and wounded countless others, not once was there mention of the word murder. My brother was no murderer, sire, and everybody here in Farther Heights knew it. And the people of Dunne, though they knew not his character, all attested to the presence of the beast within. It was the beast they were running from, you see, not my brother. In fact, many never recalled seeing the man at all, just a great, sword wielding monster drawn straight from hell's black heart. Else I might have been hanged by proxy on first setting foot in the township, would you not agree?"

Epsilon arched his brows appreciatively. "It seems highly likely, Soldwin's Son."

"But the people were not angered any further than their damaged wares and walls. Once all was paid for and repaired, I encountered not so much as a stern countenance all the while I was there. Indeed, many of the woman folk were as kind to me regarding my brother's untimely death as they were to the widows of the townsmen slain that dark e'en. I dined freely on Cakes of

Wake and wine and other hallowed foods from morning until dusk, and left a stone's weight heavier than when I arrived!" Deldric laughed merrily, seeming to shrug off the ponderous weight of his murderous brother's own bloody murder.

Changing tacks, he huffed a deep breath and continued. "What happened to my brother was bad and not all too uncommon, sire, believe it or no. And mind you, my brother's fate is not the only known expression of those unseen terrors of the Wilderlands. Like I earlier said, they are for the most part harmless to a wary man, but even a wary man may fall prey to their subtle heckling from time to time.

"You will want to hear of Grawyler Glenn's Son, now, I suspect." The forester paused for affect, as any expert storyteller might, both to allow Epsilon a moment to shift more comfortably onto his bench and to take a sip, a mere lip wetting, of ale. Replacing the horn with exaggerated care, Deldric rumbled, "Grawyler..." let the syllables roll singly from his tongue. "A more pathetic wretch have I never known. I have never been one to wish Wilderland ills onto any man, friend or foe, but Glenn's son was a sore temptation of my nature..."

As the peasant seemed to desire some kind of response from his audience, the Emperor's Warfarer offered, "He was a bad man?"

"Bad? Bad? If bad is a pebble, Grawyler was a stone. If bad is a grain of sand, Grawyler was a beach. The man was rotten inside to out. What all did he do? I could not number his crimes. Oh, nothing so vile as to cost him his life, to be sure, but little things, lots of little things."

Epsilon cleared his throat superstitiously. "Have your people no ways of the dead, citizen? Do you dare openly speak so blackly of them?"

Deldric paled, fearing he had offended his high guest. The forester made a sign of penitence to an unknown god and bowed his head. "Forgive me, lord. You are most noble to correct me. Let me quickly say something kind of fond Grawyler Glenn's son. Let me say... eh, ah... let me say that he was not a murderer. At least that I can attest to." Deldric scowled thoughtfully. "We did not have to hang him. Are you appeased, sire?"

"Oh, I was never offended. I merely questioned your ways."

"Good then. For he was a miserable wretch, forgive me. I will not burn your ears with a recital of each and every incident, as I had first thought to, but will instead hurry along to the crime of relevance.

"It was, as such things often are, centered about the trading of a horse. A farmer by the name of Cowan had a fine gray mare he had brought all the way from Tesla, which he used to ride into town every other day, proud as a princeling heir apparent. I forget the man's family name, but he played only a small part in the tale. I say 'small', but I might have said 'short' and been better understood. For, you see, this man Cowan rode into town one day and dropped dead in the middle of the road and that was the end of him.

"Since he was but a serf and thus tilling another man's land, Cowan left little behind when he passed along. In fact, all he left was a shabby suit of clothing, all he had been wearing, a purse containing naught but a few silver beads, and..."

"The horse." Provided on cue from Deldric's captive listener.

"Exactly. The horse." Deldric beamed and smacked his lips gleefully. "My, but she was a lovely, fleet piece of work. You should have seen her, sire! Perfect in every line, she was, well fleshed but tamed in her manner. Though not so tamed that a man would feel like a woman sitting astride her. She had a spark! A fierce, ready-to-run spark! I could not then and cannot now guess or dream where Cowan Forgotten Son found that mount, but she was a truly covetous animal, truly covetous.

"Now you'll remember that I told you Cowan rode into Farther Heights and dropped dead in the middle of the road? Yes? Well and good, for I did not mention it that you might easily mark the spot for ceremony. For had he died while tending his land, possession of the horse would never have been in doubt, as the land, and everything on it, would have reverted into the holdings of Cowan's master, the right gentleman of Lockes. But he did not die on his master's property, and neither did he die on the Emperor's estates, either. For, though he dropped dead in the center of Tesla Road, he did so only after crossing over the terminus of the Royal Right of Way. Which is to say, he died in the town proper. Which is further to say that his corpse and possessions, including the horse, became property of Farther Heights and its citizens, since Cowan had no living relations to lay claim against his estate.

"From there the horse went into a private stables, boarded at cost to the city coffers, while all these matters of ownership were delivered and resolved. Six weeks or more passed, until it

was finally adjudged that the gray did, indeed, belong to the citizens of Farther Heights. And since a town has no need of horses while it is filled with men, an auction was set to sell the prize.

"Now Grawyler was especially fond of the horse, it seemed, and was determined to win her, no matter the cost. Which was a strange attitude, you see, considering the fact that Grawyler had not much money and even less standing for credit in the township. He knew he could never hope to purchase the animal, and so devised a more sinister way to have at her. And so, as black hearted men in these parts are ever wont to do in times of desire, Glenn's Son made a pact with an Otherside sprite and fell into leagues with it.

"Nightly before the sale, he and the shade roved the Farther Heights, making mysterious calls on his neighbors in the darkness, shielded from sight and disturbances by fell Wilderland magics that deceived even the Emperor's dogs of watch posted along the road. No man knows where all that skulker trespassed nor what all he spoiled, but everyone agrees that the town's fortunes took a sudden turn for the bad not long after that gray turned up. Milk cows went dry, crops browned overnight, tend animals ran off in herds or were devoured by the lot, houses burned, women went mad, and, most telling of all, Mary's own good ale went sour in its kegs... and stayed sour right up until the day after the sale.

"And what of the horse? Let me tell you of the horse. It seems the biggest part of Grawyler's scheme had been to nightly steal into the stables where Cowan's lost mount was kept, and, once inside, foil the animal's fodder. By emptying the manger, Glenn's son sought to starve

the beast to boniness, and so to lower its cost come auction day. A clever plan, no? Clever enough, it seems, for it worked to perfection.

"For when the sale was convened, and all the bidders called to order, not more than three men were standing in the stables; the table tender, who was serving as auctioneer, myself, and Grawlyer. All the other men of the town were either too busy trying to save their own floundering lives, or were already gone to the poorhouse or begging help from neighbors merely to eat. I remember how I arrived with my last ten doldeccas in my purse, hoping to purchase the beast cheaply or buy her not all. Now, I had not viewed the gray in all those six weeks since Cowan dropped dead and the sale was called to order, but I clearly remembered her from her master's many visits to town. A vision of perfection that animal was in my mind, sire, almost as beautiful as a maiden in full flower." Deldric smiled happily upon remembering the gray, which smile dropped quickly to a scowl, however. "You can imagine my horror, then, when the auctioneer brought her out for parade. Naught but bones and skin was she, and so weak that her once proud limbs trembled with the effort of but a slow walk. I was angry, and demanded to know the why of it from the stable master. The man was as perplexed as I, and declared honestly that he had fed the beast nightly, checking by morn to be certain the animal had eaten. He showed me where his store of straw had been depleted by her needs, and, since he had tended no other animals in all that time, I could but believe him.

"We scratched our heads together trying to reason it out, and all the time Grawlyer kept to the shadows, sniggering. Me and Harley, the stable keep, decided it must have been the work of

some mysterious darkling curse, and, what with the way that foul son of Glenn was capering about, that it must in some way have to do with Grawyler's unwholesome lusts. Now I would not bid on so sickly a beast at any price, not when my women and children were going daily without milk, and talk of a general curse on the town was growing day by day. I would not have bid on her then if she had been auctioned free, for it was obvious that the beast was bewitched by magic, and long gone over to the Otherside. Which prejudice is doubtless what Glenn's Son had hoped to achieve.

"Thus he had the gray for a song that day and led her away from the stables to fatten her up again for riding. I might have begrudged him his tomfoolery for a long while after that, too, but for the lifting of the plague and a sudden turn in my fortunes. The whole of Farther Heights seemed to breathe of life again after he got his hands on that mare, what with all the brown returning to green and all our lost animals suddenly wandering down from the hills. My own cow gave milk the next morn, as well as the two others I had bought to replace her, and it was the sweetest milk I ever tasted! The revival was most incredible, lord, and much was made of its coincidence at the time.

"As it turned out, however, our harvests were bountiful that year, though late, and we were all kept busy dawn 'till dusk each day struggling with the recovery. So it wasn't until the first snows started falling that anyone turned their talk to Grawyler and his new mount.

"We all wondered what had become of him, and it was not long before we had an answer to our wonderments. One e'en, just before the sun went down early behind a bank of high clouds,

Grawyler crossed the bridge over the frozen Wine River at a full gallop and came charging into the Farther Heights howling at the top of his lungs. We all poured out of The Roaring Lion to see what was amiss, only to find that cursed demon's friend stirring up the mud beneath a fresh fallen snow, drunken as a fish in a vat. He was sitting astride the gray, gouging its flanks and yanking its reins this way and that so the beast danced crazily to and fro in the town's center. Now and again he would give it a free head and let it fly from one end of the village to another, whooping and hollering like a banshee come storming from hell.

"And there was something frightfully different about that mare, sire. A dark and evil light glowed in that monster's wild gaze, a light like wolf's eyes seen at the far edge of a campfire's glow, a light like demons eyes watching o'er a sleeping babe through frosted window panes. Strong and well fleshed now, perhaps stronger than it had ever been before, that crazed gray carried the frail Grawyler as a burden of nothing, back and forth, back and forth they dashed, heedless of obstacles and showing no fear of death.

"Then we all saw it, Grawyler's laughing demon. It clung to his shoulders as he flew about, its long, tattered wraith's body flowing out behind and whipping in the breeze like a ragged flag of shadows. All the while it whispered into the madman's ears, bidding him do only the gods know what. Spurred on, Glenn's Son continued his tirade, even escalating it by charging through Harley's stables and setting them alight with a carelessly tossed lamp. With that, he gouged the gray's flanks deeply and they bolted for the Wine Bridge once more at full lope, escaping before the town could up in arms and after him.

"We had not more than dashed back inside the inn to don our heavier cloaks and buckle on weapons, when we heard a high scream of man and neigh of horse. It sounded to have come from the bridge, and upon arriving there we found Grawyler sprawled on the bank of the Wine while his gray drowned 'neath the ice.

"His demon was nowhere to be seen, of course, and Grawyler was abandoned to suffer his fate alone. Despite his broken neck and immobile limbs, that foul worm cackled and babbled for hours it seemed, telling of his plots, chiding his victims, scorning his hated enemies, and generally laughing at the people of Farther Heights. I never learned his joke, for it was a secret thing which he kept for himself unto the grave. But it must have been most humorous, for he died laughing, there in the snow. We burned his body the next day. His and the mare's.

"Now none of us could really be said to mourn his loss, you see, not after witnessing all he had said and done against us. And since it was a dreadfully cold winter that year, nobody was particularly keen to tend the worm's funeral pyre. So it was left unguarded that afternoon during a heavy snowfall, which smothered its flames before they could work their cleansing magic. As a result, the spirits of Grawyler and his horse were wed as one and released into this world to roam unrequited forever. Or so it is said. I, myself, have never encountered his wraith, but others swear by holy things that they have. It is a ghastly shade, as they describe it, half horse, half man, horribly disfigured and deformed, malignantly evil.

"For all I know, such fates may be the mother and sire of all the Wilderlands' unseen demons. For there is indeed a dark power that broods just beyond the Great Barricades, sire, one

so potent and virile that it easily effects us even here, a full league from the border. When you travel there, go not unguarded." Deldric sighed a high, chest heaving swell and concluded with, "And that, Lord Warfarer, is all I have to offer you by way of advice. That, and the simple words, 'Do not go at all.'" The forester smiled weakly, hoping his final words would be well received.

Epsilon merely shrugged his shoulders and spat a stream of jill juice to the floor between his booted feet. "I must go. It is the way of the Rite. It is the way of the Emperor. It is the way of the Warfarer. I must go."

"Of course you must, lord. I did not mean to detract from your endeavors. I merely wondered... why? Why must you go? Turn back, sir, find a home in the forest. We would accept you gladly here in the Farther Heights! You could stay with me and Hildegard while you settle on lands!"

The Warfarer laughed choppily and waved Deldric's words away. "No, good citizen, I could never do as you have suggested. I am honor bound to seek my destiny beyond the Gates, though that destiny be undoubtedly short and bloody. Still, I thank you for your kindness. It is the last I am sure to know for a long, long time indeed. Maybe for eternity."

"I hope not so, lord, for you seem a good enough man to me. Not at all like many other alleged gentleman that I have known, all haughty and pretentious, puffed up like toads with their self importance and well fed gullets."

Epsilon smiled dreamily, suddenly certain that he had chewed too much jill root too quickly. "Even after the way I treated you earlier?"

"Especially after that, sire. I feared for my life, I can tell you, and near wet my britches in the fright, but you were only having fun and did not make overmuch of it. Another lesser gentleman might have had my head to finish the sport. As would have been his right for my crime of addressing one of High Bearing. Some still adhere to the ancient ways, you see, and there is not one of the Emperor's judges that would convict a noble for killing a peasant."

"I do not kill for sport."

"Well and good, but I knew that not. For all I knew at that moment, my life was at an end and foolishly so. As it turned out, however, you were merely serving my query, offering up trophies for my men that will be more fondly remembered than anything you might simply have handed them. And for me, the tale. The tale of how I befriended a Holy Emissary of His Most High Majesty, the Emperor. That claim I could never forget, even unto my grave, for I shall have it carved into my headstone so deeply that ten thousand years of summer rains will not wash it away."

"You honor me, Deldric Soldwin's Son, more than I deserve. But, as I said earlier, there is nothing holy in my nature. I am an emissary of nothing, bound to nothing, unless I am an emissary of death, bound to murder." Epsilon spat out a last bolus of root and tilted his head down to admire the shining length of his immaculate sword. "And here is the Emperor's sacred charge of ambassadorship, placed into my keeping by none other than Himself. Such a fine blade it is, too. And so badly wasted."

"Even as the man that will wield it is to be wasted."

"No, there you are mistaken, Soldwin's Son. I am not wasted in this matter. For I am already dead.

"Born fatherless, I was unwanted, undeserving of life. Had the Rite's martial druids not claimed me for their ranks, I would surely have been slain in infancy, cast into some icy river or tossed off a high cliff, no doubt, like the refuse that I was. Yet I was claimed, and thus rescued from my fate. Rescued but not saved." Epsilon paused speaking to run his right hand lovingly along the intricacies of his finely wrought weapon.

Deldric cleared his throat and shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Beg pardon, sire, but I am lost in your words. How are you dead when you are clearly living?"

"My flesh lives, citizen, but my soul is long departed, gone these many years to that land of shadow bounded by the River Death. I am life borrowed. My every breath is a purloined thing, stolen from the gods even as my heart secretly steals its beats." Epsilon chuckled gloomily without smiling. "Who but a dead man would dare venture beyond the Wall?"

"I do not understand."

"Understanding is not expected of you, citizen. You are not of the Rite. Do not insult me by presuming that I might teach you all my life's learning in a single night."

The big peasant paled miserably. "Deldric would never offer you insult, sire. Forgive his ignorance, I beseech you."

Epsilon calmed his disturbed drinking companion with a casual wave. "All is forgiven, citizen. You were--" but the Warfarer's words were cut short by a tumult of neighing horse and raging curses, which were uttered in a foreign tongue.

"Helmcleaver!" cried Epsilon. Standing and drawing his weapon in a single fluid motion, the angry Ritesman bellowed, "Heigh, Helmcleaver, to war! To war!" And through the window he leapt.

2

Of Empire and Alcorde

Epsilon's warhorse was quartered in a small corral that crouched alongside Mary's ramshackle inn. It was a stark shelter, open to the general cruelties of the night weather, but the Warfarer had little to fear for Helmcleaver's safety. Like as not, any would be thief would find himself brainless rather than enriched, for the beast's name was well earned by example.

Even as the Warfarer jumped through the window and into a courtyard abutting the corral, he watched a shadow in the form of a man as it was struck down by the rearing, angry animal. Another shadow fled across the dung scattered yard, leapt the fence in a single attempt, and dashed out of sight around a corner. A third form cowered in terror against the rails, too frightened to flee.

"Heigh, Helmcleaver, down, down! Back! Come to me now! To hand! To hand!"

Epsilon reached for and grasped the animal's dangling reins. They were neither cut nor snapped in two. Somebody had unwisely decided to untie his mount, then.

The cowering shadow sought to slide along the fence toward the same freedoms his fled partner had found, but was held up short by the flashing threat of Epsilon's blade. Sweeping his cape back behind to free his arms for fighting, the Warfarer demanded harshly, "Who are you? What business do you have with my animal?"

Whining, the foiled thief collapsed to his knees, prostrate. Even in the dull blue glow of a full moon, something seemed dreadfully wrong with the wretch. His body seemed oddly lumpy and misshapen. He stank miserably.

Epsilon could see no weapons, but neither could he see the man's hands. "Raise yourself, you miserable fiend. Let me see your bared palms."

A lamp's light jostled the shadows at the Warfare's back, as Deldric held a lantern forth from the un-shuttered window. "What trouble here, sire?"

"A brace of brigands at hand, and one gone 'round the barn, escaped with his life."

"Where? Let me get a view." Deldric raised his lamp.

"The coward will not bare his hands or his face." Epsilon sidled cautiously across the lot, his blade at a lethal readiness. He neared the splayed body of the second criminal and kicked it softly. It moved not, but a suppleness in the alleged corpse's response was all too telling of life. The Warfarer hissed poisonously and backed away. "Deceiverrr," and his blade flashed in the lamplight to deal a death blow.

His partner's severed head rolling on the ground near his feet, the surviving thief straightened slightly, but would not yet reveal himself. The lamplight shadows swayed bizarrely, hypnotically, as Deldric's arm wavered. Everything seemed alive and moving.

Epsilon barked, "Bare yourself, fiend! Or deny me at your peril." He took a threatening step forward, raising his blade.

Still the cowering brigand would not speak. All that issued from his throat was a strangled gargling, a phlegmatic rumble of fear and loathing.

Instead, it was Deldric that stirred the silence, adding his own choked cry of disgust. "Sire! At your feet! Look!"

But Epsilon had already taken note of the changeling in their midst. The headless heap of rags that was the slain horse thief was not still as a slain man should remain, but was moving with a writhing, wriggling flow of its lumpy flesh and bony hard spots. The sacrificial hero backed away from this display, suddenly aware that he might still be facing two adversaries rather than one.

Only now did the huddled survivor rise up to his full height, revealing his monster's reptilian face and vile, clawed hands. Epsilon gasped and was instinctively repulsed. Never in his life and long experience had he seen such a beast. It was fell and nasty, and reeked of days old rot. It opened its mouth to gargle an unreadable curse, then leapt for Epsilon with a strangled howl of rage. In the same instance, a cold, rasping grip closed around the Warfarer's armored shank as the decapitated beast cinched its dead right hand about Epsilon's ankle.

Shaking off his stunned horror in the last moment, the holy warrior reacted savagely. With the deft skill of long practice, he assumed an offensive stance and rotated his sword arm in a high arc. The charging monster's two arms came off neatly just below the elbows, and were followed a heartbeat later by those of its dead brother. But Epsilon was not finished. In rapid order he beheaded the yet screaming beast and diced its body into large pieces before it collapsed to the earth. Its mate was similarly ravaged, and all was largely still, save for the slight and ineffectual twitches of the individual pieces.

Deldric climbed through the window with his lamp and ambled across the yard to stand over the remains. Nonchalantly, he let down his trousers with a free hand and urinated on the grotesque offal. "Here, lord, if you will," he said, offering the lamp. "I will fetch the dung shovel and clean this mess up. I can see no sense in you soiling your good riding clothes with the likes of these cretins."

His eyes wide in its fickle light, Epsilon accepted the lantern and queried, "By the gods, Soldwin's Son, what were they? Men or beasts?"

"Oh, beasts most assuredly, sire. Beasts from the Otherside. We get them from time to time. They are like insects, you see, largely harmless to an armed man, and no real threat to an unarmed one save that their jaws are venomous. There now," he grunted, shoveling the chopped pieces into a pile. "Let me have that lamp again, beg pardon. Just a bit of the oil is all I need." Deldric cackled happily, "Ready yourself for a treat, Sir Warfarer, for I doubt you have once seen

the likes of this blaze in any Teslan hearth." Saying this, the peasant poured a wealth of hot oil over the twitching pile of appendages and ignited it with a touch of the lamp's flame.

All went up with a whoosh of sucking combustion and a billowing burst of light. The colors were varied and bright, like the markings on the scaled back of a poisonous cabermarrand. The monsters' severed limbs burned like dry cordwood and were quickly reduced to ash. A moan of evil rage rose up with the burning, and was answered by a ghostly echo sounding from the unseen Wilderland distances.

After the roar of the fire had settled a bit, Deldric cleared his throat to say, "It was the beast they were after, sire. No doubt about it. We never leave tend animals out of doors at night in these parts. I should have warned you earlier, but I thought... I thought you must know what you are about, sire, you being a soldier of the Rite and all."

Epsilon grunted and stared off into the night shadows, wondering what had become of the third insect-man. "I need not have fought every one of the gods' creatures, Deldric, to be proficient at what I do. But it seems I am less prepared for the Wilderlands than I was led to believe."

"Perhaps not, sire. After all, no man can be said to be of the Wilderlands, or accustomed to its strangeness. Magic is home there, not men." Deldric spat into the fire and swelled his chest with pride. "Yet be you not forlorn, Lord Warfarer, as I have told you all that is known in the Empire of the Wilderlands. No mage of Tesla might have instructed you better."

The Warfarer made a scoffing, derisive noise with his mouth. "The mages of Tesla know nothing of the 'lands.'" The fire's light was flickering dully to die. Epsilon kicked at its embers and once more scanned the night shadows for the escaped interloper. "Nor do they care to learn. Knowing that the Wall works and stands long is enough to serve them. They are so fat and live so opulently that--" The Emperor's Holy Warrior caught his tongue in mid-sentence and shook his head uselessly. "Bah, what purpose words?"

"I am a more than a hundred days gone from Tesla and its parlor perversions, a hundred days that might as well be ten thousand thousand. I am lost to that world, never to return, cast off and cast out like a fledgling from a nest, sacrificed to the gods and no hope of flying back home again. Those fattened princelings, how they must be laughing now! Laughing at me, laughing at all of Empire."

Epsilon turned away from the faded fire, now naught but a lingering warmth, and only then sheathed his blade. Sighing wearily, he enquired, "You say you were sent to school in Tesla?"

"Aye, lord." Deldric turned to follow his gentleman friend, holding the lamp on high to light the Warfarer's way. "For three seasons whole. Until my father was killed by a forest lion and I was called back home."

"Three seasons, hmm? Then you must have attended Festival. You must have witnessed the Martial Ritual of Alcorde at least once."

"Twice, actually, lord. Many years ago."

"And what did you think of it?" Epsilon gathered Helmcleaver's reigns to lead the giant beast into Mary's crumbling barn.

"It was a genuine spectacle, sire. I had never before heard such noise. Nor had I ever seen so much color and light. So much fighting."

"And dying."

"Aye, and dying. I saw many men fall, never to stand again in this world."

"All of them born into the Martial Rite. All of them sacrificial heroes, trained from childhood to die yearly in droves for the Emperor's pleasures. Some of them were like brothers and sisters to me. While we contestants drank blood and dined on slippery guts there in the arenas, His Majesty Most High and all the court's merest princelings and kings glutted themselves on the finest wines and roasted joints, all the while laughing to see us stumble, regaling to watch us fall, doubling over with mirth when murder was done. And afterward... for the victor... for me, Alcorde. Alcorde and exodus to the Great Barricades.

"So am I here now. And I can say honestly that the mages of Tesla know nothing of the Wilderlands, except that it be the proper place to forever banish the Empire's finest war maker."

"Banish? But why banish such an asset?" Deldric pushed one of the barn's ponderous, protesting doors aside and held it open for Epsilon.

"The Empire has not fought a war in seven hundred seasons, citizen, and no threats are reared within its borders. All that is terror in the world exists without the Wall, and the Wall has not been breached since it was first raised by Vandegarte, the First Emperor.

"I ask you, what use has a nation at peace for men of war? Hmm? No use at all, I say. While in the same hand, rulers of sleepy lands have much to fear from such men. Before the Long Peace, many kings were dispossessed of their kingdoms through the subtle plotting of bored generals and restless armies. Vandegarte, himself, rose to power from the humble beginnings of a backwater palace coupe, earning his first crown from within by despoiling his own master. Indeed, this was a tactic he used many times with much success in the course of his long and numerous conquests; offering alliances to wayward princelings or errant generals in order to gain the keys to their gates, and then slaying them as reward for their treachery, ironically denying them the commands they had so covetously sought, usurping all for himself. Thus was the Empire forged and made whole, gathered kingdom by country through the gluttonous demands of but a single traitor."

Deldric gasped to hear the Warfarer's last words, which were blasphemous, and let go the door to cover his ears. The unevenly set door, in turn, swung heavily to and all but knocked the peasant from his stunned and stumbling feet.

"Do not be shocked, Deldric Son of Soldwin. I speak only the truth. This tale is well known and openly related in the ranks of the Martial Rite, even if it is forgotten by the general population." Helmcleaver balked at entering into the barn when its door threatened to let go, so Epsilon paused speaking to soothe the beast with soft words and gentle strokes of its closely cropped mane. When the warhorse was calmed and safely within the structure, the Warfarer continued. "Vandegarte was an old man and failing to death when the last of his enemies' keeps

fell to his armies. And now the old war dog was come up against the fate to which he had subjected so many of his vanquished foes. The last of his wars were fought, his nation was at peace, and his armies had nothing to occupy their attentions. Men long accustomed to campaign and bloody conflict were left in the lurch; retired unto pastures they knew not how to plow, dismissed into clerkships that held little fascination for their martial minds, or dispatched to far away, slumberous outposts that passively guarded the Empire's Wilderland Borders.

“As Vandegarte's stooped body weakened and was bent by his old age, the First Holy Emperor watched and listened for plotting at his back. Often were such devious designs turned up, and many men were executed for their treachery, but nothing, it seemed, would do to quiet these tiresome rebellions. All too soon, he realized, a wagging tongue would be missed, a head would escape the axe, and somebody, somewhere, would rise up to despoil him, even as he had despoiled so many others. So Vandegarte commissioned the building of the Barricade, and commanded all of his warriors, reserve and enlisted alike, to participate in its construction.”

Deldric hung the lamp from a peg and set to filling a manger with straw, but Helmcleaver was having none of that. Instead, the lethal beast made its way eagerly to a salt lick and beset the block as though it were candy and he a happy child.

Epsilon sat upon a milking stool and drew his blade from its scabbard. Cleaning it with a bit of velvet drawn from a pocket in his tunic, the swordsman added to his tale. "It is my belief that the old man hoped the project would outlive him, and I gravely doubt that he ever desired to see it finished. Yet, as you well know, finished it was, and many years before Vandegarte's death.

Which brought The Wall Builder hard up against the same delayed fate, and him being so many years older than before. You can well imagine how heartily his men must have been griping by then, what with their own age so hard advanced in service of the Emperor's long labors.

Revolution was a hotbed of coals scattered across Empire, waiting for but a splash of fuel to send it raging into ruin.

"But The Wall Builder was not to be so easily undone. On the pretext of a fabricated border incident, the old man declared a general war on the strange peoples of the Wilderlands, and mustered his aging armies one last time. From all surrounding lands the warriors were mustered, old men and their sons born into service, and from the gates of Tesla they marched into a great purging of the Empire's military might. Through all nine of the Wall's Gates, five times a hundred thousand men were sent to their doom, never to return or be seen alive again."

At last satisfied with the polished shine of his steel, Epsilon sheathed the weapon and watched Helmcleaver turn away from the salt lick to find a water trough. Deldric was leaning on the manger, warily watching the four legged monster in their midst, when he cleared his throat to interrupt.

"I have heard that story, sire, but I had never heard it told that the First Wilderland Wars were based on fabrication. According to every other telling in my memory, the First Wars were a total bloody defeat, and only the Great Barricade saved Empire from absolute ruin."

"Aye, so it is told now, even as Vandegarte announced it then. But we of the Rite know differently. Our stores of history date back long before Vandegarte's time, and are kept current unto this day, pure of content and unblemished by lies. We know the truth of it.

"Think a moment, citizen. What better way to gird an army for war than to tell them their wives and sons are threatened all 'round by magical beasts? Was it not a convenient conflict, to have waited until the wall was standing whole and strong? And when it was fought and allegedly lost, was not the defeat a timely thing for Vandegarte? Hmm? His rebellious armies were lost and destroyed, his kingdom left behind in peace, and all the minds of his people were turned to the Wilderlands and its mysterious threats. Where before they had cursed the Wall for its great expense and seeming waste of resources, now they praised it. Where before the soldiers' wives had grumbled that their men were being squandered in the wastelands to no end, now they were raised up in glorious widowhood, their husbands all martyred, and they could point to the narrowly avoided disaster and declare that it was their own particular man that had narrowly saved the day and all the Empire besides. Vandegarte's problems, it seemed, were solved at once. His wall was justified, the rebellions quashed, his dangerous armies dispelled and banished forever. It seemed, in fact, that he might live out his unreasonably advanced years with little to worry his rule.

"But this was not to be, for old men that perish are ever replaced by their sons and grandsons, and, though he had purged one army, another restless generation of potential soldiers and further ages of rebellion loomed with the morrow's promise. What to do in this matter?

Hmm? It was a difficult thing, for he could not continue to wage useless wars year upon year. Not even Vandegarte's fabled wealth was so vast. Neither could he afford to squander the cream of the Empire's manhood, not when they were sorely needed in rebuilding crumbling civil works, long neglected during the raising of the Wall. What to do?" Epsilon paused speaking as though he required an answer, when he was instead merely distracted by the care of his expensive animal. He feared Helmcleaver might drink too much too quickly. But no, the beast raised its head and glanced toward the manger.

Deldric took notice of this and stood to move quickly out of the stallion's way. Making a response to the Warfarer's rhetorical query, the peasant offered, "He declared the Disarmament and initiated the first Ritual of Alcorde."

The Warfarer smiled. "You are more learned than even your smooth speech betrays, it seems. But, though you are largely right, in one minor thing are you misdirected. Vandegarte Wall Builder did not initiate Alcorde. We, of the Rite, authored that ritual, and have practiced it since ancient times, since before Eluin the Great stormed the Black Forest and was repulsed. Yet it is true that before Vandegarte's undesired intervention, Alcorde was a secret practice. Scarcely a hundred sacred warriors were considered worthy of the contest, and few of them were slain. Mercy was the rule of the un-bastardized way, for it is unprofitable to openly kill one's brothers in arms.

"But Vandegarte would corrupt both the Rite and its Martial Religion to serve his own needs. First, as you have said, he disarmed his own ranks, stripping them of the right to bear arms

in times of peace. Their lances and swords were replaced by shovels and trowels, and the Empirical Legions were reduced to the status of civil engineers. At the same time, Vandegarte levied high taxes against any man prolific enough to beget more than five children in his lifetime, so restricting the manpower available to the many farms and apprenticeships that few young men were left to volunteer for the army in the first place. Clever, no? Well, maybe not.

"Not if Vandegarte had altogether neglected the need for a well trained armed force. But no mere army was good enough for his use, as private men were given to individual corruptions and secret weaknesses. No, what he needed was a more dedicated band of conscripts or volunteers. What he needed was the Holy Warriors of the Martial Rite.

"Now it is well known even among the common people that there exists a harsh hatred between we of the Rite and Vandegarte's long lived Empire. Even in that time this hatred raged, but more fiercely. At the end of the eighty seventh year of The Wall Builder's rule, during the Festival of Alcorde, a violent coupe was effected and all the Rite's most holy druids were kidnapped and removed to Tesla.

"There they were held under a continual threat of death, but they were not slain. This was, naturally, a most egregious insult to the sanctity of our holy ways, since all the stored knowledge of our martial histories and practices were kept in the heads of our druids. We of the lower ranks depend on the teachings of our Masters Superior in order to maintain an elite martial way of life. Without the combined understandings of all their long and varied combats, the training of our younger initiates would be sorely compromised, and new elders, new Druids, could

not properly succeed through the ranks. Vandegarte understood all this, perhaps better than the Rite did at that time, and so he did not murder his hostages outright.

"Rather, he held them safe in Tesla's fortified keeps where they enjoyed no hope of rescue, though many brave assassins tried and died in the attempt. In time, once it was clearly elucidated that the Druids were utterly, irrevocably under Empire's control, a bargain was struck between the Rite and Vandegarte. Our lower priests were allowed access to the High Druids, that their teachings might be passed on, with the proviso that neither the Druids, nor those they would instruct, could ever leave Tesla's prison walls once entered. It is a pact that persists to this day, and so the Rite has been since wed to Tesla and its stagnant Empire. All that we have of our own religion is dispensed from Tesla's bureaucracy, bit by bit, and the number of free ranging Ritesmen is carefully controlled. Even the once sacred Ritual of Alcorde has been bastardized and corrupted to serve Empire, its traditionally bloodless contests turned into an orgy of murder that both entertains petulant princelings and dispenses with the best of the Rite's yearly brood of warriors in senseless mortal combats."

Deldric chewed a straw, his face stunned. He was trying to absorb all that the Warfarer had said, in part because it was knowledge sourced from so high and educated a man, in part because it smacked of reasonable truths. Yet so much of what the Warfarer had said ran contrary to everything the peasant thought he knew. Unable to formulate anything cleverer to utter into the awkward silence, the forester choked, "So that's the way of it? I always wondered why the Rite stood in service of an Empire it seems to hate."

"We do not hate Empire, but the restrictions that it places on our way of life. We hate Vandegarte, and hate him so dearly that even his children five hundred years and twenty five generations removed hold a special place in our blackest thoughts."

Soldwin's Son scratched his head and averted his keen gaze. "You are a strange man, sir, so full of contradictions. You hate Empire and especially its Emperor, yet you fought for the right to serve the Emperor's will. You slew your own kind to triumph at Alcorde, all for the privilege of dying in the Wilderlands at His Majesty's pleasure. His Holy Majesty Most High, whom you hate."

Epsilon shrugged his shoulders as he watched Helmcleaver munch hay noisily. "Alcorde does not serve the Emperor, or his Empire, though it may seem so to you. And I do not journey into the Wilderlands at His Majesty's pleasure, but rather because it has ever been the way of the Ritual. In its un-bastardized form, the Warfarer's Exodus was but a solitary journey into unknown regions of seven years duration. At the end of this time, the chosen warrior was bound to return to the High Druids and disseminate all that he had learned of distant lands and opponents, thus renewing the Rite's store of knowledge. Now Alcorde means something else entirely. Since the time of The Wall Builder, Exodus has meant exile and unknown doom." The Warfarer sighed heavily, his shoulders suddenly drooping beneath the oppression of an unseen weight.

"Tomorrow, I, myself, go to that doom beyond the Postern Gates. Tomorrow, the Warfarer will pass once more into his yearly oblivion."

A long, deep silence followed that was broken by neither man. Both were consumed by the contemplation of their individual fates. Deldric was concerned with his own meager existence that was void of glorious battles and great deeds, but filled with a certain surety of life. He was not daily the hero to anyone save perhaps his own small children, but neither did he fear the morn for all the new mortal threats it might present. And he would never be required to breach the Wall. While the ways of the Warfarer, it seemed, were completely the opposite. Epsilon could know nothing of life's sureties, and secretly envied Deldric and all the lowly citizens like him, men that were nothing great but that had at least known their fathers as children.

In the end, Epsilon reclined pointedly into a soft bed of straw to rest, and Deldric stumbled away to his bed. The lamp burned until its depleted well of oil was drained, then all was dark in the stables.

3

Exodus

Epsilon was awakened the next morning by a flight of birds taking raucously to wing from the haven of Mary's loft. A symphony of wing beat percussion and silken throated cooing sounded beneath the rafters for a breathless moment, then all was still. Downy quills and dust motes were left to tumble silently into inevitable death from the heights above his head.

The Warfarer rubbed itching eyes and smacked a reeking mouth, reclining on his soft bed of straw. He was naturally in no hurry to rise, as rising was but the next footfall to further him along his wayward course of doom. Summer days were long, he reasoned, filled to overflowing with time to die, and the Postern Gates were but an hour's ride further along the road. There could be no real dallying in this task, but a minute or two would not be cause for great shame. A minute or two to savor all that he was and once had been here among the worlds of men. It was not time enough to savor anything properly, least of all a lifetime, but it would have to do. For today, this very forenoon, he was bound by honor to open the Gates and journey beyond.

Many times and long had he pondered this fate that was now readied at the pounce, eager to take him at last. During the torpid course of his passage out from Tesla, Epsilon had often questioned the lot of his life; its purposes and consequences, its beginning and ending, its meaning, if it held any meaning at all. He had questioned every matter of his meager existence; from his time of swaddling and orphanhood, with all its implications of absent parents, to his first clear memories of life within the Rite, to his final days before the Festival. He questioned his triumphs in contest, and even the bliss of Alcorde. He questioned the monarchy of Tesla and the Empire it ruled. And he questioned the Warfarer's Exodus. He questioned the very way of that vain ritual, and particularly his place within it. Many times he had paused to ask, 'Why me?'

Though he rarely received any clear answers to such questions. After all, what is a man that questions, if he is not ignorant?

So, enlightenment be damned, Epsilon had grown weary of asking. He had resigned himself to his morbid duties, and now thought nothing further of opening the Postern Gates than to consider it but a minor task that could be briefly delayed. A few minutes longer would not do serious damage to the clockworks of the world, he reasoned, reclining on his soft bed of straw.

Yet how should he spend these last precious moments? Hmm? Surely now was not the time to squander thought in attempting to solve an old puzzle that had no solution. Now was the time to fill his mind with fond memories of happier times... but no such memories were to be found in the record of Epsilon's stark existence. Again and again, no matter how he steeled his

discipline to force his thoughts along to other things, they were returned again and again to that same tired question. *Why me?*

Haunted and frustrated, the Warfarer sat up abruptly and opened his covering cloak to find his feet. Upon standing, a drift of chaff and a sheath of yellowed paper settled out of the folds of his clothing, and fell to the dung strewn floor at Epsilon's feet. Curious, the sacrificial hero stooped to retrieve the letter, fluttering it open.

Its sentences were rough hewn and crudely scrawled, as though the author had penned them with his toes. It read;

Friends may be ugly,
foes may be fair,
do not judge your lover
by the color of her hair,
and if you go walking
in the Wilderlands by night
keep your wits in your pockets
and your sword in your right.

--The Invisible One

Epsilon glanced up from his reading to eye the barn's interior shadows. Its doors seemed undisturbed, and he had heard nothing in the night. It must have been a wily man indeed that had crept up on the Emperor's Warfarer, even in his sleep.

Helmcleaver was standing at the trough, filling his belly for the morn's ride. The horse seemed neither nervous nor skittish, and had not neighed in the night. How strange it seemed... but then, this was a strange land, here at the end of the road. Perhaps one of Deldric's night spirits had wandered in on an errant breeze, unfelt and unseen, to deliver the post. This at least made sense, even if it was an impossibility, especially since the unknown author had signed himself as 'The Invisible One'.

Epsilon was by nature a foot-sturdy man, not given to girlish hysterics or old women's superstitions, and he would not ordinarily have been inclined to believe in otherworld magic. If not for last night's confrontation with those strange Wilderland creatures, in fact, he would not have given Deldric's strange tales any credence at all. And again, here was this letter, delivered to his very bosom without the slightest disturbance, a feat of stealth that could only be magic borne. Epsilon checked the shadows and heights once more, as much to hide an eery shudder that had crept up his spine as to search out hidden enemies. He had a strange feeling at his back... a feeling of covetous eyes restlessly watching.

Whatever else it might portend, the letter was in ill omen, and a poor start to so dangerous an exile. The sacrificial warrior read its words a second time, then a third, and finally folded the paper way, tucking it into an oil skin pouch on one of his cross braces.

He went to Helmcleaver and soothed the beast's flinching flanks, reaching for his helm where he had hung it from the saddle's horn. "Well, my friend, today becomes the day. We are all set for our long banishment beyond the wall, and go happily this morn to the Gates. Hmm? No? Not happily, you say? Resignedly, then. However, we go." Epsilon moved around to his mount's left side and cinched the saddle's surcingle tight. "And it seems we are already met by emissaries of the Otherside. Two last night that were no real threat, and one this morn that was. It well serves me, or poorly--I know not, that our mysterious guest was merely a writer of script and not a cutter of throats, eh? Oh," he laughed as Helmcleaver sucked air playfully, "You were not afraid? Well, no wonder, for it is widely known that men are generally assassins of men and rarely of horses. Which is not to say you are anything less than a wonderfully admirable beast, Helmcleaver. What, let yourself go, eh? Could not hold your breath unto senselessness?" The gut strap was at last tight and its free length tucked away. "There! Now, I have you! The Warfarer's Exodus is not to be denied, either by demon or stubborn stallion."

Helmcleaver stamped and backed away from the trough, blowing spray and braying loudly. The powerful beast stood himself in the center of Mary's stables and reared, thrashing his steeled hooves proudly.

"Heigh, Helmcleaver!" called an exultant Epsilon. "Up now! Up! Parade! Parade!" The beast rotated atop his hindquarters, thrashing out in all directions. "Down now! Down! To rear! Heigh! To rear!" Obliging, the lethal animal tipped over to his forefeet and lashed out with savage jabs of his powerful flanks.

When this display was finished, the horse trotted back to his master for the adoration now due. Epsilon obliged with long, firm strokes of his hand along the animal's rippling, corded flesh. "Aye, you are indeed a magnificent creation, Helmcleaver. You should be brushed to a high glow and dressed in the brightest silver plate for your exodus from Empire. All should see you one last time as only you should be seen outside battle. Alas, it is not to be. I have not the time and cannot now well afford the trouble. We will go to our doom as we are, dressed for the road and dusted with its grit."

Tucking his heavy helmet under his right arm, Epsilon led his horse to the doors with his right and pushed them aside with a forceful kick. A lacework of sunlight pikes jabbed at his breast from gaps in the forest canopy. It appeared that he had slept later than he had at first thought, for the sun was already quite high in the sky, high and bright enough to force a painful squint.

Glancing up and down its length, Epsilon saw a scattering of people lined the road where it passed through Father Heights' town center. They darted fearfully inside, however, when they heard the stable doors slam open and saw him standing there, all dressed in black velvet and steel mail, the Warfarer's scarlet coat of arms emblazoned on the brocades of his outer cloak, the studded face of his small shield, the crest of his helm, and broadly upon the baldric covering his armored breast.

Epsilon led Helmcleaver around the corral, past a pile of ashes sifting in the wind, and around to the front of the Roaring Lion. There, he tied his warhorse to the rail and entered Mary's house to retrieve his bow and saddle pack and to purchase dried foods for his journey.

As it turned out, the old wench had laid everything out for him at the ready, including a great double sack of victuals that were held together by a short cord, fit for slinging safely over Helmcleaver's broad back. A bit of rabbit's hide was attached, Mary's version of a receipt. She had charged him for the goods, deducting from his leavings with her, which she had apparently counted out in the night. The Warfarer smiled, and laid his helm aside to wash up in a basin the hostess had also provided. Next he broke his nightly fast on smoked ham, honey cakes that all but swam in honey, and a bountiful pile of boiled eggs. All was washed down with a big mug of cool wine and another of hot tamboo.

When he finally pushed his platter away, satiated, the Warfarer glanced up only to find Mary standing there, her customary spoon jutting out of one fist, which was placed sternly on her ample hip. Epsilon belched to show how good the meal had been, patting his armored belly.

"Do all Emissaries of His Majesty rise so late?"

"Beg pardon, but no, M'selle. I had too much of your good ale and Deldric's smooth tongue last night, it seems. I had not the sense even to shed my armor and weapons, but slept in them as though I were away to war."

Mary grunted suspiciously, apparently doubting that the Emperor's men did much of anything save sleep. "You saw your edibles? It is the best I had in the house, though I only

charged you like it was the moldy stuff I sell to the widows on Saturn's Days. I don't figure Horn will mind too much, you going out to look for him and all." The old woman did not offer a smile, for it seemed her skin would crack if she tried, but her eyes were sparkling as she spoke. "And you remember my message to him. Tell him his Mary is still waiting." With that, she gathered up his spent utensils and hurried them off to the kitchen, her head bowed and shoulders strangely heaving.

Humbly, moving as silently as he could manage for fear of disturbing the wench's hidden grief, Epsilon donned his helm and gathered his supplies and saddle pack. This latter item contained the whole of his world, everything he owned that he was not wearing or carrying, and so he was careful to check its seals and contents before adding it to his burdens.

Outside, he tied the baggage to the back of his saddle and arranged his unstrung bow and its soft quiver to ride beneath the stirrup flaps. His small shield dangled from the horn on Helmcleaver's right side, away from Epsilon's mount but easily to hand. Ordinarily, as a knight errant of the realm and a disciple of the Rite, he should be accompanied by at least one liveryman, a squire or page, and a train of baggage. But no man in his right mind, noble or ignoble, would volunteer to follow and serve him unto the far wastes of the Wilderlands. And Epsilon was not so fond of tend animals that he would willingly subject himself to the fickle nature of an ornery beast of burden. There would be little time in the heat of battle to curb a wayward mule. No, he and Helmcleaver would carry it, or it would not pass beyond the Gates with them.

Besides all of which, Epsilon seriously doubted he would have great need of provisions or spare armor in the Wilderlands. Though he did not feel this was his day to die, the Warfarer was nevertheless convinced that his stay in the 'lands would be a short one, for whatever reason.

As a dozen pairs of eyes watched warily from the cracks of shuttered windows or from beyond the shadows of open doorways, the Emperor's Warfarer climbed astride his beast of war and arranged his cloak about him to keep out the morning's chill. Epsilon pulled gently on the reins, pointing Helmcleaver further along the road toward the Barricade, and they were on their way.

Halfway through town, a big silhouette separated from one cluttered porch and drew near the street. Behind it covered two smaller silhouettes, each clinging to one of Deldric's legs. The peasant called, "Hey, now, Sir Warfarer. Well met."

Epsilon pulled up short and leaned across his saddle's horn. "Aye, you are well met Soldwin's Son. Does your head yet swim in Mary's ale as does mine?"

"A bit, perhaps. We were too late and too long at the cups, I guess." Deldric shook his head stiffly, and held something out for his friend to take. "My wife has baked these for you. They are full of good mints and herbs and should ease the throbbing of your head. They have always done for me."

"Thank you, good citizen," offered the Warfarer, gratefully accepting the gift.

Deldric made a dismissive gesture. "It is as nothing, sire. Your thanks would be better spent on Goodwife Soldwin, but I could not persuade her to come to town with me."

"It is a fond wife that shuns town and stays to home. And who are these danglers-on? Hmm? Monkeys or mice?"

"These would be my two oldest sons, sire. Beg pardon, but I brought them along with hopes that they might see you, ere you... venture beyond. This would be my firstborn, Lepson, and this Dembric, after my own brother. Step forward, boys, show the man your grace." Deldric tried to drive his young sons forward, but they were as soft down on the glue of his shanks, and could not be shaken loose. "Forgive them their timid hearts, lord, it is not often that they witness the passing of an armored man of war. They are young, and are perhaps more awed by your presence than I had anticipated."

"Indeed."

"Well, sir, what with you tending your fine animal so late and us sitting here since before the sun's rise, I had much time to talk. And you know how my tongue is fond of wagging. Which is to say that I... well, I might have built you up in their minds. I fear you must seem a god to them by now."

Epsilon laughed, and reached into a pouch on his belt. From this he drew forth a brace of sweet meats, part of Mary's generous stores, and tossed them to the children, who were not so shy that they could not scramble about the porch after their treats. "So then let me be a kind, generous god. And here," he offered the rest of the candy more carefully to Soldwin's Son, "For your other children. Tell them that the Emperor's Warfarer has commanded their good faith in service of their parents."

It was the peasant's turn to laugh. "Aye, that I will. It should frighten these two, at least, to bed for many seasons to come."

The Warfarer frowned slightly. "Do not frighten them with my memory, Deldric, I beg you. Let them instead remember me more gladly as a friendly spirit that would protect them from harm in their restless dreams."

A tiny voice squeaked, "Do you walk even in dreams, sire?"

Epsilon shook his head slightly. "Not yet, son. But who knows where spirits wander after they cross the river? I do not."

"Neither do I." Then the boy's mouth was stuffed so full of smiles and sweets that he could say nothing more, but was content to cling once more to his father's thick leg.

Deldric cleared his throat uncertainly and shifted about on his great booted feet. "I hope those biscuits fix you up, lord." He seemed not to know how to act on parting. "Curse my crippled tongue, I feel awkward as a schoolboy called for an answer. I know not what to say."

The Warfarer laughed resonantly. "I'll wager that to be a first time event."

"Indeed."

"Then say you nothing at all, good citizen, but the standard 'good journey'. I will say the same, and thus we go our separate ways."

"Aye, it serves well enough. Good journey, Holy Warrior. We will not see your likes again for many long seasons to come."

"Good journey, Son of Soldwin. And good journeys to you, Sons of Deldric."

The children waved. Epsilon turned Helmcleaver back to the road and started off on the final paces of their long walk into exile. Farther Heights was soon a memory, and nothing but the forest remained.

So far from Capitol Tesla, the road was reduced to nothing more than a narrow cart track. Hacked out of the underbrush and poorly paved with uneven cobbles, it was more a danger to his mount's legs than it was an aid in passing through the woods. Epsilon kept Helmcleaver to a smaller but better defined foot trail that followed alongside. This was, no doubt, the preferred path of the citizens in these parts, as it showed every sign of having been used much and often. Where the trail climbed or descended low forest hills, tree roots had been laid bare like convenient living steps, while a cathedral of heavily greened boughs arced ever overhead. It was a wondrous way, so peaceful and fair, so soothing in the way the sun's light but trickled softly through the leaves, that Epsilon found himself wishing all the remainder of his passages to and through the Wilderlands would be so relaxing.

All too soon, however, even this way turned aside to run parallel to the Wall, which was then not more than a thousand sticks further along. It seemed the people rarely had call to venture so close to the Postern Gates, and for good reason, according to Deldric's tales. An old, faded wooden sign dangled crookedly from its rotting post at the end of the trail. The Warfarer had to squint and struggle a bit to make out the words, 'BEWARE OF MAGICAL BEASTS' before he guided Helmcleaver off the foot trail and back onto the Emperor's Road.

Pausing at its side, Epsilon glanced up and down the overgrown thoroughfare, curious as to its neglect. Weeds grew up through the cobbles to a knee's height, and the foliage so thickly overhung the way that it was all but choked off in places. Yet there remained obscured indications that once this had been a main artery to serve the land. Not far away, a tall, slender milestone leaned back into the trees, its numerical marker so deeply carved into the granite that it was readable to this day. Deeper into the brush, at the end of a dimly outlined walk that curved away from the road, squatted an abandoned building made entirely of thick stone slabs. Its empty round windows and doorway were glutted with the growth of vines and ivies. This was, or had been, one of the Emperor's toll houses, built to withstand the ravages of time. Hundreds of others just like this one dotted the Empire and lined its main traffic corridors, in use since they were first constructed more than six hundred years past.

Clearly, then, the road had once passed beyond the Wall to serve the Wilderlands. But why? Why provide those demon hordes with ready access to the heart of the Empire? To himself and aloud he said, "Perhaps the Wilderlands were not always so wild." Perhaps.

Perhaps not.

Here again he was come up against a puzzle with no sure solution. Vandegarte's aging Empire was full of ancient relics such as these, and they seemed to be especially concentrated here at the end of the road. Epsilon knew that many of the crumbling ruins dated back to a time before Empire, when all the lands had been but minor kingdoms and provinces ruled by local monarchies, royal bloodlines that had histories dating back thousands of years. There was no real way of

knowing when this toll house had been built, though it probably dated the wall, and likewise was there no way of knowing why or when it had been abandoned.

The reason behind it all had nothing to do with Epsilon, the Emperor's Warfarer, or his exodus to exile. That much was clear.

So Epsilon pressed on, careful not to hurry Helmcleaver for fear of the stallion coming up lame in one of the crooked cobbles. The sun rose, unseen, high over their heads as they crawled through the flesh of the woodland, apparently unwatched and unheeded. Birds darted back and forth on mysterious errands, and squirrels scampered curiously out onto their branches to examine Epsilon's passing. The furry creatures chittered and chattered and scratched their heads and bobbed their tails like a gathering of clucking old women, as if to scold him for his foolishness in traveling to the utmost ends of the road.

Presently, a loud, rustling sound emanated from the undergrowth far to the Warfarer's right. All chirping of birds and chattering of rodents was instantly stilled, and the animals that kept homes hurried to them, frightened for their lives. The rustling sound came again, and Epsilon brought Helmcleaver to halt.

The horse's ears were twitching back and forth, and it turned its head to watch for movement among the tall ferns. Remembering the note left him in the night, Epsilon drew his sword and brought his warhorse around to face this new potential threat. For many long seconds he stood there resolutely, listening, watching, waiting, but all was utter silence. Until the rustling sounded a third time and was met by a shrill, high pitched scream. A deer bolted across the road,

dashing from one side to another in a blinding flash of dappled brown fur and alabaster antlers. Closely behind leapt a forest lion, its mouth gaping hungrily, its long, heavy tail whipping crazily about to aid its balance during the chase. A churning of the undergrowth flowed away from the road at a life-taking pace and climbed a low hill.

Epsilon patiently awaited the outcome of this mortal contest. When he heard the lion's frustrated roar of rage, he knew the deer had escaped its fate... for the moment.

He sheathed his weapon once more, chuckling grimly. "Such are the combats of the forest, Helmcleaver; anonymous and quick. Was the deer courageous in his escape, do you think?" They started off once more at a nudge from the Warfarer's hobbled heels. Helmcleaver's hooves sounded on the cobbles slowly, relentlessly, as the lazy beat of a drum in dirge. "Is it a courageous thing to fight for one's life in the grips of absolute desperation? Or is it courage that flees mindlessly without making a fight at all? Did the deer have such a choice to make? Hmm? No, I suppose that buck scarcely paused to consider making a stand, but fled in the first instant of threat. And what of us, my friend?" Epsilon leaned forward to stroke his mount's twitching mane. "What of the likes of us? Hmm? We are as deer before the Wilderland Wall, which flies at us like a pouncing lion. Yet we make no slightest effort to save ourselves or flee from our fate. Rather we rush forward headlong to meet it, whether in courage or foolhardiness I know not, all because we are steeled by the teachings of the Rite, the Disciplines of the Sword. What aid can that black religion avail us this afternoon, when we are lost to the cat's empty belly? Hmm? When we are consumed by the beast, who will save us then?"

Helmcleaver shook his head and snorted. He knew not. Or perhaps the beast was trying to indicate that no one would save them. That no one could save them. Either way, there was no comfort to be found in Helmcleaver's serendipitous gesture, and Epsilon decided it was a fell omen, the second of the morning.

They stirred on in silence, passing beneath endless over-arching forest boughs like the vestibule arches of some vast cathedral. Choirs of songbirds sang from unseen pews, and galleries of squirrels offered up indecipherable prayers to unknown animal gods. It seemed impossible that Deldric's tales of magical monsters might be true.

Do demons really trouble paradise? Would the gods allow such blasphemies?

As if in answer to Epsilon's unspoken queries, the road led them past a vast clearing burned into the trees. Many months old, it was a domed chamber formed of felled trees and crushed undergrowth, and the decaying, crumbling bones of a massive rib cage stood at its center. Newly grown ferns and sapling trees were already pushing up through and around the bones, but Epsilon thought he could see the curved pate of a boulder-sized skull nestled among the weeds. A gaping hole had been opened in the cathedral's green ceiling, so it appeared the massive beast must have plummeted from the skies.

Dismounting from Helmcleaver's back, Epsilon cinched his chin strap tighter and reached for his buckler. Then, sword in hand, he approached the rotted carcass with all due caution.

It was certain the slain monster posed no threat to him, but where one could be found there were sure to be others. He approached the skull until he was standing over it. Though it

rested squarely on its lower jaw bone, the crown reached nearly to Epsilon's waist, and the entire structure turned out to be much longer than he had first guessed it might be. The bone was charred about the brow ridges and snout, evidence of the flesh having been burned furiously away. A long, uneven line of neck bones stretched back and curved around to meet a huge pair of moldered shoulder blades. Clumps of thick hide yet clung to parts of the carcass there, but the ribs rose bare and clean to form an ivory gazebo overhead. Another line of bones jutted out from the side, which ended in long curving scythes of obsidian that must have been the monster's savage claws. Each was as long and sharply tipped as an assassin's dagger. Epsilon stooped to pick one up and examine its fine point with a gauntlet sheathed fingertip. The talon was sharp enough to convince the Warfarer that it might easily have pierced full plate armor when wielded in life.

Shuddering, he returned the alarming relic to ground and spun on his heel to leave. After a few paces, his booted feet kicked up something in the undergrowth.

It was another rotting sign. On it was carved a warning to keep clear of the site by order of the Emperor, Himself. The Emperor's seal was engraved in the wood, along with the coat of His Majesty's Royal Engineers. The plank appeared to have once hung from a brace of tall spears. Epsilon put his weapon away to reseal the lances and re-hang the sign. Then he returned to climb atop Helmcleaver's back and admire his handiwork. Somehow, the site seemed much more foreboding for the Emperor's impotent caution. A large, black scavenger bird settled through the opening in the canopy to alight upon one of the arching rib bones and stare back at him.

Presently, the bird ruffled its feathers and squawked at him loudly. Another fell omen.

Epsilon turned away and spat into the ferns. "Damn you, too, dark familiar."

The bird took to wing, but surprised the Warfarer by darting into the road right of way instead of up, into the rent canopy. It flew ahead of them as they followed the road along the flanks of a gentle rise to a hillock's shallow summit. At its top, they were abruptly quit of the forest, and entered into a cleared killing ground that the Emperor's engineers had installed all around the Great Barricade. It was several hundred sticks broad, and had no doubt been wider before this remote region had fallen into general neglect and normal maintenance routines were relaxed.

The green was well grown over with a thick, luxurious grass that clung close to the earth. It grew so thickly, in fact, that nothing else could get a foothold on the clearing, not even the tough, opportunistic trees that populated the forest proper at Epsilon's back. Even without regular care, this lawn would last a long, long time indeed.

Incongruously, the road was better here. Its cobbles ran flat and even, though they were somewhat overgrown by grass root tendrils seeking for open earth. Helmcleaver's footfalls were muffled on this final approach to the Wall.

Which was a massively dominating structure that stretched off east and west as far as the eye could see. It was thirty sticks high, the height of fifteen tall men, and wide enough to drive five wagons abreast all along its length. It ringed the Empire full around, and was breached by but a score of ponderous gates. Epsilon halted Helmcleaver halfway across the green, the better

to examine the gates from a reasonable distance. They did not reach to the top of the wall, but their supporting arch was tall enough to allow egress of the largest catapults and siege towers. There would be two sets of these ponderous doors, Epsilon knew, one within and one facing the Wilderlands. Each was constructed entirely of everwear steel that shone brightly even to this late day. Each weighed as much as a small keep, but allegedly opened of themselves with but a turning of a key in their locks. The Wall, itself, was constructed of massive granite stones that had been quarried and fitted with such skill that no mortar had been required in the construction. A knife blade would not fit into the joints, it was rumored, and from this vantage the rumors appeared to be verifiable. The Barricade's face appeared to be smooth, though worn, and seemed solid enough at a distance.

On closer examination, however, Epsilon noticed it was shot through with endless fissures and finer cracks. In places the faults were so large that windblown soils had collected within and plants had sprouted from that sustenance. The Warfarer was reminded of Deldric's drunken tales, as he approached the Barricade near enough to make out a riot of mushrooms growing from one such miniature garden. Further along and higher up, a sapling tree had taken root and was flourishing. This did not bode well for the Empire's continued safety, and Epsilon wondered what had become of His Majesty's much touted engineer battalions.

The road approached the Gates through a defensive canyon of tall terraces, which lined it on both sides, and which were topped by baffled parapets, long deserted. On either side of the terraces, a pair of courtyards had been fashioned and paved with flagstones. Squat granite

buildings ringed those courtyards all around, and seemed to be the relics of disbanded garrison barracks and stables. Into the stones of the Barricade Wall, dual stairs had been carved, which climbed to its summit, flanking the gates.

Epsilon followed the road where it dipped between the defensive terraces and led up to the gateway. All was quiet and still, save for Helmcleaver's soft hoof beats echoing back and forth within the confines of the canyon-like avenue.

Another black crow, or perhaps the same one, alighted at the top of a nearby parapet and watched as he passed beneath. Epsilon tried to ignore its presence, and instead sought to focus his attentions on the massive steel portals. For the first time he had noted they were wrought finely into a giant mural and were heavily adorned with the words of an ancient dialect. The speech, when read, was a close cousin of the Common Tongue if not its sire, and so Epsilon had little difficulty deciphering what had been written there.

For the most part, it was an aggrandized version of Vandegarte The Wall Builder's exceptionally long life. It told of his rise to power (supposedly as a prince of noble blood, which was an absolute fabrication) and his 'Wars of Enlightenment' that had allegedly cemented the Empire and put an end to all strife in all lands. Nothing was said of his purged armies, or of the countless thousands that had perished on the chopping blocks of his executioners. Nothing was said of the famine that followed his armies afield, of the pestilence and disease that passed ever in the wake of his conquests. Nothing was said of his insatiable lusts that knew no restraints of morality or bounds of decency, that were as gluttonous and unflattering as a hog's feeding at a full

trough. According to those unknown and misguided historians of yore, the Wilderland Wall was not built by a forsaken army sent to an outpost named Oblivion, but rather by happy, willing citizens that had volunteered their sweat and tears in fond service of His Majesty Most High. At one point, Epsilon laughed to read that the Great Barricade's builders had boasted they would have gladly constructed ten similar walls, if such was the pleasure of Vandegarte, the Vile Usurper. What tripe!

The sacrificial warrior glanced around at terrain he could not see, wondering how many piles of bones moldered beneath the green, testament to the lives lost in securing success of this bloodless campaign of construction. From the Rite's own carefully kept histories, Epsilon knew that more than ten thousand men had perished in the endeavor directly, and another thirty thousand had been sent home maimed and destitute, without compensation, to die the slow death of starvation. Epsilon doubted very much that anybody had volunteered much of anything here. Besides outcast soldiers, many of the Wall's builders had been slaves leftover from Vandegarte's long wars. No, he decided, this was not a happy monument. Its only greatness was its own sheer size and overbearing dominion.

Somehow, regardless, it was a fitting monument to Vandegarte's lifetime. Everything about the man seemed to have been vast and boundless, from his un-abiding martial lusts to his unbridled civil designs.

Epsilon thought the Wilderland Wall might stand another one thousand years intact, however, and still it would not outlive Vandegarte's black reputation. Long after the Barricades

were crumbled to dust and these lies written on the Postern Gates were erased by rust, Vandegarte's name would be remembered in secret curses by men that hated him, that remembered him for exactly what he had been.

At the bottom of the gates, where they rested slightly buried on their forgotten stoops, a final epithet had been scrawled. These last words were not carved into the everwear steel, but were, rather, painted on with a flaking pigment.

Crudely written, as though the author had held the brush between his toes, the words read;

Watcher ware 'round the watchtower march,
open be your eyes come morning,
for stealth is ever the deceiver of sleep
and assassins rarely offer warning.

--The Invisible One

Epsilon dismounted and approached the heavy portal. The paint came easily away from the unblemished steel with the slightest touch. Clearly these words had not been here long, and would not remain long after he was passed through the Wall. They might have been painted this very morning.

Nervously, the Warfarer scanned the parapets and skies for danger. He glanced back along the road, but saw nothing and no one; no darting shadows, no lithe wraiths gathered as mist, nothing. Silence filled his ears.

Helmcleaver stamped impatiently, snorting. "You feel it, too? Hmm? Yes, we are being watched. Eyes burn into my back when it is turned. Who is watching, you ask? And why?" Epsilon slapped the reins absently against his mailed thigh. "I know not and cannot exactly guess, but I would hazard to say that the Emperor might be interested in knowing whether I had, indeed, opened the Gates. Perhaps it is only a spy of this side that follows, watching, and not an unexplainable apparition come from the Otherside. What do you say, fierce stallion? Nothing, eh? Aye, it is a wise man (or horse) that holds his tongue in the face of ignorance. We shall not guess, at all, as the Rite teaches, lest our preparations for ambush become clouded by unwarranted prejudice. Let us, instead, be ready for all foes on all fronts. We shall not be surprised when our watcher turns willing, Helmcleaver. Perhaps then, at the least, we will be done with this pesky business of skulking hangers-on that never show themselves."

With that, he led the horse along the face of the great gates to a small stone hut that had no windows and but one door. This faced away from the road and was fixed so close to the terrace wall that a horse could not pass through its side entrance. So Epsilon passed within alone, drawing a large golden key from a gilded chain that lay beneath his mail shirt. A wooden facing had once adorned the stone slab that served as the structure's only entrance, but it was long rotted away to splinters and dust.

Epsilon expected the granite underneath to swing open not at all or with much protest. Instead, the slab gave way easily and noiselessly, exposing the lockroom within to the bright light of a noon sun. A frenzy of disturbed bats flowed out of the doorway and through a small crack beneath the eave of the roof, startling the Warfarer half out of his wits. He had not suspected an enemy here, of all places. Belatedly, he drew his long knife and probed the interior with a cautious eye. Naught but bat droppings were to be seen within, and so he entered warily.

The lock was fixed into the wall behind the door. It was sealed in an everwear box that was armored against all manner of assault. Epsilon's key fit easily into the tumblers and turned them noiselessly. He opened the little box to expose the mechanism inside.

This was a series of wheels fixed to a common axis. Each wheel was marked with esoteric runes, all of them different. The runes were drawn from an ancient tongue, the all but forgotten High Speech of the Druids Martial, which was now known only among the most privileged disciples of the Rite. A general officer of that order was required to open the gates. Fortunately, Epsilon held such a rank and so he could read the runes. When arranged in the proper sequence, the twelve symbols should tell a brief tale. All twenty of the Postern Gates had their own particular runes carved onto the mechanism, therefore no single combination could open more than one set of gates. And the combinations, thus the tale they were made to tell, could be changed from time to time as necessity demanded.

The Emperor's Warfarer cleared his mind and practiced a brief meditation that was usually kept for battle lulls. Almost immediately the tale to open this particular doorway came to mind.

"Bassalt of Merebund was destined to be crowned king of a great hall when his brother Ulalt usurped the throne and had him slain instead." It was not a thrilling or entertaining tale, but it was a true bit of history that could be recalled with ease, even in the fierce heat of battle. Epsilon quickly dialed up his short message and resealed the lock box, then the granite door.

Back outside, he led Helmcleaver out onto the road once more to await the results of his wisdom. They stood well back from the stoop, for Epsilon knew the doors would open outward. If they opened all.

He was just beginning to doubt the mechanism, when a strange, whining sound of protesting, grating metal sounded from the steel and stone. The whine increased in pitch and intensity until it had become a head wracking din that all too gradually faded and died. Next, a series of heavy catches sounded to have been thrown open in sequence with a peel of CLANG! CLANG! CLANG! CLANG!, which doubtlessly echoed throughout all Empire. Now that whine of grating metal started up again, this time with a vengeance, and it did not end so quickly. As it rose to a high screech, the steel doors cracked apart and started their ponderous swing open. It was a long, slow process that all but deafened the Warfarer in its workings. Then something apparently gave way or rolled onto a greased surface, as the grating sounds ceased abruptly and the doors started moving faster.

Epsilon thought he could hear the rumbling of huge wheels that turned on rusted, pitted bearings. He thought he could hear wheezing pistons rising and falling while aged, rusted shafts turned slowly to a tune of squeaks and rattles.

At last the doors were thrown back with a bone jarring crash, and Epsilon felt it safe to enter the Wall. He passed into the well defended atrium that lay between the double gateway, nervously eyeing these shades that had not seen light for a hundred seasons or longer. Loopholes for archers and sky lights for hot oil vats stared blankly back at him from the walls and ceiling. Not even bats had taken up homestead here. It was with much trepidation that he and Helmcleaver waited at the far gates for them to open.

While they waited, Epsilon's ears played tricks on his mind. He thought he detected the restless scurry of feet on the stone, as though a phalanx of guards were rushing to the loopholes in the walls in order to cut him down with a hail of arrows. He thought he heard the whispers of remnant commands, whispers which hinted at words he could scarcely understand. A subtle cacophony of echoes reverberated in the chamber. Helmcleaver's ears snapped back and forth, side to side as they chased the noise about.

Epsilon soothed his animal with a series of firm caresses. His own heart fluttered nervously, and he felt Mary's delicious breakfast rising to spill out onto the cobbles. "Easy now, Helmcleaver. We are come to the brink un-trembling, let us not tremble as we leap." The warhorse stamped and snorted, rearing its head impatiently. The Warfarer hissed with sudden vehemence, "Oh, would that His Majesty could see us now! He and all his courtling pretenders, his feigners and shank grapplers, his boot licks that would laugh when he laughs, frown as he frowns, that would demand the death of innocents merely to prove royally pleasing. Would that they could see our iron bound hearts, our steeled courage, our martial discipline that is Nars' pride

and the Rite's sturdy backbone! They would pale in our presence! Our fiercely beating hearts would seem as tympanic drums to drown out their finger snapping! The purity of our courage would belittle their manhood and goad their womanhood to a lusty abandon! Oh... would that the Emperor could see us now."

And the outer gates were rent vertically by a column of blinding light that broadened and grew inch upon inch. A shriek of protesting steel was sounding once more, but Epsilon did not hear it. His whole attention was focused on the Wilderlands panorama that opened up before his dazzled eyes...

...Epsilon was uncertain what he had expected to see, but it definitely was not the scenery that greeted him. Nothing seemed to change from one side of the Wall to another. The cleared green was mirrored there, and another dense forest picked up where the lawn faded. From the tallest tree to the merest butterfly, everything on the Otherside was familiar. Having steeled himself for a visual assault of horror and absurdity, the Emperor's Warfarer was more than mildly disappointed. The vaunted Wilderlands seemed to offer nothing beyond the mundane.

No fierce magical beasts raged in the distances, and nothing charged up from the brush to devour him whole. The trees were not orange, the sky was not green, the heavens did not rain forth fire or glowing embers. Not one single thing, however slight, seemed out of place.

Those strange echoes of whispers changed abruptly to a snide sniggering at his back. Epsilon rotated in his saddle to fill his eyes one last time with sights of the Empire. Then he made

an obscene gesture with his free left hand, urging Helmcleaver anxiously forward in the same instant with a gouge of his studded heels.

Once through the Wall, his mount climbed the outbound ramp and curved back around to the right, following a digressing way that was paved with long slabs of bedrock. The path led up to a recess in the wall that housed a heavy steel lever. This, Epsilon knew, was the exterior closing switch. Once he pulled it down, those tall, shining doors would slam shut forever, and nothing short of scaling the Barricade would see him over to the Empire side again. For a fleeting moment, he considered simply leaving the Postern Gates ajar, but only for a moment. He was instantly reminded of Deldric and the peasant's two handsome young sons, and all thought of dishonorable cowardice was vanquished from his mind.

There might be little to fear in the Wilderlands. Perhaps its mythical dangerous were unfounded. Perhaps not. As a disciple of the Rite and the Hero of Alcorde, Epsilon could not in good conscious take so great a risk with so many lives. The Warfarer regretted his selfish considerations even before they could be wholly voiced inside his head. And with a slight blush of secret shame, he dismounted Helmcleaver to immediately throw the switch.

Lacking fanfare and applause, the Postern Gates swung to with a final clash of steel on steel, and all was silent save for the fleeing echoes. Epsilon breathed a heavy sigh of resignation, and Helmcleaver snorted in answer

Taking reins in hand, the sacrificial hero led his horse of war back down the steep terrace and onto the road. They walked slowly across the Otherside green, their heads turning warily this

way and that, watching both earth and sky for threats of any kind. A flock of small black birds had alighted from the far tree line, and these were now noisily settling down into place in the ensuing silence of fading echoes. Epsilon watched their twirling, swirling dance, hypnotized by their random yet orchestrated mass movement that resembled nothing so much as a school of fish swerving in shoal. Dimly, as his ears recovered from the abuses of the Gates, Epsilon found he could hear the winged beasts' raucous calling in the distance. Nothing abnormal there.

His eyes next searched along the tree line for that certain point where the road penetrated the forest's leafy green flesh. The opening was there, but it was narrowly overgrown and deeply filled with darkness. It seemed a cavern etched into a mossy stone wall.

Despite his many years of martial training and long hours of practiced meditation, Epsilon was deeply frightened. His nostrils flared fiercely and the hackles rose on his neck.

Something was indeed amiss in the Wilderlands. Of this the Warfarer was suddenly convinced. Though the Otherside forest seemed perfectly innocuous at first glance, Epsilon was left with the impression that something vast and ancient brooded within its jade colored shades. It almost seemed alive and eager to devour him. Indeed, some of its shadowed boughs assumed the semblance of consternated brow ridges in his imagination, while others outlined jaws, lips, eyes and even a nose. Soon the forest would open its maw to speak, to entice him ever forward on sleepy dream feet into its waiting, covetous arms. Arms that would wrap 'round and cover him over as surely as though he had been buried in the earth. Arms that promised the warm caress of a fond lover, but that were as cold and savagely final as any grave. What made it seem so?

Epsilon could not exactly say. It was not evidence that flooded his eyes or sense of touch, or any of his other five natural senses. Rather, it was... an emotion, a gut feeling that something was terribly, horribly wrong here.

He stopped walking when a pile of bones turned up in the weeds grown between the cobbles. It was outlined by a wide ring of brown vegetation where the sturdy lawn grasses had refused to grow. The outline was roughly in the shape of man. Another in the general shape of a horse lay nearby. Epsilon found it curious that these remains had been left to lie so long undisturbed by either scavengers or... or other things. The warrior's arms and legs yet reclined where they had fallen, and were still sheathed in rotted scraps of clothing and armor. A heavy pair of boots covered the shriveled feet. A helm lay toppled mere inches from the skull, as though it had fallen there when the man had fallen, never to be manipulated again. Now brittle and molding, a swath of once yellow hair lay on the ground between the helm and the skull cap. Where the right hand lay, a sword rusted in the weeds. Near the left, a shattered buckler. Most of the linen and velvet portions of the unknown's uniform were wasted away, but this warrior had once worn a breast shield of plate armor. On it was stamped all the evidence that Epsilon needed to see to know the bluntest details of this fallen hero's story. For on that corroded heart shield was stamped the Warfarer's coat of arms.

Epsilon dropped to one knee beside his fallen kindred, and searched among the corpse's waterproof pouches for identifying artifacts. A scroll of parchment was tucked into one sleeve, and had survived the wear of ages to some extent. It identified the man as Kappa Twelve. He

had been born into the Rite and was a Hero of Alcorde. He had passed through the Postern Gates in the four hundred and fifty seventh year of Empire, more than one hundred and fifty seasons past. And here had he lain from that time to now. His had been a short exodus.

But how had these delicate remains lasted so long in such pristine condition? How had they escaped being washed away in the rain, or from bleaching unto powder beneath the sun? How had they escaped night's many hungry mouths or the earth's insidiously sucking draw?

It could only be the result of black magic, Epsilon decided. A more important matter soon occupied his thoughts. How had this once proud warrior been slain? There was no obvious damage to the corpse's mail or plate, save for that shattered shield, and none of its bones had been broken. What had happened? Epsilon might have had an answer to his query if the dead could speak. But Kappa was unlikely to say much of anything regarding his untimely fate.

Epsilon replaced the scroll where he had found it, and scooped up a fistful of soil. This he tossed onto the fallen coat of arms, chanting a prayer for the dead. Then he stood and gathered the soldier's sword, helm and shield. Planting the blade firmly between the cobbles, Epsilon arranged Kappa's buckler and head cover to dangle from its pommel. Now he was singing a traditional song to Nars, the god of war, which begged, on behalf of Kappa's wandering soul, for a final leave from the field of battle, and which sought to gain him safe passage into those dark lands beyond the River of Death. It was all Epsilon felt he could do.

Helmcleaver nuzzled the equine remains rotting nearby, and snorted inquisitively. The stallion seemed to recognize a dim kinship to those lost and long forgotten bones. Kappa's mount

had once been well arrayed in the finest leather skirts and keenest parade plate armor, for even in long death the beast seemed to have been a fierce weapon. The Warfarer tossed another fistful of soil onto the old warhorse's carcass, knowing full well that no hero of the Rite would be worth his rations without a good horse, even in death. Then he gathered up his own steed's reins, and they set to following the road once more.

It was a long road, and straight. It approached the forest's flesh surely and without hesitation, passing within as though there was nothing to fear.

When he had crossed half the green's breadth, the wind changed suddenly from fair to foul. Initially it was a faint odor, as of a corpse rotting many sticks up wind, but it grew stronger with each footstep forward. A chill breeze ruffled the treetops so far ahead, and flowed toward him over the lawn grasses in a single wave of odorous assault. With its passing, the reek grew stronger than ever, and Epsilon thought he might retch.

His warhorse whinnied pitifully, obviously disgusted by the stench, and the Warfarer needed no further urging to mount. In the precise moment that he gained the saddle, a high, unnervingly loud screech of bestial rage sounded from just beyond the tree line. An instant later, a giant flying creature swooped over the treetops and descended on the clearing. Screaming a second time, it flew toward Epsilon at a prodigious rate, its lethal, claw-tipped wings extended to drag but inches off the green. In seconds it would be on top of him!

Epsilon spurred Helmcleaver forward into a mindless charge, drawing his flashing sword impotently. He had no hopes of surviving the assault, but made it merely because dying this way

was preferable to dying as frightened prey scooped up by a hungry predator. A howl of rage and frustration sounded from his own constricted throat, and quite suddenly he was filled with a feverish battle lust. "Heigh, Helmcleaver! To war! To war! Fly! Fly!" Wishing for a battle lance instead of a meager long sword, Epsilon brandished his weapon fiercely nonetheless and renewed his vocal rage. The gap between aggressors narrowed to close.

At the last moment, both swerved ever so slightly. The terror's menacing talons sliced past Epsilon's helm in a blinding flash. Epsilon's blade was an answering flash, but of steel. The beast shrieked awesomely, and a hot gust of foul wind beat down on his shoulders. Something came loose from the monster and fell into the grass at Helmcleaver's hindquarters.

But Epsilon could not afford to look back. He was making time for the tree line, having realized that only those high trunks could salvage him now.

His ears tracked the monster in place of his eyes. Judging by the shrieking and the sounds of disturbed air, the winged killer was rising high and swinging around to attack him from behind. His only hope of defending against such an assault lay in turning Helmcleaver sharply about, but that tactic, though it might save him once, would surely see him dead at the next pass. No, his best chance for survival lay in seeking shelter among the forest's harboring arms.

Helmcleaver seemed to realize this as well, for the stallion's feet scarcely touched ground as he rushed for safety. The Warfarer leaned hard over his mount's neck and applied his studs judiciously, not so much to urge the horse forward as to guide its flight. Even as they neared the trees, Epsilon could hear the monster swooping down to snatch him from the saddle. A stinking

wind preceded the beast, and the Warfarer gagged in its presence. The stallion stretched itself fully now, throwing its last reserves of strength into the effort, its lungs whistling, its flanks heaving, its nostrils flared and mouth agape, blowing foam. A last burst of speed would see them safely into shelter. The monster's mouth snapped open and it screamed, reaching forth with its brutal, clutching claws while its great, membranous wings spread broadly to shadow the sun...

...then, as quickly as his flight for life had begun, Helmcleaver penetrated the Otherside forest into sanctuary and it was ended. Screaming in rage, the monster veered off into the heavens, thrashing through the treetops with scarcely enough altitude to avoid self-destruction. Epsilon heard its giant maw snap shut as it passed overhead.

When they were several sticks deep into the woodlands, the Ritesman pulled up hard on his reins and brought Helmcleaver to a blowing halt. Sheathing his sword with a ring of steel, Epsilon whipped his shrouded bow and quiver free from its carrying space, and scrambled down off the horse's back. Quickly tossing its soft cover over one shoulder, the Warfarer dodged back along the road to take shelter behind a thick tree trunk.

By the time the monster had wheeled around again and was flying at him once more, Epsilon had strung his weapon and notched a lethally poisoned missile. Readied just above the thumb of his left hand, the Warfarer traced the moves of his target behind his arrow's barbed head. Nearer and nearer the monstrosity flew. Epsilon could see it now clearly for the first time.

It had a long, pointed head with a single curved horn pointed out of the back of its skull. Its body was relatively small compared to its wings, which ran from forelimbs to rear like a bat's,

and stretched out the length of many men to each side. As its claws formed a part of the forewing, the beast would naturally have to fold them to grasp at anything. At this point in his rapid examination, the sacrificial hero smiled smugly.

Several lethally tipped toes on the behemoth's left wing were cut away and freshly bleeding. He had not struck his first and thus far only blow in vain, it seemed.

As it approached the tree line, the monster began to rear back, flaring its descent sharply as though it would land. Epsilon's sphincter threatened to unbuckle when he considered fighting that beast afoot without a long pike in his hands. This was, naturally, the last thing he wanted to do today. So he let loose the string with a vibrant guitar's thrum. And he watched as the feathered shaft shot away in a shallow arc, spinning straight and true through the air until it impacted with the chimera's scaly breast. The dragon roared and jerked spasmodically in mid-flight. Then, with two long, oddly graceful swipes of its leathern wings, the monster avoided a landfall and instead rose above the canopy once more, screaming its defiance.

Epsilon had already set another missile and was drawing back on the string when the monster flew out of sight. Sighing with relief, he eased the bow to slack and lowered his aim. He could ill afford to waste arrows without great need.

"Let the griffin come again," he hissed aloud. "For I will have its eye on the next turn."

As he followed the monster's shadows through the treetops by sight and monitored its rage and agony with his ears, Epsilon wondered what affect his poison would have on the creature. The barbed point of his arrow had been dipped in enough ryzen to knock down a war

elephant, but war elephants rarely flew madly about the field of battle. He was reminded that this was an otherworld beast of unknown constitution. It was of magical origins and lived a magical life. Perhaps it was immune to merely Empirical poisons.

Higher up now, the monster wheeled back into view. It was circling around to the road again, seemingly intent on making another more lethal over flight of Epsilon's hiding place. The man watched closely as the beast flapped into position. Something seemed wrong with the way it was moving. The monster seemed to be favoring its left wing. It cried out in frustration and confusion, its head turning back to nibble at its own weakening forelimb. It wobbled and wove, and appeared to abandon all thought of attacking its prey. A sudden seizure wracked its long, sinuous body. Before it could recover, the monster had plummeted ten sticks and all but crashed. It somehow managed to swing its hindquarters around in time, however, and these skidded onto the road awkwardly. Five hundred years worth of accumulated soil and grasses were plowed up from the cobbles in a huge wave of displaced earth. Epsilon heard a pair of loud reports, as the beast's two hind legs broke on impact and were snatched out from under. The monster's long neck snapped down, slamming the great head hard against the pavestones. Flipping and rolling, the behemoth's dying was a spectacle of flying destruction.

When it at last came to rest, the broken monster could but twitch and spasm where it lay sprawled in a ruinous heap, many sticks distant from the tree line and to one side of the Teslan Road. Epsilon remained cautious, and stood for many long minutes behind the tree trunk, his bow in hand and another poisoned arrow at the ready.

But the beast was dead. After a time, even its reflexive, spasmodic twitching was stilled.

Shaking from the ebb of an adrenaline high, Epsilon turned away from his mammoth victim and pressed through the high ferns, making his way back to Helmcleaver's side. The warhorse was stamping and blowing, its rib cage heaving to suck air. The corded muscles of its flanks trembled with exhaustion. Obviously, the animal had utterly spent itself in the flight. To mount and ride now would risk doing Helmcleaver serious damage, and would perhaps ruin the stallion's stamina for many days to come.

Epsilon eyed the forest warily and listened to the stirring breezes for sign of another flying leviathan. All seemed peaceful in the wake of the monster's passing. And since the Emperor's Warfarer had little to fear from man or beast, he decided they should rest here for awhile, ere they pressed more deeply into the Otherside woodlands.

"Heigh, Helmcleaver Fleethoof, it was a hard race well run. You have earned yourself a respite, eh? An hour of the sun's arc to recover and munch fodder. While I seat myself at the curb to chew Mary's good dried beef." Epsilon drew a skin of water from the stores of his pack to fill his gloved right palm. This he offered to the stallion that the beast might wet its foam speckled lips. "Just a bit of water now, while you burn. Later, you may drink the entire skin, my friend. I owe you my life."

Helmcleaver nodded and snorted, stamping. Epsilon filled his hand again, and a third time, then he dropped the reins to let his animal wander. It would not stray far, he knew.

Retiring to one curb with his water skin, the sacrificial warrior searched among his many pouches and pockets for a chunk of dried beef. Chewing mouthfuls of jerky thoughtfully, he watched and listened to the life that was slowly returning to the Otherside woodlands. From the finches to the squirrels to the dominating green cathedral, nothing seemed to have changed from there to here. If not for the monster's failed attack, Epsilon might have believed he was resting on the Empire side of the Wall. Yet he was not. This was the Otherside.

Beware of magical beasts.

What other unimaginable threats might the forest offer up? The Warfarer raised his helmed head to scan the treetops, rolling his head full around until he had seen it all. Nothing stared back from the leafy shadows. Nothing was watching from among the ferns.

Yet... he had that feeling again, that intuition he was being watched. The short hairs prickled at the nape of his neck.

He scanned the trees nervously once more, chewing his lunch. A hint of movement caught the corner of his eye, but the Warfarer disciplined himself not to flinch with the discovery. Instead, he affected an air of ignorance and did not allow his sight to focus on that one spot for too long at a time. Yet he watched it, and he watched it carefully. There! Again! It was but a ripple of movement, a delicate shifting of shadows near the lowest branches of a nearby trunk. The apparition was so strange that Epsilon could not immediately convince himself as to the truth of what he had seen. Letting his eyes stray but never too far, he waited for it to come again. When it did, Epsilon knew it came too late. Whatever had caused it, man or beast, the changeling

shadows seemed to have noticed his attentions, for they had flowed up and around the trunk, out of sight.

One of Deldric's unseen demons? Epsilon clamped off another bite of jerky and fingered his bow. It was finely carved ash, wrought with the impression of a diving falcon on one side and a swooning dove on the other.

It was an adequate weapon when firing onto the green, but it would be of little service on the road, deeper into the forest. What he needed was something designed for closer range. What he needed was a weapon that utilized missiles he could better afford to spend. What he needed was a crossbow. Upon having this thought, the Warfarer gulped a last mouthful of rations, chased it with a slosh of water, and stood to unstring his delicate longbow and stow it away.

Helmcleaver had wandered over for his share of water, which Epsilon was obliged to provide using a leather trough that fitted over the animal's snout. He added a bit of salt to sweeten the brew and slapped the stallion's sweaty forequarters fondly.

As his mount slaked its thirst noisily, Epsilon rejoined the nearly empty bladder to his stores and followed it with his ash bow. Next he removed a small bundle from one of his side packs and carried it back to the curb.

Unrolling it onto his knees, Epsilon extracted several pieces of everwear steel, a short length of steel cable, a small, oddly shaped bit of wood, a small coil spring, and finally a narrow cylinder that had machined screws protruding from one side. Taking the longer bit of steel between his knees, Epsilon joined two smaller pieces to one end, fitting them into slots that

pointed away from the haft of the weapon. These were the powerful bow arms that would provide him with an armor piercing punch. Next, he fitted the cocking lever into its axis just beneath the cross brace, adding its retracting spring after it was in place. Then he added the wooden stock and the cylindrical site, and the weapon was ready to be strung.

This was easier said than done. It was a muscle wrenching task that was impossible without a special tool, which Epsilon had wisely included in the kit.

When he was finished, and the bundle stored away once more, the Warfarer hefted his newly assembled crossbow admiringly. He relaxed it to his hip and snapped it up as though to fire it into the treetops, practicing this movement many times over until his familiarity of the weapon was renewed. Then he fitted a bolt into the run and set it to fire with the cocking lever, smiling grimly to himself. If any more changeling shadows turned up, he would be ready to find out whether his eyes were playing tricks or no.

Back atop a much rested Helmcleaver, Epsilon pointed the stallion southward and urged it forward, further along the never ending road. They traveled on for many hours without incident, though the Warfarer was careful to keep his crossbow resting at the ready atop his mailed thigh.

Where it first penetrated the forest, the highway was so heavily overgrown as to utterly erase all evidence of the cobblestones and curbs. Indeed, Epsilon almost missed a bend in the road and was many sticks into the woods before he realized what had happened. Before long, however, the undergrowth was pushed back and the avenue broadened considerably. If anything, the highway had been larger and better built on this side of the Barricade. Its pavestones were

fitted together more tightly here and the roadbed was less tolerant of interloping greenery. After three or four leagues, a wide lawn began to accompany the path on either side, further pushing back the trees. By now, thirty sticks of open space lay on either side of the Warfarer as he walked, and an open swath of sky could be seen overhead.

All of this was comforting in many aspects, and would have seemed pleasant on the Empire side of the Wall. But Epsilon had not forgotten the giant flying monster that had nearly devoured him only hours earlier. He was careful to remain concealed beneath the trees and out of the open sunlight.

If not for the grass tendrils shooting across the forgotten pavement, he might have believed this part of the road to be well traveled, for it was in good repair. The milestones stood straight and true, and all the stone arch bridges had survived intact. Now and then he passed ivy grown buildings similar to the toll house outside Farther Heights, all constructed of thick granite slabs that seemed too cumbersome for merely human hands to have set into place. For the most part, these tended to be small one story affairs, but a few were quite large. One appeared to have been more than five levels tall, with the upper floors having been built of wood that had long ago rotted away. Still another appeared to have been a small garrison keep, for it was set well back from the road, surrounded by its own cleared killing fields and ringed all around by a crumbling masonry wall.

Just prior to sunset, he passed before a squat, rectangular, two story structure that had many windows and many doors. A single large hall stood at one end like the cross piece of a gallows pole.

Beneath its ivy grown eaves, a sign had been carved into the stone wall. Its edges were obscured by rampant growth, but Epsilon could read the remnant title '-OUSE OF CLAIRBOR-', and below part of a caption that said something about beautiful women and cheap ale. None of this was of particular interest to the Warfarer, but one thing, at least, did not fail to escape his attention. For there, standing between the drinking hall and the road, was a small stone pavilion with a conical metal roof. It was a well house.

Epsilon's mouth watered to consider a wash of icy cold liquid rushing down his throat into his waiting belly. He guided Helmcleaver off the road, onto a grass grown courtyard. Empty windows like orb-less eye sockets stared at him as he approached. A disturbed owl alighted from its roost inside one of the rooms, flapping away into the gathering dusk with a soft, melodious calling that was answered from a great distance. The traveler harbored no real hopes that the well would yet hold water, but stranger things had happened in the course of his lifetime.

At any rate, night was coming on, and this seemed a good place to stop. He would eat first and decide later whether to make camp or continue on by moonlight.

He led Helmcleaver to fodder and tied the animal securely. This precaution was more to keep the horse from eating too much than to prevent its wandering off. After dismounting, he leaned the crossbow against the rough hewn wall and loosened the saddle's surcingle and forebelt,

sliding it off. The poor beast had been wearing the bothersome thing for two days running, after all, and it would want a change. Hanging the saddle and blanket over a windowsill, Epsilon returned for his baggage and did the same with it. All except for Mary's dried goods and his mess kit, of course, which he carried with him to the well house.

This was surrounded on all but one side by a granite bench. Epsilon kicked weeds out of the way, clearing a spot to deposit his double sack and eating utensils. Then he leaned over the shaft to sniff for the wet scent of water. It was there, damp and musty. Epsilon eagerly turned back to the large, round oilskin pouch that held his mess kit of interlocking pots, pans, plates and cups. One of these last items was a large leathern container rigged like a pail with a short, looped handle of leather thong. Tying a provided cord of hemp to the cup's handle, Epsilon leaned back out over the shaft and let it drop into the dank darkness.

As he was about to run out of line, a sound of disturbed waters echoed up from below. Epsilon jiggled the cord to make certain his cup was filled before he hauled it up again. Its sloshing weight was reassuring in his gathering grip.

When the cup was back in his hand, the sacrificial warrior held it up in the fading light to examine its clarity. It seemed pure enough. He sniffed it. Nothing there. He touched it with a bare finger, having drawn off his gauntlets to tie the string. His flesh was not burned. Epsilon smiled happily and raised the cup to his lips. Tossing back his head to drink greedily, he caught himself up short at the sight of something strange beneath the well house roof.

A folded piece of paper was wedged into the conical apex of the ceiling. The Warfarer sighed wearily and set his cup aside, eyeing the gathering shadows suspiciously. Reaching for the note, he fluttered it open and read;

His heart sold his head,
fa la la, la la la,
his heart sold his head
for a woman.

His palms sold his head,
fa la la, la la la,
his palms sold his head
for money.

His tongue sold his head,
fa la la, la la la,
his tongue sold his head
for honey.

His lips sold his head,

fa la la, la la la,
his lips sold his head
for poison.

'Do not drink from abandoned wells.'

Your own words.

--The Invisible One

Epsilon grimaced and wadded the paper into a quick ball. He would have tossed it into the well, too, had his better judgment not voiced itself at last.

Abashedly, he unfolded the note again and spread it out smooth on his thigh. On sudden inspiration, he withdrew a length of soft lead from one of his many pockets, and used this to write down what he could remember of the words painted on the Postern Gates. When he was finished, Epsilon had a complete record of all three of the Invisible One's cryptic messages.

Though he knew nothing and no one would be evident, the Warfarer scanned the trees and courtyard shadows again. Again, he noticed nothing irregular.

Out loud, in a clear booming voice, Epsilon stated, "It is good that you are no assassin of His Majesty's Emissaries, Invisible One, for you are a crafty pestilence indeed. As the buzzing

mosquito, you are ever about to irritate, and always unseen. Yet a quick hand may undo even an invisible plague." The Warfarer grinned wryly and loosened the chin strap of his head cover. He set his helmet on the granite bench and reached for the cup. Sloshing the sparkling liquid back and forth, Epsilon sniffed it once more, then poured it out on the ground. "Then again, it may be that you are no pestilence, at all. You have not tasted my blood, as a mosquito would. Rather have you acted to light my way through this unknown Wilderland darkness, much like a gentle glow worm. Is that what you are, oh, Invisible One? Hmm? A friendly glow worm!" Epsilon laughed genuinely. "Very well, then. Play your poet's games. And if I see a changeling shadow skulking in the boughs..." He let his voice trail off playfully, as he stood to fetch one of his own water bladders. "Perhaps I will restrain my swatting hand. Unless, of course, I find a note to tell me otherwise."

Back at the well house, Epsilon ate dried venison, mushrooms, and potatoes. He followed all with dried apples and plenty of fresh water from his own good stores. Then he had a jaw-full of jillroot and watched Helmcleaver munch fodder until the sun went down.

When the evening's shadows had ripened and grown into full darkness, all the forest creatures that ruled the day retired quietly to their homes, and the creatures of night were drawn out. These Otherside woodlands changed perceptibly. An eery sense of brooding watchfulness replaced the cathedral's daytime hymns. Ten thousand pairs of predatory eyes opened with the coming of dark fall, eager to seek out new prey, while ten thousand more were clamped tightly shut in fear, anxious only to be done with the dying. And the cathedral's ceiling no longer glowed

like jade, but was dark and black, a construction in unyielding obsidian. The breeze stirred sluggishly once more, like a dying man crawling forward one last inch, before it perished altogether. All was still then, save for the anonymous rustling of nocturnal foragers and their hungry hunters. Epsilon listened carefully to these soft, stalking rustles, which inevitably culminated in noisy flights for life or in the savage sounds of deaths freshly dealt. Small beasts screamed out in terror as larger beasts chewed their flesh away. Larger beasts bellowed in rage as their prey escaped. Epsilon listened intently for each event, considering how much like his own life were the lives of those pathetic, squeaking things that were forever doomed to run from one set of gnashing jaws to another. Ever on the verge of predation, there could be no rest for the forest's nocturnal prey... or for him, the Emperor's Warfarer

When the moon rose shortly after sunset, it was not the same moon that Epsilon had known on the Empire side of the wall. Its light was not pale and blue, but fierce and red. The Otherside forest was washed in a crimson glow the color of blood.

Epsilon stirred from his perch atop the well house bench and gathered up his things. It was time to go. He re-saddled a sluggish Helmcleaver and re-hung his packs, offering the horse a bit of water while he worked.

Then he reached for his helm to don it once more. Turning it over to arrange the padding inside, Epsilon was startled to find another note. *How, by all the gods, had this happened? I was not more than a stick away from the damned thing all night!*

He read hastily;

I am not a 'changeling shadow'.

You have not seen me.

You have seen the Enemy.

--The Invisible One

The Warfarer, a veteran of countless combats and campaigns, felt his bowels threat to unbuckle with fear. For a mad moment he was consciously reduced to his naked primal essence. He was no longer the Hero of Alcorde, a high ranking disciple of the Rite. He was become a mere boy, lost and alone. He was become a rabbit cowering before a pack of slobbering hounds, trembling and paralyzed by an unreasoning, oppressive terror, well aware of the bloody, savage dismemberment that would be his inevitable end. Surrounded on all sides by a vast and incomprehensible host, Epsilon harbored no hopes of escape or salvation. He was cast into the pit to do or to die.

Then this first wave of terror passed, and the martial disciplines of the Rite returned to control him. The Warfarer shut his eyes gently and sucked a long, cool breath, exhaling through his nose. Once, twice, three times, as he had been taught.

Opening his eyes slowly, as though to view a bright, new morning, he chanted mentally;
The world is right. The world is good. I am in my place. I am at peace.

His fears subsided. The gathered forest boughs no longer assumed the shape of towering, hungry dogs, but were returned to themselves. When he next thought of the changeling shadows that had stalked him through the day, it was not with a sense of helpless horror, but with a deadly intent. Epsilon considered how he could most efficiently destroy the fell creature.

For destroy it he must. It was not a friend. And not simply because the 'Invisible One' had said so. From the first time he had caught it skulking in the trees, Epsilon had enjoyed a feeling that there was something... wrong... something *evil* about the creature. Mistaking it for his seemingly benign invisible companion, however, Epsilon had been temporarily willing to cast his doubts aside. Now, of course, he would proceed with more caution, and his crossbow would be more ready than ever for quick service.

Epsilon stowed the note away with the others, donned his helm and tied his chin strap tightly. Then he leapt atop Helmcleaver and brought the stallion around with a sharp tug at the reins. As they walked across the abandoned courtyard, the Warfarer hefted his crossbow into a ready position, making certain its quiver of bolts was near to hand.

Eyeing the night shades warily, he wondered why the beast of shadows had not yet attacked. With such guile, it surely might have slain him ere now, if such was its intent. Perhaps it was nothing more than a spy, then, sent to gather information for an unknown foe. This was more likely the case, but Epsilon remained unappeased. Spies were the dregs of every camp. They were generally low ranking scoundrels that listened more than talked and watched more than witnessed, all to cut a man's throat with his own loose tongue. The Warfarer, as a forefront

man of war, was not unaccustomed to the use of infiltrators and turncoats in the prosecution of a successful campaign, but he had never known much love for that putrid ilk. It had always been his general rule and the teaching of the Rite that any man capable of deception with one hand could not be trusted for the other. Epsilon vowed that he would rid his camp of such pests at the earliest possible opportunity.

And what of the 'Invisible One'? Was he (or she) a friend or a foe?

At the moment, Epsilon could not say for certain. For all he could discern between them, the 'Invisible One' and the changeling shadow were one and the same, though this was an admittedly remote possibility. It seemed improbable that even a lowly spy would encourage his own murder. No, another much more obvious facet of the intrigue should be considered first. It was most likely that the Invisible One was attempting to foster a genuine trust between them, and thus a relationship. A man can only betray his friends, after all, and never his enemies.

Epsilon would be cautious, then, on both fronts. If it proved possible in the event, he would only wound the changeling shadow, with the further objective of capturing and interrogating the beast, should it prove to be intelligent. Then he might have a larger glimpse at the truth. Until that time, he would do all he could do, which was to simply watch and wait patiently for the crisis to come.

In this regard, he turned his full attentions to the ever lasting road and its surrounding sanguine woodlands. At the clapping of Helmcleaver's steel shod hooves on the courtyard flagstones, the forest creatures quieted, and their eternal combats were momentarily stilled. A crushing solitude settled down upon the Warfarer's shoulders as an all but unbearable weight.

4

Dragons and Dead Men

It would be a long, dark ride. A chill crept into the still air. Epsilon tied off his reins and drew his heavy cloak from the packs behind him. Claspings this secured beneath his chin and ruffling its folds to settle about his long, muscular shanks, the Warfarer found a slight measure of comfort and relief. *Would that I could so easily assuage my weary thoughts. A night's sleep is the only cover to ease my mind, but I cannot pull it closed, not for many long hours to come.* Instead, he reached for the next best thing, a huge bite of jillroot. Chewing this relaxed his weary muscles and reduced the ever present pain of that ancient wound to his hip. Epsilon cracked his spine by arching his back and turning his head up to the sky.

It was an eery sky, all crimson velvet heavens laced with gold, and diamond stars twinkling far, far away. He could not see more of the moon than what shone between gaps in the canopy, but its light was bloody and disquieting. Winged monsters roamed the airways, unseen but for their serpentine silhouettes that momentarily blotted out the heavens, flowing this way or

that, sometimes screeching dimly from great altitude. Epsilon was careful to keep close to the forest lee of the roadway, where he could be sheltered by overarching boughs. Thus he was actually walking along the periphery of one of the cleared lawns.

Presently, the road broadened into two separate avenues, with a wide median running between. Milestones marked the distance, standing like stout soldiers in the onslaught of a bloody downpour that was the waxing moonlight. They climbed a low hill and back down into the shallow valley beyond. Here, the greenway dropped to the steep banks of a narrow creek, while the dual lanes of the road ran across a pair of finely fashioned stone bridges. The supporting arches of that structure were ivy grown and well worn by many seasons of rain and flood, yet they stood whole and sound, apparently capable of supporting mass traffic even to this late day. All except, of course, for the flying terrors that lurked ever overhead, ready to devour any wayward visitors to these Otherside realms.

But for its demons, a paradise, he thought, considering the myriad terrors of these Wilderland woods. *Beware of magical beasts.*

Epsilon guided his mount around to a draw in the creek's sheer banks, where the terrain sloped more gently down to its bed and Helmcleaver was less likely to break his legs. The great warhorse splashed disdainfully through a mere trickle of water at the stream's trough, then scampered awkwardly up the opposing bank, onto the farther green.

There, Epsilon stopped and turned the horse about abruptly. He had heard... something.

He listened intently for a repeat of the noise, his helmed head rotating curiously back and forth, but did not detect it again. It had been a kind of rustling-- no, more a snuffling sound. As though a great beast had been sniffing at the Warfarer's passing spore. And it had emanated from beneath the ivy grown arches of the bridges. Deep shade resided there. Impenetrable shade. A war elephant might be lurking just beyond the moon shadow eves, and Epsilon would not see it. Eventually, he decided it was not wise to stand about, tempting the unseen monster to dine.

So he brought Helmcleaver around abruptly, goading the animal into a comfortable lope with sharp jabs of his steel studded heels. They were away at a gallop.

When Epsilon next looked back, he saw the silhouette of a giant head standing atop a long stalk of a neck, which in turn protruded from beneath a bridge arch as though it were some sort of obscenely transfigured tortoise with a shell of granite. The Warfarer shuddered sickly and urged his mount to run faster. Though the monster offered no indications that it might give chase, Epsilon could ill afford to take chances with a creature so large. One combat of this nature per diem was enough, he thought, and was much relieved to glance back only to see the monster duck out of sight again.

Whereupon he pulled back on the reins, restraining the stallion to an unhurried walk. The sacrificial warrior was proud to note that Helmcleaver was scarcely blowing from the effort. Good. The horse had its wind. He slapped the animal's neck approvingly, clucking his tongue softly.

The road curved away slightly to the east, then back around to due south, whereupon a large plaza opened before them, filling a broad, shallow valley. At its center was a tall monument fashioned in the shape of a man geared for war, which was surrounded by a parade common. Standing perhaps twenty sticks high and facing Epsilon resolutely, the figure held a sword, point down, in one hand and supported a great battle shield with the other. The figure was almost large enough to contest the trees for rule of the heavens. Its massive granite feet rested on a square base that was ten sticks on a side and five high. Words seemed to have been engraved there, but Epsilon could not read them from this distance. Where the road's twin lanes would have run headlong into the great base, they instead branched around to each side, forming a circle. Inside the circle, abutting the inscription, were two stands of oddly shaped trees, all bare, twisted branches and fat, bloated trunks.

Despite his fears of flying monsters, Epsilon surrendered to the whims of his curiosity, and abandoned the overgrown green's relative safety. He joined the road where it ran into the tree lined common. Once undoubtedly intended to be a magnificent parade ground, the common was now so rife with weeds and upstart saplings that it was difficult to separate from the forest on the far side of the lawn. The Warfarer cared nothing for parades or picnics, however, and was rather grateful for the cover offered by its disrepair.

As he approached the monolith, hoofbeat by hoofbeat, Epsilon examined the weather worn countenance that stared down at him, and found himself consumed with a sense of

familiarity. Somehow, from somewhere, he knew that face. He knew that face as he might have known his own father's, had he been blessed with one.

Long before he neared close enough to read the inscription at the old stone warrior's feet, Epsilon recognized Vandegarte's rat-like countenance. It was a young conqueror that towered over him, not the stooped, decrepit old man that had built the Wilderland Wall. The statue's marble face was sharply featured and cruel in appearance. It glowered down at him sternly, covetously, as though it yearned to overthrow, despise, and own him for a slave. To near its ivy grown legs was to enter into its threat as a tiny insect beneath the usurper's marble boot heels. Helmcleaver balked in the idol's moon shadow, and would have halted altogether, if not for the Warfarer's relentless gouging.

Epsilon guided his mount directly onto the road's grassy cobbles for the first time in many leagues. The road was safely overgrown here, and the pavement offered more certain footing should they be forced to flee suddenly. This seemed to comfort the stallion somewhat, as it progressed less skittishly from there.

As they thumped along, Epsilon noted the presence of a long picket of rusting iron poles, which paced the broad avenues on either side. The Hero of Alcorde led Helmcleaver around a large sapling that had shot up through the pavestones, then returned his attentions to the forgotten pikes. Through widely scattered gaps in the canopy, random moonbeams pierced the gloom to light the way. Before long, he had seen enough to know that those corroded, twisted poles had once been used to impale living men, the unhappy captives of Vandegarte's victorious armies

perhaps. Here and there, scraps of armor and bits of rusted mail dangled from vicious tongs that had once held the men in place, preventing their bodies from sliding too far along the shaft and thus too soon into an easy death. There seemed to be hundreds, perhaps thousands of these nasty pikes. They stood like a gruesome colonnade lining the road, and encircled the central plaza at Vandegarte's feet. And for each pike, a man, a suffering victim, a corpse. To what end? For what purpose? Only Vandegarte and his long dead commanders would know.

Now Epsilon was standing before the base of the statue. He jerked his mount to a halt there, and paused to ponder the marble's ancient inscription.

Though it was criss-crossed by creepers and ivies, the Warfarer could read enough to put the story together. The monument had been erected in memory of a long, bloody battle, which had been waged ages past for the ford of a river, called Three Forks, that lay just beyond the southern hills. Many of Vandegarte's men had been slain in the conflict, and the usurper's designs had nearly been foiled, but for the last moment intervention of someone referred to as Urlock, the Magnificent. Nothing was said of the men impaled here, save that Vandegarte, in his indignant outrage, had allowed no mercy and no quarter in the prosecution of his ultimate victory. None of the opposing force had survived.

The Warfarer grimaced and spat to one side. This was an evil, haunted place.

Vandegarte's despicable, cowardly actions were contrary to everything the Martial Rite had taught him about the prosecution of war. In victory, the victor should be magnanimous and generous, especially when waging campaigns in foreign lands. The wanton murder of helpless

prisoners generally served only to arouse opposing sentiment and harden the resolve of any foes left afield. And when, in rare instances, widespread executions became necessary, the Rite dictated that the deed be done in a humane fashion, quickly and painlessly.

Epsilon could think of only one scenario that might excuse this cowardly waste of human flesh. If all those men had been slain to set an example... to frighten an enemy that Vandegarte feared... to demoralize an opponent that had the upper hand... if they had been impaled to instill a debilitating terror into the ranks of an overwhelming host of survivors, then, and only then, might the tactic be justified, even by the disciplines of the Rite.

However, if these soldiers had been wasted to no end... if their tortuous murders had been merely a carnally vindictive thing, then Nars would not be pleased. All soldiers were his servants, and should serve him in contest, not in sacrifice.

Vandegarte stared blackly down at him, as though disapproving of Epsilon's thoughts. The Warfarer cursed and spat. "Aye, you were a black hearted overlord. Nothing was sacred to your spoiling hand, not even the gods of heaven and earth. What should you care for their curses, when you were already damned and hated by so many?" Helmcleaver snorted, as if in derision, and started off around the circle of his own accord. Epsilon soothed the animal with long, firm strokes of its twitching neck.

Aloud, he said, "Something queer lurks about this place, Helmcleaver. The hairs are standing on my nape." The stallion nodded its head up and down several times, blowing.

All nerves and tense muscles, they started around the circle, passing abreast of that eastern grove of bizarre trees he had noted earlier. No ferns or grasses grew within that meager wood, nothing save those oddly shaped trees that were all trunk and bare limbs and but a crown of thorny leaves at the summit. Void of bark, the wood seemed carved from alabaster, and all too perfectly reflected the moon's bloody, unlovely light. Knotholes like misshapen faces stared back at Epsilon as he passed, and the Warfarer felt he was observed by the silent ranks of an army of grotesque freaks.

Rounding the corner of the base, Epsilon noted uncomfortably that the strange trees continued on around the bottom of the statue, evidently encircling it on three sides. Anxious to be rid of this ominous place, the Warfarer extended his feet to kick Helmcleaver into a full gallop, when movement caught his eye at the southeastern corner of the granite platform. It was a soft, glowing light, like that of a firefly, but much, much larger. It moved through the trees, sending shadows scurrying forward and back, forward and back, with each trunk that obscured it. Before long, the apparition would round the corner and be exposed.

Epsilon was forced to call the stallion up short. While he waited for the light to be made clear, the Warfarer checked his crossbow for readiness, releasing its safety lock to be certain.

When next he glanced up, the eery light was extinguished and a man was sitting astride a horse in the center of the lane. He was geared as for war, in full plate armor with a long, deadly lance reclined from the support of his armored right hand. The unknown warrior's mount was wearing plate armor to cover its vulnerable head, neck, fore and hindquarters, and a mailed skirt

that extended to its underbelly. Both wore a coat of arms that Epsilon did not recognize as being of Empire.

Helmcleaver reared defiantly, neighing and thrashing steel shod hooves. Once his mount settled back to ground, Epsilon raised his crossbow high in the moonlight, displaying his superior weaponry that the stranger might be discouraged from making an attack.

Apparently oblivious to Epsilon's threat, the warrior started forward abruptly. The Warfarer mentally prepared himself for combat by sucking long cool breaths and chanting his singsong prayer for inner peace. Just as he was raising his weapon to fire a steel bolt into his opponent's armored breast, the stranger relaxed his posture by laying the lance back across his shoulder and using his free left hand to raise his helmet's visor.

Drawing his horse to a slow walk as he neared, the stranger called in a resonant voice, "Hale knight, well met!" Epsilon found it strange that the man's armor did not rattle or jingle as he moved. "What news of the north?"

The Warfarer was taken aback by this untoward display of familiarity. It seemed the unknown knight had mistaken Epsilon for a member of his own ranks. "I have just come from the north, sir, but I bear no news," he offered hesitantly, his crossbow held ever at the ready.

Upon hearing this, the stranger's armored shoulders slumped miserably. "Our defense of the ford goes not well, as I have feared. What of Captain Enol and his Rangers? Have they returned from their foray into those heathen lands?"

"I know nothing of your Captain Enol."

"Nothing, eh? Nothing at all?" The stranger's tone was distraught and mournful. "Ah, he is lost. Lost and never to be seen alive again. I curse this disastrous campaign for its unwarranted miseries!" and he slapped the reins against his mailed thigh, though it made no sound that Epsilon could hear. "We are, all of us, for the grinder! What of you, then, Sir Knight? Where are your men?"

Epsilon was tempted to turn and glance behind his back, fearing that he had forgotten someone. "I bring no men. Just myself, alone."

"You are alone? You have no men? Are we to have no more reinforcements from the northern garrisons than this pittance?" The unknown warrior wheeled his mount around in a tight circle, as though surveying armed ranks and the array of battlements that were not to be seen. "We are doomed, sir. Doomed, I say. The ford cannot hold. Not even if you were one thousand men."

The Warfarer, confused, hedged, "Beg pardon, sire, but I fail to understand. What need have you of men? I passed no combatants on my way south. These lands are not at war."

Now the stranger ceased his restless saddle shifting and kicked his mount closer to Helmcleaver, bringing them alongside. He leaned forward, as though to stare directly into the Warfarer's eyes, and for the first time Epsilon saw the man's face. It was a pale face, lean of feature and wily of eye, with a pale moustache and beard covering the mouth and chin. The stranger hissed, "What do you mean to say? Not at war? Not at war! Nay, it is war as certainly as any war I have seen. Our northern keeps are all thrown down and their masters burned alive.

Our northern army is in rout. The ford defenses stand but to fall at any moment! Heathens swarm the lands! It is war, my brother in arms! Make no mistake!"

Vaguely doubting his own understanding of the world, Epsilon surveyed the strange woods at the base of the statue and then those of the overgrown common. Save for standing awash in the gory light of an Otherside moon, nothing seemed unusual or out of place.

While the stranger yet leaned close, Epsilon raised his hand to touch the man's armor. His fingers encountered no resistance, but passed right through what had appeared to be solid everwear steel. Those short hairs at the back of his neck prickled more fiercely now, and Epsilon leaned instinctively away while drawing back on his reins. Helmcleaver took an obliging step backward. The stallion's eyes were rolling, its nostrils flaring, its ears dancing nervously back and forth.

Epsilon hissed, "What are you?"

"I? I am a man, as are you. My name is Andol, Lord of the Castle Keep Silverstone. My lands lie south of the river, beyond the ford. And who are you? Where are your lands?"

Instinctively responding to the query, Epsilon returned softly, "I have no lands. I am lord only of Helmcleaver. His broad back is all that I own of the world."

"You are a mercenary, then. We have need of every blade."

"I am no mercenary, sire, I am called Epsilon Three, of the Martial Rite, merely a traveler in this dark country." It was strange indeed, this conversing with a sheer figment, but Epsilon saw no harm in it. He did not fear the wraith, as it was composed of nothing. Though heavily armed,

Lord Andol could not harm him. "And your war is long since fought and lost. Do you not recall the end?"

Andol leaned back in his saddle and cocked his helmed head, apparently puzzled. "The end? Ah, yes. The end! It was not pleasant. I was long dead, ere then... but I saw all! THERE! DO YOU SEE?" he screeched suddenly, rising in his stirrups and sweeping his free left hand around to indicate the colonnade of tall skewers. "DO YOU SEE WHAT EVIL THAT DEMON HATH WROUGHT?" The wraith shook its armored fist noiselessly, and raised its lance as though to threaten Vandegarte's towering stone likeness. "DAMN YOU, CURSED MADMAN!" The ghost horse reared in support of its master's emotion.

When the spirit was quieted once more and his moans of rage and anguish were abated, Andol tossed his lance aside and took the reins in his right hand. His tone weeping, the old warrior wailed, "I was there, you see! I witnessed all! That monster had every one of my men impaled on those damnable pikes, the living and the dead alike!

"Days upon days were spent placing all those unhappy soldiers onto the poles. And many days more for some of them to finally die. *Days*, I say, sitting atop the pikes with the shaft piercing their anuses... how they moaned and whined piteously, how they cried out for the mercy of a quick blade to end it all... *days*, Sir Epsilon, entire days of suffering... hours after minutes after seconds... heartbeat upon heartbeat... breath upon breath... new agonies compiled from old... *whole days*, do you see? DO YOU SEE WHAT VILE BLASPHEMIES THAT WRETCH HATH FORGED HERE?" Lord Andol seethed restlessly for a moment, his ghostly glow

flickering in the crimson light of the moon. "Ten thousand men, sir. All of them my countrymen and friends, and their blood yet staining these, my incompetent hands.

"My own corpse rotted on that very skewer, there." He pointed to a corroded pole standing at the eastern most edge of the circle. "It is a special brand of dishonor, you know, to have lain me in state so awfully, here at the scoundrel's right hand. As if to say that I had been his single greatest asset in the campaign. I, his right hand man! And why not? It was my failure that handed him the northern realm, and my failure that let him through the Wall. And lastly I failed here, at the Ford of Three Forks, thus handing him the whole of my kingdom and all the kingdoms beyond!"

Andol made a tortured sound far back in a throat he did not possess. "And what price, my failure? Days, endless days of suffering. For even now, long after the last tortured shriek has passed away and is forgotten, even now do I fight that lost battle. Even now are mine eyes witness to the horrors of that savage defeat and its violent aftermath.

"Six hundred and more seasons have I counted," he lamented, "All spring thunderstorms and winter winds, and none of them, no amount of passing time, have eased the unbearable grate of these tortuous memories as they wander through my thoughts."

Epsilon shut his eyes and gently shook his head, wondering if he had dreamed Andol's tirade. But, no, the apparition was still there after he opened his eyes again.

The spirit wept openly. "It is magic, you see. Magic that has dealt me this damage. Magic that has undone me. Magic that has entered into these lands at that despoiler's behest." He

spat at Vandegarte's daunting image vehemently, then waxed sullenly nostalgic. "What a peaceful world this was before, filled as it was with the soft cooing of babes and lowing of fattened calves. And now... now that demon has filled the forests with creatures of his own ilk, fell monsters and depraved ghouls that haunt the evening shade and disturb daytime's slumberous sunbeams. They are a relentless perversion, those chimeras drawn from beyond the River Death, and more useful than any occupying army of mere mortals. They have subjugated this land, sir, utterly and completely. My once proud people are reduced in dominion to skulking wraiths, but sacks of skin filled with bones that creep about like frightened rodents! Rebellion from that lot? Bah, never!"

Andol turned suddenly in his saddle and called back over his shoulder, "Bring my cavalry to the fore! We charge now, while the enemy's ranks are yet mustering!" He paused, as though to listen to an unheard reply. "Damn your girlish heart to Hades, man! You are my lieutenant! Do as I have instructed! And you there, look lively! Array those pikemen along the flanks of that hill, and tell their sergeant to make ready to repel a counter attack! WHERE ARE MY GODS FORSAKEN MEN OF HORSE?"

Epsilon answered softly, "They are all dead and gone away, my lord. Returned unto dust."

"Ah, yes," sighed the ancient warrior, easing back into his seat, rubbing his non-existent eyes with an armored hand that was not there. "Yes, of course, they are all dead. None have survived. Not one. Yet, can it be true? Can it be true these many years?"

"I fear it is, sir."

"Yes. I see. Very well, then. Carry on, good knight! Your business will not keep, and it is unwise to dally on the field of battle."

"My business?"

"Your business beyond the ford, further along the road. Surely some grave errand or another has drawn you through the Great Barricade, into this nation of strife. Surely you are no simple summer pilgrim, out to gather calling cards for the post."

Epsilon grinned thinly while his dark countenance remained grim. "I am no mere pilgrim. That much, at least, may I confirm."

"You will be traveling south, then?"

"Aye. To the utmost end of the road."

"That is a long way to walk, indeed. May I offer you a few simple words of advice, ere you pass along?"

"I would be honored to hear them, Lord."

"Good. This, then, I impart to you, Epsilon Three of the Martial Rite;" Andol drew himself up proudly to his full height, his shoulders no longer slumping in defeat but jutting out straight, firmly set. He growled dourly, "Beware of magical beasts." Then he slapped his visor shut and wheeled his vaporous warhorse about. Expertly leaning far over in his saddle, Andol snatched up his discarded lance and cried, "To me, ye men of Silverstone! To me! We are not defeated! Rally to the colors and stand! STAND, I SAY!" And with that said, he disappeared

around the corner of the statue's base, and nothing save that same eery light could be seen of him.

It flowed soundlessly into the stand of misshapen trees and was extinguished.

As he urged Helmcleaver into a trot at the south side of the circle, Epsilon thought he heard a host of men gathering on the common. Horses whinnied nervously. Steel clashed on steel. Booted feet trod the earth, ten thousand strong. Horns blared, sirens wailed, drums rolled, dogs barked and men of war shouted orders that would never be executed.

Epsilon hurried along the rode at speed, until it led him up and out of Andol's haunted valley. Grateful that the old spirit had not soured or turned generally spiteful during the long course of his otherworld exile, the Warfarer offered up a short prayer to the god of war on Andol's behalf. Epsilon prayed that eternal peace should claim this last forgotten relic of the Battle of Three Forks, though he held little hope for its fulfillment. Lord Silverstone's soul was reduced to a macabre, much admired trophy, and his plight would not be undone by anything so pathetically powerless as the mere prayers of a mortal man. Nevertheless, Epsilon formed the outline of a shield over his heart with the motions of a trembling hand, and bowed low to the last rotting iron pike that they passed. "Rest, my brothers in arms. Be at peace."

Once they passed beyond the rise of another low hilltop, the road's dual lanes curved back around to the west, then ran straight and true in a long, lazy slope to the banks of a river. Actually, of three rivers, which had all flowed into one less than half a league upstream. Each tributary rolled separately out of the hills and into this one valley, where they met in a broad, stony draw that was easily forded in all but the most violent of floods. The road crossed on a pair

of high stone bridges, which seemed too well built for the slight flow of water that ran underneath.

Epsilon decided he would not go that way, for fear of flying monsters, and instead returned to the highway lawn, where the trees grew more thickly. This he followed down to the shallow banks of the waters edge. Heavily overhung as it was by long, sweeping willow boughs, Epsilon found sufficient cover here, but realized he would be completely exposed once he started across the ford. Only by traveling beneath the bridges' tall arches might he find some measure of protection, but Epsilon was reminded of his last encounter with the road's bridges. Might not larger creatures dwell beneath these larger stone shells? Possibly. It would doubtlessly prove to be a short surprise, were he to encounter so large a monster at such close quarters. With legs mired shank deep in icy waters, Helmcleaver would be hard pressed to make speed.

For many long minutes, the Warfarer considered his options and the risks each entailed. While overhead, countless misshapen gorgons flapped to and fro like obscene fish swimming through an ocean of blood. Epsilon wondered how sharp their monstrous vision might be.

Were they eagles or bats? Would they see him crossing the river so far, far below? Or were they largely blind? Was it safe to cross here? Was it safer beneath the bridge?

He was arrived at an impasse. Unwilling to return the way he had come, Epsilon found himself unable to press forward. Yet he could not make camp here, either, so press forward he must. But which way? In which manner?

To resolve his tactical quandary, Epsilon cleared his mind and let the rational disciplines of the Rite intercede. Within his now becalmed thoughts, in his master's chanting voice, he heard, *When two things are equal and their merits in question, it is a wise gambler that bets on both or on neither. And, At the divergence of two paths that share equal potentials of ambush and escape, it is a cautious warrior that forges a middle ground between the two.* Caution be damned, this last bit seemed sound enough.

Having made his decision, Epsilon eyed the heavens one last time to be certain they were relatively clear, then he goaded his steed into the cold waters, angling his advance to narrowly approach the bridge supports. When he was a comfortable distance away, the Warfarer turned back to a parallel course, and kept Helmcleaver splashing along.

That he should better hear and thus aid his straining eyes, Epsilon loosened his helm and pushed it back on his head, clearing his ears for action. Water tinkled softly over rocks and divots in the riverbed. A gentle wind was stirred by the flow, which in turn stirred the overhanging riverside willow whips. Occasionally, fish and other swimming creatures leapt out of the water, only to fall back into the flow with unnerving plops that sounded as stealthy footfalls. Countless frogs burped and chirped and squeaked and trilled, a discordant chorus tuned to ten thousand separate beats and singing ten thousand different songs. Crickets and leafhoppers added to the din, which quite completely filled the Warfarer's ears and overwhelmed his senses.

He detected no snuffling, at least, and was relieved to see that the spaces beneath the spans tended to be unoccupied. Glancing back cautiously, the squeaking of his leather and mail

unbearably loud in his own ears, Epsilon saw that he had traversed a quarter of the total distance.

Only three quarters of it remained.

Helmcleaver was up to his belly in the stygian flow by now. Ice cold water washed suddenly over Epsilon's left leg, wetting it to the thigh and so he was forced to suck a hissing, surprised breath.

The current was deceptively strong. Helmcleaver fought to keep from being drawn downstream, and his surging effort became a rhythm of regular splashes that any fool would know to be a horse in ford. If an ambush had been lain for him on the far shore, its instigators, whether man or beast, would be certain to hear him coming. Epsilon shrugged his shoulders at the thought.

They reached the middle span. Here, the water was deepest, the current strongest.

Epsilon gathered in the pleats of his heavy cloak, hoping to keep it relatively dry. Helmcleaver narrowly avoided being swept off his footing. Legs kicking impotently, the stallion swam for a few strides. Then he struck the graveled bottom again and began heaving himself out of the river.

It was a long, tiresome struggle. The ford was deeper on its southern side, its bed more uncertain, strewn as it was with large, treacherous stones. Helmcleaver stumbled often, and once plunged suddenly into a deep hole. The stallion kicked instinctively up and out of this obstruction, and was soon trotting through the shallows. Blowing and tossing his wet mane, the

warhorse proudly raised his hooves high with each step, clearing them completely from the icy water before plunging them back down again.

Seeming to realize the dangers of their approach, Helmcleaver's advance slowed and quieted as he neared the opposite bank. His long, lean legs scarcely disturbed the waters as they worked stealthily up and down. The animal's nostrils flared and its eyes bulged, straining to pierce night's impenetrable shadows.

Presently, Epsilon drew his mount to a halt. He paused to listen. To observe. But only briefly, as he noted overhead that one particular flying silhouette had grown abruptly larger, as if in descent.

This observation, more than anything else, convinced Epsilon that the threat on the far shore was uncertain, while the death swooping down from above was all but assured. Helmcleaver was unable to breach the bank where they first met it, however, so Epsilon turned the obsidian stallion upstream, heading away from the bridge arches that were already uncomfortably near. They passed beneath the tree line, thus beyond the lawn, and were many sticks into the forest before Helmcleaver found a way onto dry land.

By then, the flying monster had flared to land in the center of the ford, its long, sinuous neck roving its head curiously in all directions. It was apparently blind by night, though it was not wholly without a predator's sharp senses. All too quickly, the monster fixed its attention on the portion of the forest where Epsilon had taken cover. It began to splash and waddle across the river, crawling like a bat on wings and stunted hindquarters. That great head reared back to its

full reach, mouth agape, fangs glistening gorily in the Otherside moonlight, and it hissed with a startling intensity.

Requiring no further urging, Helmcleaver crashed through the ferns and underbrush, fleeing for cover among the woodlands. Theirs was a climbing flight, as the southern bank rose more steeply away from the ford than did its northerly mate. The Warfarer's mount was soon blowing and lathered from the effort. Yet Helmcleaver's flanks worked tirelessly to drive them up and away.

Alerted by a thrashing in the canopy overhead, Epsilon only just managed to raise his crossbow in time to save himself. Without really considering the action, relying only on his finely honed reflexes, the Warfarer took aim from his hip and loosed a wild bolt straight up into the sky. However undetermined its origins, the missile flew straight and true, and embedded its poisonous barb soundly in a gigantic serpent's eye. The monster's mouth, at first opened to consume, now opened wider to bellow angrily. It gnashed shut mere sticks from Epsilon's helmed head, then withdrew into the treetops.

Epsilon could hear the monster struggling with its useless webbed toes to remove his deadly bolt. Knowing the power of his crossbow, the Warfarer realized all such efforts were wasted. That shaft would be buried deeply into the bone and impossible to remove. Before long, the poison would take effect and all would be finished.

As he completed this thought, the monster came undone from its high perch and fell, screaming, to the forest floor. Immediately, it was all mortal business, its wounded eye forgotten,

for here, close at hand, was its prey, the creature that had struck the fatal blow. Helmcleaver reared in terror, though he was a well disciplined beast of war and had been trained never to do this. Epsilon did not begrudge the horse its first reaction, but reeled in the reins to prevent its repeat. What he needed now was precise self control, extreme discipline of movement. For every slightest action might decide his ultimate fate.

Though it was quite dark beneath the full cover of the trees, a large hole had been opened in the canopy by the monster's entrance. It was well lit in a spotlight of its own making, and thus exposed clearly as a target.

The Hero of Alcorde hastened to tie off his reins. He would guide Helmcleaver with his knees, thereby freeing his hands for the fight.

Next, he reached for the strap of his quiver, pulling it around until he could get to the pouch it held. Using a series of precise, well practiced movements, he pulled back the cap, drew a bolt from the quiver, and fitted into the run on his crossbow. Now he took the weapon in both hands and heaved on the cocking lever.

Meanwhile, the half blind monster had found its stance among the ferns. Its huge, horribly armed head reared back and snapped abruptly forward, striking like an adder. The blow fell short, fortunately, and Epsilon's unreasoning opponent was forced to withdraw and make a second advance.

It was all the time he would ever need. The bow string snapped into position on the trigger catch, and the lever eased the shaft into place.

Epsilon snapped the weapon up to his shoulder to fire a well aimed shot. With a musical strum of vibrating spring steel and a comforting thump against his shoulder, the missile was released. Anxiously, he lowered the weapon once more to set and notch another bolt. He did not watch to see where the second arrow would strike, for he had foreseen it already in his aim. When he looked up again, ready to loose a third round, he was not surprised to see a shaft protruding from the monster's long throat, just beneath its deadly jaws.

It did not scream again, and Epsilon was not required to waste another missile. His poison was slowly doing its damage, and the blind dragon's movements were reduced to a spasmodic twitching that the Warfarer recognized instantly as the first throes of death. Soon enough, the monster's head collapsed into the tall ferns and did not rise again.

Helmcleaver flicked his tail derisively, as they turned to finish climbing the high bank. When they reached the summit, Epsilon allowed a brief pause to rest.

Aloud he said, "It is a strange night, my friend. Strange and long. Between those giant bridge turtles and these flying serpents, I think Lord Andol's company will prove to be the best this land has to offer."

When the monster began thrashing about again, the Hero of Alcorde turned his mount to the west and started back along the ridge toward the road. He intercepted the lawn with little trouble and followed it south as before.

The road continued on as a pair of identical lanes, with a generous median between. Milestones marked the leagues as they were laid down beneath Helmcleaver's hooves. The

angular shadows of those monoliths etched the lawn like moondial pointers, thus the stones were made to tell time as well as distances. As the hours crept slowly along, the Warfarer measured them out inch by inch in the shadows' arc. When the way markers' umbra was long and stretched full away from sunset, Epsilon dismounted wearily.

He would not sleep, nor would he pitch camp. Yet he could rest for an hour, perhaps until the sun rose again to light the new day.

To serve this end, he had chosen the lee of a crumbling brick wall. It was of unknown origins and intent, and had stood near the lawn for an undetermined age, yet Epsilon was content merely that it stood. Once he had loosened the saddle and shifted its lathered blanket, Epsilon offered the warhorse a bit of water and grain.

Only then did he turn to tend his own needs. He retired eagerly to the wall with a water skin and a sack of rations, reclining there in a fashion that eased the aching muscles between his shoulder blades and at the same time spared his protesting buttocks. After a few seconds of this comfort, the Warfarer found himself longing for more, and so he dared a bootless death.

Sloughing his footgear was the greatest service he might have done himself, save for entering into a long sleep. His relief was instantaneous and overwhelming. Epsilon sighed and groaned softly, wriggling his cramped toes. Next, he tended to his aching haunches, especially his left hip where that old wound flared painfully. Kneading his tough, wiry muscles with his knuckles, Epsilon decided this was not good enough. He needed a more determined treatment.

Unfastening his outer garments and raising his mail shirt, the Warfarer pushed his undergarments down to expose the troubled area as bare flesh. To which he applied a generous dollop of a jillroot salve drawn from one of his many pouches. Epsilon worked this into his skin and was rewarded with a slow relaxation of the flaring muscles underneath. The effect eventually spread down to his tortured joint, finally relieving the most bothersome portion of the pain. Epsilon worked his hip socket gently. It felt as though it had never been pierced by an enemy's lance.

The weary traveler rearranged his ruffled clothing and sat back against the wall. He would not close his eyes for slumber, but kept them open and ever vigilant for danger. At the same time, he emptied his mind and ended its thought processes, stifling it forcibly into a rest state. Though his eyes remained open, Epsilon slept.

5

Tolls of Empire

Helmcleaver was screaming! The stallion's footfalls were base drumbeats on the forest floor! It reared and wheeled about, striking out violently at the interlopers that had surrounded it in the minutes just prior to dawn.

Epsilon jumped up and was running, sword drawn, to join the fray, even before his mind was fully awake and recovered. His blade held high, the Warfarer screamed defiance and swept his sword cleanly through a dark shape charging out of his dreams. It was cut neatly in two, and Epsilon ran disdainfully between the halves as they fell away to each side.

Then, just abruptly as it had begun, the disturbance was ended. Helmcleaver stopped circling and settled back down to all fours, snorting haughtily. A flurry of shadows in the shape of many men fled around the remnant wall, and dissolved into the forest's yielding flesh. Epsilon blinked his eyes several times, and rubbed the sleep away with his left thumb and forefinger. What a mad dream!

Only it had not been a dream. Turning to seek out the body of the man he thought he had slain, Epsilon found nothing beyond Mary's double sack of victuals, its conjoining cord cut in the middle.

If not for this evidence and his mount's continued disturbance, Epsilon might have believed all had been part of an unsatisfying nightmare. But, no, he had been raided in the night. Judging by tracks left in the loamy soil, the Warfarer decided that perhaps a dozen men had entered his camp, probably to steal his rations. They had not been assassins, this much was clear. From what he had seen of them, none were armed with anything more lethal than a stave, or wearing so much as a pair of worn boots. Which thought prompted Epsilon to think of his own bare feet.

Stooping to retrieve Mary's dried foods, Epsilon shook his head for no particular reason at all. "The poor wretches. They are obviously starving." But what of it? What he could he do about it? Why should he do anything, at all? The bastards had attempted to rob him, had they not? What good service did they deserve of him? None, of course. Yet the Warfarer found himself wondering.

He recalled what Lord Andol had said of his people. 'But sacks of skin filled with bones'. Might this have been a remnant of the Wilderland's former human inhabitants? Could humanity be so drastically reduced? They had seemed scarcely more than animals.

A movement in the brush caught his attention. It had been a slight motion, but it was enough to convince Epsilon that his visitors were still visiting.

From between the forks of a low trunk, Epsilon was startled to notice a face staring back at him. It was dirty and pocked with disease. Hair framed it all around in matted clumps and tangles. A pair of wide, curious eyes blinked in the sharp shadows of a rising sun. Though a great impression of fear was evident in that disheveled countenance, Epsilon realized it was also rife with curiosity. Perhaps the creature had never before seen one of its own kind dressed and living as a civilized man.

The Warfarer lowered his sword's point and extended his gloved left hand, empty palm showing. "Do you speak the common tongue, good citizen?" His abrupt words frightened the face away momentarily. Only slowly did the savage rise up once more from behind the tree trunk. "I am not your enemy. Provided, of course, that you are not mine. Do you understand? I mean you no direct harm. Here, I cover my blade," which he did, easing the Warfarer's sword into its finely fashioned scabbard. "Do not be afraid. You see, we may be friends."

But the forester would not answer. He, or she, only cocked his head curiously from side to side. When Helmcleaver approached from behind, the visitor disappeared again, only to pop up in the crook of another tree deeper into the forest. Then the horse coughed loudly, and the stranger was gone for good.

Epsilon reprimanded his mount gently. "Aye, you are a fierce bully. But gruff bravado is no use when making friends." Helmcleaver shook his head, as though to clear his ears of flies. "So, you will not listen. You have no patience for starving cretins, eh? Your heart is as cold as it

is fierce, I think. Would you turn widows and orphans out into winter snows, too? Hmm? Of course you would. But I will not."

Smiling secretively, the sacrificial warrior cinched his saddle's surcingle tight, then rummaged among his gear for a box, which contained a particular item. When he found it, Epsilon held it aloft in the rising light. The small bottle was intricately cast with a hundred flat facets that sparkled like diamonds when rotated in the sunbeams. Roughly the size of his palm, the vessel contained a powerful potion that one of Tesla's most renowned mages had given him at Alcorde. Runes stamped onto its clamped cap marked the contents simply as 'Deer Juice--For Bucks'.

The mage had cautioned Epsilon to be exceedingly dexterous in his use of the mixture, as a single drop spilled onto one's hands or clothing would have undesirable, if not disastrous, consequences. One of the Emperor's royal hunters had experienced such an incident, and had been subsequently stalked for three weeks by rutting roebucks determined on mating with him. Epsilon wanted none of that, but he was interested to know just how efficiently the stuff worked. He had never used it for his own sake, and would employ it now only to hasten the hunt. Good citizenship need not consume one's day entirely, after all.

Now he donned his boots, then sought a likely spot to place the bait, choosing an old rotten stump that stood halfway between the lawn and the road. This site offered a clear field of fire, while it remained concealed from the watchful eyes of skyward scavengers.

He strode over and dabbed but two crystalline drops onto the soft, rotting wood. By the time he had moved Helmcleaver out of sight, definite signs of movement had already developed among the forest ferns. Epsilon motioned his warhorse to absolute silence, then drew his crossbow and quiver from the saddle's horn. Before he could exchange the poisoned bolt for a milder variety, the first interested deer leapt onto the lawn some one hundred sticks to the north.

It sniffled the wind delicately, its ears whipping back and forth. And abruptly it was gone again, having returned to the woods with a mighty leap. Epsilon mourned the lost buck, as any hunter would, but he was not discouraged. Not five minutes had passed and already he had a nibble at the bait, where he might have waited in the blind all day and had not one shot without it. Besides, judging by the disturbances among the undergrowth, other curious stags would soon be along.

With this thought finished, three, then four, then five magnificent deer stepped out curiously onto the lawn, snuffling at the breeze and posturing to rut. One had a beautiful head of spikes that had more than a dozen points on each. It was the largest and finest of the five, but Epsilon would not take it. Somehow, it seemed wrong to so heartlessly manipulate so valiant an animal, one that appeared to have lived long and warily enough to generally avoid hunter's traps. No, he would select one of the lesser bucks.

Which he did, ending that creature's life with a musical thrum of his bow's steel cable, using a common, untainted bolt. The Warfarer hurried to reload, but need not have, as none of the deer had fled at the sight of their slain comrade. Instead, they were drawing closer to the

baited stump, eager to mate with it. Two of the deer began to spar with their antlers. Epsilon had time to shoot them both. He added a fourth to his score and deemed this to be a sufficient day's work.

By that time, nearly a dozen love crazed harts had entered onto the lawn or were mingling in the street. Epsilon had to fairly shoo them out of his way in order to retrieve his kills. In all his many years as a hunter, he had never seen such brazen, fearless behavior in the presence of an armed man. Those deer were rendered absolutely nerveless, and were soon so engrossed in combat that they were not discouraged from their contests even when a great, flying behemoth swept down to snatch a buck from the road's median. It was violently torn from the terra firma, bawling, but not one of its mates so much as flicked an ear to notice.

Epsilon hung the carcasses from a thick branch, then skinned and gutted his kills in short order, glancing up occasionally from his work to watch the harts mount and copulate with the unhappy stump. He laughed to consider what the Emperor's careless hunter must have endured after spilling Deer Juice on himself. Imagine being that stump for three weeks straight! He must have been a miserable man, indeed. And busy, too.

Now that the deer were cleaned, Epsilon cut off their heads and tossed these into the ferns. What remained were four perfectly dressed roasters, ready to spit and eat.

As he cleaned himself and his cutlery, the Warfarer called into the forest. "Heigh! Ye miserable, starving wretches! Come and eat! Come and eat!" He indicated the bounty he had laid out, using a generous sweep of his powerful right arm. "And praise Nars, the god of war, as

you fill your unwholesome bellies! Praise Nars that he has, in his martial pride, raised up such a man as Epsilon Three to feed you this day! But come and eat! Come and eat!"

No great rush of eager feet disturbed the dusts, much to Epsilon's disappointment. For a moment he thought the savages had all gone away, leaving his labors un-rewarded. Then that same face reappeared in the crook of the tree boughs again. The cretin's eyes were wide and wild, and the Warfarer was disgusted to see its tongue protrude pinkly from glistening, drool washed lips. As an animal, it slobbered and croaked and appeared to be hopping from foot to foot behind the tree's trunk. Only the Warfarer's undetermined threat seemed to keep the wastrels from their feast.

Sighing resignedly, Epsilon shrugged his shoulders and called for Helmcleaver. "It is probably best that I not tarry to watch them eat, in any event. I could only let go my own rations at the sight." With a leap, he sat himself astride his horse of war, and reached for the reins.

He was only vaguely surprised to find a scrap of paper rolled about one of the leather straps, awaiting his attentions. After his customary examination of the terrain, he unrolled it and read;

Aye, this proud maker of war has a heart!

For he loves hungry mongrels and children!

All save pups fear the Warfarer's sword!

And he would salvage his foes, ere he kills them!

Aye, this fierce monger of Nars is gone soft!
His armor is corroded by feelings!
Yet he is the keeper of an Emperor's charge!
And charged has he been with death's dealings!

--The Invisible One

Exasperated, Epsilon folded the note and gathered his reins. Shouting into the general forest, he called, "Lovely words, oh, Invisible One! I have enjoyed your scribblings all. So much so, that I would hear more of them. Come, show yourself. Let us put this game of taunting aside and travel together as friends. It is sure you are no enemy!" He said this last with more feeling than he felt, as he had made no such determination as of yet.

Regardless of his intentions, no answer was returned from the forest, save for the slobbering of starving savages that had boldly slunk to the edge of the lawn. Epsilon tried once more.

"Beware, then, if you will not come down; I grow weary of this foolishness. I might have a look at you soon enough, even against your will. Do not forget that spiders lay invisible traps at night to catch prey they cannot see!"

Hoping his threats had not sounded as impotent to the Invisible One as they had in his own ears, Epsilon gouged Helmcleaver forward, heeling him hard over to the south. They galloped

along the lawn for a bit as the sun rose, leaving the savages behind to ravenously devour the deer carcasses, guts and all, without a fire, while the meat was yet pink and bloody. Epsilon glanced back only once, for once was enough to tell him the entire twisted story of that sorry lot. They were no longer men and women. They were animals. It was no wonder that Epsilon's unseen friend had found cause to mock his kindness.

As before, the way markers passed with the leagues and the morning grew old, tuned to the stomping of Helmcleaver's resolute strides. Thrice in that time, on glancing into the forest shadows or back the way they had come, Epsilon thought he had glimpses of a changeling shadows following at a discrete distance.

His crossbow remained ever ready, but no clear opportunity was presented to test his skill. Since the well camouflaged beast had not formally attacked him, Epsilon was reluctant to kill it outright, and would not risk doing so with an undisciplined bolt.

No, he would bide his time and wait patiently for the crisis. All things, after all, had their time and place.

After many long, bone weary miles, just before the sun arced across its noon zenith, something happened that completely dispelled considerations of the changeling shade. A long, buzzing bee shot out of the forest, impacted against the Warfarer's helmet with a skull jarring clang, then skipped out across the road and was buried in the median between its lanes. Epsilon was momentarily stunned. His steel head cover was tilted crazily to one side, and he had been knocked half out of his seat by the blow.

The Warfarer shook his head to clear it of the loud ringing in his ears. Righting himself in the saddle, he glanced to his left and saw the feathered shaft of an arrow protruding from the narrow greenway.

His mind was instantly cleared by the sight, and his thoughts flowed un-muddled once more. Epsilon instinctively reached for his buckler, and raised it to cover his vulnerable right side. In the same motion, he kicked Helmcleaver into a hard run, crying, "Fly! Fly! To war! To war!" Another bee buzzed out of the densely grown foliage. It passed through one of Epsilon's saddle bags and disappeared into the trees on the far side of the highway.

A strange voice boomed out of the trees now. It was inhuman in construction, and sounded as though it was blown from a bass set of steel organ pipes. It called, "HALT, ELOPER! YOU ARE COMMANDED IN THE NAME OF HIS MAJESTY'S ROYAL TAX COLLECTOR TO PAY A TOLL!"

As his mount accelerated away, Epsilon glanced into the trees at his right hand, and noticed a dimly outlined recess in the forest. Once, the lawn had extended into that clearing. Far back in the shadows, so heavily overrun by creepers, vines and saplings as to be utterly obscured, squatted a familiar stone building. It was another of the road's old, forgotten toll stations!

Yet surely no garrison was stationed there, and certainly none of the Emperor's tax agents. This was the Otherside, after all, the Wilderlands. The Empire had garnished no revenues from these kingdoms in ages.

Something rustled from within the building's deeply shaded confines. Sounds of rending vines and snapping boughs could be heard, despite the din of Helmcleaver's fleet hoof beats. Another buzzing insect passed over his head, this time flying from the opposite direction. And yet another strange voice boomed, "HALT, ELOPER! YOU ARE COMMANDED TO PAY A TOLL!" which emanated from another obscured granite hut that had serviced the opposite lane. The foliage was also disturbed there. Something large and powerful was struggling to break free of a long confinement beneath the overgrowth.

But Helmcleaver had fled so swiftly from the threat, that Epsilon found himself carried up, over, and beyond the crest of a hill, and thus out of sight, before he could so much as glimpse his persecutors. This was unacceptable. Their nature had to be assessed in order to form a rational plan of battle. Whether they would chase him or no, Epsilon felt compelled to ascertain their capabilities. He had no way of knowing how many other similar creatures he might have to fight, and deemed it wise, therefore, to learn as much as he could now, while he held the superior ground.

To serve this end, he brought his horse up short and turned it about. As curious dogs that have been chased away, they were content to return only enough to peer beyond the hill's summit.

Thus obscured, Epsilon watched and listened, as the thrashing and leaf shaking waxed to a frenzy of movement, and those awesome warnings were become a general din of confusion. Suddenly, something gave way, and a strange form lurched out of the farthest stone building.

At first glance, it seemed to be a construction of the forest, so obscured was it by clinging creepers and torn fern leaves. Then it emerged into a patch of light, and the Warfarer was dismayed. A centaur form strode out toward the lawn, but it was not a form of flesh and bone. Rather, it was an absolute fabrication of armor. From head to tail, shoulder to hoof, the monster was wrought from everwear steel plates that slid and worked around each other fluidly at the beast's every mechanical movement. No spot of rust stained that immaculate coat, but centuries of wind blown soil and organic decay had worked thoroughly into its joints. The steel centaur moved with a grating sound of un-greased metal. One of its hind legs seemed to be inoperable.

It continued to bellow its warning, then used the powerful arms of its man-shaped upper torso to fix another missile to the string of its deadly bow. This was tensed to full force and slowly aimed up the hillside at Epsilon's silhouetted head.

Mouth agape and eyes wide, the Warfarer was too stunned by what he had seen to move. Every aspect of his senses told Epsilon there must be a living creature inside that steel shell, but he knew no living thing might have stood guard for so long, enduring such privations. No, this was a magical beast, a remnant of another time that Epsilon had never known and could not possibly understand.

Now the centaur's arrow was centered on target. Just as it would have let fly the shaft, one of its three good legs was caught in a high root, and the monster tipped over to fall. With a slow, clumsy scramble, its debilitated appendages fought to remain upright, but, in the end, gravity won. When it struck ground, the monster broke into half a dozen large pieces, which

settled away from each other, yet working as though nothing had happened. The bow let go with a guitar's strum. The missile curved up, up and out of sight.

Squinting his eyes against the bright noon sun, Epsilon was horrified to see that the armor shell was empty inside. Its human arms and horse's legs thrashed about for a moment before they stilled completely. The centaur's voice was severed in mid sentence.

Epsilon had no time to rejoice, however, as the other toll house was soon emptied of its contents, and yet another metallic centaur burst free from untold confinement. Identical to the first, this latest monster was in better condition. Its joints and armor plates made no discernable sounds as they worked together flawlessly. Once free of trailing tendrils and vines, the steel beast moved with a surprising dexterity and alarming speed.

It commanded, "HALT, ELOPER! YOUR CRIMES ARE PUNISHABLE BY DEATH!"

And a lethally aimed arrow was let loose. It missed Epsilon's breast only for being deflected by a fortuitous bough. The centaur immediately drew another everwear shaft from a rigid quiver at its back, and began notching this to its un-corroded longbow. With the agility of a living creature, it sprang onto the lawn and settled down for a more rewarding shot.

Needing to see no more, Epsilon yanked Helmcleaver about, and they were away at the animal's fastest run. Something about the way that centaur had moved, however, told Epsilon that no mortal horse could win a race run against it. Not even with the lead that Helmcleaver now enjoyed.

Since he knew of nothing else to do, Epsilon decided to rely on the brief time his forerun would purchase. He let the stallion have free rein, and it ran like a hare. Perhaps he would come across an unforeseen saving grace before the centaur neared close enough to force a contest. Perhaps not. Either way, he could always make a fight of it at the end.

One thing he realized immediately, though, was that his crossbow was an ineffective defense against his opponent's superior offense. What he needed was his own ash longbow, but he dare not try to draw and string it at a full run, for fear of losing it in a jostle.

Glancing back, the Hero of Alcorde paled to see the centaur spring lithely over the top of the rise behind. So quickly? It was impossible!

Yet real enough. The steel beast landed softly and came to rest.

It raised its bow. Epsilon saw sunlight flash at the arrow's razor point. Like a shooting star returning to the heavens, it streaked away.

Except the Warfarer had drawn his steed into the sandy bed of a stream, which curved close to the lawn's edge. Helmcleaver had to slow and jump off a low, steep bank. The centaur's spent missile clattered through the undergrowth just behind, its flight ending with a distant report of impact.

Its steel shod hooves muffled by the damp loam, the stallion flew more quietly at the creek's edge. Epsilon stood in his stirrups to ease his mount's movement, and let his knees flex gently with the rises and falls of Helmcleaver's flanks.

At their backs, the mechanical voice boomed, "FLIGHT IS FUTILE! SURRENDER NOW, ELOPER!"

When he heard hoof beats following closely behind, and thus knew his enemy had found him, Epsilon bellowed, "And what if I stopped to pay my toll? Would you let me pass in peace, then?"

"NAY, FOR YOUR CRIMES ARE NOW CAPITAL! YOU HAVE SLAIN ONE OF HIS MAJESTY'S SERVANTS! SO MUST YOU BE SLAIN! IT IS THE LAW!"

"I slew no one! Your partner tripped over its own clumsy legs!"

"THAT IS NOT SO! THAT IS NOT SO! YOU BEAR FALSE WITNESS! THIS ACT HAS COMPOUNDED YOUR FELONIES!" The deafening voice was nearing. Epsilon hunched forward defensively in his seat. "DO NOT SCURRY, LITTLE RABBIT! YOUR FLYING FEET WILL ONLY SEE YOU MORE ANGRILY UNDONE!"

"I am no rabbit!" shouted Epsilon peevishly. Helmcleaver had followed the streambed, as it curved about the base of a heavily wooded hillside. The passing greenery was nothing more than a jade wash of motion, and all his attentions were focused on the soft, graveled path. "I am His Majesty's Emissary! I carry sealed documents to prove myself!"

"THAT IS FINE! THAT IS GOOD!" The metallic tones waxed happy. "STOP AND SHOW THEM! SHOULD THEY PROVE VERIFIABLE, I WILL EXECUTE YOU PAINLESSLY, AS IS ALLOWED FOR ALL HIS MAJESTY'S CONVICT SERVANTS!"

"And if I do not?" Epsilon picked a gentle bank that led up into the trees, and guided Helmcleaver onto it. The stallion blew fiercely as he climbed, but scarcely slowed at the grade.

"THEN YOU WILL BE SHAFTED AND FELLED! ONCE YOU ARE AFOOT AND WOUNDED, I WILL PLAY YOU AS A CAT PLAYS A MOUSE! IN THE END, YOU WILL BE DICED TO SMALL PIECES!"

Epsilon swallowed harshly. It sounded to be a sincere promise. How strange it seemed, that empty armor should be as humanly vindictive as any mortal knight might have been.

While they climbed the hillside, Epsilon noted with relief that the tree trunks were quite broad here. Towering one hundred sticks high, these wooden columns that upheld the cathedral's jade roof were thirty meters in circumference at their bases, more than sufficient to conceal both man and horse. Helmcleaver ducked behind one of these and continued to race upward, hidden to all below.

Down in the creek bed, the bizarre centaur announced, "IT IS A CLEVER RABBIT THAT TAKES THE HIGHER WAY! MOST GO TO GROUND!"

Though he wanted to make a reply, Epsilon dared not for fear of betraying his position. He wanted to shout out that he was no rabbit, but believed his interests were better served in silence. He and Helmcleaver maintained their ascent until the stallion was all but spent. They had run as far as they could. It was time to turn and fight.

Epsilon leapt down off the warhorse and reached for his longbow. He strung it quickly and drew a specially designed headless arrow from his quiver.

Where the point should have been, the shaft ended in a small ball joint. To this, the Warfarer attached a heavy iron weight drawn from his gear. The weight was roughly diamond shaped, with a blunt point on one end and the ball socket's mate fitted into the other. This specially designed point would ride securely on the shaft, like any other point, with the difference that the assembly could disassociate on impact, ejecting the missile's body while imparting all its forward momentum into the head, doubling its destructive force. While poorly suited to piercing flesh or steel, this special arrangement was ideal for breaking bones and crushing plate armor. When drawn back to full force and fired at a decent range, Epsilon's projectile could take a fully armored foe cleanly out of the saddle, staving in his breast shield so deeply as to suffocate the opponent before it could be shed.

Hastily assembling three of these deadly missiles, the Warfarer returned to the hunt afoot. He could move more silently and efficiently this way, and spared Helmcleaver undo exposure to harm. All he needed was one shot.

Before he could take up position behind a thick, gnarled trunk, standing atop one of its massive roots in order to see over the ferns, the metallic monster sprang up and out of the creek bed. It landed softly behind a thick column some distance downhill.

"SURRENDER NOW, FRIGHTENED RODENT! YOU ARE FACED BY A SUPERIOR THREAT!" It sprang out of the ferns, bounding from one trunk to another further up the slope. Epsilon raised his bow, but had no clear opportunity. The centaur taunted, "I AM AGELESS! I HAVE SLAIN SCORES OF YOUR KIND THROUGHOUT THE ENDLESS

YEARS!" It was air borne again, its body a streak of the sun's reflection. This time Epsilon had a decent chance and took it, though his projectile flew well wide of its mark. He hurried to reload.

"YOUR SUFFERING WILL NOT SWAY OR DISMAY ME! I AM WITHOUT MORTAL WEAKNESS! I DO NOT TIRE! I AM VOID OF FEAR! ONCE THE HUNT HAS BEGUN-"

It leapt again, before Epsilon was ready. As it disappeared back into the bush, taking cover behind a tall hardwood, the Warfarer realized that another bound or two would put the fell

monster in his lap. "-IT CAN BUT END IN YOUR OWN GORY DEMISE! TIME AND

AGAIN HAVE I PERFORMED THIS SERVICE FOR MY MASTER, BUT NO MATTER!

YOU WILL NOT LEARN!" It was up again, startlingly close by this time. So close that Epsilon could see the centaur's expressionless visor face. He let a second weighted projectile fly, and was

disappointed by its failure. "YOU MUST PAY YOUR TAXES! YOU MUST PAY YOUR

TOLLS!" Once again it jumped, hurriedly, before Epsilon could notch his last immediate arrow.

"OR ELSE IT BECOMES MY DUTY TO HAVE YOUR HEAD! SO COME NOW, BAD

RABBIT! DEATH IS AT HAND AT LAST! IF YOU SURRENDER NOW, I WILL

DISMEMBER YOU GENTLY!"

Epsilon mouthed a silent prayer to Nars. *If it be thy will that I die this day, he beseeched, Then let me have my killer as a final sacrifice to your glory. It is not a creature of flesh, granted, but it is surely the best opponent I have faced since Alcorde. Its destruction would honor you greatly.*

The Warfarer had no answer to his request, except that the centaur had fallen strangely silent. It did not immediately leap again. Many seconds passed, a time longer than eternity, and nothing happened. Epsilon suffered a funny feeling in his belly. The monster was easily within a leap's distance of its prey, yet it did not come.

Or did it? That funny feeling escaped his viscera and spread along the Warfarer's spine. When it had set his scalp aflame, Epsilon spun around abruptly.

Nothing. No movement. No sound. Nothing.

Completely spooked now, Epsilon pressed his back up against the trunk and anxiously struggled to see in all directions at once. A rustle in the ferns caught his attention. An instant after he had jumped off its roots, a silver arrow embedded itself in the trunk where he had been standing. Epsilon scrambled uphill toward the base of another hardwood, wishing he had Helmcleaver's strength in his hind legs.

Much to his own surprise, the Warfarer achieved his objective and hid behind it, breathing heavily. On a sudden whim, feeling his viable options were narrowed nearly to nothing, Epsilon tried deception. "Fair enough, proud centaur! You have won! I will surrender, with your oath that my death will be quick and merciful!"

From less than ten sticks away, he heard the reply. "YOU HAVE MY OATH, RABBIT! IT HAS BEEN A FAIR FIGHT WELL FOUGHT! YOU ARE DESERVING OF SUCH TERMS!"

"Good, then! But you must come to me. My leg is turned on a root and broken. I cannot walk."

"VERY WELL! BUT I WARN YOU, SIR; NO TRICKS! YOUR DEATH WILL BE A MISERABLE AFFAIR INDEED, IF THIS IS DECEPTION!"

"No, deception! My bow is lost and broken."

After a brief consideration, the toll guard announced happily, "I WILL COME UP!"

Good, breathed the Hero of Alcorde silently. That the centaur should be so naive was fortunate beyond belief. So much so, that Epsilon suspected his deception had been reversed. He dared raise his helmed head and lean around the trunk to have a look. To his amazement, the everwear chimera had emerged into the open. It waded the ferns fluidly, so its torso seemed the main mast of some bizarre earthbound ship of sail.

"NO TRICKS, RABBIT, AND IT WILL BE DONE QUICKLY! STEADY NOW..." it stowed its bow away into a neat little space at its side and withdrew a sword from another compartment. "STEADY NOW... SIMPLY ROLL OVER AND CLOSE YOUR EYES... I WILL HAVE YOUR HEAD OFF WITH BUT A SINGLE SWEEP... GOOD LITTLE RODENT... NICE RODENT... MY BLADE IS ALWAYS SHARP... NEVER DULL... JUST A FEATHER TOUCH OF COLD STEEL... JUST A TOUCH..."

Epsilon was on his knees abruptly, bow drawn. He aligned the dull point of his hammer against the segment conjoining the man-half with the horse-half of the fell centaur. He released.

"WHAT?!" it raged, surprised, in the moment before Epsilon's final arrow struck true. Then the centaur's shiny shell burst into a dozen glittering fragments, which were tossed up, back and away from the Warfarer in a shower of sparkling everwear plates.

Of particular interest was the head and torso. This portion of the beast remained largely intact, and landed in the ferns not far away. Epsilon leaned his bow against the tree, and drew his own sword. Cautiously, he approached the remains of his terrifying enemy.

The upper section was a ruin of crumpled steel. One of the powerful arms was missing. The other was largely intact, and had kept its grip on the centaur's sword, but Epsilon's projectile had apparently struck it on ricochet. Where the elbow should have been was naught but a shapeless crumple of armor. The centaur's hand flexed as though it would strike, but the blade scarcely moved in response. It had no face but that of a helmet's visor, which looked to have been welded shut, but somehow the creature's countenance was all too meanly human.

"I-" it boomed without a mouth, "I AM DEFEATED! I AM DECEIVED! FOUL! FOUL! YOU HAVE NOT ADHERED TO THE SHIVELLE CODE OF MARTIAL CONDUCT! YOU ARE WITHOUT HONOR!"

Taken aback by the creature's too loud protests, Epsilon mouthed the word 'shivelle'. "Unless I am mistaken, that code is obsolete, centaur. It has not been practiced for five hundred years and more." The Warfarer grimaced, and kicked away an everwear horse's leg that had started twitching like it would strike him. "And I am not without honor. I am of the Martial Rite, a high disciple, in fact. Honor is the blood in my veins."

"THEN YOU ARE A FOOL! LEAN CLOSER THAT I MIGHT DASH OUT YOUR IGNORANT BRAINS!"

"Now, now, good centaur. Your moment is passing. Do not let it pass indecently."

"DAMN YOU, DECEIVER! DO NOT SPEAK TO ME OF DECENCY! YOU HAVE SLAIN ME WITH A LIE! A LIE! WHAT HONOR IN FALSITY?" The armored torso writhed and contorted violently, apparently in an attempt to wriggle nearer to its mark.

Epsilon conceded patiently, "As a way of life, none at all. Yet an honorable man might lie with impunity, if that lie serves an honorable purpose. Or so the Rite teaches."

"I DEFECATE ON THE COLLECTED LEARNED TOMES OF YOUR CURSED RITE, FOUL RABBIT! WHAT IS HONORABLE ABOUT YOUR ANIMAL'S STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL? NOTHING. I HAVE WITNESSED THE PASSING OF HALF A MILLENNIUM! FIVE HUNDRED YEARS! ALL TO BE UNDONE BY A GADFLY THAT WILL NOT LAST OUT THE NIGHT!" It struggled closer, its crumpled arm working pathetically with a useless sword. "OH, THE GALL! THE AUDACITY! THE IMPUNITY! I CAN IMAGINE NO ACT MORE CARNALLY VAIN OR DISHONORABLE!"

"True, true," he replied, placing his booted foot atop the ruined centaur's hand to strip it of its sword. He dare not trust such a weapon to magical hands, even when those hands were largely crippled. "Yet, you are the one undone here, and I will walk away. Would you not agree that the means serve the end in these matters?"

"BUT WHAT HONORABLE PURPOSE? WHAT HONORABLE MAN? IT IS A LOST VICTORY THAT IS WON WITHOUT INTEGRITY!"

"In Nars' eyes, all combat is sacred. All combatants are, therefore, rendered worthy of honor. We, of the Rite, believe integrity to be nothing without the life that propagates its virtues." The dented carcass rumbled a bit, but said nothing. The Warfarer continued, "When the good and the bad are in contest, the bad will know nothing of moral restraint or human decency. These are all causes of what is good. It becomes impossible, then, to impose such restraints on mortal combats, as this methodology only ensures that the unscrupulous party will inevitably win. Consequently, the Rite teaches that no tactic or strategy is unemployable in times of war. Nothing is sacred inside Nars' martial arena, save for the arena, itself." The everwear form offered no reply. "As I have said, centaur, your Code of Shivelle is dead. As are all the men that would practice it in these undisciplined lands."

"YET I AM NOT DEAD! I HAVE STOOD TRUE AND FAST ALL THIS TIME! I HAVE ENDURED!"

"Yes, this is so. And now you are fading, doubtless among the last of your kind. Do you not see, centaur, that you were defeated by the keeping of your own naive code? Hmm? You are a relic of a gentler day. Honor no longer has a place on the battlefield."

The centaur appeared to relent. "PERHAPS IT NEVER DID. IT SEEMS I AM GROWN OLD BEYOND MY TIME." The shattered suit of armor stopped moving all at once

and lay still. "TELL ME, SIR, IS MY DYING A GOOD THING? IT HAS BEEN SUCH A LONG, LONG TIME COMING."

Epsilon sighed heavily. He suddenly felt quite sorry for his victim. "No death is good, centaur, though all are necessary in their time."

The dented head twitched slightly once, twice, three times, as though nodding in agreement. "IT WAS A GOOD FIGHT! YOU ARE A WORTHY FOE! AND UNCOMMONLY WISE... FOR A RABBIT!" Then all was still and the voice was gone. The centaur was de-animated.

Testing the everwear remains with the toe of one boot, Epsilon whistled for Helmcleaver and sheathed his sword. When the warhorse had drawn close, the Warfarer returned for his bow.

"Next time, my friend," he announced, "I think we should pay our tolls."

He had gathered the reins to walk his winded horse downhill, but stopped in mid-stride at the sight of a particular piece of crumpled armor. Retrieving this, he hefted into the light and brushed away a grime of ages. A small, deeply etched gold tag had been fitted to the everwear steel. On it was stamped a name and title;

ANAFOL MALLORY'S SON, SERGEANT

HIS MAJESTY'S ROYAL ARMY

But these words had not caught his eye. For, below the centaur's name, was engraved this further information;

Killed at the Battle for Ronwyn Down

Incorporated, C.Y. 611

Epsilon could only guess what this last bit meant. It seemed the centaur had once been a living man. Somehow, for some obscure reason, his vital essence had been preserved and confined to the everwear shell. His soul had been 'incorporated'; literally, 'formed into a body'. How obscene! The Warfarer offered a brief prayer for the sanctity of his foe's soul, tossing a handful of soil onto the dented breast shield, as ritual required.

Returned to the lawn again, Epsilon thought of performing the same service for the other centaur, but changed his mind when he heard a flying monster stirring about overhead. A simple prayer would have to suffice.

They hurried south, as always, with Epsilon leading his mount afoot. He carried his crossbow slung beneath his right arm, easily at hand, and kept a constant watch for danger.

At his back and out of the corner of his right eye, Epsilon had a glimpse of that familiar changeling shadow as it dashed out of the forest in pursuit of him. Apparently, the shapeless creature had followed him even into the grips of mortal combat. As quickly as it scurried for a

concealing shade on the noon lawn, Epsilon spun about more quickly and launched an unpoisoned bolt from his hip.

It flew with a whistling whisper. And struck something solid.

A high-pitched screech pierced the still air. Something thudded to ground and sounded to be rolling awkwardly to a stop. Epsilon whipped the crossbow off his shoulder and dropped it gently to the green, drawing his sword in the same liquid motion. He rushed forward silently to chase his errant bolt. Though he could not see what held it, he could see the shaft. It jiggled and bobbed erratically, as if it were being carried along by the flesh in which it was embedded. But there seemed to be no flesh!

"Halt, damnable specter! Halt, or I shall cut you in half!" He was standing over the twitching bolt now, and only now, so close and in the full light of the sun, could he detect the dim outline of a figure on the lawn. It was not so much invisible, as it was camouflaged against its background. Like a canny chameleon, the colors and textures of its skin changed rapidly as it moved, perfectly matching the dappled grass beneath. "I see you now!" he gloated, almost maniacal, "I see you now and you are wounded! Hold still, I say!"

Abruptly obliging, the form stopped moving. As soon as it did so, its outline became all but invisible. For a moment, the tell-tale bolt remained perfectly still.

Then it began to elongate oddly. Epsilon cocked his head curiously.

From his back, a female voice called, "Kill it, you fool! Kill it while you may! It is the Enemy!"

The Warfarer was distracted. His head turned ever so slightly.

At once, the shaft popped free to settle onto the lawn. Its barbed end was visible again. Epsilon heard a soft scramble of clawed feet on the grass. The sound moved around him in a tight circle to his right.

The unseen woman called, "Beware its bite! It is venomous!"

Whereupon a heavy weight slammed into the backs of Epsilon's knees. His legs bowed and crumpled. The Warfarer fell backward, splaying his arms to catch his fall. A feeling of powerful arms wrapped around his waist. Legs wrapped around his thighs. Taloned toes and fingers skittered over the links of his chain mail, eager to pierce through to his flesh underneath. The skin of his middle back was pinched so fiercely and painfully that it could only be the beast's unseen mouth gnawing at his armor.

Epsilon cried out and let loose his sword. Though it was useless to him at such close quarters, he did not carelessly toss it aside. Rather, he let it fly point forward so it was buried in the lawn close at hand. If the fight opened up once more, he could have it back quickly enough.

The changeling monster bit him again. And again. Twice before they struck ground.

As he was toppling backward, Epsilon thought he might land atop the creature, crushing it. But the beast was too wiley for that. It scrambled around to his front and landed atop Epsilon, instead, gnashing at the heavier mail that protected his abdomen and chest. His clothing was punctured and torn. The Warfarer's crimson coat of arms was savaged to tatters. Now he felt

what could only be a long, muscular tail wrapping around his legs, entangling them so he felt shackled.

Prone on his back, the Warfarer kicked out lustfully and whipped his elbows back and forth in attempt to throw the queer monster aside. It was so tenacious and quick to respond, however, that this proved a futile endeavor.

As they wrestled wildly about, Epsilon drew his long knife and lashed out. The blade struck but did no apparent damage.

Now the beast was working its slow, inexorable way up his chest. He inserted his left arm between their bodies and heaved with all his strength. His efforts rewarded by mere inches of separation, still the monster would not let go. Its tail cinched tighter. Its claws were scrabbling at the overlay of his mail shirt, struggling to push it up and thus get his garters down, exposing his delicate groin and genitals.

"Your throat!" called the unseen woman, "Protect your throat!"

My throat? he wondered silently. *At the moment, m'selle, that is not my greatest concern!*

A tough collar of studded leather protected his throat, but his face remained bare enough. It was raked by a set of three claws, opening the skin of his right cheek deeply to let his blood flow freely.

Epsilon growled in rage and pain. With a monumental surge of strength, he freed his left leg from the monster's long tail and brought that knee up harshly. It met the creature's tough flesh solidly. Again and again he repeated this movement.

The various grips on him were slackened and finally loosened. He tossed the deceptively heavy form away and scrambled agilely to his feet.

Even as he reached for the yet oscillating pommel of his embedded sword, he saw the fell chameleon roll to its feet. It crouched for a moment, nearly unseen, then launched into another charge, this time leaping high at his head. Yanking his blade from the ground with his left hand, Epsilon turned to face the renewed assault. At just the right moment, he kicked out as hard as he could and caught his foe squarely on the abdomen. It was sent flying backward, but landed on its feet and was scrambling back. The Warfarer's finely wrought instrument of death swept up and around, meeting its intended target somewhere between forelimbs and hind. Screaming from its top half, the bottom half of the chameleon separate and fell away.

Still, Epsilon was not content. He let the momentum of his heavy blade swing his body around in a whipcord circle. It met its tumbling target once more, this time removing the creature's head. Its scream was curtly interrupted, and the fierce chameleon was slain.

Breathing heavily from his effort, Epsilon warily watched, as the twitching remains came to a final rest. As it died completely, its ability to adapt its camouflage to the background diminished and failed. In the end, it was completely visible.

Much like the three creatures he had encountered in the Father Heights, this thing was all gray, scaly skin. It looked much like a lizard. Or perhaps an insect. And it was in roughly the shape of a man, albeit a small one with a long, curled tail. Epsilon stooped to examine the changeling's head more closely. Bulbous crimson eyes stared vaguely back at him, already waxing

to cataract opaqueness in morbidity. It had no nose, merely tiny nostril holes. Its mouth was agape, and a sticky frog's tongue dangled limply from one side. Using the tip of his sword, he pried the maw open a bit to get a look inside. Twin rows of sharp teeth lined both jaws, and a pair of fangs were folded onto the upper palate.

A sudden spasm shut the mouth with an audible clap. The fangs scraped Epsilon's blade.

Shuddering repulsively to think the fell creature had been at his throat, the Warfarer raised his blade to chop the dead chameleon to bits. When he was finished there, he returned to Helmcleaver to fetch a skin of flammable oil and a self lighting lamp. As he doused the unspeakable remains, the Hero of Alcorde vowed to never again merely wound a creature of these Wilderland woods. Not when he was presented with a chance to kill it outright. He lit the bonfire grimly, and spat into the flames.

With this finished, Epsilon turned his attentions to the forest. He had not forgotten the woman's voice that had distracted and nearly destroyed him.

"Show yourself, fair lady! I owe you my gratitude!"

Timidly, from well beyond the tree line, a soft, lilting voice answered. "And your thanks, I would imagine."

Epsilon laughed brusquely, but not for the joke. He laughed because his body was suddenly filled with the delirious drugs of adrenaline's ebb. His knees felt weak, his hands shook. And he giddily wondered what kind of new threat he was facing.

After all, nothing was as it seemed on this Otherside. The Warfarer heartily doubted that an innocent damsel was lost amid these fell groves.

"Aye, and my thanks. But come, show yourself. Do you require aid?"

She laughed primly. "It is you that requires aid, I fear. And more of it than I can supply."

"Perhaps. But I am learning."

"Perhaps. But it is a stupid man that learns to live by first dying."

He was indignant. "I am not dead."

"You would be, if not for my warning."

"Your warning? Lady, your ill timed insights nearly cost me my life. If not for your distractions, I might have successfully interrogated the cursed creature."

Unseen, she laughed again, louder and mockingly this time. "Interrogated? That? And what, pray tell, did you hope to learn? What did you hope to have from its mouth beyond a poisonous bite and horrible death?"

"Its mission. Its mind."

"From a speechless lizard?"

Epsilon retorted hotly, frustrated to converse with an unseen debater. "Dumb forest animals are not man's enemy, merely his predators or his prey. Yet you called this thing our enemy, implying it is intelligent. I had already divined this much for myself, you see, and would have dealt with the spy in my own fashion. Except for your interference."

"Tell me, what do you think caused you to glance back in time to see that beast rushing out of the forest? Do you think your luck was simply serendipitous?"

"You did not make me look back. I heard a noise, is all. The creature stumbled and gave itself away."

She made a derisive noise with her mouth. "It would not have been so clumsy in the prosecution of a formal attack."

"I do not believe it was attacking me. Why should it? We had traveled together in peace for many long leagues."

"It was unsure of its chances until it saw you fight the toll collector. It knew you were distracted in the aftermath. It had, in fact, saved its assault for just such a moment. And, without my timely intervention, it would have surely succeeded." She paused a moment before adding, "Besides, was I interfering at the Wall? And what of my warning at the well house? You might have quenched your thirst there, ending all your hopes and mine in a single gulp."

"Sooo," he cooed, his suspicions realized, "You are the Invisible One. I had thought your tongue too eloquent to be masculine." He paused a moment, considering the woman's words.

"And what do you mean by saying 'your hopes and mine'? We do not share hopes or dreams or endeavors. We are not married together."

"You should be so fortunate." Her tone was suddenly sarcastic, but strangely so. She had sounded almost self-derisive. Then her sharp wits and tongue returned, and she successfully

avoided his query. "Except I would not marry a mere boy, no matter how handsome he might be."

"Surely you can see that I am no boy."

"Oh, your frame is that of a man's, right enough. Yet you remain a babe in these Wilderland woods. You say you are learning its ways, but you are not learning quickly enough to save yourself. All too soon, you will fail one of the forest's lethal tests of skill, and that will be your end."

Epsilon paused a moment to scan the greenery all around. Ultimately, he said, "Then come down from your hiding and guide me. I would welcome a friend's company on this long walk. You could teach me."

"It is a wise warrior that knows and can admit his weaknesses. Alas, it can never be. Now, in blindness, you would have me gratefully, but on first sight of my face you would be dismayed."

The Warfarer's guts stirred uncomfortably. *Was she a Medusa?* "What do you mean?" he asked instead.

"I am ugly."

"Is that all?"

"You do not understand. I am more than ugly. I am... grotesque."

"Would sight of you turn me to stone?" he asked playfully.

"It is not an enchanted sort of ugliness... still, it is unbearable."

"To whom? How can you judge through my eyes, when your thoughts do not fill my head? I have seen ugliness before now."

"You have not seen me."

"Then how can you say I will find you grotesque?" He took a cautious step toward the bush. He heard a responding rustle of movement.

"Do not! I will run away!"

Epsilon raised his hand in placation. "No! Stay! I beseech you."

"Move back to where you were." He did as told. "Stand there. Do not advance again, or you will hear nothing more of me."

"That would doubtless mean my death."

She was appeased by this, and even sounded a bit pleased when next she spoke. "Can you not be content with the arrangement we already enjoy?"

"I could be content with it, but not satisfied. My curiosity would become more unbearable than any mere lack of beauty ever could." Epsilon sheathed his sword slowly, removing a symbol of threat from his appearance. "Back in Tesla, I had a friend that was maimed in a training exercise. His nose and half his face were sheered cleanly away one day by a deflected broadsword, you see. It was a wound that would not heal. Oh, it scabbed and scarred as all cuts will, but his nose, cheek and lips never grew back. To this day, his jawbone and teeth are laid bare, and he is required to wear a mask in public by order of the town council. Many would say he is ugly, yet he remains one of my fondest friends. His ugliness could not alter my love of him."

The Invisible One was silent for a time. Epsilon feared she had left.

Then she offered, "That is all well and good, save for one obvious flaw. He was your friend prior to his disfigurement. I enjoy no such privilege. Furthermore, my ugliness is not limited to the scars of a simple wound. Would that this was the case! No, my deformity is more holistic in nature. I--I am no longer human in my physical form."

"Of course not! You are invisible. The Invisible One!"

"My invisibility is only a cloak to disguise my unsightliness. Much like your friend is forced to wear a mask."

"Then accompany me in your invisible state."

"Why not remain hidden altogether?"

Epsilon was exasperated. "This seems a futile intercourse. You have usurped mine eyes and mind and have adjudged yourself in my place. Nothing I say will persuade you of my unprejudiced opinion, and you will not offer me the chance to see for myself. What more can I say?"

She was silent again for a time. The forest cathedral chattered its prayers and sang its hymns, oblivious to their frustrated exchange. A gentle breeze stirred the canopy, as a flying behemoth flew overhead, shrieking.

"What if I showed myself, and you were repulsed? My strangeness might goad you into slaying me in your unreasoning fear."

"I never slay without reason, lady. I am of the--"

"I know. You are of the Martial Rite. Yours is a well disciplined blade."

"It is, indeed."

"Yet you are also of Empire. Those people enjoy no love of monsters."

"Are you a monster, then?"

"I am considered as such in Empirical Lands. Though here, in these Wilderland woods, I am considered... normal. I am accepted. You are the freak on this side of the Wall."

"So be it. Come down, now, and befriend a fellow freak."

"Do not be flippant, fool! For all you know of me, you might be inviting a hungry spider into your fly's midst. I might befriend you, and afterward behead you. No one and no thing is trustworthy out here. Have you learned so little of this country's threats?"

"You do not seem a threat to me."

"Neither did that pile of ashes smoldering at your feet."

Epsilon smiled and raised a pontificating finger, as if to say 'ah-ha!'. "You see! There you err, lady, for I had assessed its danger even before your warning at the well house. Why do you think I assembled the crossbow? Hmm?"

The unseen woman laughed again, mocking him. "I might accredit you with foresight in that matter, except for your first and only shot this noontime! You did not shoot to kill! Tell me, proud Warfarer, what sort of deadly threat is it that should not be slain outright?"

Now he was embarrassed. "I will concede that I did not fully assess its harmful potential on first sight, but what effect did this have? The contest was fought and won, and I remain the victor un-maimed."

"Only just barely so."

"Barely, scarcely, nearly--all work well enough in such situations. Either my heart is beating or it is not. Which is the case?"

"Oh, you are alive now. That much will I, in turn, concede. The question then becomes, for how long?"

"Longer, perhaps, with your unqualified aid. Come down, I say again. Let us travel together openly, as friends."

"I cannot. I am repugnant."

"Let me decide."

"No. Your wrong decision could ruin all."

"All of what? You never told me why my hopes and yours should coincide."

"That is none of your concern for the moment."

"How can you say that without laughing at your own joke? If you feel your life should intertwine with mine, then I should have some knowledge of the matter. Do you not agree?"

"I do not."

Epsilon grunted and shook his head. "You are impossible. If you will not show yourself, why did you speak in the first place? Why not remain anonymous?"

"I thought you were in danger. Perhaps I spoke without thinking."

"And perhaps I will one day find a milk cow lodged in my rectum, giving milk!"

She laughed yet again, but this time without cruelty or derisiveness. It was a spontaneous burst of mirth that escaped her with a sputter and spray. It was many seconds before she could rein herself under control.

Deciding he had scored a hit and opened his benefactor's defenses, Epsilon pressed his attack home. "If it would ease your discomfort, I could retrieve the mask of my helmet and fix it in place. This would spare you my initial reaction, should it be one of abject horror." She did not quickly refute his approach. He hurried forward. "Though I believe myself to be disciplined enough not to run away, screaming like a frightened schoolboy, at the first glimpse of you, however ugly you may be. And if I can hold still that long, might I not hold a while longer, and a while longer after that? Might I not eventually become accustomed to your countenance, altogether? Let me try, m'selle! I beg you."

"And what if I prove to be the Enemy? What then?"

"We will fight, of course. One of us will win. That is all."

"I would win."

Epsilon shrugged his shoulders and shifted his stance defensively. "This remains to be seen."

"I remain to be seen. Yet, you may believe me. I would win."

"As you say. What of the mask?"

"It sounds to be workable enough. Except my primary dilemma remains. Though I be spared your initial reaction, I might not be spared your fickle sentiment. Your ill opinion of me could ruin everything."

"So you left the notes, hoping to establish the relationship that way."

"Yes. And it was working, too."

"Aye, your simple device was working well enough. It was working at my patience. It was working at my resolve. It was working to get you caught in the Warfarer's net. Then would we surely have fought."

"And you would have lost."

"Again, as you say, m'selle. Either way, your purposes would have come to naught."

"There will be other Warfarers, you know." Her tone was becoming petulant, and Epsilon knew his words were having effect. "Every season, a new one makes the long walk into oblivion. You are not unique."

The latest Hero of Alcorde smiled slightly, secretively. "I think I am unique in one regard, at the least. For, while it is true that this exodus is a yearly event, it is highly improbable that another Warfarer will pass this way again for many, many years of time. Perhaps never again. As you undoubtedly know, most follow roads that lead east and west into the northern wastes, where the Wilderlands are subdued somewhat by long, savage winters. Few venture due south, directly into the belly of the beast."

"Still, I could wait that long. I could wait as long as it takes."

"I think not. Somehow, the tone of your voice indicates it may already be too late for you." He crossed his arms smugly atop his swelled chest. "I do not think you could wait one day longer, much less ten thousand or more."

The Invisible One remained silent for many long seconds. Epsilon did not interrupt what was obviously a time of deep thought and reflection.

Presently, his benefactor hedged, "And if I step out into the light... if I bare myself and you are not aghast, what then?"

Epsilon considered his options quickly. "First, I would think it wise if we repose for a noon meal. We could share meat and drink and many words, and Helmcleaver could recover from his courageous flight."

"And afterward?"

"Who can say? It may be that our company is mutually incompatible. It may also be that we become fast friends."

"To be honest, Sir Warfarer, I could use a friend like you."

"And I you."

Another short hesitation followed. Then, "Go fetch your helm's mask, Ritesman. Prepare yourself. While you work, I will tell you a portion of my sad and sorry tale."

"I am eager to hear it," he said, turning to retrieve his visor.

The Invisible One called after him, "I do not relate it to reap a harvest of sympathy and pity. What I tell you now is imparted only that you might better understand my condition."

"Of course. Whatever else I may feel, m'selle, I will not feel pity. Of that, you may be assured."

"Good. I do not want your pity. Or your sympathy. These things are for small children with scraped knees. These things are for unhappy innocents. I am not an innocent. I freely admit that I have had a hand in the shaping my own unfortunate fate.

"After all, it was I that was born a girl child into this world of men. It was I that grew up hating the hand that beat me, though it fed and caressed me, too. It was I that watched the women folk of my village wilt, as they were dominated and subjugated nightly, and I that learned to despise their geese's hearts. It was I that stood as a child on the brink of womanhood, looking forward to what would be my life as a wife and mother, and I that came to detest myself. It was I that abhorred the domestic slavery to which my birthright had doomed me. And I that decided to be rid of it all.

"One overcast autumn day, after the harvest was gathered and the Emperor's taxes were paid, a traveling show came to our village. They were tumblers and strongmen and bards and fools, and one great fat woman that roasted skewered beef so it fairly melted on the tongue. All that long noon after they juggled and danced and sang songs, roving from house to house, corner to corner, calling for unanimous attendance at their one and only evening show.

"Everybody wanted to go. Everybody was bound to go, it seemed, except for me. I was left behind to watch over my ailing grand dame, whom I secretly despised. The old woman was wont to pinch me and whisper hateful things into my ears when the others were not watching.

"So it was not surprising that my whimsical nature should run away with my feet, and I find myself at the show regardless of my duties. I watched all the night long from well concealed shadows, as acrobats and funny men and puppets and poets danced across that tiny stage. Toward the end of the show, a magician came out and announced that he would disappear a village woman right before our unsleeping eyes! I could not imagine such a thing.

"And instantly I realized I should be the one disappeared, if anybody in that gods forsaken town should be. The old mage was somewhat surprised, I think, when I leapt to my feet and scrambled into his magic box, as were my father and mother, who expected me to be at home. I do not believe he had ever intended to draw a genuine volunteer, but would have utilized one of his own cronies had I not intervened. As it was, there was little he could do or say. The expectant eyes of the villagers decided for him, and he shut me away in the box with a few words of encouragement and a warning 'not to make a mess of things'. Nothing happened at first.

"The wizard said a few magic words and rapped on the wooden box a few times, but my flesh did not fade. I was disappointed, and thought maybe something had gone wrong. Then I found a trapdoor at one end of the coffin, and instantly realized my fate was at hand. In a brilliant flash of absolute lucidity, I comprehended how that tiny, insignificant little door could become my salvation.

"Crawling through to freedom beyond, I scrambled around underneath the wagon until I found a good place to hide in its undercarriage. From that vantage, I listened to the rest of the show." She laughed abruptly, as if remembering that night fondly. "How those geese hissed to

see me gone from the box. How they cackled when I would not return. I thought the magician might be stoned to death on the spot!

"But he was a clever man when it came to saving his own hide. He had witnessed my entrance, and had wisely deduced the discord of my existence. Without so much as slurring a word, he recovered his wits and declared that I was not lost. I was, instead, reappeared at home, where, he claimed, I had remembered forgotten duties that needed tending! That made them all laugh, especially my mother and father, who would know I might have good reason to run away home from the show.

"Afterward, the mage quickly left the stage and the jugglers came out again. While the balls and bells were flying up front, the rest of the crew hurriedly searched underneath the cart for me, without success.

"When I was not found, the troupe panicked, fearing the worst. As the performance came to coda and the collection plate was passed 'round, I heard them wildly loading their wagon as though a flood were coming and their camp were pitched in a streambed. Before midnight, they fled along the road, never to return that way again.

"I fell asleep before the ride was through, and did not recover until late into the next morn. By then, we were untold leagues lost and gone from my home, and my destiny was decided. They took turns beating and cursing me, saying that I should be killed and buried before they were accused of my abduction. Then the old mage came to my rescue and cast the others aside.

"I can still recall how I loved him in that instant, how I loved him like the benevolent god that he was. Though old and bent, the ancient wizard's eyes were fierce and his grip firm. None of my tormentors had the will to challenge him with so much as a single word, and so he had his way. And I was doubly saved from two unsavory fates at once." She paused for dramatic effect, then added, "This all happened more than one hundred years ago, on the Empire side of the wall."

Epsilon had found his mask and was busy fitting it onto his helmet. He stopped in mid-movement and glanced up sharply. "The Empire side? Then how did you cross over the Wall?"

"I come to that presently. After it was settled that I should remain with the troupe and not be returned to the life I loathed, I entered into a twilight of my youth that I shall ever remember fondly. From the moment the old warlock took me under his wing, my fortunes changed drastically. Gone were those endless, backbreaking days in the fields. Gone were prospects of a fat, drunken husband and his a heavy hand. Gone was the specter of thankless motherhood. For the first time in my life, I was raised up above the status of a mere farmer's tool. For the first time in my life, I could look forward to a future that held more than endless breeding and child rearing unto death.

"I experienced many things in my time with the show. I was taught to juggle and dance and sing and play. I learned to act and recite poetry. The strongmen taught me to fight and use weapons. Before long, I was a regular on stage, and a favorite with the crowds.

"Most significantly, because it was necessary for the act, I learned to read and write. Thus, my mind was opened to worlds beyond my sight. My thoughts were no longer confined to

that which I could directly see and feel and smell and hear. Once I became aware of books and the magics they contained, I was become a world traveler overnight. It awed me that I could move from one part of the Empire to another, indeed, from one time to another, with but a slight movement of my wetted thumb and forefinger. One moment I might be sitting in the caravel of a raging elephant of war, and the next standing upon the deck of a tossing ship. I have journeyed among the stars with Chupetek, the Astronomer, and flown like a bird with Icarus.

"And I have studied black magics." The Invisible One paused here, as if to gauge Epsilon's reaction. He showed none, or tried not to, but kept working with the visor as though it was difficult. "Not for evil's sake, but for the sake of curiosity.

"I was filled with a youthful, abiding hunger, a hunger that knew no satiety. Unlike the emptiness of my gut, this desire of knowledge did not pass with feeding but grew. With the resolution of one question, a hundred more arose. And in answering each of these, yet another hundred were dragged to light. I raced from tome to tome, book to book, filling my head with facts and figures until even the mage's store of written knowledge was exhausted.

"Then I pried into his head. Night upon night, during and after the show, I interrogated him discretely regarding his understandings of the world and the magics that make it work. At first he was reluctant to tell me all, doubtless fearing I was nothing more than an upstart child that would learn to make toy firepoppers and nothing more. He was impressed, I think, when I would not go away. Though he kicked and cursed me for a pest, I returned night after night with new questions. I was there in the morning when he woke up, eager to wash his clothes or cook his

breakfast. And there at night when he went to bed, available should he need... well, you know what men need at night. In the end, my relentless curiosity won out, and I was accepted as his protégée.

"At first glance, this seemed to be no great honor. The old conjurer acted like a drunken buffoon on stage, you see, and used only the most painfully obvious tricks in his performances. I think most members of the troupe secretly disdained him for a doddering old fool. But I soon learned this was not so. He was, in actuality, a deceptively wise and powerful man.

"His name was Semmelweiss. He hailed from a far, forgotten country that he would never name. I garnered the impression that he was an exiled outlaw in his native lands, that he had taken up with the troupe in hiding. Fortunately, I was not concerned with his personal knowledge, and did not care what crime he had committed or who wanted to punish him for it. I never asked more of himself than he offered, and required nothing more of him than a better understanding of the physical world. This much, at least, he was willing to offer.

"Night upon night, day upon day, we studied the small things that make up the larger things of the world. Semmelweiss arranged reality for me on the level of its most basic elements. He taught me to distinguish Oheyen from Barcon, and Niteyen from Hiteyen, and he taught me how these simple things might be combined to make greater things, which in turn can be combined to make larger things still. He taught me the nature of metals; how to work them singly and as alloys. I have learned medicine and the working of nature's bodies. From him, I know

more of your flesh and bones than do you. I have studied numbers and mathematics unto abstraction. And philosophy. And languages. And ultimately, magic.

"An understanding of this final matter is arduous and largely useless without understandings of the others, you see. And so it came last. Perhaps it came too lately. Perhaps I did not learn quickly enough.

"I will never know." The Invisible One stopped speaking, and shifted about restlessly in the bush. "You are ready with your visor? Good. But do not don it yet. Hear the ending of my tale first, that you might have an opportunity to decide once more.

"As it stands, you have heard only the gentlest portion of it. The rest is not so pleasant.

"One day, fifteen years gone from my mother's hoary arms, the troupe entered into an oppressed and dismal kingdom. Its people were dour and gray, as was the weather, and they rarely smiled. They wore rags and looked to be starving. I remember wondering why we had come, when the people did not appear to have enough coin to feed themselves, let alone pay Semmelweiss to disappear their womenfolk. Still, we had come, and once inside that country, there was no going back.

"Our first stop of call was the kingdom's capitol city. It was walled mightily, as though to defend against hordes of screaming heathens, and its dank keep towers over watched a steaming moor that was gathered nearly all around.

"Its master was a moody man named Marakeel, who controlled and owned everything in the land, including its subjects and their children. He knew no higher authority, and thus had no

reasonable restraint placed upon his ministering hand. In that miserable nation, his merest whim was become instant law. So instantly, in fact, that I once saw a man judged, sentenced and executed on the spot for a slight, forgettable offense, all at that madman's bequest. And on our first evening in the hall, too.

"That night, after we had cleared the stage and retired for the evening, the troupe debated its collective fate. Everybody agreed to leave right away, but we found our wagons had been confiscated when we went to load them. At that news, we knew our fates were sealed.

"Marakeel charged us with breaching our contract, and had us arrested. He confined us to his dungeons for an indefinite term, and we lived in the most despicable conditions, without sanitation, with no food and little water, and no privacy at all. He treated us as despised carnival animals, and beat us remorselessly in the day only to command us to perform by night. Though he starved us, that madman could not understand when one of us stumbled in weakness or fell on stage. Though he had us beaten relentlessly, that dark overlord could not comprehend why our actors should mumble or forget a line. The punishment for such crimes was severe, almost inevitably death.

"As it would happen, Semmelweiss committed just such an error one night, many nights into our torture. He failed to correctly guess Marakeel's concealed card, and was beaten savagely in consequence. Then the cursed monster had my old master hung from his feet in the prison's gallery, and left him there for a day and a night.

"By the time he was returned to me, the old mage was reduced to nothing. He was delirious and on the verge of death. To this day, I cannot imagine the stamina, the strength required to keep himself so well for so long. I can only say what I have already said, that my Semmelweiss was a deceptively wise and powerful man.

"He did not regain himself until the break of the next day, whereupon his rolling eyes fluttered open and his pale lips worked as though to speak. Then a queer thing occurred. All the old man's injuries were apparently undone at once, and he was suddenly lucid. His eyes went wide and were filled with a canny light. His once palsied hands snapped up to grip me firmly about my shoulders, to draw me close, as though intent on dragging me across the River of Death with him. He whispered, 'It is time, my child. Whether you are ready or no, I must pour me out, and you must be the cup to catch the flow. Gaze steadily into mine eyes; do not blink, do not glance away. When it is finished, my raw power will be yours. Everything I am, so shall you be. But be warned, it is merely my ethereal power that you receive, not my wisdom or knowledge. You must learn to use your strength in your own way.'

"With that said, the brewing strangeness bubbled over, and wondrous visions flooded my mind, seemed to flow from his fading eyes into mine. I cannot describe what all transpired, except to say that the experience was much like an epic journey. When it was done, I felt ancient and worldly beyond my years. I felt I was a crumbling old man.

"Whatever it wrought in me, that awesome exchange had the singular effect of draining Semmelweiss of all but the last drops of his life. In the aftermath, he was reduced to a skin

draped skeleton. He could not speak, but managed to open his blouse with the fading remnants of his will. There, carved into his paper thin flesh with his own sharpened thumbnail, were the words of a puissant changeling spell.

"Had he shown it to me prior to the transposal, the runes would have meant nothing to my eyes. And few people realize the dangers of reciting spells without the proper inflections and intonations. My merely looking at that powerful conjure would have required some small amount of interpretation within my thoughts, which might have activated its potentials all or in part, doing the gods only know what kind of damage. Even after the exchange, I was not entirely sure what havoc the invocation might induce. I only knew the results would be preferable to sitting in my own filth, rotting away inside Marakeel's hellish prison.

"I invoked the words, even as Semmelweiss expired. Nothing seemed to happen with the first recitation or the second, but upon saying the spell a third time, the world was wildly transformed. Or I should say that I was transformed wildly within the world. I was... altered.

"I was become that which I am today. Though it is a terrible affliction now, one I would gladly be rid of, then, in that dark time and place, I was genuinely grateful for my new form. It was a large and powerful frame, you see, daunting and able. And when I roused me in my anger to take vengeance on Marakeel and his mongrel court, few men had the heart to withstand my advances.

"So filled was I with the black momentum of hatred, that my first act of terror was to stand and brush off my chains as if they were nothing more than vineyard creepers. Then I

stormed the bars of my cage as a cold nor'easter cyclone, ripping them bodily from the mortar and bricks. My guards were so stunned by my sudden appearance, that they could do naught to defend themselves. They fell to my bloodthirsty hands like dapple hens that have had their necks wrung. Tossing these hapless men aside, I gathered and donned their weapons and armor, where I could find a fit for my over large limbs, and from there commenced a general slaughter.

"I slew men of all shapes and sizes and demeanors, and they died in ways as varied as the number of stars in the heavens. I crushed helms and pulled off arms and chewed throats and tossed my foes from the battlements. I kicked and scratched and battered and swung my sword like a scythe, reaping harvests, whole harvests, of death. Blood was a spring runoff to fill that city's dinghy street gutters, for I was not content with mere escape from Marakeel's prisons. No, what I wanted was more than personal freedom, more than vengeance upon the underlings that had tortured me on command. What I wanted was the madman, himself. I was intent on washing my fiercely taloned hands in his hot, flowing blood, even as his dying eyes watched me dine on his liver.

"Naturally, the inner keep's gates were shut when I arrived, and a general alarm had been raised within the city's walls. Scores of men were drawn from the garrison and sent against me, only to fuel the flames of my bonfire wrath as they succumbed one by one. I shouted up to the battlements for those luckless sentries to send their master down, and threatened them with their lives, walls not withstanding, should they fail to acquiesce.

"Do not mistake me, I harbored no delusions that Marakeel would be so easily tossed down. It is a rare chicken that owns a lion's heart, after all, but I felt compelled to offer them one last opportunity to act as men and overthrow their own terrible oppressor. When they would not, my anger and hatred blossomed suddenly into an abhorrent, violent thing. Though they were but his subjects, it was those very cowards that had empowered Marakeel to do all he had done. They, more so even than the tyrant, were responsible for what had happened to my life-loving troupe and my proud, reverent Semmelweiss. All pity for them was dispelled in the instant of their refusal, and the citizens of that dour city were also encompassed by my vengeance.

"I am not certain what happened directly afterward. I cannot remember scaling the keep's barricades or ramming down its heavy doors, though I must have used one of these tactics to get inside. My next clear memory is of berserking atop the ramparts, raging atop the walls. There was so much blood, so much gore and clot before me, that my memories of the slaughter remain colored crimson to this day. And to this day, I can hear the dying screams of all those men that perished to appease my lust for attrition. I cannot give you the number exactly, except to honestly boast that the castle keep was nearly cleared of defenders by the time I had finished atop the walls. Most of the garrison ran, of course, but not all. Not all by a long measure of the stick.

"Unopposed, I crossed the courtyard into Marakeel's unhappy palace. Its thick oaken doors were barred against me, but would not keep me out. I commenced a mighty hammering at the portals with the bare flesh of my two strong arms. As a base drum tolling a relentless dirge of doom, my blows sounded throughout the hall again and again and again. I could hear women

screaming inside, children crying, men cursing, and, above all else, Marakeel's high-pitched, girlish hysteria. He commanded suicide assaults against me that were never made real. He threatened me with fates worse than death, but I remained undaunted. He promised that he would have my heart out to eat it for breakfast, but my pulse did not falter or fail.

"Then his doors were burst asunder, and I was entered into his sanctuary home as a despoiler come to loot. Most of his liveried men were shed of their fighting spirit by now, and scurried away at the sight of me. A mere score stood to defend their despised overseer, and I was left to face Marakeel all but alone.

"We met distantly at the ends of his main hall. Tables and benches were arrayed between us, readied for the night's performance that now would never be. The monster had positioned his men before him as sacrificial pawns, intending that they should blunt my fury while he escaped to the rear. Facing those well armed and armored warriors, I suddenly realized that I was come up against the only real men in the whole damned city. They were elite combatants, hired mercenaries, and each was armed with a lethal longbow.

"Not even I, in my changeling state, could withstand a barrage of those deadly missiles, and so I was brought up short. For a strangely silent moment, I observed them resolutely and they me. Finally I shouted for them to stand aside. 'Your master is to be undone,' said I, advancing but a single step. 'I am done with dealing to his sniveling underlings. Step away from the cur now, and I will find no dishonor in your actions. I can see that you are all fierce men of martial natures, and as such do not deserve to die in the company of a coward, at a coward's

command. Look at him! Even as you prepare to fight and perish, Marakeel prepares to run away! Is this how you would offer Nars' your lives, by serving so miserable a wretch?"

"I fell silent and motionless as I awaited their answer. I fully expected to hear the thrum and whistle of a full volley of shot at any moment. Instead, the men quietly lowered their bows and exited the banquet without a backward glance.

"Marakeel was terrified by the prospect of facing me alone, and raged maniacally at his departed servants. Impotently, he promised them all manner of reward and awful punishment, but the mercenaries would not return. With a last curse at me and the mother that spawned me, he turned and fled along a rising stair, climbing higher into the tower.

"I followed, only to encounter the way blocked at its summit. Marakeel the Coward had lowered a massive granite slab into place before the parapet's access, effectively barring the door to all but a war elephant. Now I am no war elephant, but my long claws work well enough in climbing. So I retreated back to the base of the tower and began scaling it from the outside. It was a long, arduous climb, but it could only prove successful. Not one single defender remained to be seen anywhere in the palace. All the despot's fawning boot licks had abandoned their unholy master like rats chased from a heap of spoiling grain, leaving me to do as I pleased with him.

"At the apex of my vertical struggle, I dared a cautious peak between the parapets. Marakeel was nowhere to be seen, so I climbed onto the rampart beyond. As I rounded the pinnacle to enter within, my prey came dashing out. He was apparently intent on peering over the edge to see what might have become of me, and scarcely reacted when he first bounced off my

horny hide. Rather, he merely shook his head confusedly and would have continued blindly on around, had I not reached out a great, blood stained hand to stop him." Here the Invisible One paused to laugh gloatingly. "Would that you had seen his face in that instant, Sir Warfarer! His stark terror was delicious to witness! Marakeel's countenance went from smug to contrite in an instant, and he was suddenly trembling all over. His bowels and bladder released at once, and he fouled himself miserably before my mocking eyes. I laughed as scornfully as my new form could manage, and then spat in his face."

She sighed and rustled the brush. "Alas, that squirming bastard managed to deny my vengeance in the end. When I reached out to take him in my arms, the coward let out a shrill woman's scream of horror and threw himself down from the tower."

Epsilon shrugged his shoulders when she stopped speaking again. "He died like all poltroons should; by his own hand and in disgrace. I think it was a fitting end."

"Fitting, perhaps, but it was no end. Leastwise, not for me.

"From there, I returned to the dungeons to free my troupe. I thought to be accepted among them as a rescuing hero, you see." She snorted contemptuously. "I should have found a mirror first. Those people were so repulsed by my new appearance that more than one died when I simply laid on hands to remove their chains. How they whined and moaned and wrung their fists at the sight of me. They preferred to retire to the dungeon's darkened, feces-strewn corners rather than let me ease their suffering. Once freed, they did not run to me and hug my neck for a savior. Instead, they gathered stones and weapons to destroy me as anathema. I was chased from

the bowels of one persecution into the intestines of another. And chased there by spiteful maniacs that until recently had been my friends.

"Though they had forgotten me, I could never forget them. Neither could I harm them, though they cursed my bloodline back to the misty beginning and hurled stones at my misshapen head. I could not harm them and they would not allow me to harmlessly remain, no matter that I had cast down the hated tyrant. So I ran away into the dark forest beyond the moor, taking with me nothing but what I was wearing or could snatch up in hasty flight.

"Even then they would not let me be, but hunted me nightly with dogs and fierce horses. No sooner was I chased from one woodland by one people, than another would rise up and herd me further along the road. I had no rest in those terrible weeks, not one moment of peace. My nights were firestorms of bobbing, harrying torches, and my days were filled with distant shouts of trail head and the baying of hounds. To make matters worse, I could not bring myself to turn and slay those ignorant people, despite their persecution of me. They were, after all, beloved fathers and sons that had done nothing worse than succumb to understandable fears. If I had taken to murdering them at every opportunity, then I really would have become the ugly beast they mistook me for. So I ran... and ran... and ran... until I was driven up hard against the Great Barricade.

"There, with the pack at my back and the Wilderlands before me, I could only choose the threat of death that was least certain. I could only choose to scale the Wall.

"Thus, here am I, as I am." The Invisible One advanced delicately through the ferns. Epsilon noted the approach and hastened to don his mask. "Yes, you may place your helmet now, if you still care to see. But I caution you once more, sir; I am ugly, nay, beastly. You will not know me for the maiden I once was. You will not know me for human. I have seen my own reflection, and recall mine to be a predator's countenance. In the least, you will find it difficult to lay your prejudice aside and offer me trust.

"Having said this, I ask you one last time; will you see me or no?"

The Warfarer did not hesitate to reconsider, but promptly declared, "I will." Indeed, he had already fixed his head cover and was resolutely faced into the forest.

"I thought you might," she lilted softly. "And suddenly I am reluctant. My tongue has wagged long enough, one would think, to have prepared me by now, yet I tremble at the thought of baring all to you. I feel as a frightened virgin on her first tryst."

"We do not woo love here, m'selle."

"Of course not. But... it has been long since I have stood openly before a... a man. And I am naked."

"Naked, m'selle? How naked?"

"Utterly. Except for my kits and bags, I mean. We, of the Otherside forests, do not wear clothing. We do not require it."

"Then I shall not be shocked. But come, step into my sight."

"Very well," she sighed. "Steel yourself."

Epsilon stood straighter and squared his shoulders defiantly. He stiffened his neck and spine to prevent his head from flinching at the moment of truth. Then he sucked a deep breath and exhaled slowly, reciting a mental prayer. "I am ready."

The undergrowth was disturbed quite nearby. Fern leaves bent backward and seemed to be pushed aside, though nothing could be seen among them. The lawn's grasses were depressed as though by footfalls, but Epsilon could detect no presence of feet. This invisibility was utterly unlike the chameleon's. The Invisible One was, indeed, no mere changeling shadow. She was, rather, completely transparent.

The Hero of Alcorde watched warily, as a pair of impossibly large and misshapen footprints exited the tree line and progressed several sticks onto the lawn. They stopped when they were standing uncomfortably at hand.

Not knowing how tall the lady might be, and yet fearing a sneak attack, Epsilon dared not take his eyes off that impression of a narrowly splayed stance. All at once, his vision shimmered and swayed, and a pair of gaudily colored, hornily scaled feet began to materialize. They were heavily clawed and powerfully corded. The scales were purple and pink and bright red, the colors of a poisonous or dangerous creature.

Epsilon let his gaze stray upward slowly until it had consumed the entire length of his benefactor's strange body. Leading up from the feet were two powerful legs. These seemed well suited to running, with their long, finely boned feet and meaty thighs. A stubby but heavily muscled tail jutted out behind. The Invisible One had a lean, muscular frame. Her torso was

articulately wrought with countless armored dermal plates, which fit and formed themselves perfectly to every curve, every outline. The scales of her belly were rectangular and few, while the scales of her back were diamond shaped and many, much like those of a serpent. She was largely colored a deep, rich purple, especially on her belly, but slashes of cautionary crimson and pink adorned her back. Raising his eyesight yet higher, the Warfarer was shocked to see a pair of firm, armor plated breasts jutting out at him. These were void of nipples, but were so intricately sheathed in dermal scales that Epsilon found them to be utterly fascinating. Her shoulders stood to the crown of Epsilon's head, and her two arms were as thick as his legs. Each ended in a pair of massive, lethally clawed hands. As she had indicated, the Invisible One was wearing nothing more than a bandolier of pouches and a series of cleverly fashioned leathern sacks dangling jauntily from one shoulder.

So far so well, he thought, gulping a quick breath. *Now for her face. How ugly can she be?* Realizing there was only one way to see, that being to look, Epsilon lifted his head and opened his eyes wide.

The vision was not what he had expected. He had expected to see a horribly deformed face rife with disease and covered with open, oozing sores. He had expected to see a slobbering fiend's countenance, all bulging eyes and smacking lips. He had expected to gaze into a morbid ghoul's eyes and find there naught but creeping darkness and unspoken malfeasance.

Instead, the face that stared back at him was not entirely un-handsome. It might have seemed comely, in fact, to another crimson-on-purple lizard. It was a smoothly featured visage,

with a high domed skull and huge bird's eyes set right up front. Before the eyes jutted a high, arched snout that capped a wide, toothy maw. A serpent's forked tongue writhed within that dental cage, apparently eager to wag and make speech. Epsilon returned his sight to the Invisible One's eyes, expecting to see an adder's slitted irises. Instead, her human eyes were soft and intelligent, bright with interest and understanding. The entire arrangement, when viewed together at a backward step, was an odd paradox of expression. On the one facet, she appeared to be quite fierce and deadly, especially around the lines of her obviously lethal maw. While on the other, those kind orbs easily dispelled the myth of her ferocity.

Epsilon was stunned by the awesome might and animal beauty of this... thing... this lady that had entered into his presence. She stood well over two sticks tall, and dominated even the Warfarer, an uncommonly large man, by a full head.

Quite suddenly, as he peered up at her curiously cocked head and reptilian face, Epsilon was certain that he had seen the Invisible One before now. He worked this prospect around in his mind for many long seconds, involuntarily raising his left hand to gnaw its gauntlet beneath the mask. Though he struggled with all his mental ability, he could not place just where he had seen this creature in the past. He had glimpses of her pressed into corner shadows at the edges of his vision, and shuddered. He shuddered, because he was certain that he had walked obliviously past the Invisible One many, many times, even before Alcorde and Exodus.

"I-I," he stammered uncertainly, chewing the heavy glove of his left hand, "I have seen you." His voice was reduced to a foggy whisper by his silent mental wandering. "I have seen you

in my dreams... " Or had he? Was it that he remembered her from dreams, or from a dreamlike waking state? There she was again, flashed before his mind's eye in one of his oddly disjointed memories. The lizard lady was peeking from around the trunk of a tree, just at the edges of his vision. She seemed to be watching as he passed, poised ready to dash forward to her next point of observation when his back was completely turned. Behind her, in his dream or dream state, he could see a familiar building. It was Mary's Roaring Lion! Then the vision was gone to be replaced by another. This time, he found himself staring straight ahead, with a well worn footpath stretched out before him. At its end stood a familiar, crooked sign; *BEWARE OF MAGICAL BEASTS*. And there, jutting straight up from atop a low oak bough, were a pair of scaly, crimson-on-purple legs. The mere tip of a tail could be seen sprouting from the canopy. Then this image was in turn swept aside, and quickly replaced by another. He was in contest at Alcorde, eyes fixed on his bloody opponent charging at him from across the arena. Standing in the crowd high above, the Invisible One. Though surrounded by jostling, jeering spectators, she seemed to pass utterly unnoticed. Again, he mouthed, "I have seen you, ere now. Have I not?"

Her oddly expressive mouth moved to shape these words; "Perhaps. You have been wary quarry, and very difficult to follow. Even to a skulker like me that is endowed with the power of blindness."

"I *have* seen you, then, in the shadows, at the brink of corners, ever in the edges of my vision, watching me from afar. You have pursued me since before Alcorde!"

The Invisible One made a dismissive motion with one powerful yet strangely articulate hand. "I have pursued the Emperor's Warfarer. You interested me only after it became clear you might win that title."

"*But why?*"

"All revelations have their time, Sir Warfarer. Have you forgotten that another, more urgent matter lies unresolved between us?"

"Oh, that," he intoned dryly. Though he was yet wary of her potential dangers, Epsilon was not so overcome by her features that he felt he might lose his water. Shedding his visor and helmet, he ruffled his sweat dampened hair and said, "If I could be certain you would not eat me, I think I could accept your company readily enough."

Her response was eager. "I will not eat you. You have my solemn oath in this matter."

Epsilon grunted, not at all convinced. "See that you do not."

6

The Invisible Revealed

They faced one another squarely and without speaking for many long seconds. Each eyed the other warily, suspiciously, a pair of prison inmates that have been chained together at the ankle. Neither could withdraw without showing weakness and presenting his (or her) vulnerable side, and yet neither could they approach closely to embrace as long lost friends or lovers. Their eyes locked in a kind of silent combat, the two struggled mentally to gauge their counterpart's strengths and weaknesses, assets and liabilities. Epsilon noted immediately that the she-thing was without arms or armament. Then again, she hardly needed steel to pose a threat.

The she-thing finally broke the tension. "You mentioned something about food?"

"Of course," he blurted, "Forgive me!" He turned to find Helmcleaver. The horse had drawn off down the tree line to munch a swath of soft, green grass. Strangely, the stallion did not seem alarmed by the monster's presence. "This is passing odd," he noted aloud. "I had forgotten

to give the order to stand down. That horse should be faced off and prepared for your threat, ready to dash your brains out at the slightest untoward movement."

"What? Helmcleaver?" the she-thing fairly purred. "Not momma's little baby! Come to me, my darling one! Come to momma!" And that damnable, fickle stallion came at a trot!

Epsilon was stunned. "Momma?"

The monster rubbed snouts with the fierce warhorse and scratched its ears affectionately, as though it were nothing more than a soft, fuzzy pup. "Momma. And momma loves her baby, does she not?" Helmcleaver snorted playfully and nodded his head. "Helmcleaver would never hurt me. Would you, darling? Hmm?" The horse stamped impatiently and presented its ears for further attention. "There now! My gentle lambkin!"

"I think my appetite is lost. Avert your eyes, m'selle, for I am sick."

"Oh, do not be silly," she scoffed, gently urging the beast of war to return to its master. "I have befriended your Helmcleaver out of necessity. He remains the bloody killer you have always known. He simply will not kill me, that is all."

"That is quite enough, madam. You have ruined him!"

"I have done nothing of the sort. I have, in fact, prevented his certain ruination. Think a moment what might have happened, had your animal attacked me. You would now be a rider without a mount."

"As with your other forebodings, I can only reply that this remains to be seen."

The she-thing hissed her frustration, or perhaps it was a sigh, Epsilon could not be certain which. "You say that even now, after I am revealed?"

"It is a wise warrior that foresees neither victory nor defeat, but fights the battle before him with all due attention." The Warfarer retrieved his traitorous beast, pulling it close by the bridle to peer suspiciously into the animal's too happy eyes. He verged on saying something provocative, but held his tongue. Instead, he waxed diplomatic. "Except there will be no battle between us. Will there? We are companions now."

"Yes. Companions. What have you to eat?"

The Warfarer went to his packs and reached for Mary's double sack, all without taking his eyes off the lizard lady. "As closely as I have been pursued, I would think you could answer that question for yourself."

"Fair enough. Perhaps you would like to know what I have brought." She reached for her satchel and opened its flap. Epsilon kept watch for weapons, but was not surprised to see her fetch nothing more dangerous than a large wooden biscuit box. "Foods of the Otherside, which even you can eat. You should start learning to love these victuals soon, if you are to long survive the Wilderlands."

"I was told to neither eat nor drink on this side of the Wall."

"Bah! You have that from some backward Empirical peasant, no doubt. What could they possibly know about the Otherside?" She carried her box over to a soft spot on the lawn, and there squatted to lay it out, opened. "They shelter in their rodent's dens, frightened of everything

that moves in the night, afraid to walk within thirty sticks of the lawn! It is a timid man that is guided by weaklings."

"You will not goad me into anything, m'selle. Not on the field of contest, and not in a banter of words. I will, however, sample your fare, as is the custom when meeting travelers in foreign lands." He hefted his own stores of food and water, and joined the monster on the grass. "But not because you have implied that I am a timid man."

"Of course not." Licking her many teeth, the she-thing snapped her lethal mouth open and shut slightly, as though smacking lips that she no longer possessed. With an offering gesture of her scaled hands, she indicated the box's contents. "Behold! Bloodfruit! Asp berries! Bread of nettles! Dried ashelstek, a meat finer than any venison or beef! And salt! And pepper! Here, try a bloodfruit first."

Epsilon stood in front of his squatting benefactor, but did not deposit his goods or sit. "While it is customary for a man to eat strange foods in strange lands, it is also customary for him to have his host's name and title, prior to the meal. How shall I act, not knowing whether you are royalty or a commoner?"

She laughed, an all too human sound coming from such an obvious beast. "You have heard enough of my story to know that I am no Royal. Still, you should have my name." Standing, the monster curtsied low, arraying a skirt that she was not wearing. "Meet Pandolyn, Daughter of Hynalyn. I am at your service."

"And I, Epsilon Three of the Martial Rite, am at yours, fair lady." He bowed in turn.

Pandolyn, the lizard lady, giggled girlishly. "You are as flattering as you are handsome."

"No doubt," he conceded smugly, sitting. "Let us eat, then. Will you have water from my skins? Do you have a cup?"

"I have a cup, but perhaps you would prefer wine, instead. I have some here, slung over my shoulder." Squatting once more, she produced a large, crescent-shaped bladder. It sloshed wetly as it was moved. "An Otherside vintage, it was pressed from the leaves of a succulent plant called the juliose. I had some juliose preserved in my rations, but they are a delicacy and were devoured long ago. I do apologize. Perhaps we shall find some growing wild as we travel further south."

"Perhaps. Let me have some of your wine, Lady Pandolyn, but not too much. I have a lily's heart when it comes to alcoholic beverages. The Rite does not sanctify immodest consumption of spirits."

"Be that as it may, sir, you will find your peasant friend to have been correct in one matter, at least. The water here is undrinkable. Once your stores are depleted, you will drink juliose or die of thirst." She poured some of this brew into the Warfarer's proffered cup. "It is not a heady stuff. Gallons would do you no great harm, unlike that swill you seemed to enjoy so much at the Roaring Lion."

Raising a protesting finger, Epsilon said sternly, "Mary's was a good brew, m'selle. Among the best I have had. Do not mock a man's love or his favorite drink!"

He raised the cup gingerly to his nose and had a sniff. The sparkling green liquid smelled of freshly cut grasses and summer dew. Epsilon inserted the tip of his tongue into its fluid body. Rolling this back, he tasted. Then again. "Mmmm," he found himself humming, "What did you call it?"

"Juliose."

"Juliose..." he let the syllables roll off his tongue, then used his tongue to taste its wet flesh again. "Juliose." He had a big drink. "It is good." And another. "I like it." His cup was empty. Immediately, eagerly, he held it out to be refilled. "More, please."

"Very well," Pandolyn refilled his vessel, "But be warned; while I said that gallons would do you no harm, I did not mean to imply the stuff is not precious. It is most precious. And a bit will work wonders on your flesh. A bit will renew you. Too much, and you might feel larger than you are, fiercer than you should, more virile than a mortal man could ever be. It is not a heady stuff, but neither is it utterly impotent."

He was abashed. "I am sorry, m'selle. I can only say that my tongue has never been so blessed before now, and offer you my promise to practice restraint in the future." Regardless of his words, he had another huge quaff of the stuff. Pandolyn had filled his cup to the brim this time, however, and plenty remained when he was finished. Setting his vessel aside with a satisfied belch and chuckle, he shook his head ruefully. "It is very good. Mary's ale is like coarse burlap to its soft silken flavor."

"You see," the she-thing shined pridefully, "The Wilderlands are not all horrors and damnation."

"I had not thought them to be. These woods could be a paradise, save for the beasts that prowl the shadows." He opened one of his own sacks and extracted a generous portion of dried rations. These he laid out on the lid of his companion's box; fruit and 'shrooms and jerked beef, even a bit of cheese that had not gone rancid. "And those toll keepers! Never in my life have I encountered such creatures."

Pandolyn selected a large bit of mushroom in one hand, and a slab of dried meat in the other. Sniffing these delicately with nares that were but holes at the end of her toothy, scaly snout, she replied, "Many more such encounters will you endure, all of them with strange beasts or otherworldly machines. It is the nature of this country." She bit into the 'shroom first, and chewed it curiously. "I have traveled here for more than one hundred seasons, and have rarely met the same nightmare twice. This meat," she added, changing subjects abruptly and indicating the jerky, "It smells odd. Are you sure it is good?"

"Good enough. It is Mary's finest stock. I believe she rubbed the portions in sage root, ere she smoked them. It imparts an odd flavor and aroma to the meat."

"To say the least." Pandolyn had a cautious bite, and found it delicious. She was soon chewing merrily. "I had forgotten the tastes of real Empirical fare. Next, you must try this bloodfruit." The lizard woman offered him a shriveled black mass about the size of his fist. When he had taken it, she produced a soft bowl that was cleverly fashioned from a bit of leather and a

wooden hoop. "Place your fruit in here," she instructed. Pouring juliose over the dried delicacy, she mumbled what sounded to be a prayer, and stirred the bowl.

The bloodfruit began to swell enormously and change colors. It soon filled the large leather container, and was now crimson in hue, the color of blood. Pandolyn indicated he should cut a slice with his knife, which he did.

Raising it to his nose, he sniffed it cautiously as before. Its scent was delicate and all but imperceptible. Largely, he smelled the juliose. Taking a small bite, it was the juliose he tasted first. The flavor of the bloodfruit asserted itself as he chewed, however, and was soon an overwhelming presence on his tongue. His expression winced comically. His eyes squinted tightly in horror. Reflexively, his mouth snapped open and his tongue began working backward, pushing the offensive material out. He rolled over to his side, coughing and spitting repulsively. "Blech! Nausea! Nausea! I am truly sick!" Retching emptily, he reached for his water skins to wash the foul aftertaste away. "You have fed me putrid, rotten flesh! I am poisoned!"

Pandolyn drew back, dismayed. "No! I intended no such thing!"

Epsilon rinsed his mouth, grimacing sickly. His momentary lapse of reason was passed in that instant, and the statesman returned, albeit a bit shaken in faith. "Perhaps. It may simply be that your bloodfruit has gone bad."

She cut a slice for herself, sniffed then chewed it. "Delicious. Like a sweet melon's flesh, only more satisfying. Are you certain you will not have another bite?"

"No!" he replied hastily. "No, and I thank you, m'selle. It is your turn. Have some of these dried grapes. They are called-"

"I know what they are called, sir. Do not forget that I was born on your side of the Barricade." She accepted a handful of the sweets and smacked them down happily enough.

Next, she offered him the asp berries, which he found to be quite palatable, and then the ashelstek, which he found to be even more so. The bread of nettles was another matter, however, and would seem to be an acquired taste.

After this customary exchange of foodstuffs, the two odd beings settled in to consume their own familiar rations. The sun arced over its zenith, and started its slow plunge into fiery oblivion on the western horizon.

Around a bite of jerky, Epsilon stated, "I have considered your tale briefly, m'selle. From what you have said, I can only assume that you are by now a powerful magician in your own right. Is this the case?"

Pandolyn made a noncommittal motion with her forelimbs. "Some would agree with your words. Others would scoff. I suppose which would depend on your company."

"But this Semmelweiss... was he not great?"

"Great? He was one of the greatest. A member of the Synod of Seven, in fact."

Epsilon's eyes went wide. "That is impossible! The Synod was destroyed ages ago."

"Impossible, nevertheless it is true. As I have said before and will say again, my master was a deceptively wise and powerful man." She munched a large slice of bloodfruit, while

Epsilon paled at the sight and pretended to be busy with a tear in his ravaged tunic. "His proper name was Rit Merdian. Now it is my proper name. He occupied the right hand point of the Septad. Now I hold that seat. Or would hold it, were the Synod to convene once more."

"Now *you* claim to be of the Synod of Seven!"

"I am. Or would be. I inherited Semmelweiss' power by chance, and have since worked ceaselessly to hon my skills. As you have guessed, I am quite powerful as the average mage is measured, but I am not yet powerful enough to lay open claim to my title. I am forced to remain in hiding until I have grown considerably stronger."

"Forced? Forced how? By whom?"

"By the Sinistral side of the Septad, of course." Pandolyn sounded exasperated by his ignorance. "Did your Rite teach you nothing of the Synod's ways?"

"We learned only that your Synod was overthrown from within and destroyed more than six hundred years ago. Beyond its myth, I can tell you nothing of it." When Pandolyn appeared to doubt, Epsilon pressed, "Do not forget that I was an orphaned bastard, a ward of a state that long ago outlawed and still fears all magic."

"Yes, of course. How could you know?" The she-thing smacked another juicy bit of bloodfruit. She paused a moment to masticate and gather her thoughts. "I will try to make a large, lengthy and complicated thing much less so in all regards."

"The Septad is a circle of power, and the Synod occupies its seven seats. You may view it as a flat-sided wheel that has seven edges and seven points. At rest, it stands on a flat, raising a

lone point to the highest vertical position. This is the most powerful seat of the circle. The wizard that occupies it is named Apica. Below him sit the other six seats of the ring, three on a side, each side opposed to the other but of equal strength beneath Apica.

"Apica is intended to be a neutral position, but it is filled when the wheel rolls either right or left. Thus, its occupying wizard is drawn from the right or left, Rit or Sin, respectively, and the nature of that chair may change. Directly below Apica are seated the twin chairs of Supri; Rit Supri and Sin Supri. Below that, Merdian, Rit and Sin. And finally, Infri.

"As you can see, Rit and Sin Infri are the two least powerful points of the circle, being the lowest, but they are not the least important. They are, in fact, the most important... beneath Apica, of course. This is because the Infri positions decide which way the wheel can roll, and thereby whether Apica will be Sin in nature or Rit. If, for instance, the Sin Infri wizard can be converted from his evil nature into taking up the cause of goodness, then the wheel rolls, the balance of power is altered, and the Apica seat is filled from the Rit Supri position. The case is reversed, of course, if the Rit Infri is converted. Then Apica is drawn from the Sin side, and evil reins."

"What of the other positions? What happens to them when the wheel rolls?"

"Picture it in your mind, sir. A wheel with seven points, seven spokes if you will. When it rolls, all points move around the hub, up or down, left or right, as the case may be. Therefore, when Apica is filled from Rit Supri, each wizard below that level on the Rit side moves up one turn. Merdian is promoted to Supri, Infri to Merdian. And the converted Infri merely switches

sides, retaining the same power but gaining a reformed nature. On the other side of the circle, the old Apica is demoted to the Sin Supri position, Supri moves down to Merdian, and the poor Sin Merdian Wizard is forced back into the Infri seat."

"I see," hedged Epsilon, thoroughly confused. He munched at a bit of 'shroom and sipped juliose. "The net effect of a turn seems to be the loss of one seat on the Synod. When Apica is lost, the losing side is reduced in power to three positions, while the new Apica adds to the victors' ranks to make four."

"You learn quickly. And so it would seem. In reality, the process is infinitely more complex. One must figure in many other effecting factors. The advent of a wizard's death, for an instance."

"As with your Semmelweiss."

"Exactly. Because the power of the circle cannot be diminished, an individual wizard's power cannot be destroyed. It is, rather, transcorporated upon his (or her) death. If the receiver is less worthy than the original chair holder, then that position is diminished in strength and the rest of the circle benefits."

"How can that be? If you received all of Semmelweiss' power, why should your seat be diminished?"

"Because the concept of ethereal power is a multi-faceted thing. In the Septad, a wizard's status is a threefold measure. The raw power of his or her seat is the base of the triad, with his or her innate potential and level of education forming the remaining two arms. When my master

died, I inherited the power of his seat, and had already been given much of his education. What I lacked were a few fine details and some talent. My inheritance of his seat weakened Rit, simply because Rit Merdian is now a less capable conjurer. Thus, Sin was made stronger."

"I see. And what happens if Apica dies?"

"Synod Wizards cannot die."

"Then what if he is slain?"

"His slayer inherits his chair."

"For Sin or Rit?"

"That, I am sure, would depend on the nature of the slayer. As I said before, Apica was intended to be the one neutral seat... in the beginning."

"And now?"

"Now? Apica is Sin. Six hundred years ago, the wheel took an ill turn."

Epsilon enjoyed a last bit of meat and water. "Six hundred years ago," he pointed out, "Your Synod was destroyed."

"No, not destroyed. All but destroyed. Rit Infri went over to the other side, and Apica was filled by Sin Supri. The wheel turned, that is all."

"Then why has your circle of power remained silent all these years?"

"It has remained silent only to the blind. Look around you, sir, what do you see? The Wilderlands? The Otherside? No, you see evidence of Sin's work. But for its Great Barricade, your beloved Empire might have suffered the same fate. Its oasis of peace is a lone exception to

the rule of the world, and that rule is named Chaos." Pandolyn finished the last of her bloodfruit and rinsed its bowl with a bit of juliose. Shutting her biscuit box, she hefted and replaced it among the articles in her satchel. "Another cup of wine, ere I cork the bladder?"

"Please." He accepted her gift gratefully.

"Look at us here," she observed, pouring the juliose with great care. When she finished, her reptilian head turned to face the road. "Making picnic in a land of dread, while a fate of incomprehensible madness awaits our attention to the south."

He shrugged. "Even doomed felons enjoy last meals."

"True enough. Yet felons do not enter willfully into their own executions."

Epsilon sipped his wine and eyed Pandolyn above the rim of his cup. Licking his lips when the juliose was finished, he said, "We both know why I am bound south. But why should you go, m'selle? You seem convinced the trip will be all too short."

"I travel south for my own reasons."

The Hero of Alcorde stored his cup in his mess kit, then gathered his skins and double sack. Lugging these back to Helmcleaver without removing his attention from the she-thing, he retorted, "Then tell me why I should travel with you, at all."

"Because you want to survive."

"In that, you are wrong, lady. I am entered into the Wilderlands to die, for death is the nature of Exodus. Not survival."

"Now you are in the wrong, Ritesman. The nature of Exodus is conquest and campaign. You are not commanded to waste your life frivolously, but to spread your martial spirit into new lands, winning new converts for Nars and the cause of combat. Thus, mongering war is the nature of Exodus."

The Warfarer smiled ruefully and tipped his head in a slight bow. "You speak truly, of course. It seems you know more about my religion than I." He finished loading Helmcleaver.

"A Synod Wizard must know many things." Pandolyn had slung her wine bladder, and was standing ready nearby, her crimson-on-purple scales glistening in the dappled sunlight. She licked a fine sheen of juliose from her snout with a long, sinuously forked tongue.

"There is, obviously, one thing you do not know," he replied. "Or do you simply prefer to remain an, uhm... whatever it is you have become?"

She laughed, and the Warfarer was surprised to hear it. "Yes, well, that would indeed seem a contradiction. Here I am boasting of my alleged prowess, while at the same time I appear incapable of restoring my human form."

"Are you not?"

"No. Which is to say that I am not. Capable, that is. And believe me, I am not overly fond of this form, powerful and magnificent though it may be."

He checked his saddle's straps, and stepped into the left stirrup. "What prevents you?" he grunted, pulling himself up and into his high seat.

"Semantics. Simple semantics."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Old Semmelweiss must have run out of flesh or patience in the end. He left me only the forward form of the spell, and neglected its reverse. Which would be no great problem, were I able to recall the exact semantic structure of the original conjure. Alas, it was jarred from my memory during the bloodbath that followed, and return to my master's body proved impossible."

"Can you never be rid of your curse then?"

Pandolyn began striding alongside Helmcleaver when Epsilon turned the animal south. "Never" is a daunting word, especially when wielded in the presence of an immortal. No, my reversal of the spell is all but inevitable, providing I prove to be more adept than the old Rit Merdian. One of the Septad's paramount laws states that a Synod Wizard's incantation can only be directly undone by himself, his inheritor, or a more powerful Synodal Wizard. In my case, this means one of three things must happen before I am freed; Apica must reverse the spell, which is not likely; Rit Supri must reverse the spell, which is equally unlikely, as that chair has not been seen alive for six hundred years; or, lastly, I must undo the spell myself, which I can accomplish only after I have surpassed my master's abilities in all ways."

"And you say your predecessor magician lived to be how old?"

"I do not know exactly. He was quite ancient, and often spoke of the Synod's undoing in the first person, as though he had actually been there."

"Then I offer you my wish for your success. Add that to what you have already stored in your pocket, and you might make a dust mote."

Pandolyn laughed again. "It certainly seems my prospects are no better than that. Yet I remain optimistic. Given enough time and opportunities, I can only win."

"Perhaps. Whatever else may come of them, your words have shed further light on the nature of your Septad."

"And what are your thoughts, sir?"

"I was considering Apica. If, as you say, a wizard's work can only be undone by a more powerful peer, and Apica is the most powerful position of them all, why is there need of a circle, at all? Apica could simply undo everything his opponents might initiate."

"In a one against one contest, this is true every time. Yet the dichotomy of the Septad allows for a coupling, even tripling, of forces. Three together can overcome Apica. Three together can turn the wheel."

"And your Rit Supri is missing."

"Unfortunately, yes."

"What of this Rit Infri? Is he missing also, or has he gone over to the other side?"

"Rit Infri is alive and well and incorruptible, thank you for asking. More than this, I cannot say, as the Enemy is always listening."

"Forgive my ignorance. You are two, then, against four. And Apica is aligned against you both."

"Yes."

"What prevents the Sin side from turning the wheel again, thereby crushing the Rit side altogether? If, as you say, three together may turn the wheel."

"The power of the circle cannot be diminished, it cannot be destroyed, and neither can it be hoarded. The Septad's structure commands its nature, you see. It requires two opposing sides of three equivalent points, with a single position to rule over them all. There can be, therefore, no more than three partisan chairs to each side, and but one Apica. The Sin domain has had its turn, and may not take another.

"For six hundred years, an evil Apica has ruled the circle, abutted by his corrupt Sinside underlings. Imagine how it must be for that lot, if you can, while the balance remains stagnant. Black magic has already conquered the lands, and now there can be no advancement without first destroying a superior wizard. And lesser wizards are nothing if they are not hungry to be greater wizards. So it would seem to me that the Sin side must be consumed by internal power struggles and bloody in-fighting by now. In such a state of disarray, it would be impossible to muster all three Sin seats for a concerted action. Or even two. We, of the Rit, might turn the wheel unopposed, laying claim to Apica and recovering our wayward Infri in the same instant. If, of course, we could simply muster at once."

"Which cannot be accomplished without your Rit Supri Wizard."

"Precisely."

As they proceeded along the lawn, skirting both the forest and road, Epsilon tried to divide his attentions between the tree shades and Pandolyn, who was walking at his left side,

nearest the highway. He goaded Helmcleaver around to the she-thing's own left hand, and now the monster was between him and the woods. He could watch both with the same eye.

"What do you think has become of him?"

"Or her. We do not know. Something horrible, most likely. We know the chair is not dead, at least."

"Simmelweiss had no idea?"

"No. When the wheel turned, the whole world was cast into a state of anarchy. We, of the Rit, were persecuted and separately driven out of our lands. Rit Merdian ran for his freedom, if not his life, as did Supri and Infri, both. I know now that the old Infri was slain only recently, and his chair turned over to a new wizard. Rit Supri, however, disappeared in that distant time, not to be seen since. And worse things have happened.

"All that our Rit Supri wrought as Apica was undone by his successor. These kingdoms were once a place of paradise, I am told, filled with goodness and beauty. Sin has corrupted all that in six hundred years. Perversion has replaced chastity. Depravity has supplanted civility. Men are ruled by animals, and goodness is despised."

"Despised by whom?"

"The people... the creatures of the Wilderlands. You seem surprised." She hurried forward to more closely examine his expression. "Oh, you are thinking of your starving savages. No, they are not the people of the Wilderlands, but merely monkeys to sit and chatter in the forest. Your form, and theirs, is sanctified only within the Empire's high walls, and that not for

long. Out here, on the Otherside, monsters are citizens and citizens are beasts. Citizens are creatures similar to the one that attacked you this morning, so thoroughly shredding your garb. And creatures like me, though my kind is rare."

"But what are they? Man or beast?"

"Both and neither. Are you truly so ignorant of the Wilderlands?" The lizard lady seemed perplexed. "Your Emperor would send a man so ill prepared into the heart of wilderness? Year upon year?"

Epsilon shrugged, suddenly and inexplicably embarrassed for himself. "My kind is not wanted there, any more than yours. And I am not altogether unprepared, Lady Pandolyn."

"Of course not. I simply had not realized the full import of your Exodus. It is more than a religious rite or political war mongering, it is a form of self-destruction. While the Hero of Alcorde is bound to travel and return, none ever do so. Not one has ever come back from the Otherside. Have they?"

"Not to my knowledge," he conceded with less emotion than he felt.

"Why? Because they drank the water!"

The Warfarer jerked back on his reins at the tone of her voice. "What do you mean to say? What became of them?"

"They eventually exhausted their supplies of Empirical water, and stooped to sip from a Wilderland spring, or well, or river, and that, sir, was their undoing! With the first taste, the first drop, they consumed the Otherside, and, in turn, the Otherside consumed them!" She stopped in

mid-stride and settled down before a nervous and mounted Helmeleaver. "This land is magic, sir. It is filled with magic and thrives on magic. Everything in this country is bewitched, almost without exception. By drinking the water of this land, or eating indiscriminately of its flesh, a person may draw that magic into himself, bit by bit, and thus be consumed from within. It is one of Apica's laws, you see.

"When your predecessors ventured into the Wilderlands, they all came geared for war, not for a long sojourn. I know, because I have pursued many of them in my time as Rit Merdian, hoping beyond hope that one would turn south. None ever did, the fools, and none ever enjoyed the slightest hope of surviving two nights in the wastes. I did not deem it wise to save them, as I have saved you, because they seemed not to want to save themselves. What sort of man enters into a vast desert without carrying more water than armor? What sort of man would travel into northern tundra without carrying more rations than steel? A dead man, I say.

"But you, Sir Epsilon, were different from the start. Your conduct at Alcorde was not a hedonistic display of all abandon, but a well disciplined act of concession. Your vows of celibacy were not bent or broken, and you did not whimper as a frightened child before the Barricades."

"You are saying others of my kind have done these things?"

"Many others. Most, in fact. I have seen more than one turn aside at the Wall, never to make the crossing. They thought to cheat their fate, but I never knew one of those cowards to let themselves live longer than a fortnight, even in sanctuary. Something about their natures would not allow such indiscretions in matters of honor and courage to go long unpunished, even if that

punishment must come from their own hand. Most make the journey in the end, or fall upon their swords."

"I see." The Hero of Alcorde kicked his mount too harshly and continued his southerly passage. "And what more did you observe to be different about me?"

"Primarily, I noted that you came equipped for an extended experience. You took on extra rations at your last stop, and filled your skins. And, most telling of all, your armor was not the heaviest plate in the Emperor's inventory. You wore nothing more than mail and a helm, and entered into the wilderness unwittingly well suited to survive its harsh environs. Even your choice of weapons has been well matched to the threats you have faced."

"I thought only to leave Helmcleaver as light as possible for any potential flight."

"There. You see? A different frame of mind all around. This very same consideration slew many of your kinsmen, ere they crossed the lawn. They could not fight their hopeless battle with the flying monsters, even with their heavy armor, but neither could they run away!"

"Kappa." Epsilon had spoken the name before he remembered he was not alone.

"You are referring, of course, to the Warfarer fallen on the road. Yes, well, that was before my time, and I can only guess at his fate, judging by his dress."

"And still you have not told me what becomes of those that drink from Otherside wells."

"I have not? Forgive me, this forked tongue is prone to rambling. It is long since I enjoyed the company of a rational man. What happens to them?" Her dinosaur's head bobbed up

and down, as her long, powerful legs vaulted over the lawn. "They are transcorporated, each and every one. Transcorporated into milts."

"Milts?"

"Certainly, milts. That is what they are called. You are familiar with the darting flies that live at the banks of most Empirical rivers? Yes? Then you must know how the fly is not born a fly, but as a worm, which feeds until it grows into a pupas, which in turn sprouts wings and leaves the water as the adult fly. Milts are like the worms. They are the youngest and tenderest of all the Wilderland's corrupted intelligent forms. Like the worm, they start out at the bottom of the chain and must work their way to the top. From molt to molt, grade to grade, they learn and grow, absorbing the land's magic, until they are large and powerful enough to avoid predation. Until they become, in fact, predators, themselves."

"That chameleon thing, it was a milt?"

"A higher milt. It would have soon molted for the first time, had your blade not intervened."

"And those that attacked Helmcleaver in Farther Heights?"

"Lower milts. But they were not attacking Helmcleaver. They were attacking me. Your stallion merely intervened on my behalf. Did you not, my darling? Hmm? Momma loves her baby!"

Epsilon winced and was ashamed. "Lady Pandolyn, will you grant me one boon? Refrain from calling my horse your 'baby'. In my presence, at least. It is not fitting for a Martial disciple of my rank to sit atop a purring kitten."

"I apologize, Sir Epsilon. But he is such a handsome creature!"

He winced again, "I asked you to stop that, m'selle. Instead, tell me why you should come under attack."

"Because of who I am and where I was at the time. Those milts were the Enemy, you see, and it is the Enemy's nature to attack its foes when it can. Besides, had one of those slugs succeeded in the attempt, it would have inherited my power and been promoted instantly to the top of the chain."

"And what, I fear to ask, occupies the top of the chain?"

"To your credit, you have met and slain two of the beasts. Yes," She nodded, her smiling maw all bristling teeth, "Those flying terrors that ever stalk the Wilderland skies. They are called illdross."

"It is fantastical! Those monsters were human spawned?"

"Every single one. They are the top of the chain, but not generally the finest specimens these lands have to offer. Unless they have altogether shunned the use of magic, they are the dregs of the milts, the dull, brutish thugs that are best adapted to killing but poorly suited to learning. They have been unwilling or, more likely, unable to effectively harness the ethereal powers they have inherited from the lands. Or perhaps they have duly learned their magic, and

simply enjoy the rigors of bloody murder. You may find it strange, sir, but many of these Otherside villains prefer their existence as a milt to their life as an Empirical subject.

"It is true. Among the wastelands, power is something that truly grows from the tree boughs and flows in the river beds. While in Empire, how may a poor peasant boy advance himself in the world? He cannot. His world, the world of Empire, is a closed society. It is filled to capacity with humanity. Every little bit of the earth is owned there, and nothing is free of nature's bounty. Not one stone lies in those lands that does not have a master's name on it, and men must have stones to build their houses. Not one field lies fallow, but that it lies fallow by some master's design. And men must have land to feed their families. Not one apple or grain or animal is harvested, but that it be harvested for a fat landlord's table or sale. Yet more than fat landholders have need of these things. How, then, is a simple man to get them? In Empire, he can enslave himself to serfdom, or he can steal. He can starve or hang. No gray area lies between the haves and have-nots there. Nothing is to spare in those intemperate regions, not even the space of a bed on Tesla's marble pavements.

"I imagine many men and women of Empirical lands have stared into darkened, empty hearths in the dead of winter, and pined for but a lump of coal to warm their bones. I imagine many of your kinsmen have seen their tables empty and ringed around by pale, hungry little faces, and felt pangs of unbearable misery or dread in their hearts. I imagine it often happens that this starving wretch or that comes across a rich man's bounty, and goads himself into stealing an

apple, or a chicken, or a lamb for himself. Only to find his reward to be a dangling hemp rope, as well as a filled belly.

"And so they run. Blindly at first, but with more determination as the days pass. I know, because I have fled, myself. In the end, there is only one place to hide. This, also, is the nature of your Empire. The Wilderland Wall is both barricade and beacon. It draws castaways like a bonfire draws nocturnal moths, for it promises safe harbor with one hand and clutches doom in the other. Its promise is a dim hope of freedom. And its many deaths are well known, even in Empire."

Pandolyn jumped over a rotted log as she jogged, frightening a hare out of hiding at a bolt. Unfortunately, its dash for freedom ended prematurely beneath the she-thing's heavily descending foot. It died with a sharp squeal of exhaled breath.

"Pardon me, m'sieur," she intoned apologetically, without breaking stride. "Thus end the voyages of so many Empirical travelers in this country. While many others survive the lawn and the forest's general threat, and are transcorporated into milts. From milts, molt by molt, they evolve and their power grows. Either they adapt to the land's magic, or the land adapts them to it. Do you see?"

"Well enough, I suppose." Epsilon found himself goading Helmcleaver into a faster and faster canter to keep up with his loping companion. "It seems a bit complicated, but I think I have the gristle of it all. If one drinks the water or eats the wrong foods, one is corrupted by Wilderland magic, and thereby turned into an Otherside insect. Correct?"

She chuckled. "You will learn soon enough to be serious about such matters. Until then you must careful not to consume or accept anything, anything at all, from these lands, without first approving it with me. I will aid you in your travels, but only if you will let me. I cannot be your mother hen to peck at you every waking moment."

"Your words are well taken. I will do as you say."

"Good. Then you might live a while longer."

"Beg pardon, m'selle, but I must ask again; why are you so concerned with my well being? Back at that well house, why did you prevent me from drinking the water?"

"As a milt, you would be lost. You would be of the Enemy."

"And I am not now of the Enemy?"

"Perhaps. Only your heart knows the answer to that question. At the least, there is doubt in your manhood. As a milt, you would be ruled by your creator, the Sin Apica, and your heart would command nothing... for goodness or ill."

Pandolyn stopped speaking abruptly, and they passed more than one league marker in silence from there. Epsilon considered all that he had learned, and tried to incorporate this information into his previous understanding of the world. Much of what he had heard was alien to all he believed, but some of it answered fundamental questions. For instance, why was the world so foul? Why was the Empire walled? Why were the Wilderlands what they were? What is magic?

Several times, as they hurried south, Epsilon found his gaze drawn sidelong to the she-thing. He admired her lithe, powerful form, and tried to imagine what an asset it would be in battle. He admired the fierce lethality of her reptilian face. Though quite capable of human expression, it seemed more adapted to animal displays of emotion. The Warfarer imagined his companion rending and savaging her foes by tooth and fang, and was awed by the thought. No armor could withstand such an assault!

She was potentially an unbeatable foe, and yet she was running alongside like a happy puppy. Even if she was only a monster, this was a strange enough sight. But to consider her a genuine member of the fabled Synod... it was fantastical.

What a monster! Look at her, all corded muscle and armored hide! She could have me with a single bite. Why am I playing with her?

One half of his mind was suddenly clamoring for action and calling for war. It urged him to draw his sword and attack, attack, attack! The hackles rose on his neck, and he was suddenly inspired. Drawing back on his reins, he drew the Warfarer's flashing sword with a flourish and raised it in menace.

Pandolyn had surged ahead, but now came around and stood her ground, facing Helmcleaver resolutely. Daring his fate, Epsilon raised his blade higher and spurred his mount forward. At first reluctant, the stallion was goaded into a half-hearted charge with repeated strokes of its master's studded heels. As they approached the she-thing, Pandolyn leapt clear,

avoiding Epsilon's singing blade with nimble tuck of her muscular body. Helmcleaver immediately rounded to face the expected counter charge, but was reined in by Epsilon's firm grip.

The monster had dashed to the tree line, and was poised there, ready to flee into her forest. "Why have you assaulted me?" cried Pandolyn, wounded in spirit if not in flesh. "I have not provoked you!"

Epsilon waved his weapon about, rolling it skillfully in his grip. "You will not come and fight, then?" he called back.

"No, of course not! Have you gone suddenly mad?"

"Good," he said, breathing easier. "Forgive me, m'selle, but I sought to test your attitude."

Pandolyn's stance straightened a bit, and was no longer bent at the waist, ready to run. "Oh, I see. You thought to sally your opponent's ranks to test his resolve."

"Or hers." Hoping his sudden outburst had not spoiled the mood altogether, Epsilon dared to return his sword to its scabbard. "When so provoked, a weary foe will stumble, a frightened foe will flee, an undisciplined one will pursue, and an ally will hold his hand. Or so it is said."

"And the foe that has come to fight?"

"The foe that has come to fight will slay the provoker." He sat proudly atop his horse, which stood stiffly on the lawn. "Will you now slay me?"

"Do not be silly. I would ask you the same thing."

"I meant you no harm, m'selle. Else I might have taken off your head."

She chuckled humorlessly, a child amused by an insect that it has crushed. "As you are so fond of saying, this remains to be seen." Cautiously, she edged over to rejoin him. "I must note, however, that your threat was singularly effective. For a mad moment, my heart was a rabbit's and I could not think but to run. So angry, you seemed! So magnificently defiant!" Standing alongside him and peering directly into his face, she added, "You are indeed a beautiful creature of death, Epsilon Three!"

He blushed. "I thank you, Lady Pandolyn. As are you."

"I am, am I not? Still, it thrills me all over to consider what your opponents at Alcorde must have felt, as they faced you alone in the gory arena. How they must have trembled secretly at their knees or gushed hotly from their bladders!"

The Warfarer shook his head modestly. "You underestimate the Rite. They were no more afraid of me, than I was of them."

"How easy for you to say such a thing. You, the Hero of Alcorde!" Her tone was mildly mocking. They started south again. "Your guts were not spilled! Your arms and legs were not hacked off! And neither was your head! Save for sweat and perhaps a few tears, you left nothing behind when you exited the arena. What of your opposites? Were they so lucky?" The she-thing shook her raptor's head dourly. "No, I tell you now and truly, sir, that you are a genuine fright. In the moment you drew that gods awful blade and raised it high, I was utterly dismayed. Had

you screamed out in bloodlust, as I have oft heard you do, I might have collapsed from sheer terror."

How could he be anything but pleased to hear Pandolyn's remarks? Especially when she was so large and ferocious in her own right. "I am not certain whether I should thank you or no, m'selle."

"Thank me, Epsilon, for I have paid you a high compliment. This land lacks your sort of courage. All those that would stand up to their oppressors are quickly ground down here, while slinking curs are tolerated and even encouraged. Black hearted sneak thieves prosper on this other side, while men of valor are mulched for compost. Why is this so? Because Sin rules, and Rit wanes.

"Sin does not love a self-governed man, for such a man is too much like a free man. Neither does Sin love a man with will, for he is too much like an opponent. The milts and their progeny are the resultant spawn of this paranoia. They are neither self-governed nor possessive of individual wills. They are worker bees that are ruled by a queen. Queen Apica. What does your Martial Rite say about bowing to foreign potentates?"

"I will bow to none save Nars and my betters on the field. And only then to surrender my head."

"What about your Emperor?"

Epsilon spat poisonously. "To hell's heart with that effeminate boy-child! I am shed of his shackles forever, and would not now bow to Him for any reason."

"Then why do you pursue this doomed errand he has commanded?"

"I do it not for his sake, of that you may be certain. I would not have crossed the Empire, let alone its Walls, simply to honor that imp's merest whim. No, I pursue Exodus because the Rite has commanded it, because I am the Hero of Alcorde, because, as you have already noted, there is something in my nature that will not allow me to turn back. It is south or die."

"South or die," she repeated ominously. "You are bound to follow the road, then?"

"I am bound to do nothing more than exit the Postern Gates, which I have done. Beyond this, I am free to roam where I will." The Warfarer's head rotated warily atop his shoulders, as he habitually scanned the treetops and forest shades for signs of ambush. Pandolyn was secretly pleased that her companion's watchful attention was no longer focused primarily on her. "I follow the southern road simply because I have chosen it as my way. And I chose it as my way simply because I have heard it runs straight and true unto a vast ocean sea." He guided Helmcleaver around a gaping hole in the lawn. It was wide and deep enough to be a freshly dug grave, and the earth was pushed up all around on one side of its mouth. As he passed, Epsilon looked down to see a large, furry head with beady eyes staring back at him from the pit. It hissed and disappeared into a deeper darkness. "I have never seen an ocean sea."

Pandolyn's tone indicated her confusion. "Why should you have a desire to do so?"

Epsilon glanced at her sharply, sternly. "Why should you have a desire to run away with a traveling show?"

"Touché."

He softened a bit. "I have always wanted to swim a salty surf. And, since I must have provenance from my Exodus to verify its completion, I thought to gather bright shells from the beaches. No such prizes are found anywhere in Empire, as you know, so none could deny that I had been far, far beyond the Walls. Should I return to present my provenance, of course."

"Sir Epsilon," she gushed, "You must be a true romantic! A soft puppy inside, like that great stallion of yours!"

His face red, he huffed, "You do me no honor, m'selle. I had asked you to stop that!"

"Oh, I am sorry, sir." She seemed to struggle with an eruptive snigger for a moment. "But I was thinking of you with that peasant's two small boys. How they smiled when you tossed down sweet meats! In that instant, you were transfigured from a tall, angry godling of war into a gentle, doting, mortal man. And again, when you fed those hopeless savages! And now with your visions of ocean seas and brightly colored cockle shells!"

"You mock me," he gloomed, slowing Helmcleaver to a petulant walk.

"Not for the ideals of your visions, but for the visions, themselves. What do you hope to find at the end of the road? Normalcy? Another Empire that is void of magic? I tell you now that no such place exists in all the world. Were you to arrive at the shores of your ocean sea, it would not be wise to swim in its salty surf or gather shells from its sandy beaches."

His retort was skeptical. "Have you been there?"

"Yes. Once. It is a violent, storming place, void of sanctuary. Great terrors stalk from below and above, and the weather is a monster of another, deadlier kind. I would not go back again. Not while Sin dominates the circle of power."

"Why did you travel there in the first place?"

"To see an, uhm... a friend. And to trade for certain elements that I require for my conjuring."

Epsilon pondered what had been said for several strides of his mount. Then he stated, "I do not doubt your words, Fair Pandolyn. However, I think I should nonetheless like to journey there and see for myself."

"This is, of course, your privilege. I can only warn you that it is a long and arduous journey, even at the best of times," Pandolyn's tone waxed hopeful, "And offer you an alternative way. If you will have it."

"Ah," he gloated. "At last we are come to your business with me."

"In part."

"And what is your way?"

"South along your deserted highway a bit further, then east, into the populated lands of Bac Tur. I mention it now, only because we approach the crossroads. It is not more than three leagues distant."

The Warfarer grunted ambiguously. "Why should I make passage to this unknown land of Bac Tur? What lies there for me?"

"Certainly not sand beaches and sea shores. Rather, something you might find more appealing."

"Maddening monster! I ask again; what?"

"War."

"What sort of war?"

"A bloody, violent war! Whole cities await the sack! Evil warlords beckon to be thrown down! Entire kingdoms are kindling, waiting but to burn!" Pandolyn laughed and kicked up her heels to dance a merry little jig. "Come and burn them, sir! Come and burn them down!"

And she felt irresistibly drawn into song;

"The moat bridge is crackling aflame, my lord!

Heathens are ramming the gates!

Aye, the moat bridge is aflame, my lord!

I fear you are come but too late!

Our battlements are crumbling to fall, my liege!

Skirmishers have taken the flanks!

Aye, our battlements fall, my liege!

And berserkers have ravished our ranks!

Where have you been that we are failed, my lord?

We died by the score in your lack!
Had you been here in the nick, my lord,
we might have turned this tide back!"

Pandolyn bobbed a quick bow when she was finished, as though she were on stage and would now trot off behind a curtain. Instead, she trotted deeper into the heart of darkness, bound to an uncertain destiny.

The Warfarer clapped his hands slowly. "A lovely rendition. It gladdens me that we are now companions, m'selle, as your words would not have seemed nearly so eloquent on paper."

"I thank you."

"Yet they tell me nothing of Bac Tur and the conditions there. Neither do they speak to me of your cause in this matter, or of why I should gladly go to surrender my life in its unobvious name."

Pandolyn made a dismissive gesture with one powerful forelimb. "You have heard the most of it already. The rest is but details."

"Many men have crossed the River Death for a minor detail."

"Very well, I am happy to tell you all. Within the brooding heartland of Bac Tur lies a castle keep that is called Ilmacht. Ilmacht is home to Sin Supri, a tyrant of a wizard that is overly fond of war. Even in this bleak land of monsters, he is a dread and despised man. And a very powerful one.

"Though he has already conquered many eastern nations, he remains unreasonably thirsty for blood. Within Ilmacht's black, twisted granite bowels, his bewitched, demonic armies ever horde and muster for campaign. When they reach strength and the despoiler has set his sights on new quarry, they sally forth to utterly destroy that quarry; to knock down its walls, burn its fields, rape its bounty, and uproot its peoples. It is a war of six hundred years' duration, and seems doomed to last six hundred more. That madman will not be satisfied until he is Apica."

"And Apica opposes this wizard?"

"No! That is the damnable aspect of it all! Sin Supri cannot find his superior. Apica has not been seen alive for three hundred years, not since his own castle keep was thrown down and despoiled by his upstart underling."

"Then why wage so long and costly a war?"

"Bah!" She spat in disgust. "Who can say what is in a madman's mind? To me, he seems nothing so much as a boy upturning shells in search of a pea. Upon plundering his latest conquest and coming up with an empty sack, the monster inevitably retires to Ilmacht to sulk and pout and dwell on his dilemma. Before long, he becomes convinced that one or another of his remaining neighbors is plotting to keep his beloved prize from him, and the cycle is renewed. No one is safe from his unclean hand. Nothing is sacred."

"Why should the Septad's most powerful mage be forced into hiding as a common refugee? Surely Apica could wipe the slate clean from the vantage of his high seat."

"Ordinarily, this would be true. Ordinarily, a king rules his kingdom. In this case, however, the king has lost all control. Sin Supri has conspired successfully to ensnare and murder both of his underling mages. He had thought to gain control of a quorum and cast Apica out of his chair, but the madman's puppets turned on him. Sin Infri and Sin Merdian are since become independent powers, heeled to no one. Not even Apica. The king is alone and stripped of his armor. His kingdom lies in disorder.

"And now there is only one way for Sin Supri to impose his own brand of deranged law on this deranged land. He must locate his superior and destroy him. Once he has accomplished this, he will inherit Apica's seat, and become empowered to appoint his own successor. I cannot imagine what sort of ghoul he will employ to fill his place, but you can be sure he will not make the mistake he made with the Infri and Merdian chairs. With firm control of two powerful positions, Sin's domination of the Septad will be complete, and all hope of turning the wheel will be lost."

When she stopped speaking, Epsilon prodded with, "Well and good. But what has this to do with my going to Bac Tur?"

"Not just to Bac Tur, but on to Ilmacht. We will go there to throw the castle down and empty its unjust dungeons."

Epsilon laughed. "You say that as though you were planning a daytime picnic!"

"Granted, it will not be easy, but neither will it be as difficult as you imagine it to be. Sin Supri has been preparing for war these past many months. When I last left those fouled, reeking

lands, his hordes were verged on eruption. They should be long gone and marched away by this time, leaving Ilmacht largely unguarded. The old conqueror is so smug in his might that he deems his abode unapproachable, even in his absence."

"A poorly defended wall is one thing. An army to take it with is another. How am I to work this feat alone?"

"You will not be alone. I would simply have you serve as general to my armies."

"You have armies?"

"Several large armies, in fact, arrayed about Ilmacht within striking distance, poised to attack. They lack nothing save a stout heart to lead them."

"But you said the peoples of this country, those milts, are all ruled by Apica. Surely not even that persecuted leader would willingly aid you in turning the wheel against himself!"

"No, Apica would not allow his minions to serve Rit. Mine is an army of uncorrupted men." Epsilon did not seem as surprised to hear this as she had hoped. But then, Pandolyn reminded herself, the Warfarer was fresh from a land of the living and did not know how rare real men could be. "Do not forget that once this country was not unlike Empire. It was full of wondrous beauty and everlasting peace. Men walked here without fear. They married wives that bore them children, and built houses to keep warm, just as all men are wont to do today. Kingdoms there once were, and kings to sit upon thrones. Then the wheel turned, and all was changed forever. The old walls were brought low and new ones were raised up. Law was cast aside and madness reigned.

"Yet the people endured. Though malevolent new warlords rose up to replace the benign monarchs they had known, many rebelled. Vast, mongrel armies were formed to combat those terrible oppressors, and remnants of those forces remain functional to this day. More than this, I cannot say."

The Warfarer scoffed. "Remnants. Of defeated mongrel armies. Six hundred years old."

"Are not the best troops those that are most seasoned?"

"Seasoned, perhaps. Aged or ancient, never. Do you have ten thousand old men huddled, shivering, about your enemy's walls, Pandolyn?"

"Not one is older than thirty years, sir. And all are veterans of countless campaigns."

"How many do you have en toto? And I mean to ask, how many are currently viable for war?"

"Many more than ten thousand."

Epsilon weighed this number for a time in silence. He had seen ten thousand men mustered at once on more than one occasion. It was a large and promising quantity. A man of his talent could do much with so many.

"What of siege engines?" he enquired.

She was suddenly subdued. "Alas, I have no heavy equipment. Nothing larger than personal arms. But I do not believe I will need such."

"It is difficult to lay a siege without siege strength weapons."

"What if you were not required to lay siege, but to stage a direct infantry assault behind the enemy's walls? Would you require catapults and aeronelles then?"

"Of course not. In an assault situation, heavy weapons are burdensome supercargo. A large number of men with small arms would prove generally sufficient, provided the ranks were well packed with skilled archers wielding heavy bows."

"Bows and bowmen I have in abundance."

"But what of the walls? How will your armies get behind them?"

"That, sir, is my concern. Suffice it to say that I have devised a method to lay their bombardments low in an instant. Once down, they will seem as nothing, and you would have but to storm the keep."

"I would, were I to accept your commission," he corrected. "I can only imagine the magic you must have in mind, but it all sounds too promising in my ears. I gravely doubt a man that has waged war for six hundred long seasons would leave his own hearth and home unkempt at his back." After a moment's further thought, he added, "Besides, by your own tongue Sin Supri is, in every way, your superior. How can you hope to counter his powers?"

"Again, this is my concern. I can only tell you that I have found a magic older and more powerful than his. It will serve our purposes in this matter, but I will only have one opportunity to wield it before it is gone forever."

"One opportunity, m'selle? In matters of offense, once is rarely enough."

"In this matter of offense, once must be enough."

The Warfarer shifted in his saddle and stroked Helmcleaver's corded neck with his free left hand. "So, you have a mighty army, but no general to command it. You have a means of knocking down the city's walls, but cannot be certain of victory without my aid. Next, you were going to tell me why you want to destroy Ilmacht in the first place."

"As I have said before, we will open its unjust dungeons."

"Is there someone in those dungeons whom you are particularly anxious to free? A missing wizard, perhaps?"

Pandolyn responded with a denying shake of her broad, toothy head. "I can neither confirm nor deny your suspicions. At worst, you may assume I am just another bored child that would turn shells in search of a pea. Will you help me overturn this shell?"

"I am not decided. I will want to know more, ere I make a choice. Primarily, I will want to know what my reward is to be."

"Must you be rewarded?"

"Aye. Nars does not favor amateurs. As a commissioned general, it would be customary for me to receive a salary. And a share in all spoils, of course."

"Done. What is a fair wage?"

"To govern more than ten thousand men and overrun one walled city... a lump sum of thirty pounds of gold and fifty of silver, and one part in ten of all booty." He paused uncertainly and hedged, "I lack coffers, however, and have nowhere to spend my funds, in any event. Let us, then, settle on a token payment for now. What have you of value?"

"Nothing of real value." Pandolyn fell silent to mentally peruse the contents of her bags and pouches. "And only one thing of any personal value. This," and she produced a small gold locket without a chain. "It is all I have left of Semmelweiss. I kept it in my... on my person while we were held in Marakeel's dungeons, and have kept it safe since that time. Were you to present it to a coin changer in Capitol Tesla, it would fetch not more than five shecks, but it is priceless to me." She proffered it hesitantly, cupping it in her scaly right palm.

Epsilon heeled Helmcleaver to a stop and brought the animal around to examine the prize. "Aye, you are right in that," he disdained, seizing the locket in his heavily gloved right hand. It was a little bit of nothing, worthless really. But Pandolyn had declared it priceless in her eyes. That, Epsilon decided, was all he could desire of a token payment. "I will accept it, lady. And with it, your armies' command. We shall go to Bac Tur to wage war together. When Ilmacht has fallen and my material reward is secured, you may have your locket returned again. Do we agree?"

"Gladly so, sir!" she gushed. "I acquiesce to all your demands."

"Fine. The bargain is struck. But be warned, Lady Pandolyn; I will not tolerate deceit or betrayal. If your force is not ten thousand in number, or your means of leveling Ilmacht's walls should fail, I will not be held to this contract. I will not wage a vain or sacrificial combat again. Not for an emperor. Not for a wizard."

"Again, I agree. And let you also be warned, Ritesman; do not mishandle my keepsake of Semmelweiss. It is worth more to me than your life."

Epsilon eyed the lizard lady sharply, but held his tongue. With all due care, he stowed the token away inside his armor. And turned away to ponder the road to Bac Tur.

7

Exile of Dung

As Pandolyn had predicted, the two travelers came to a crossroads. Even through the overgrown canopy that shaded the lawn, Epsilon could see a great, towering marble sculpture of Vandegarte standing unremarkably at its center.

They descended a low hill into a shallow valley, through which was laid another heavily cobbled road. It ran east to west to intersect the Teslan road at right angles through a broad, circular plaza. The way to Bac Tur was not so wide or well constructed as the northern road, but it seemed serviceable enough. As they neared, Epsilon could see how it was paved with a unique stone that was the color of dried blood. And he could see one thing more. At the base of the statue, a lone figure was sitting, oblivious to his and Pandolyn's approach.

Recognizing the man-shape as one of Pandolyn's afore mentioned milts, the Warfarer drew his blade in a silvered flash and spurred Helmcleaver forward with a savage cry of war. The

thudding of his mount's fleet hoofs accelerated, even as his warrior's heart hastened its pace. Epsilon rolled his blade expertly around his head, brandishing it with all due menace. With a violent start, the milt looked up and its bulbous eyes bulged wider. It jumped to its feet, dropping the object it had held cradled in its lap. Issuing a surprised, choking scream of terror, the creature leapt away from Vandegarte's stony feet and made a vain dash for the forest's harboring flesh.

Halfway there, Epsilon intercepted the creature. His lethal steel dropped in a blinding arc to take away the milt's horny head. But the insect was agile beyond belief. It dodged to one side and tossed something high in the air.

Before the Warfarer could react, the projectile hit him squarely on the nose. He scarcely felt the impact, but the soft bag burst on contact, emitting a great puff of fine white powder. Epsilon sucked a deep, reflexive breath. The powder invaded his nostrils and mouth to assault his lungs.

Helmcleaver passed through the huge, hanging cloud of particulate matter in a rush, sparing Epsilon further insult. But the damage had been done. The Warfarer gagged and coughed and spat and sputtered so violently that he lost all sense of balance and direction. Blinded, he could not see. Suffocated, he could not breathe. Beaten by mere dust motes, the valiant, sacrificial warrior succumbed to his injuries and toppled from his high saddle. He landed in a heap on the soft turf of the lawn. There he rolled about in agony, dying.

Suddenly, Pandolyn was at his side, hovering over him. "Fool!" she hissed, dropping to her scaly knees even as she rummaged in her bags for something. With an amazingly strong grip,

the lizard lady took her general by his seized shoulders and forced him prone on his back. "What did I say? What did I tell you? Is your memory so short, Ritesman, that you would perish of forgetfulness?" Pandolyn shoved two of her thick, powerful fingers into his powder choked mouth, prizing it open wide. Now a warm, heavily scented liquid dribbled down his throat and filled his oral cavity. "Fool!" she hissed again, even as she flushed out his nose and eyes in a harried attempt to save his life. "Rinse your mouth and spit. Blow the juliose out of your nares. Do it quickly!"

Epsilon rolled over to do as he was told. Pandolyn performed the washing again, and then a third time. Next, she told to him to inhale deeply and poured a great dollop of the potent wine down his throat as he did so. The Warfarer's reaction was immediate and violent. His body arched and buckled. His lungs cinched tightly and expelled the heady liquid in a gush. Along with it, the last of the powder was flushed from his systems.

Coughing and wheezing, he demanded weakly, "Would you drown me in punishment?"

Though Pandolyn was paying him no mind. Her attention was instead cast over her left shoulder. Addressing someone that Epsilon could not see, she called, "Ubar! Ubar, you wayward child, come here at once! I need your help! Fetch me some lentlell and another skin of juliose! Quickly now! We may yet save this ignoramus!"

"Ubar?" groaned the Hero of Alcorde. "Who is Ubar?"

"Your obvious superior in combat," spat the lizard lady derisively. "Now hold still. I must smear your face with this lentlell to counteract Ubar's poison. I know it stinks, but hold still!"

It is your only prayer for salvation. Without it, your face will swell and split open. You would be dead before nightfall. There. It is good your Helmcleaver is so fast and sure of foot. One breath more of that toxin and all would have been lost." As an afterthought, as she stowed her goods away and Epsilon sat up to rub his burning eyes, Pandolyn called him a fool once more.

Then she turned her wrath on the unknown Ubar. "And you! I know not which fool is the greater. He that charges without thinking, or he that sits without watching!" Calmer, she added, "Or I, for not warning our general of his allies' appearance."

"I beg pardon, High Wizard," grated a roughly fashioned reply. The speaker sounded as though his vocal cords were clogged with phlegm. "I was frightened. I thought only to save my life."

"And in so doing nearly destroyed it!"

Blinking his bleary, half blind eyes widely open, Epsilon inserted, "Mayhap you are better served in hiring this Ubar for your general." Dimly, he could see that Ubar was none other than the milt he had assaulted only moments earlier. "His tactics are strange, but strangely effective."

"Indeed. But he is no general. He is no warrior. He is my protégée."

The Warfarer was sitting now, rubbing his protesting eyes. "Your protégée? A milt? I thought they were all bound to the Enemy."

"I am no milt, sir!" protested Ubar.

Pandolyn extended a staying hand to stifle her underling's hasty tongue. "Indeed, Ubar is not of the Otherside. He was born in Empire. And transcorporated there, as well. He is like me. Note the streaks of crimson and pink along his spine."

Epsilon shrugged helplessly. "I shall take your word for it, m'selle. My eyesight struggles against me for the moment." He blinked and stared to pontificate. "And I suspect not even full vision could tell me the difference."

Ubar gasped and harrumphed. "Well," he heaved, "I am insulted."

"Please," beseeched the lizard lady. "You nearly killed the man, Ubar!"

"He nearly killed me!" came the hot return. "Did you see how he swung that sword? It passed within inches of my very life!"

"Of course it did! What did you think I journeyed to fetch in Empire? A tumbling monkey?"

"But he was intended to slay your enemies, not I!"

"Enough, Ubar!" hissed Pandolyn. "Be silent now, or I shall transcorporate you into a vile, crawling thing. I accept the blame in this matter, and that is saying enough."

Now the lizard lady turned to examine her general once more. He seemed well enough, though his eyes were heavily bloodshot and his face was rife with rashes. "I do apologize, Sir Epsilon. I am so accustomed to Ubar's ordinarily gentle ways, that I had forgotten how strange he might seem to your Empirical eyes. But I must point out that you were forewarned not to do

or touch anything without my prior approval" More gently, she offered him a small, jade jar and said, "Here, rub more of this lenthell onto your brow and cheeks. It will ease the sting."

"Aye, it is a fearsome sting, too. It feels as though a thousand scorpions are all biting me at once." Epsilon accepted the small container gratefully and applied liberal portions of the evil smelling stuff wherever he hurt. Relief was slow in coming, but complete when it came. Sighing gratefully, he returned the half empty jar to its owner. "What was in that powder?"

Ubar answered his query proudly. "A toxin of my own manufacture. I refined it from several Wilderland plant species that are known for their toxicity. It is a simple process, really, merely a matter of rendering and distilling the plant extracts, which I then mixed with a talc base that-"

But the Warfarer had extended a halting hand to stop the recital. "Suffice it to say, you made the stuff and it nearly killed me. The rest means nothing to me."

Pandolyn chuckled softly. "Ubar is a clever child, Epsilon. It ever dismays him, I think, that all the world's people are not so clever."

"And it dismays me that what you call a mere child was almost my undoing. How old is he?"

Ubar blurted, "I was but fifteen seasons along when the Emperor's mage cast me out of Empire. And I have lived on this Otherside for nearly two years!"

The Hero of Alcorde shook his disbelieving head miserably. "Fifteen and two," he grumbled. "That would make you..."

"Seventeen," provided the boy. He turned to Pandolyn and gloated. "Not very bright, is he, High Wizard?"

Epsilon was galled to the pit of his churning stomach. "Where is my blade?" he belched. "I will show you all the brightness I require with but a flash of its razor edge." Casting about blindly for his sword, the Warfarer surrendered his vain search and instead drew his long fencing dagger angrily. "Come closer, boy, that I might admire your witty tongue properly." And he wove the knife cunningly back and forth, as though he would dice Ubar for a carrot.

Injecting herself between the two males, Pandolyn shooed her terrified protégée off on an unknown errand, then turned to help her newly hired and defeated general to find his feet. When he was standing, she handed him his sword and then Helmcleaver's reins. As he lofted into the saddle, the wizard sought to soothe him. "Your blindness is only temporary. It will fade quickly. As for your face... the sting should largely have abated by now, but the rashes may linger for many days. Or even years."

"Ah," he breathed sarcastically, "More good news. I am maimed for life by a child. Already your campaign for Ilmacht goes well."

Pandolyn took Helmcleaver's bridle in hand to lead them back under the forest's overhanging boughs. An all too familiar screech had sounded from the clouds, and the wizard's keen hearing had detected a decided change in the wind. The illdross' claws raked the treetops in frustration, and the beast was gone again.

"Do not be petty, sir. Your beauty will not win Bac Tur's capitol."

"Your Ubar has not merely marred my beauty. He has demeaned my prowess. He has shaken my confidence. Never before have I come so near to death." Epsilon sighed leadenly and rubbed his aching orbs. "I must necessarily question my ability to lead ten thousand men. Perhaps I have not the brains."

"What good are brains in this matter, without the courage to persecute a strategy? What you could not see in your blindness was how Ubar did not stop to cut your throat once you were unhorsed. Even in the throes of death, his fear of you was so great that he was reduced to the hare and could but run away, defecating with each step."

Epsilon smiled despite himself. "Defecating, hmm?"

"With every step," she assured him.

"Then he must feel lighter for the experience, I suppose." Epsilon laughed weakly at his own weak joke.

"To be sure. I urge you not to feel ashamed that Ubar has beaten you this day. You have no idea how intelligent he truly is."

"More so than you?"

"Many times over again. Though he lacks learning in certain regards, his mind is quick. If wits were trees, his head would sprout a forest."

"And mine?"

"A grove perhaps, in comparison. Again, feel no shame. Yours is a specialized education, where I have installed in my protégée a broad, general understanding of the world. He is no more

adept at arms than you would be in deciphering alchemy. Else he might have made a stand against you."

"Your words are small comfort, m'selle. It is a wise coward that wins his victory with a quick stab in the dark and a quicker retreat."

Pandolyn heaved a weary breath. "Let us put this unsavory matter aside, sire. Let us forget. Ubar is no more your enemy than am I. What happened here was a comedy of errors. Laugh and be done with it all."

"Very well. I will hold my emotion in check. Providing your boy checks his mouth."

"That I cannot promise. Even I am, at times, exasperated with Ubar's sharp tongue. He is not an easy person to claim, and a more difficult one to claim fondly. He will try you at times, I imagine, but you must have patience."

"Why must I?"

"For the good of our conquest."

"What purpose will he serve? Are we to debate our foes to death, or fight them at arms?"

"We need him. That is all I may say for the moment." Upon noting that Epsilon's eyes were clearing of blood, she enquired, "How is your vision now? Better?"

"Yes. Much better. I can almost see to fight. Where is your Ubar now? I would have a better look at him."

The wizard was suspicious. "A look or a cut?"

"I mean him no harm. I would simply learn to distinguish between his kind and the milts. That is all."

"I see. Well, then, you shall have to wait, for I have sent him into the forest to fetch supplies we have stored near about. He shall return directly, I imagine. Until that time, you should rest and flush yourself once more." Pandolyn led Helmcleaver into a shady recess that was bounded on three sides by a high hedge. At the center of the semicircular space squatted a time worn marble form. "Dismount here, and sit upon this bench. Perhaps a bit of that jillroot you carry will speed your recovery."

Epsilon climbed down and sat where he was told. After a final wash with Wilderland wine, his vision was much improved, and nearly all his remaining pain was relieved. Happy to be rid of his discomfort at last, the Warfarer sighed his contentment and reached for a wad of 'root. Chewing this, he examined the crossroads plaza and its surroundings for the first time in detail.

Noting that a statue of Vandegarte stood at its middle (again surrounded by those oddly shaped, nearly leafless trees), Epsilon found himself searching for the inevitable skewers. None of these loathsome devices were evident, however. Instead, Vandegarte's everlasting marble form was ringed on all sides by a high hedge that opened only to allow the two roads to enter and exit. Recessed into the hedgerow were a series of deep, broad indentations, much like the one within which he was currently sitting. And within each indentation, a lone bench and sculpted form.

Turning in his seat, the Ritesman spat to the ground and eyed the graven image that was closest to him. Two sticks tall, its features were worn nearly smooth by incessant rainfall, but

enough of the face remained to spark a cord of familiarity within Epsilon's memory. He stood to approach it more nearly.

Kicking away a dense growth of weeds and creepers, he cleared the sculpture's base. An inscription was carved there. Epsilon knelt to thumb dirt away from the face of the stone that he might read its words.

"Heigh, there, Sir Epsilon!" called Pandolyn sharply. "What are you doing?"

"I thought I would clear the marble to read its-"

"Ye gods!," she cried in exasperation. "Have you learned nothing in your contact with Ubar? I only just reminded you to touch nothing without first asking my opinion of your actions!"

Epsilon's hand snapped away from its task abruptly, as though he were a child caught touching himself. Blushing, he stammered an apology, adding, "But I only thought to uncover the inscription."

"And what if the inscription is an enchanted spell laid out for just such a fool's recitation?"

"Oh. I failed to consider-"

"Of course you did. Need I tell you again that nothing is as it seems on this side of the Wall? Nothing is to be taken for granted, because nothing is harmless or safe."

"I do apologize for my transgression, my lady. It will not happen again."

Pandolyn snorted softly, as though this was the last lie in the world that she would believe.

"At any rate, you would have done yourself no harm. This time. I examined each of these

smaller pieces many seasons past. There is nothing magical or bewitching in them or the words that mar their bases. You may uncover and read them, if you like."

Frowning, the Ritesman turned back to his task, wondering why he had been interrupted in the first place, when she knew all the time that what he was doing was quite safe. After much brushing and blowing, he managed to clear the text enough to read its words.

He recited, "Marshal Werte of Walbunde, Slain on the Night of Many Knives. May his memory never fade. Let not the crimes committed against him pass un-avenged." Standing, his knees popping, Epsilon scratched underneath his hot helmet. "Marshal Werte of Walbunde..." he repeated. "I do not know that name, and yet the face seems strangely familiar."

The wizardess laughed heartily. "Aye, and so it should. The same face adorns each and every one of these likenesses, as well as that of the main statue. It is a face you have seen many, many times over."

"Vandegarte," hissed the sacrificial warrior.

"Of course. Did you think his enormous vanity would allow for the enshrinement of any mortal image other than his own?"

Epsilon shook his head slowly. "But what is this place? And what was the Night of Many Knives?"

"Both answers are long and tragic tales, I fear. Still, I suppose I could give you the short of it without doing much harm to the whole." Pandolyn sat upon the bench, and her general soon joined her there. Rummaging among her things, she produced a cup and filled it with juliose.

Epsilon had consumed more than enough during the purging of his eyes, nose and mouth, and so he declined her offer of refreshment but waited contentedly to hear her tale. After a sip of the tasty stuff, Pandolyn smacked her mouth open and shut a few times before resuming her speech.

"It was many, many long years ago, before the wheel had turned. The Synod was yet aligned with Rit, and goodness reigned throughout the world. In that time, the Wilderlands was a gentle and bountiful country, a patchwork of kingdoms large and small. Though there were minor disturbances and border disputes, the lands were largely at peace from the northern wastes to the southern seas, from the eastern coasts to the mountains of the west.

"And so it might have remained for untold years, as it had been before, save that a madman issued forth from the walled confines of a minor northern province.

"Vandegarte was a bloody criminal from the start. Soon, he savaged all the civilized nations of the north. He slaughtered their leaders, cast down their gods, uprooted their peoples, razed their walls and burned all that would not serve him in fidelity. Great funeral pyres lit the heavens to rival the sun, moon and stars; day after day, night upon night. It seemed all the world was on the verge of ignition, for that tyrant's lusts for conquests and lands knew no satiety and no sure defeat. Time and again his intended victims fell, protesting, to his clutching grasp. Time and again, just when it seemed the madman's cause would sputter and fail, just when it seemed his rag tag peasant army had marched its last desperate mile or made its final bloody stand, the madman would overcome all obstacles to stand victorious atop the piled corpses of his crushed enemies.

"Word of his prowess and depravity swept through the courts of the world, and more than one monarchy trembled and quaked at thought of his dreaded approach. It was whispered that no mere stone battlements could dissuade him of his assaults, that no city was safe, however well made or defended, for it was widely accepted that Nars had taken a right hand in the world and this right hand was named Vandegarte.

"So violent was his reputation in those bloody days, that many masters abandoned their nations in terrified flight at the mere mention of his approach. It was deemed wiser among the royals to despair in banishment rather than destroy one's kingdom entire in a vain and sacrificial denial of the madman's advances. In the end, his entrance into new lands generally proved sufficient to conquer them, and where fight was offered, it was often quickly finished to the ghoul's lusty satisfaction. All the world, it seemed, was doomed to fall victim to his martial campaigns.

"Except for one thing that no mortal man can deny, regardless of his position and authority. Time. Inexorable time. Time that inevitably ages men, that wears away stone walls and grinds down the highest mountains. Time.

"Indeed, it appeared that even Vandegarte ultimately realized the import of his own mortality. For his conquests came to coda, and Empire was walled away into a perpetual state of silent fester. It was as much a barrier to keep Vandegarte's enemies without as it was intended to keep his subjects within. And that suited the rest of the world just fine.

"Years passed and the madman was forgotten. Then something happened. Something more awful than all the mayhem that had gone before. Vandegarte captured the Rit Infri Wizard of the Synod, who had foolishly ventured into Empire in order to determine whether or no the madman yet lived. After many long, hard days of torture, Vandegarte personally slew the old Rit Infri and assumed his seat on the Synod."

Epsilon paled and gasped involuntarily. "What?" He vainly hoped he had misheard.

"Vandegarte is Rit Infri?"

"Was. Recall that I told you how the wheel turned six hundred years ago? That it turned on the Rit Infri position, which converted to Sin? What sort of man would do such a thing, do you think?"

"Vandegarte, of course."

"Of course. His lusts for powers were unabated, even in his advanced age. Once he gained the immortality of a Synodal Wizard, the madman looked up the long line of advancement, and realized that Sin was weaker than Rit. He deemed it easier to climb that side of the wheel, and so he turned, eager to make a start of it.

"And for the first time in twenty years, he was loosed beyond the Walls of Empire. Loosed, but without an army of his own. For, as well you know, his own lands were long purged of men of martial spirit, save for the Rite, which he could not trust with bloody campaigns of conquest. Your kind of swordsmen, sire, are not much given to dishonorable sack and sacrilege. No, what he required was the tool he had used of old. Ignorant, brutal peasants in abundance.

With but a bit of steel and a dram of grog, such men could be urged into most any kind of depraved act. And, no matter how many of these corrupted commoners might be slain at the hands of skilled men at arms, Vandegarte was not worried for his numbers, since the world once held peasants and pigs in abundance.

"With this in mind, he initiated his new campaign in an uncharacteristically quiet manner. For many years, maybe thirty or more, no one knew he was yet living and walking among men. All thought him long dead. Bit by bit, he waged the opening battles of his long wars. Disguised as a diplomat, he worked within the courts that governed the nations surrounding his Great Barricade without. In the name of unification and peace, he labored prodigiously to create a combined counsel that would serve all these countries alike. Vandegarte called it his 'League of Monarchies', and intended that it act as an autonomous governing body that would direct a single defense against the war mongering Empire, should that enslaved nation ever wage bloody war again. Writ by writ, decree upon decree, he succeeded in cementing the League's authority.

"Where bored and uninterested kings failed to intervene on their kingdom's behalf, Vandegarte was able to painlessly and all but effortlessly seize command of their martial forces. All with nothing more than scraps of paper to serve as his siege engines. And when enough of these armies had been herded into the League's umbrella of dominion, the usurper used their combined might to bully the remainder of the League's member states into also surrendering their arms. At last, he had managed to unify and concrete his plans for conquest, and only then did he

install himself as Chairman of the League, its most powerful position, which enjoyed all but tyrannical powers over its member monarchies.

"From there, it was a simple matter to stir up trouble to the south and east, and thus create a demand for the League's martial services. Victorious in its first minor skirmishes, Vandegarte's patch quilt army was brought together on the field to serve beneath him, and the madman used the opportunity to extract an oath of allegiance from his reluctant soldiers.

"Then came the Night of Many Knives. It is so named, because Vandegarte had many enemies at that time. Many lesser generals and field marshals had refused to take his oath, claiming that their loyalties belonged solely to their homelands. These men turned away from the field of battle, and would have hurried home to urge their masters to be shed of the League and its maniacal Chairman, save that Vandegarte called them back.

"He planned a feast that night, there on the verge of wilderness, a mere stone's throw from the opposing camp. He promised his wayward officers their freedom, and vowed to revoke the oath immediately upon the morrow's dawn. His rivals appeased, Vandegarte appeared to retire, beaten, to his campaign tent, leaving his underlings to debate and argue among themselves deep into the drunken darkness.

"Just before dawn, the slaughter began. When it was finished, every man that had shunned the oath of allegiance was slain, including three princelings, fifteen dukes, and scores of lesser Royals. The members of his League of Monarchies were incensed by the news, and demanded vengeance against whatever nation dared perpetrate so heinous an act. Naturally, Vandegarte

was quick to supply a scapegoat, and so he was granted title and authority to wage war unchecked in that hapless land.

"So it began. Nations fell in droves once more, as though an epidemic of conquest was raging and its victims knew no immunity.

"Throughout these initial campaigns, Vandegarte maintained his carefully crafted illusion of the League of Monarchies. By way of proving his false fidelity, Vandegarte had this crossroads installed, with all its marble forms. You can imagine the crocodile tears he shed over these very inscriptions, vowing vengeance that would never be served.

"But when he had come to control a sufficient population of peoples, he ordered his armies to enslave all the young men they could round up, and he had these commoners trained simply in the ways of war. Now he had his brutal peasant army.

"And when the League's member nations at last protested Vandegarte's selfish designs, he overthrew and deposed the very monarchies that his bogus organization was sworn to protect. In this manner, goodness faded from the land, and evil reigned, even as it does to this day." The wizardess stopped speaking abruptly to finish her juliose in a quiet, reflective manner.

The Warfarer struggled to absorb all he had heard. *Could it be that Vandegarte yet lived unto this very day*, he wondered silently? But, of course, it must be true. Pandolyn was, perhaps, many bad things, but she did not strike him as a liar. And this reality, however unpalatable, certainly explained a great many mysteries that he had encountered beyond the Wall. Then another thought struck him.

He coughed to clear his jill-numbered throat. "You said Vandegarte *was* Rit Infri. What is he now, then? Sin Infri?"

"Alas, no. In such a lowly seat, he might be more easily destroyed. No, your terrible tyrant is now none other than Sin Supri, the wizard we are bound to overthrow, the Master of Ilmacht and King of foul Bac Tur."

The Hero of Alcorde could say nothing for a time. His mouth worked open and shut, even as his owl's eyes blinked impulsively. What could he say? What could he do?

"Stunning, is it not?" interrupted Ubar. He pushed through the hedge and deposited his burden of wine skins and baggage on the lawn. Blowing from the effort, he declared, "You can imagine my surprise when I learned these very same facts! Astonishing! Truly astonishing!"

"To label it lightly," Epsilon agreed morosely. Then he added, "We are doomed fools... nay, doomed lunatics. We that would sojourn into perdition to cast down a devil." He considered his new enlightenment quietly for a moment, and chewed jillroot relentlessly. Finally, he spat the bolus into the hedge. "I do not think I can honor our contract as it stands, or your commission of me, Pandolyn."

Ubar hissed immediately upon hearing these words. "You see! You see!" he cried gloatingly. "I knew he would never wage war against the infamous First Emperor of Empire, the bloody Wall Builder! I knew he would have no more to do with your conquests, High Wizard, once he was told the name of Bac Tur's evil king! Hah! Ubar was right! Ubar was right! Ubar was-"

Epsilon growled a choking rage and stood abruptly. In a single, fluid motion, he balled his right fist and lashed out. Ubar, the lizard boy, was tossed back off his feet to land tail first on the soft lawn grasses. A surprised grunt was forced from his lungs, as he found his seat forcibly. From a sitting position, he slowly toppled over to one side and slept, unconscious.

Pandolyn scolded her uncertain general, and rushed to aid her protégée. "He is breathing, at least. I suppose he will survive."

"Ahh," complained Epsilon, "I did not strike him with force. He should awaken any second."

Indeed, the boy-lizard made a gargling noise far back in his throat, and shook his spinning head gently. "Look out!" he cried weakly. "Look out! A raging bull is loose!" And followed that a moment later with, "What happened?"

"You fell down," supplied Pandolyn.

"Oh?" he retorted confusedly. "Well, I suppose I should be more careful in the future."

"Indeed," was all she had left to say. The wizard helped her underling to find his scaly feet, and began loading him with wine skins and baggage once more.

The Warfarer cleared his throat as though he would speak. Pandolyn turned to offer him her full attention. And, though her reptilian face remained expressionless, her eyes betrayed the wizard's uncertainty.

"I did not mean to imply that I would not serve as your commander in chief. I meant only that I can accept no pay for my commission. Vandegarte's destruction will be reward enough."

The fierce warrior's face waxed lethally serious. "If it be Nars' will, I shall seek the madman out and tear his throat from his body with my naked teeth." And he returned her token.

Pandolyn shuddered to hear his obviously genuine oath. Suddenly, she was extremely grateful that she was not Sin Supri. But she reminded her general of their mission, regardless of her hopes of his fulfilling that terrible promise. "Bear in mind, Lord Warfarer, that our intent is nothing more than the destruction of the city Ilmacht. Vandegarte will almost certainly be absent."

Her general shrugged his shoulders cavalierly. "Be that as it may, my vow stands. I now realize this to be my destiny. I must confront the beast and destroy him. Whether I fail in this endeavor or succeed, only Nars can know."

Now the wizard was suspicious again. "Whatever you have planned for yourself, you must promise me, Epsilon Three, that you will first conquer Ilmacht."

"Aye," his reply was immediate and forceful. "I will indeed destroy the monster's lair, whether he is away or no. Then I shall seek him out on the open road or in the ruins of his own court, and we will do battle to the death."

With that said, he called Helmcleaver away from fodder and fairly jumped into the saddle. Without waiting for Pandolyn or Ubar, he whipped his warhorse about and called back over his shoulder, "You said the road runs east, correct? Well? What delays you? On! On to Bac Tur and Ilmacht!"

"To Ilmacht!" Pandolyn responded happily, erupting into a ground eating lope.

Ubar followed meekly. His head hurt too much to rejoice. Besides, though his incredibly alert mind struggled valiantly, he could find no aspect of death that merited any kind of light hearted celebration. Grumbling about overly eager men of war and wizards' indecipherable plans, Pandolyn's protégée quickened his pace to catch up with his master before she was out of sight along the eastbound road.

As Epsilon hurried along, he felt the eyes of all those likenesses of Vandegarte staring out at him from their shady bowers. *Everything about this land is twisted and wrong, and now I know the why of it all. That madman has passed his infection beyond Empire. He is an incurable disease, and this warped country is the pathology of his nature. In the aftermath of his assaults on serenity, naught but chaos and insanity can survive. This evil forest, these Wilderlands, must suit that mongrel dog well, and it is right and proper that the depraved wretch make his home amid such a profusion of perverse creatures and hellish environs. For such is his heart. Such is his mind.*

What save time could bring a Vandegarte low? And if time's reach is removed, what then?

As if in answer to this unspoken question, Epsilon was filled with a sense of godhead, of destinies revealed. He now realized that his entire life, from his ill conceived birth to his triumph at Alcorde, would be rendered less than meaningless without a confrontation with Vandegarte. It was no mere coincidence that he had taken the south road through the Wall, and no simple happenstance that Pandolyn had taken an interest in destroying Ilmacht. It was no queer thing

that she had selected him for her general, but a set and determined thing. Epsilon could all but feel Nars' hand upon him. It was a tight, hard fist that enclosed him all around with an invisible, impenetrable armor. From his childhood, voices of reason and logic and despair had whispered to him of his destiny. Now a new voice added its tones to the din. It was a voice of calm and confidence. It whispered again and again, *You are the One... You are the One... You are the One...*

He knew of many crimes he should avenge... for the world was plagued with great wrongs to set right. Epsilon could not begin to catalogue the madman's crimes, and he knew but just a small part of the world's greater history.

Where could one man's depravity carry him? How far into the realm of lucid dementia could a single man delve without losing all sense of himself? Vandegarte's lust for power was obviously his one great driving ambition, but what motivations underlay that ambition? Was Apica's authority enough to at last sate the demon? If he should, gods forbid, come to possess that prized seat on the Synod, what then would he do? Would he be content to wield his new powers unchallenged? Or would he lust for still more? The answer to this query was as clear to the Hero of Alcorde as a vision of the sun as seen through a cut white diamond.

But what more could there be, beyond Apica? Epsilon could not guess, and decided no mere mortal of his lowly stature could ever determine what might be in the mind of a man so powerful. One thing only could he say certainly about that madman. Based on all the atrocities gone before, Epsilon realized Vandegarte was not the type of man to rest in victory. He was not

the type of man to relax on reward. The First Emperor was nothing if he was not eternally greedy. Nothing, if he was not restless. Nothing if he was not contemplating new conquests.

Where would it all end? Epsilon shuddered to think. But end it inevitably would, one day, as all things under the sun must end, immortal or no.

Epsilon vowed he would be there on that day, standing before the madman, blooded and bloody. Epsilon swore by all that he held sacred in his martial heart that nothing short of a god's intervention would save Vandegarte from his vengeance. For, even as the First Emperor had loosed himself on the Wilderlands, so was the Warfarer now loose. Epsilon had come, not by force or at the point of a prodding spear, but willfully, intent upon conquests of his own.

Suddenly filled with a violent spirit, Epsilon drew his sword and wielded it over his head so it flashed in the dappled sunlight. He screamed his defiance for all the Wilderlands to hear, and goaded Helmcleaver into a forehoof-slashing sally. The warhorse brayed and whinnied skittishly, wondering what the trouble might be.

When he was brought around to face back along the eastern road, Vandegarte's tall, graven image stood before him, dressed out in full armor of war and leaning a marble broadsword out from his hip. Epsilon raised his own bladed fist and bellowed, "Damnable, foul overlord! Thy immortality hath but saved thee for this blade, this hand, this time! See me now and be dismayed!"

And suddenly a dark cloud rolled over the declining face of the sun. All the world paled in that instant, and a peel of thunder sounded from the heavens.

Ubar rolled his eyes skyward. "It is an ill omen," he commented dryly as he jogged past.

Epsilon smiled blackly and sheathed his sword. Turning away from the likeness of his nemesis, the Warfarer growled, "Aye, but for whom, lad? For whom?" And he spurred Helmcleaver eastward.

From there, they pushed on in silence, each brooding his (or her) own fate. The sun set at their backs, its descent aligned all too perfectly with the straightforward passage of the road, so their shadows were visible despite the forest, even late into the evening.

The road was difficult, as it climbed and descended many steep hills. By nightfall, all were weary and ready for bed.

The Hero of Alcorde was anxious to press on, despite his fatigue, but Pandolyn dissuaded him of his intentions. She said it was not safe to travel through the Wilderlands at night, even for a High Wizard of the Synod. Trusting to her guidance, they chose to pass the night in an artifact stone building set close by the lawn. Its heavy stone shutters were permanently sealed in place, and a blanket proved adequate cover to shield the door. So cloistered out of sight, Pandolyn felt safe enough to permit a cheery fire. Ubar cleared the chimney's ancient flue and Epsilon gathered wood from the forest floor.

That night, they ate their rations hot. Epsilon discovered that juliose seemed to change flavors when warmed over an open flame. If anything, it was savorier. After dinner, the three each chose a wall of the small hut and placed their aching backs against it.

"We should set watches," announced Epsilon tiredly, reaching for a plug of jillroot. "It is sure to be a long night."

Pandolyn smiled a toothy, reptilian smile and rummaged through her many sacks and bags. From one of these, she produced a thickly padded velveteen pouch. Loosening its drawstring, she poured out an enchanted stone the size of a woman's fist. It seemed a mere pebble in the lizard lady's massive, scaled hand, and she handled it delicately, as though it were precious beyond estimation. "This," she intoned, "shall serve as our werewatch."

"The Eyestone of Bebblegeth," breathed Ubar. "More capable than any human orb. It sees all, even that which is charmed or invisible."

"Indeed," she said by way of agreeing with her prodigy's words. Addressing Epsilon, she asked, "How long has it been since you slept? Not since the Roaring Lion, unless I miss my guess. Yes? Well, tonight you shall sleep unworried. The Eyestone shall watch over us all, and not be blinded by night or magic or foul weather."

The wizardess held the crystalline object in her left hand for her general to admire. Her right swept over it slowly, gently, as though she were polishing it without touching its surface.

In a low voice that rose steadily in pitch and intensity, she sang;

Eyestone of Bebblegeth, un-blinded orb,
watch from high towers
for signs of the horde,

warn us of dangers, whether near or afar,
beware of invaders
be they hidden 'neath stars.

Eyestone of Bebblegeth, all seeing orb,
let this night pass safely
without fright or alarm,
let no sneak thief plague us, for good or for ill,
but call out in darkness
that our killers be killed.

And she tossed the gem into the air. Epsilon winced, and expected the beautiful contrivance to be smashed beyond repair against the hard marble floor. Instead, it reached the apogee of its flight and hung there, spinning slowly in the uncertain firelight. The Warfarer suddenly felt a strange gaze upon him. Its presence was unsettling at first, but he soon became accustomed to it and was even comforted by it.

Pandolyn announced, "There is a long and interesting story behind the orb and my possession of it. That bit of glass has seen more of the world than any human eye on the face of the planet, mortal or immortal. It is unspeakably old.

"Once, it adorned King Lemlot's capitol city, Allnacht, and revolved in the highest tower of his castle keep to watch over all the Kingdom of Darchmoore. It witnessed great days and sad there, for it served Darchmoore long. The Eyestone has seen innumerable vandal hordes encamped about Allnacht's walls in its final days, and watched as whole royal bloodlines were cut in twain and bled out in vain denial of Darchmoore's capitol. That city was defended, but at great cost to its people. In the end, their valiant struggles mattered not, for Vandegarte had merely stumbled at Allnacht's headwaters. He had not been defeated. All too soon, he returned to finish the conflict, and King Lemlot was thrown down. The Eyestone witnessed that event, too.

"Though he was tortured mercilessly, the courageous king would not betray his disposal of the Eyestone, knowing as he did how the enchanted orb would only enhance the overlord's already considerable powers. What is worse than an immortal man that cannot naturally die? One that also cannot be easily slain. And with the Eyestone in his possession, Vandegarte would be all but impossible to assassinate. So Lemlot held his tongue to the end, and died without speaking.

"Meanwhile, the Eyestone was passed out of Darchmoore in the clutches of a great eagle. The bird bore the coveted stone far away from that blighted land, delivering it safely to Lemlot's distant, royal cousin, Ooberrot. In its turn, the Eyestone of Bebblegeth watched over Ooberrot's domain, the Kingdom Montanya, even as it had watched over Darchmoore for his cousin. From father to son, the prize was passed through three generations in that happy land, until once more the vandal hordes pitched their camp and countless watch fires outside its master's capitol. Once more, sack and sacrilege were propagated in the madman's name, until the king's armies were in

route and its people enslaved. When Ooberrot's great grandson realized his rule was in grave jeopardy, he removed the Eyestone from its place of keeping and fled south with it to the sea.

"But the boy king was betrayed, and Vandegarte was forewarned of his intentions. Pursued to the very sandy edges of the world, the madman's minions cornered the boy on the beach, and slew all his servants and kindred caught traveling in his company. None save the deposed kingling remained. Again, Vandegarte's torturers were called into service, and they worked their craft with a will. Yet the boy did not surrender his last hope.

"When he perished silently at his taskmasters' hand, Vandegarte learned of it and was enraged. He had his own camp razed and his own soldiers slain to a man for failing in the quest. As for Ooberrot's great grandson, the boy's body was left afield to be devoured by creatures carrion.

"Little did Vandegarte know that the Eyestone was kept safe within the kingling's body, hidden as it was much as I concealed Semmelweiss' locket from Marakeel's inquisitors. In time, the boy's flesh decayed, and only his bones remained. Then these, too, were devoured and scattered in turn, leaving only the orb behind.

"And so it remained, drifted and all but lost among the seashore's sand dunes, until a lonely peasant woman picked it up and rescued it from oblivion many long, long years later. From there, it passed through her family as an heirloom, generation upon generation, until the time of the Wilderlands. Before they were all lost to Sin Apica's fell magic, the stone was somehow smuggled north, where a dying man traded it for a last meal from a kind stranger.

"I was the kind stranger that furnished the meal. For, you see, the wretched wanderer was quite blind by then, and utterly unconcerned with my ugliness. It has been my most prized possession since that time, and has saved my life many times over. Never has the Eyestone of Bebblegeth failed me. And I pray to all gods in heaven that it never shall."

Ubar raised his eyes to the heavens and mouthed a silent prayer of agreement. Epsilon whistled appreciatively, and turned a new gaze on the contrivance. It seemed all the more wonderful for his fresh understanding of its history, and he was grateful that Pandolyn had shared it with him. The kingdoms she had mentioned in the course of her short tale were the stuff of legends, even in Empire. If the Eyestone was left to watch over those entire nations, then surely it could safeguard three lonely travelers. He would, indeed, sleep well, though guardedly, tonight beneath its altruistic protection.

Groggily, he enquired, "But who, or what, is 'Bebblegeth'?"

Ubar grunted haughtily. "Only the best known and most powerful wizard this world has ever seen. What knave has not heard Bebblegeth's tales?"

Epsilon bristled, casting off all thought of sleep. He might have made a foul remark, save for Pandolyn's timely intervention.

Inserting herself into the uncomfortable silence, the wizardess admonished her upstart protégée. "You, yourself, had never heard of Bebblegeth until you were banished to the Wilderlands, Ubar. Do not forget that our general is but fresh to this country, and largely

ignorant of its ways. Ignorant, I say, and not stupid. In time, he will learn all he needs to know. As mentors, it is our duty to inform him gently, without belittling his lack of knowledge."

"Yes, High Wizard. I have erred. Forgive me, Sir Epsilon. My tongue is not so well tuned as my mind."

The Warfarer eased back against the wall and let his eyelids settle nearly shut. He took another bite of jillroot and chewed slowly. "Well, it is no matter, boy. I have brushed aside more lethal strokes. Yet come again, who will tell me of Bebblegeth?"

Pandolyn sipped a cup of juliose and grinned a toothy grin. "It is a long story when told well. Too long, even for this night."

"But tell him some of it, at least, master," urged Ubar, whining as a petulant child. "I will be long in finding sleep without a rousing tale to settle my mind."

"Very well. I will tell him what little I know of Bebblegeth, the man, and something of the wonderful contrivances that he fashioned in his time. Would the Story of the Lyres suit you, Ubar?"

"Indeed, for I have not heard it in many months!"

She laughed softly and sipped her wine. "I know not when Bebblegeth was born, save that he lived in ancient times. I know not where he was born, save that he traveled all the world and loved all places equally well. I know not what sort of man was he, save that he was wise beyond measure and powerful beyond belief... and... he was allied with Rit.

"In his time as Apica, Bebblegeth forged many great works and performed many fantastic deeds. He traveled alone to the far western regions of the world, indeed, to the world's very edge beyond Sky Cap Mountains, and returned with knowledge that learned men in these regions have never imagined. Many of his creations have survived to this day, while others have passed into the realm of legend and rumor.

"The Eyestone has survived. And the Five Stars of Corinth. And Bebblegeth's Lyres.

"Of all his baubles, it is the Lyres that I most fancy. It is said that Bebblegeth fashioned them for deposed Prince Tallian to aid the youth in retaking his usurped throne. Prince Tallian had journeyed to a far kingdom on a diplomatic errand, and fell victim to a coupe while he was away. It was a dastardly and most cowardly act, one that threatened to disrupt the world's balance of power then in much the same way that Vandegarte has disturbed it now. As such, Bebblegeth was pledged to set matters aright.

"As I have said, the Lyres were his answer to Tallian's problem. Fashioned secretly in his mountaintop sanctuary, Bebblegeth wrought the golden harps with much care and skill, instilling in every shaping of the alloy, every stretch of the bow and strings, a simple but time daunting magic. So perfectly wrought were those instruments, that their merest note is said to be enough to enslave a score of men.

"When he had finished with the Lyres, three in all, Bebblegeth sent them via armed courier into Tallian's lost homeland, the sea bound Kingdoms of Lemmerling. There the gifts were well

received by the usurper, for the Ancient One had affixed a false message from Prince Tallian, which claimed truce and offered the Lyres as gifts for sparing the prince's life.

"Anxious to gloat over this, his latest victory, the despoiler called for his minstrels, and commanded that they play the fabulous Lyres for him. And oh, how they played, Sir Epsilon! How they played and played and played!" She laughed and sprang lithely to her feet. Though her form all but filled the small building, Pandolyn found sufficient space beneath the peaked roof to dance a little jig. In slow, lilting tones she sang;

Lyres of Bebblegeth

play me a song

that I might dream

all the night long.

Lyres of Bebblegeth

bleed me a lay

that I might dance

all the long day.

Lyres of Bebblegeth

tinkling as bells

drown me in treble

cool, deepling wells.

Lyres of Bebbblegeth

bell my lost heart

that I not stray

but stay near to your art.

Lyres of Bebbblegeth

bring down my walls

redeemers come tumbling

into the midst of my halls.

Lyres of Bebbblegeth

play me a dirge

cover my bones

with lamenting words.

Lyres of Bebbblegeth

lay me down low

thy sweet tongues have undone me

and gratefully so.

Epsilon and Ubar both applauded when her song was finished. Pandolyn curtsied, arraying a skirt she was not wearing, and returned to her makeshift seat. "I thank you. Your clamor reminds me of my minstrel youth."

Both men (or one man and a boy lizard) called for more. Epsilon was especially interested to hear what became of the usurper's reign.

"As soon as the first string was plucked, all within hearing were enchanted by the Lyres' music. The despoiler's court was rendered immobile in the grips of Bebblegeth's magic spell, and so they remained, held at the harps' mercy until Prince Tallian had breached his own walls and retaken his own capitol city. His soldiers, you see, had been forewarned of the Lyres' influence, and so waged their one side contest with ears stuffed full of waxen flax. Only when the usurper's enslaved minstrels were slain did they cease their playing, undoing the spell.

"These are the danger's of the Lyres of Bebblegeth. As with all the Ancient One's talismans, the harps are beautiful beyond mortal design, breathtaking to behold, irresistible to the touch, but deadly once employed. More than one would be thief or owner has dared Bebblegeth's power to play the harps. All have died in the attempt.

"For the Lyres are not instruments of pleasure. They are implements of war. They are weapons, and quite deadly."

"I see," grunted a weary Epsilon, slouching more comfortably into the corner he had selected. "It is an interesting yarn. But what has become of the Lyres? You said they have survived the ravages of time."

Pandolyn shrugged her scaly shoulders and stifled a yawn. "Indeed they have. Or so it is said. I know only that they were last seen in Vandegarte's possession many years ago, though it is

whispered he has long since lost them. Perhaps he destroyed the Lyres, fearing their potency that rivaled his own best magic and surpassed it."

"I do not believe that for an instant!" interjected a suddenly animated Ubar. "Surely not even that madman would undo objects so wondrous, so sacred as the Lyres of Bebblegeth. There must be some sane limit to his depravities!"

The wizardess sighed leadenly. "Foolish boy. You dream of rainbows in the midst of a tempest. Such is not to be. Not in this day, at the least, not until the wheel turns again. No, he has destroyed them or scattered them where they will never be found. On that you may rely."

Ubar raised his head as though to speak, but mumbled something inaudible instead. Upon Pandolyn's demand to repeat himself, the youth stated more loudly, "I would not be so wasteful."

Epsilon scoffed. "Oh? And what would you do, boy, were you standing in Vandegarte's boots? Have the Lyres fall into an enemy's hands to be used against you some day?" Epsilon spat to one side and offered Ubar a cake of 'root. The lizard boy accepted after a moment's hesitation.

The Warfarer smiled slyly, for it would seem to be Ubar's first experience with jill. "No, Vandegarte is too vile a villain for all that. A man such as he is nothing if he is not eternally in fear for his life, eternally suspicious of all that he cannot rule. If it was his mind to do so, Vandegarte might have disposed of those priceless treasures as easily as you or I might crush a gnat between our thumb and forefinger."

The youth sniffed the cake delicately, then took an experimental bite. After delicate mastication, his reptilian face clouded comically, and the boy spat loudly to the ground between

his scaly knees. Epsilon was surprised, however, to see that Ubar did not discard the bolus altogether. "Pardon my manners, Sir Warfarer. It is fine Empirical 'root. I have not tasted its like since I was cast out."

"I wager you have never tasted its like, even then." Epsilon returned his vice to its pouch.

"It is the finest in all of Empire. Given to me at Alcorde by the Emperor, himself."

"But of course. My cousin ever had the finest tastes. I recognized his brand immediately." Ubar sniffled and chewed and spat contemplatively. "It was always a bit too sweet for my palate, however."

Epsilon's eyes went wide despite himself. "Your cousin? The Emperor?"

"None other. Who else employs mages in those lands void of all that is magic? Mages skilled enough to do what was done to me?"

"So. You are a Royal."

"Half-Royal, actually. On my father's side, as well you may guess."

The Hero of Alcorde was stunned. "A half-blood, yet you were accepted into the High Court?"

"Accepted?" Ubar laughed the word derisively. "What could they do but accept me? No, my presence was forced upon the High Court.

"While my father, the Duke of Ashingdown, yet lived, I enjoyed all the privileges of a duke's son, save that of legitimacy. And so I was educated well beyond any mere commoner's means. In fact, I so pressed my mentors that my levels of skill and knowledge all too quickly

outstripped my peers and, finally, even that of my teachers. Before I had passed fourteen summers in this world, I was a graduate of the Teslan University and a declared Savant of Alchemy." Ubar stopped speaking to eye his audience cautiously. Was he talking too much? Or too slowly? Were these daunting people interested in what he had to say? Pandolyn already knew the tale. But what of the swordsman? What of Sir Epsilon? Ubar was shocked to see that the stern war monger was listening with all due attention! The boy hastened to continue.

"Naturally, a great many people were jealous of my achievements, even enraged. Many Royals, most of them ten years my senior, were passed over for Savant that year, and most of them blamed me for their failure. The fact that I was a half-breed made matters worse. And my father's death all but sealed my fate."

Ubar gulped and blinked owlshly, as though remembering a forgotten terror. When he resumed speaking, his already rough hewn voice was edged with unstable emotion. "The Duke left nothing for me in his will, naturally, as I was a bastard. Rather, he entrusted my care to his survivors. People that now hated me.

"So precarious was my position, that I feared being slain outright the very night of my father's internment. And slain I most assuredly would have been, if not for my discovery." Ubar chose that indelicate moment to pause and scratch himself furiously just where his stumpy tail met his rump.

The Warfarer sat patiently, chewing his cud as a satisfied cow. He watched Ubar scratch and scratch and scratch himself. When it appeared the boy's attention was all consumed, never to return to the tale, Epsilon cleared his throat.

Ubar stopped preening abruptly and glanced up expectantly, as though the last thing he expected was that they might be curious to hear the end of his sad story. "What?"

"As a ray of sunshine, you are shockingly dense, boy. What discovery saved you?"

"Oh. That. It was quite simple, really." Ubar added a few more swipes at his scaled buttocks, then settled in to have his say. "It was a matter of money, you see. And nothing severs bonds, or forges them, quite so tidily as gold. Especially when it is the Emperor's gold in question.

"It was the mages, you see, corrupt as they are. They were commissioning great and holy works of art in the Emperor's name. Most of the pieces were heavily wrought in everlasting gold. Gold drawn from Empire's coffers. Long had my royal cousin suspected that his mages were conspiring to rob him in this manner, for he believed that they were somehow substituting lead, or some other worthless metal, in place of his good bouillon. Unfortunately, he could not determine a method clever enough to prove the theft, and neither could any of his Savants at the University. Until I approached the problem, in fact, they deemed it unsolvable, much as that of curvature's definitive constant.

"But this was not the case, in reality. There was a solution. An obvious solution." Ubar smacked his lips eagerly, his sinuous tongue writhing fluidly between spiked teeth to roughly form

his speech. "It struck me upon first consideration of the dilemma. I was smitten so profoundly by my insight, that I shouted out loud in joy and ran from my sanctuary all a'dither. Before too many happy footsteps had fallen, however, my good sense was returned. As a great, ponderous weight, the full and mighty impact of what I had discovered settled down on my shoulders to crush my soul. At first, I saw only my doom in the numbers I had uncovered.

"Then I realized they might also be my salvation. When my cousin called me to court the next day in order to enquire as to my progress in the matter (for it was widely accepted that I, if anyone ever, would solve the puzzle), I did not reveal my discovery immediately. Rather, I promised eventual results, and hedged when pressed for a fixed date."

Epsilon nodded sagely. He felt himself warming to the lad. "Most prudent, I think."

Ubar beamed toothily. "Yes, well, I cannot lay claim to a self-determined strategy in this matter. My life was saved quite by accident. You see, I had discovered that gold and alloys of gold displace water at a different volume, depending on the relative amounts of gold and other metals present in the sample. A stone's weight of iron, for instance, would displace a particular amount of water, whether it was formed in the shape of sphere, or plate, or Royal Crown, or whatever. While the same pound of gold in the same shape would displace quite a different and unique quantity.

"This was the crux of my enlightenment, for it had long been argued that the easiest way to determine whether the theft was occurring would be to melt the icons and holy relics down, rendering them to their base metal components. But the mages countered this approach by

claiming that such sacrilege could bring only misery and disaster down upon Empire. Once a holy object has been commissioned and formed in the name of a god, the mages declared that only an act of the gods could unmake it. All other forms of destruction would be heresy.

"Now my royal cousin is not the sort to tempt the mages and their undetermined powers. And he certainly would never do anything to upset the gods, as he believes their divine authority to be the base of his power among men. Yet neither was he the kind to take lightly to larceny. Not even his Royal Magicians would escape the axeman, were I to definitively prove their embezzlement." Ubar grinned sanguinely and rubbed his scaly forepaws together happily.

"As I was saying, the genius of my method was the use of water to determine the objects' volume. With nothing more than a simple bathtub and a few lumps of metal of known composition, I was able to plot and determine the densities of the various elements with startling accuracy and reliability. During one of my many tests, and quite by accident, I had reached for an alloy of gold and lead, that I might measure it against a similar weight of pure gold, when I instead picked up one of the mages' holy relics. Not realizing my error, I made my measure and recorded the result, noting that the sample was obviously not pure gold.

"When I withdrew the sample from the bath, in this case a sizeable icon dedicated to Jude the Holy Martyr, I was stunned to see what I had done. Thereupon, I jumped up with a shout and charged out of my sanctuary in delirium. Or have I told you this part already?

"Yes. Quite right. Well, from there, once my senses recovered, and I managed to elude my cousin's pointed and royal enquiries, I made my way to the Hall of Magicians. The guild was

none too happy to receive me, at first, and I progressed through countless underlings before His Holy Majesty the High Mage would grant me a hearing. I recall it was late at night, and the old man seemed quite upset.

"When I told him what I had discovered, he paled so completely that I thought he had bled to death on the spot. He, of course, knew that I had been to see the Emperor that very day, though the session was held in secrecy and he knew not its specific content. I suppose he thought he had been betrayed, and I had come to gloat.

"I quickly laid his greater fears to rest, however, and assured him that I had not betrayed the discrepancy to my cousin. Neither did I insinuate that the theft was done with the High Mage's knowledge. No, I simply alluded to the problem, and stated how I felt it might be best for all the Empire if the artifacts were recast and reworked before my discovery was brought to light.

"Naturally, he insisted that I never present my discovery to the court at all, but I assured him that my presentation must be made. I wanted to enlist his guild's aid, you see, in protecting me from my many detractors in court. On hearing this, he threatened me with my life once more on his own account. Whereupon I, in turn, threatened him with his, and those of all the other mages of the guild. I told him how I had made arrangements for my method to come into the Emperor's hands within four weeks, whether I was alive to present it to him personally or no. Then I named for him the pieces from the Emperor's galleries that I would test for authenticity's sake at the end of that four week period.

"You see, I had guessed that the majority of the Empire's alleged holy relics were in fact fraudulently cast. There was no possible way for the mages to replace all those works in a month's time, but they could replace a select handful. This was how I planned to manipulate them."

Epsilon was grinning now, and picked up the boy's incredibly adept tactical recitation. "You had informed them regarding the first set of test pieces, allowing the guild to prepare for your eventual examinations. Thus, their dirty little secret would be maintained for the moment. In the future, however, they would never know which pieces were to be tested or when. And yet, since it would require enormous amounts of time to replace all the artifacts, this information must needs be known. Their only hope in this matter lay with you."

"Correct." Ubar fairly purred his approval. "You are not so slow as your great girth would imply. The mages would insist on my conducting the experiments, since it was my theory and I alone, they would claim, precisely understood it. By guaranteeing my participation in the inquests, the guild could in turn ensure that their interests were well served and their dark secret kept.

"Necessarily, of course, I must needs be alive in order to betray my cousin. So my own reward would be a continued existence.

"Had I simply withheld the discovery as a means of extortion, my fate would have been sealed. The guild would have ordered my murder out of hand. Had I simply presented it forthright to the Emperor, the same end would have been inevitable. Once their embezzlement

was brought to life, the guild would have nothing left to fear from me. The High Mage's successor would be bound to take his revenge, much to my own loss.

"As it stood, I made it clear that their theft would remain unrevealed, so long as no harm befell me, whether at the hands of the guild or any of my other enemies at court. I told them how I had made arrangements for the whole truth to come out in the event of my untimely demise." Ubar sighed brokenly and averted his eyes, lowering his head shamefully. "I believed my position to be twice secured in this manner. Once in the regular tests of the Empire's riches, and once in the keeping of the secret's sultry details."

"It was a fine plan, Ubar," provided Pandolyn. "It should have worked."

"For a time, at least. Oh, I held no delusions that this subterfuge alone would see me into old age, but I was confident it would hold until I could come up with something better. I was confident my plots would hold for several years, at the least. How quickly could precious works of art be recast and replaced, after all?"

"Ah," drawled Epsilon, "I think I see the one fatal flaw of your scheme. You were counting on the difficulty inherent in replacing ALL the relics. You did not consider that the current guild's mages need replace only the works they had directly commissioned. Past crimes could be blamed on dead men, after all. As unpleasant as it might be, such revelations would not necessarily demand severed heads. If anything..."

"If anything, the guild's contemporary mages would seem all the more honorable for not succumbing to their predecessors' greed." Ubar's tone had waxed from proud and vain to

defeated and devastated. "But you are wrong when you say I did not foresee this circumstance. I had taken all this into consideration. My failure was not one of oversight, but one of underestimation.

"As I said, I had hoped to gain many years of safety by holding my tongue, for the current guild had commissioned a shocking number of holy works. By my most conservative estimations, it should have taken them no less than two years to replace all their purloined riches, and perhaps as long as ten. So much gold was involved... more than I could imagine. A horde of wealth. Mountains, quite literally mountains, of coin. Enough to purchase a thousand estates, to build ten thousand palaces. Enough money to own all the men in the world. Can you understand a sum so large, Sir Epsilon? Riches so vast? I could not. With all my intellect and powers of imagination, I could not for my life imagine so much in the hands of so few.

"Yet somehow they managed the impossible. Oh, everything went well at first. The guild could not bury their crimes in a fortnight.

"Weeks and months passed after my discovery was revealed and the Emperor's holy treasures were tested bona fides. In return for my silence, and as promised, the mages went to work on my detractors in court, removing them from my attention one by one until none of my enemies remained. Life was bliss. I even turned to contemplating marriage and life as a respected country squire.

"Then the bottom fell out of my cup. I know not how it happened exactly, save that one morning I awakened to find myself lying bound atop a pile of manure in the back of a dung cart.

My wine of the previous evening must have been drugged... or perhaps it was a spell of some sort.... At any rate, I must have slept long and hard, for we were many, many leagues outside capitol Tesla ere I stirred, that dung monger and I." Ubar shuddered and spat viciously to one side. "How the old, toothless peasant laughed to see my distress! I can yet hear the rasping cackles of his unwholesome sport! All the while he made light of my situation with comments like, 'Ye gods! A wealth of waste, for some knave has discarded a perfectly good young boy!' and 'It is a rotten load that burdens my tired donkey this day! A rotten load indeed!'"

Pandolyn and Epsilon both cracked smiles in the same instant and seemed suddenly intent on stifling bursts of laughter. Ubar noticed this and waxed angry.

"Oh, fine! Join a peasant's cruelty and mock my disaster!" The boy sounded to be on the verge of tears. "Perhaps you have slept on beds of shit all your lives, and find your pillow humorous in the morning! I would not, and did not then, in fact. I can imagine nothing more shocking than my first moments of exile, of waking in this horror world of filth and bestiality. Dung for my pillow. Dung for my bed. Dung for my covers."

"And dung for your head," supplied Epsilon, finishing the well known children's rhyme.

"Precisely. A fitting last jibe, eh?" Ubar spat again, and suddenly clenched his savage claws tightly into fists. "Those damned mages did that to me! They humiliated me and worse! I was left to sleep on a dung heap without slippers on my feet!"

Now the Warfarer laughed openly, much to the youth's chagrin. He had tried to hold his mirth, but the image of a spoiled half-Royal riding in the back of a wagon in his bed clothes,

reclined atop a heap of fresh, reeking shit was too much by far. Holding his ribs, the swordsman toppled to one side and coughed out his merriment. Ubar worked his mouth silently and bristled impotently.

When he had at last regained mastery of his own body, Epsilon heaved, "But do you not see, boy, how you had done the same thing to them? You, yourself, said you could not imagine the amount of wealth required to set matters aright. How much do you think it cost those wizards? Hmm? And how do you think they felt when all was finished? I imagine they felt as penniless and lost and shat upon as you did upon first waking into exile."

Pandolyn added, "And to think, all was done by a mere boy! A boy!"

To which the Warfarer added further, "The High Mage must have felt as I felt when you hit me with that poison powder puff back at the crossroads. What a shock! What a surprise! What a humiliating defeat! No, Ubar, your exile is not a thing of shame. It is a thing of much honor. You belled the bull, son! You belled a herd of bulls! And you have lived to tell the tale."

Epsilon crossed his right arm over his breast abruptly, so his armored forearm clashed loudly with his mailed breast. "I, Epsilon Three of the Martial Rite, salute you, Ubar the Fox. May your sage courage live long among us."

The boy grinned broadly. "Really? I?"

"None other. I can see now why Pandolyn was so adamant in your defense. And why she has accepted you as her protégée."

His grin broadened even further. "I- I know not what to say. Or how to say it."

"When a compliment is bestowed," supplied Pandolyn gently, "It is customary to merely say 'thank you.'"

"Nonsense. The boy does not need to thank me for stating the truth. This is not a high court, and we are not bound by court mannerisms."

"Still," edged Ubar, "I feel I should thank you, sir. Your words were most kind."

"And the truth." Epsilon ejected his well chewed bolus of jillroot and helped himself to a cup of wine, offering both his companions a share in turn. After they had each sipped their beverages, he added, "Now tell me briefly, ere I nod safe beneath Bebblegeth's Eye, why the mages did not simply have you murdered."

"Oh, murder was their ultimate intention, sir. I was not left atop the dung heap as an end, but as a means to the end. Upon waking, I found I was chained hand and foot, and so I remained until the end of the ride. It was a long, long ride indeed, for I was borne far away from Tesla's populated hillsides, into the mountain ranges of the west.

"As you know, the murder of a Royal, even a half-blood, is a most heinous and capital crime. The mages did not dare to dispose of me in the city proper, where my bones might be turned from the soil without warning. No, they had abducted me in so despicable a manner with the intent that I be hauled off to a far shire and slain there. And slain I would have been, if not for my master's timely and benevolent intervention." The young boy turned his reptilian face toward his benefactor with the fond gaze that a child reserves for its mother. "The dung monger ultimately delivered me into the hands of a death squad, nearly a dozen armed men. Then, just as

they would have let their arms fall in time to chop me to pieces, a monster leapt out of the forest and killed my killers."

Her face all but lost in the deep shadows forged by their suddenly dying fire, Pandolyn shrugged Ubar's praise aside. "He was but a naked boy, Sir Warfarer, a mere lambkin cowering before slobbering wolves. How could I, I who was once a woman, stand by and allow such a slaughter to be perpetrated before my un-aiding eyes? I could not.

"But neither did I expect the boy to cling to me after I set him free. I expected him to bound happily away to his home, perhaps to call out the dogs against me when he arrived there safely. Yet this boy would not go. From the start, Ubar seemed more terrified of Empire than he was of me. And when I asked him whether or no he had a home, all his long story came gushing out." Pandolyn finished her last sup of juliose and sat her cup aside. Then she stretched out atop her many bags, making her rough bed as soft as possible with much grunting and heaving of sighs. At last comfortable, she added, "Immediately upon hearing of his troubles, I realized the boy would never again know safety within the Wall. His only hope of salvation lay in seeking the Wilderlands without. I told him as much, and he was dismayed."

"Dismayed? I was daunted. Terror stricken. I found myself longing for the death squad's many sharp blades."

"To do the lad justice, he was less frightened than I had guessed he might be. He faced his fate as courageously as any Hero of Alcorde standing before a Postern Gate."

Epsilon grunted softly. "I doubt it not."

"I did not pressure Ubar to make the change I well knew he must make, should he decide to breach the Great Barricade. I did not mention it once in all the time we journeyed together. Rather, I told him of the dangers he might encounter there, and also of the Wilderlands' sparse pleasures. I told him what generally becomes of men in those lands, and how the fate of the milts might be avoided. He, in turn, asked many questions about the country, and about me. In this manner, we struck up a fast friendship. Such was Ubar's trust of me, that by the time we arrived at the Empire side lawn, he requested the change without further prompting."

"Meaning you are responsible for his... current condition? It was your spell that transcorporated him? And you, Ubar, volunteered for this treatment? Did you know she could not return you to your human form? And still you would have it?"

Ubar nodded emphatically. "I saw no other way."

"No other way out?"

"No other way of avenging myself. I have not forgotten Tesla's fat, oppressive wizards. Nor have I forgiven them. In their ignorance, they would cast me down and destroy me. In my learnedness, I would return some day to Empire and rid it of its truculent parasites." Ubar licked his savage chops thirstily, and suddenly Epsilon was grateful to be the boy's companion, rather than his enemy. "One day soon, the High Mage shall find himself awakened rudely by the dung cart's laden trundling, and Tesla shall know him no longer."

"I see." Epsilon felt himself slipping into sleep's cool, inviting grip. He stretched out on the floor, relaxed by the employment of Pandolyn's potent magic. "And what does the wizardess have to do with your personal vendetta?"

Uncertainly, the boy lizard answered. "My master has nothing to do with it directly. I only hoped to learn magic from her, that I might grow more powerful than my cousin's magicians. Once she releases me from my indenture and my debt is repaid, I will persecute my desires alone if need be."

"And you, Pandolyn, would you aid him in his conquest of Empire?"

Half asleep herself, the witch returned, "Ilmacht's fall is my only immediate concern. Beyond that, I cannot say where I shall go... or what I shall do..." Her words trailed off into a long, peaceful snore.

The Warfarer harrumphed softly. "For my part, boy, I would urge you to formulate a plan of action to rival the gods' own designs. And when you have derived such a plan, hire me for your general." Epsilon yawned mightily without covering his mouth. Though he trusted the Eyestone's enchantment, he did not trust it enough to sleep unawares. He vowed he would not slumber. "It would be most rewarding to spank your high cousin, the Emperor, across his bare buttocks with the flat of my sword." He chuckled softly. "Before his court, with all its haughty, irreproachable bootlicks in attendance." Then he slept, despite his better judgment, holding this thought...

...whereupon Pandolyn shook him awake. It seemed to the weary swordsman that he had not slept at all, yet the moon had already climbed into the western sky and was poised to set. Something about this struck him as strange. Not the moon or its pale luminescence. What struck him as odd was the fact that he could see its morbid face at all.

Before he could leap in a bluster out of bed, the wizardess hissed, "Rise quietly and quickly draw your blade. Trouble plagues us."

Ubar was already stirring in his corner. Epsilon stood whisper silent and eased his ornate sword from its scabbard. All around him, the walls of the stone building shimmered and danced, waxing transparent then opaque again from moment to moment. Through its thick granite roof, he could see the moon's scarred countenance staring down from the western corner of the far lawn. And through its northern wall, a sinister shadow roughly shaped as a man crept up to pry at an invisible stone shutter.

"What is this madness?" demanded the Warfarer in a harsh whisper. Dreamily, he drew his free left hand openly across his face. When its shadow was gone, the illusion remained.

The wizardess retorted, "The Eyestone warns us. It sees all, and sends what it envisions. Now be ready at the door."

Epsilon moved to the center of the building and faced its sole entrance. Now he could see many other shadows stirring in the night. An entire army of devils was emerging from the night bound forest. He could see Helmcleaver standing asleep beneath the twisted boughs of a shade infested tree. Crouching in the canopy there, other milts gathered, preparing their pounce.

His heart hastening its sluggish pace, Epsilon returned to his gear to fetch his helmet. Then he removed an object from his cross braces with his left hand, and dashed through the doorway, sweeping the hanging blanket aside with a swipe of the sword in his right. "Heigh, Helmcleaver! Alarm! Alarm! To flight! To flight!" he cried. With that, he used his thumb to open a hole in the cylindrical device he had pulled from his belt.

As intended, it flared to life with a blinding light. Shielding his eyes, Epsilon tossed the mage's candle high into the air.

A shadow form darted around the corner of the hut. Head lowered, it charged. The Warfarer diced it expertly with quick, forceful cuts of his blade. His steel sang a sanguine note with each stroke.

Helmcleaver whinnied nervously and reared. It struck out with its steel shod hooves, impacting against a soft milt body with a dull thud. Once the fell creature was prone, Epsilon's warhorse trampled it to pieces. Now the animal reared again, as yet another insect man dashed out of the briars to attack.

Then Epsilon was busy with his own problems. At Pandolyn's sharp shout of warning, he spun about only just in time to catch an ambushing milt in mid-descent as it jumped from the roof. Spitting it through and through with his sword, Epsilon let the monster's momentum carry him backward a step before he spun around to let the creature fall. The impact hardly slowed the attack. With a pair of incredibly strong paws, it gripped the Warfarer by his elbows and heaved ferociously to pull itself up along the length of his sword's blade. Epsilon gasped and was

dismayed by the animal's strength. Other forms were flying now from the forest, ready to rush and overwhelm him.

With his free left hand, the Hero of Alcorde drew his great fencing dagger and cut loose the milt's marauding claws. When his right arm and weapon were rescued, he used these to ultimately dispatch the hapless monster, cutting its horny body to pieces.

Epsilon returned his attention to his mount. Even as he turned his gaze on Helmcleaver's plight, a milt dropped out of the canopy to land atop the charger's broad, straining back. Immediately upon finding its seat, the miserable insect leaned flush over Helmcleaver's back and latched onto the horse's hide with brutal, deeply seating claws. The stallion screamed, bucking and rearing. Helmcleaver abandoned the pile of victims he had amassed, and turned to gallop away into the darkness, headed east along the road.

Before the Warfarer could bellow a command to halt, something struck him heavily at the backs of his knees. Resisting a fatal fall, Epsilon scrambled out from beneath the assault and turned to face this latest comer. The milt reared up before him, less than an arm's length away. Too close for Epsilon to use either of his long blades. With the speed of instinct and reflex, the Warfarer drew back his mailed and gauntlet sheathed left fist, which yet held its requisite dagger, and smashed the milt's face to a pulpy mess with a single blow. It flew backwards to land spread eagle on its back.

Reacting to a movement at the corner of his eye, Epsilon swept his sword around widely to his right. Another beast fell, severed in twain at the hip.

Following through fluidly with this same cut while dropping his arm ever so slightly, the Warfarer sheered away the legs of yet another milt that had sought to attack him from behind. Its body careened against him as it fell to the earth. Two sets of talons raked him as it swept past, scraping uselessly across the chain mail guarding his breast. A second hacking blow to the back of his foe's neck finished the fight.

Blowing from his exertions, the valiant Hero of Alcorde righted himself, assuming a ready stance in preparation of the next assault. For a moment, a heartbeat moment, the combat paused and all was perfectly still. In the flickering light of his mage's candle, Epsilon quickly counted no less than thirty milts within a short leap's distance of him. Perhaps a hundred more crouched not much further beyond. And beyond these, other larger shadows stirred, brandishing the unmistakable silhouettes of weapons.

All too soon, the Warfarer realized, he would be facing more than naked flesh and fang. His heart both swelled and shrank at the sight, for it was nothing less than his own certain doom; an end to suffering, an end to life.

As abruptly as it had pervaded his vision, the tableau faded, and was replaced by the chaos of combat. Epsilon cried desperately, "Helmcleaver! To hand! To hand! Heigh! To hand!" But no answering echoes of hoofs assaulted his ears.

Instead, he was answered by a renewed onslaught of charging milts. The hulking monsters at the rear seemed to be spurring the smaller creatures on, urging them forward despite their fears of the terrible Ritesman. A veritable tide of opponents surged out of the forest now,

bearing down on the lone defender with the inevitable weight of a crushing surf. Epsilon felt a death cry wrenched from his tightly constricted throat, and he raised his weapons defiantly to accompany the sound with physical threat.

Steeling himself to fall and perish, the Hero of Alcorde was surprised to see the living wave falter and fail before him, only to recede in a tumble back upon itself. For a moment, Epsilon's ego swelled enormously.

Then Pandolyn charged past him, arrayed in glorious rage. Her dragon's voice a bellow of enchanting spells, her massive paws filled each with a heavy stone, the wizardess wielded her might brutally. A shimmering arc of light ran before her. Wherever the light struck, fierce flames erupted. The forest was set to burning.

Swinging her thick, strong arms as hammers, kicking out with her barbed hindquarters and gnashing with her savagely fanged maw, the wizardess slew her enemies in droves. She seemed to surrender to the beast that was her form, for she fought as an animal would, using all her primitive faculties and nothing of her civilized humanity. When the stone in her right hand shattered against a hapless milt's thick skull, Pandolyn snatched off one of the creature's scaly arms and used this as a lethal club. Now she caught one of the larger, armed insect men in her arms and dashed it bodily against an unyielding bole, smashing its ribs with an audible crack. Retrieving the fell commander's lost weapons, a buckler and a great, curving scimitar, Pandolyn renewed her insults.

Following a second crest of sweeping fires into the forest, she charged headlong and fearlessly into the scattered ranks of her enemies. Before those ranks could come together and slam shut at her back, Epsilon followed furiously, reaping a vast harvest of death and injury among the wounded scraps left in the wake of Pandolyn's bloody passage.

She closed and grappled with three of the blackly scaled, serpentine task masters at the rear of the pack. An exchange of magic fires lit the forest shadows. One of the fiercely horned lizard men was set alight, and it danced as a mad candle away through the trees. The two remaining barked at one another in a gargled, hellish language. Epsilon noted that the largest of the pair wore a breastplate stamped with a fist insignia, while the other wore a half moon upon its upper armor.

As he closed to take his place at besieged Pandolyn's rear flank, he heard the devil of the fist growl, "*Ul wuh bun wullnuh. Uch t'klull nu numnum.*"

To which the second replied harshly, "*Nun mul bun wuh null. Nuch t'klullnum.*"

Whereupon they both turned and fled in a flash of light and heat and foully scented smoke. The wizardess screamed her frustrated rage and called upon the 'brimstone of Hades heart'. Another surge of firelight swept out in a vast arc before her silhouette form. The conflagration washed through the undergrowth, burning all it touched.

Epsilon's arms worked tirelessly in accord with the remainder of his strong body to keep the marauding milts at bay. Taking only the smallest steps backward to maintain a fighting interval, the Warfarer dared not divert his attention to Pandolyn's plight, so consumed was he with

the rescue of his own. By twos and threes, haphazardly, the milts staged their individual assaults. Epsilon diced their bodies and severed their limbs automatically, functioning as a finely fashioned metal works. These lower forms were not fierce opponents, he decided. Eventually, as the numbers of his victims compiled and the heaped corpses gathered at his knees, Epsilon came to pity the milts.

It was the big, ichor skinned devils that deserved the fight. They, at least, were equipped with weapons.

Pursuing Pandolyn deeper still into the Wilderland groves, Epsilon found himself at long last faced off with one of these hulking terrors. The two came together at the center of a naturally formed bower. It was a small cathedral of space formed beneath the arched boughs of three huge oaks. The tiny arena was void of all other combatants and contests. Epsilon faced his demon alone.

Warily, the two warriors regarded each other from the opposite sides of a broad circle. Epsilon noted his adversary's breastplate was stamped with the insignia of the fist. Its black wrought iron face was roughly molded and crudely forged, but it did not betray weakness. Indeed, the devil was large and extremely well made. Though smaller than Pandolyn, it was an even match for the Ritesman, in stature at least.

His sleep-numbed mind at last fully awakened and alert, Epsilon rolled his sword deftly about in his right hand, even as he worked his arms in a hypnotic dance of movement. Epsilon's opponent clutched its heavy scimitar in a horny right forepaw, while its left gripped a thick iron

buckler well studded with rivets. Its fanged maw worked open and shut viciously. Its domed head was protected by an oddly shaped helm that allowed its long obsidian horns to pass through.

"*Bluk nullunum, ulchult. T'klull, ulchult,*" it belched. Crouching defensively, the devil paced Epsilon's circling of it. At its back, indeed all around, the forest burned brightly. It feinted, but the Warfarer did not flinch to betray his eventual parry. "*Nuh nuhmumnun ul bluh.*" A serpentine tail swam patiently back and forth behind its thickly muscled shanks. Epsilon did not fail to notice the sharp spikes fixed to that tail. Finally, it spat, "*Chull ulchultum!*" and lunged forward.

Epsilon knocked its scimitar to one side with his sword while he leapt to the other. That lethal tail lashed out to catch his knees in the after pass, but the Ritesman was prepared for this tactic. With a harsh cackle of primitive glee, he cut the bristling menace off close to the devil's rump.

It screamed in pain and rage, even as it lashed out with a round about blow of its buckler arm. His ears ringing from the impact, Epsilon was tossed backward off his feet. Brilliant stars swam in his vision that had nothing to do with the night skies. Epsilon landed solidly on his buttocks, and slid backward a bit. Rolling to dodge a descending sweep of the scimitar, he scrambled to his feet. In the course of this movement, the obsidian devil stepped within an arm's length of the Warfarer. For a briefest instant, one scaled leg was exposed between the dangling plates of the demon's pelvic armor. Epsilon's left hand jabbed out with its long steel projection. His dagger bit and bit deeply.

The iron buckler came down hard across the Ritesman's shoulders. He collapsed with a surprised grunt of forcibly expelled breath. Now the devil raised his evilly curved sword to cut Epsilon in half.

Groaning insensibly, the Warfarer pushed himself up on his elbows, brought both his knees squarely beneath his breast, recovered his arms and their weapons, and finally pushed off with all his might, extending his left hand in the same movement. His dagger slipped deftly into a gap in the demon's armor, an open space where its studded belt met its mail shirt. After a barely noticed resistance, the Warfarer's long steel blade settled to its hilt. Epsilon immediately dropped his arm and squatted, withdrawing the knife. Then he stood once more, stabbing upward again. And again.

A gory, ichor clot oozed down his forearm to drip from his crooked elbow. The scimitar was descending for another stroke, he noted dully, descending to sever his helm and crush his skull. The devil bellowed its wounded rage. Epsilon's right arm rose leadenly with maddening slowness. He felt his sphincter grip and his bowels loosen. No matter how he strained, he could not raise his sword any faster than a snail might crawl.

Yet it was apparently fast enough. The devil's blow was deflected, its denial sounding in the Ritesman's ears as a peel of gongs. Though deafening, it was a lovely din.

The scimitar struck the ground with a thud, and skipped away from its master's wounded grasp. Epsilon saw his chance and took it. His right leg shot out to wrap around behind the demon's knees, even as he stood, shoving up and backward with his arms. His opponent

stumbled, but refused to fall. Its forelimbs, however, pin-wheeled wildly. It spun about to find its balance. A heavy flow of monster blood coursed down its corded thighs. A loop of guts dangled loosely from beneath its armored girdle.

Finally, Epsilon reared back to deliver the killing blow. He targeted the devil's armpit, and lunged forward with the point of his sword. It sank deeply into his foe's chest before he drew it out again.

Screaming shrilly, the beast collapsed in a heap. Epsilon jumped to one side and hacked his fallen prey to bits.

When he finished the deed, he noted how the wildfire's light had dimmed to fade. The Ritesman's senses slowly returned to the present flow of time, and sounds of the greater battle rushed in to fill the voids within his ears. He could hear Pandolyn yet raging somewhere off to the southwest. And for the first time, he recognized Ubar's high pitched cries for attention.

Deciding the wizardess could fend for herself, Epsilon followed his hearing back along the way he had come. When the youth's shrill screeching ended abruptly, Epsilon increased his pace to a full run. Then the cries issued forth once more, this time with a curiously victorious edge. Now again Ubar fell silent abruptly. Moments later, he again filled the forest with a horrible gloating music.

Epsilon burst out of the smoldering undergrowth to find the boy standing in the doorway of the stone hut, facing down a handful of slinking milts. With deft movements of his scaly paws, the boy lizard worked at stuffing something into a long, thin wooden tube. Apparently satisfied

with his preparations, Ubar raised the tube to his toothy maw and blew through it. His cries were momentarily stifled by the effort, only to erupt again once the tube was lowered.

One of the milts clutched at its throat, gargling. It plucked something tiny and brightly colored from its flesh and rubbed the insignificant wound. Ubar was shouting deliriously, "Stupid, foul, treacherous milt! You are slain and you do not yet realize it! Slain by Ubar the Magnificent! Ubar the Destroyer! Ubar the Fox! Die, vermin, die!"

The Warfarer stepped out onto the lawn authoritatively. "Here now, boy, what manner of silly game are you playing now? Surely this is not the time or place."

"Sir Epsilon! I am glad you have returned. It works! Did you see? It works flawlessly! Here, never mind, I will do it again." And he hastened to fumble with the long tube again. Now he raised it to his mouth and blew with all his might. Another milt flinched painfully and swatted something oddly colored from its flesh. Ubar cackled madly. "Did you see that time? Did you? It works! It works! It-"

But the youth's rejoicing was cut short when one of the milts charged. Ubar's eyes went suddenly wide with terror, and he ducked back through the doorway to take refuge within, his seemingly impotent tube discarded and all but forgotten.

The Ritesman reacted instinctively, and drew back his left hand with the dagger to launch it at the milt's spine. He checked his throw, however, when the beast stumbled to one knee and collapsed to the earth. Another of its mates soon followed. Then another. Within seconds, all of Ubar's attackers were quite dead.

As he strode toward the granite building, Epsilon paused to retrieve one of the brightly festooned barbs that had afflicted the milts. Holding it cautiously between thumb and forefinger, he examined it as closely as he could manage in the falling firelight. Ubar's deadly weapon appeared to be nothing more than a large needle with a tassel of gaudily dyed string attached. It was poison, no doubt, and a most curious means of murder.

Epsilon found Pandolyn's protégée cowering in a far corner of the darkened building. Two stiffening milt bodies were stretched out on the floor within.

"Get up, boy. You have nothing more to fear."

Ubar raised his reptilian head meekly "Did you get them? Did you kill the milts?"

"No. You did." The Warfarer helped Ubar to stand, and returned the long wooden tube to him. "Your little toys are infinitely more deadly, pound for pound, than even a Ritesman's sword. Next, you will be fashioning lyres and star stones and glass eyes that see through walls."

The boy might have blushed, had his stiff countenance allowed for such soft expressions of emotion. "You flatter me, sir."

"I count no less than six confirmed kills for your tally, son. And not a scratch on you. What need have you of flattery?" Epsilon brushed himself free of debris quickly, then returned to the doorway. Outside, the forest was quiet once more. Even Pandolyn's great rage had fallen silent. A handful of the milt bodies stirred in the undergrowth, their dead limbs twitching spasmodically. He saw nothing of the big obsidian devils that had apparently commanded the show. "Lady Pandolyn! Are you well? Do you require aid?"

When she did not immediately answer, he briefly considered staging a search for her, but quickly discarded the idea. It would be dangerous to enter the forest in darkness again, with so many un-mastered enemies roaming the area. For, though he counted more than twenty slain milts scattered around the stone hut, Epsilon realized there were undoubtedly many, many more out there somewhere. And many of the horned demon commanders, which were all mightily armed. No, he and Ubar would remain close to their base camp, where Pandolyn could easily locate them on her return. Should she return at all.

Wiping his blade clean with a wad of freshly plucked weeds, the Warfarer turned his gaze on the night sky. A crimson moon was sliding below the forested horizon to the west. The sun would soon rise. *Best to wait for dawn's light*, he decided morosely, wondering what had become of his beloved horse of war.

Standing in the doorway of the tiny building while Ubar kept safe inside, Epsilon patiently watched for dawn, as the forest's shadows paled to flee. Neither Helmcleaver nor Pandolyn emerged from the tomb-quiet woodlands.

8

Lost Talismans Found Again

"Retrieve the Eystone. We break camp." Epsilon stooped to gather his heavy bags, as the sun rose in the east.

Ubar resisted. "We should wait for my master's return."

The Warfarer was not convinced that the wizardess would ever come back. "She knows the way to Ilmacht. Let her follow." More petulantly than he intended, he added, "It was foolish of her to run off. She hires me for her general, but fights her battles alone." Hefting his overly weighty goods, he decided something must be left behind without Helmcleaver to bear the burden. Again he ordered, "Retrieve the Eystone." Then he squatted to sort his belongings, loathe to leave any one of his many specialized weapons behind.

"I cannot," confessed the youth.

Epsilon straightened impatiently. "You cannot, or will not?"

"I will not. Er, eh, I mean I should not. In truth, I know the words of her heeling spell, but I am uncertain of its implementation. One wrong word, one false tone, and only the gods can predict what might happen."

"What sort of adept are you that knows not the ways of his master's magic?"

Came the blustering reply, "The sort that has known his master but two short seasons. Pandolyn is strange in her methods of instruction. Though I am promised an education in the ways of the Wilderlands' most powerful magic, thus far I have learned nothing of sorcery and spells. Instead, I have learned to speak fifteen separate languages, all of them dead to this world. I have learned to quantify an element to its finest particle, but have not learned the finer relations that make the particles work together. I have learned mathematics beyond abstraction, and am learning stranger numbers still.

"My master's mind is vast and enigmatic, Holy Warfarer. Even I, Ubar the Fox, Savant of Alchemy, cannot say what occupies it from moment to moment. And I cannot undo her spells."

Suddenly enraged and frustrated, Epsilon lashed out with his booted foot, kicking a stone out through the open doorway with an audible report. "Oh, fine! I am thrilled to hear it. Just when a promise of real campaign was reared, all tumbles down to dust and comes to nothing."

"I beg your further patience, sir," pleaded Ubar. At last assured the immediate danger had passed, he began to disassemble his cleverly carved blow tube. "Do not surrender Rit Merdian for lost so easily. Hers is a powerful seat, and she is a powerful wizard. A hundred black jetlas could not overcome her."

"Jetlas?"

"You must have seen them. The big brutes at the back of the bunch." Seeing he had at last succeeded in distracting the Warfarer's attention, Ubar pressed a change of subject. "Jetlas

are generally content to prod and drive their underlings into one kind of hazard or another, never daring to risk themselves to danger. Such are the privileges of rank in these Wilderland woods." Ubar sniffed derisively and rummaged among his pouches for a leftover bit of bloodfruit. "It is unfortunate that I could not get one of the devils in front of my blow darts. It might have been interesting to note a jetla's reaction to my poisons."

"Aye. And it might have proved fatal in the same instance."

"Perhaps, for it is true a jetla can be surprisingly powerful and cunning. They are the Enemy's lieutenants, so to speak. A jetla is merely the next step up from a milt, but it is an important step. It is the first level of life with the power to wield Sin's corrupted and corrupting magic."

Epsilon returned to the doorway and stared out across the lawn. Then he turned his gaze on the Eyestone. "I should walk out to the road. Perhaps Helmcleaver is wandering within sight."

Munching his crimson sweet, Ubar shrugged his narrow shoulders, his tail working sinuously back and forth. "Was it a fast horse?"

"The fastest." Epsilon's voice threatened to break, despite the hardened nature of his soul.

"Then perhaps it has survived. If it has, it will doubtless return to this spot. We should wait a while longer here, I think."

"The boy counsels the man," scoffed Epsilon. Exhaling heavily, relenting, the Ritesman turned his gaze back to the lawn and the road beyond. "Still, your words are doubtless wiser than

my own impatient impulses. We are defensible here, at the least. With these stout granite walls around me, I think I might hold this lone entrance against a horde of milts and jetlas." His tone waxing lethal, the swordsman smacked his lips to think of the fight he might make in such a place. "Bodies will seal the way, ere it is breached or I am undone."

Unseen behind the Ritesman's back, Ubar rolled his eyes. "For myself, I will be grateful if nothing further happens this day. I feel a nap creeping up on me." And he settled himself comfortably in for the wait.

"Nap if you will, boy. Sleep safe and secure." Epsilon leaned against the cracked stone door jamb. "Yet awaken sharply to the sounds of steel striking steel. I will not pause to nudge you in the thick of a mortal fight."

"You forget the Eye. It will awaken me, should need arise."

"Did it awaken you last night?"

Ubar opened his many-fanged mouth to make an instant retort, but held his tongue instead. He sat bolt upright. "By the gods, you can be most insightful at times, Sir Epsilon. It is true, the Eyestone did not warn me of the assault."

"Is this a strange thing?"

"Most strange indeed. Always before, danger was sounded as a great beating of gongs in my slumbering ears. Yet I heard nothing until your exchange with my master." He turned his reptilian gaze on the sparkling diamond floating at the ceiling's peak. "It would seem Bebblegeth's bauble has failed us."

Without turning around, Epsilon returned, "You and I perhaps, but it did not fail entirely. Pandolyn was forewarned, at least."

"She would have sensed the jetlas from many sticks away, with or without the aid of the Eyestone. Perhaps it was their presence alone, and not the gem, that warned her."

"We may never know."

Ubar heaved an anxious breath. "My master is Rit Merdian, Sir Epsilon. She will return to explain this enigma."

"And if she does not?"

The boy lizard stirred restlessly. His long, forked tongue darted through his teeth, in and out, in and out. Ultimately, he hedged, "I know the way to the land of Bac Tur... and I have maps that show where Ilmacht lies... perhaps I could lead us there..."

Epsilon harrumphed. "To do what? Have you the authority to assume command of her armies? Do you know how to level Ilmacht's walls as she intended?"

"Er- Uhm- In a word, no."

"Then why should we make the journey? I cannot lay waste to a barricaded city without siege strength weapons and many more men than the number promised."

Ubar was despondent. He could only offer, "Lady Pandolyn will return. She must return."

"We shall see," answered the Ritesman. His eyes scanned the milt corpses sprawled on the lawn before the tiny hut, and thought of burning them. They were already starting to stink

noticeably, though they were mere hours dead. "We shall-" he started to repeat, only to bite back his words with a start. Something large stirred the bush off to the west side of the doorway.

He heard a deep, rumbling grunt, as of a monstrous pig rooting among the groves. A thick limb snapped in two, and the Warfarer could now see where the trees were disturbed. Instinctively, his hand went for the haft of his sword, but he did not draw it. Hoping beyond all hope, he waited to see Helmcleaver bolt out of the undergrowth.

At his back, the boy squeaked, "More jetlas?"

"I think not," and he eased a few finger's breadth of cold steel from its scabbard.

"Something much larger, it seems..."

With a great, squealing roar, a daunting monster burst out of the brush in that same instant. Its body stood to Epsilon's chest, and was shaped as a rat's, with a low, sloping back, a protruding spine, and a small, pointed head. In place of fur, however, it was covered with thick, armored plates of hide that clattered as it moved. A gaping maw snapped wider so Epsilon could count the individual teeth of both its jaws.

He gasped and belched, "Martyrs' blood!" even as he drew his ornate blade. The beast dashed in close, within a step and a sword stroke of the surprised Ritesman, but it stopped short of attacking. Though he had raised his blade menacingly, the creature was not discouraged.

Yet neither did it seem intent on molesting him. Instead, it snatched up the nearest milt corpse, and retreated backward into the bush more quickly than it had come. A mere stir of ferns and sapling trees remained to betray its passage.

But the monster had not gone far. Epsilon could hear it feeding noisily just out of sight. With much smacking of lips and breaking of bones, the unseen scavenger devoured its meal with obvious and sanguine relish.

"What, by all gods holy and unholy, was that?"

Peering from around Epsilon's broad shoulders, the boy supplied, "A cargot. Harmless to all save the reeking dead." Ubar patted the swordsman's back playfully. "You may put your weapon away now, I think. The danger has passed."

But the Warfarer was not so easily dissuaded. "It has not passed, for I hear the monster's jaws working mere sticks away."

"Well, then," chuckled the boy, "Do not die and decompose. For the cargot will surely come for you then, and no amount of fancy sword play will save you."

Knowing Ubar's timid heart and judging by his unconcerned tone, Epsilon at last deemed he was safe enough for the moment. His blade whispered into its well made cover, and the Ritesman dared lean out of the doorway for a glance into the forest. He was startled to see another of the cargots crouched at the corner of the hut, munching the remains of a scaled arm between its sharp teeth. With an abrupt jerk of its head, the monster took note of his notice, and retreated out of sight in a rush, dragging its prize with it.

When a sound struck his ears from behind, he turned to see yet another of the beasts sneaking out of the underbrush, apparently intent on the pile of bodies that Epsilon had removed from their temporary dwelling. It snatched one of these away, and darted back into safety to eat.

Before the forest was still again, another had appeared at the tree line, sniffing inquisitively, then another. Rotating his head in a full arc, the Warfarer counted no less than a dozen of the large, armor plated scavengers. A handful had emerged from the woods across the broad road, and seemed intent on braving the open spaces to get their share of the feast.

Epsilon watched one, then two, and finally three cargots cross the sunlit avenue without incident. On the fourth attempt, a shadow darkened the median lawn many sticks down the eastward lanes. It grew rapidly in length and width. All too soon, it assumed the shape of a dread illdross, its wings spanning both lanes of the Bac Turian road. The hapless cargot skidded to a halt and turned its angular head at the sound of a blood creaming screech. Its armored plates of hide flared and clattered with the violent motion. Now the scavenger was turning to return to the shadows from which it had come.

The illdross dropped lower still. Epsilon could see its long, lethal talons extending to snatch up its prey. But the cargot was shockingly quick on its stubby, overburdened feet. It nearly escaped. Nearly.

Then the dragon's claws descended. One large, oddly human hand settled around the scavenger's short, clubbed tail, while the other sought purchase on the scales of its back. The former found a successful hold, but the latter was turned aside by the tough scales. With the cargot held thus unevenly, the illdross flapped its great, membranous wings to climb sedately into the heavens. Screaming and struggling, the luckless cargot spread its uprooted limbs, and writhed

vainly against the predator's sure grip. Just when it seemed the monster's fate was assured, the clubbed end of its short tail parted, and the cargot plummeted to earth.

Immediately upon landing, it turned to dash back into the forest, choosing the side with the food instinctively. It snatched up a severed milt torso and, without pause, disappeared into the bush once more.

Apparently jealous of its comrade's success, another cargot dared the dangers of the road. At a full sprint, perhaps believing the danger had passed, the cargot vied for a fresh, rotting carcass at the risk of its short, vile existence. But the illdross was not finished here. Upon losing the first cargot, that dragon had risen sharply and wheeled around in a tight arc. Even as the next monster achieved the median, a shadow spread to cover it with shade. The angel of death pounced with a shriek of satisfaction.

Flaring its bat's wings at the last moment, the illdross came to a none too gentle landing, crushing the cargot beneath it. With sharp, savage claws and rending beak, the flying serpent tore its prey to shreds before Epsilon's wide, staring eyes. Glancing up with a start, it seemed to take deadly notice of his observation. Its gory mouth snapped open, forcing the Ritesman to take a frightened step backward despite himself.

Expecting a belch of immolating flame, the Ritesman was pleasantly shocked to receive only the creature's vocal assaults. Then it took to the skies with a single bound and was gone.

Epsilon had instinctively covered his ears to protect them from the cacophony, and now he lowered his arms slowly, grateful to have survived yet another encounter with one of those

winged terrors. "By Nars, it is a harsh land that has such harsh creatures in it. Bac Tur seems many lifetimes distant while Pandolyn remains absent."

Morosely, his voice soft and almost inaudible, Ubar supplied stoically, "My master will return." And he slumped against the wall to hang his head between his scaly, jutting knees. Laying his two hands together in his lap, the adept opened them palms upward and interlaced his taloned digits. Under his breath, he sang a quiet, secret song.

Presently, a soft radiance erupted in the cup of his hands. It took the form of a tiny, luminescent sprite, which danced and fluttered, timed to Ubar's all but inaudible tune. Slowly, as his mind focused and his thoughts were concentrated, the small flame grew in size and brilliance. Its dance twitched faster. Other matter joined it in a swirl of movement, leaves and twigs and tiny pebbles. Ubar laid his knees aside and raised his palms to accommodate this new influx of motion. The sprite was now as high as a man's knee. St. Elmo's fire raced between its fluid, flaming appendages and the bits of nothing that were its partners in the display. A small tornado of matter filled the air, but it was not a random display of errant winds. Rather, it was a perfectly choreographed and dynamic sculpture that drew its form and content from the dark, unseen depths of the adept's mind. Up and down it surged, out and in swelled its tubular diameter. As a serpent charmed by the horn blower, it swayed back and forth, writhing sensuously along its length. Within the microcosmic maelstrom, that form of light spun and jumped, lighting the air with streaks of following fire. His eyes closed and mouth working slightly yet feverishly, Ubar

maintained the image within his thoughts, and so wrought its form in three dimensional space before him.

When the flickering became obvious at his back, the Warfarer became aware of its presence, and spun about sharply, fearing a fire had erupted within their stark abode. Upon seeing Ubar and what appeared to be an assault of fell magic, Epsilon leaned over to grip the boy lizard by the scruff of his neck. Before the adept could protest, he was yanked off his feet and tossed outside in a tumble.

With his conjure so rudely interrupted, the fairy light faded unto death, and its partners in the dance tumbled from the still air in a unified collapse. "We are plagued by magic!" cried the Ritesman, not knowing what exactly to do for the first time in his life. How does one defend against creatures of light and whirlwind? He thought of drawing his blade, but quickly realized it could not cut empty air. But the magic was gone, and the strangely flickering light with it.

Ubar picked himself up and dusted himself off. "Gods, but you are an ungentle man! Why did you treat me so roughly?"

"Did you not see?" Epsilon's eyes were wide. He backed away from the doorway. "An attack! It had all but devoured you!"

"What attack?" returned the adept sharply. "That was my magic at work, and nothing to fear."

"Your magic?" Confused at first, Epsilon's expression quickly turned sour and angry. "Your magic, you say?" He took a quick step forward, his fists tightly clenched. "Boy, I should..."

" but when he made a move to reach for the wayward lizard, Ubar's reaction of fear did not ease his sense of frustration. Instead, he was ashamed for himself. Pandolyn's protégée was, after all, a mere child. It was not the way of the Rite to use might to intimidate the weak and timid. His expression softened, and he lowered his threatening fists. "I should teach you the ways of warfare. Some of them, at least, that you might know better how to conduct yourself in my company."

Ubar had leaned back, on the verge of bolting into the undergrowth, despite the noisily feeding cargots, when Epsilon's words reached his ear holes. He straightened immediately and was amazed. "Really? I?"

Biting back on his anger, Epsilon indicated with a sweep of his hand that the boy should return to the interior of their shelter. "You are of age. And you live in a dangerous world. Learning a few rules of combat would serve you well." *And serve me better.*

As he darted back inside, rubbing the back of his neck, the boy lizard enquired, "You would teach me?"

"I will try. The first thing you should learn is that warfare is unpredictable. Combat is chaos. Death may come from either hand at any time, so I do not couch uncertainty at arm's length, rather I embrace it as a lover during the fight. I expect the unexpected from my foes." He paused while Ubar seated himself against the wall. When all was still once more, he continued the tirade. "But when the fighting is done and I am returned to my camp, I expect order. Discipline.

I must know what my brothers in arms are doing at all times at any moment. I must know what to expect from them always, and they, in turn, must know what to expect from me.

"Why? Because an army is nothing if it is not a unified force. Though it is composed of individuals, the ranks must act as one, on the field and off. They must seem as one in every way. From their uniform dress to the equal cut of their bangs.

"Again, why? Because the very nature of an armed force dictates that it exists only to fight and die, whether in defense of its homeland nation or in prosecution of that nation's political will. It is a serious business, Ubar. It is a business that knows no hours of idleness or moments of surety. Attack may come at any time, alarms sound at any instant. Death is an unsleeping reaper of men's souls, and the sweep of its scythe is nothing if not randomly set. Whether it is encamped or on the march, an army must be ready for battle on a heartbeat's sheer notice. And when that notice is sounded, when the horns sound the assault or marshal a defense, each man must act without thinking. Each man must act on instinct. Not animal instinct, mind you. Rather, he must act on his training; his training that has been so ingrained into the very fabric of his thoughts that it overcomes his fear of death, that it transcends his animal's urge to flee, engendering raw courage in the face of doom.

"To serve this end, troops are drilled relentlessly. They are made to march forward and back, side to side, to turn and pinwheel in concert, whether in the snow or baking summer sun, whether in torrential rains or hurricane winds. To serve this end, duty rosters are drawn and rigidly maintained. Each individual knows his place in the ranks, and where to go and what to do

once he has aligned himself within that rank. And when he is commanded to fall out, the individual must know how to conduct himself as a soldier at all times, if only to better prepare himself for the unpredictable moment of truth whenever it may come.

"Soldiers do not run about wildly when they are off duty. In my camp, when my back is turned to a man, a brother in arms, I do not expect the unexpected from him. A mind cannot rest in such a state of constant unease, and an un-rested mind makes for a poor warrior when it is come time to fight. Therefore, it is generally agreed by all that nothing should be done but that it be done properly, in its proper place and time." Surprised by the breadth of his sermon, Epsilon drew a sudden, deep breath and blew it out in a long, slow hiss. His anger was at last fading away. "And so should it be in our camp. In the future, before you decide to play your little conjuring game, I expect some sort of warning. It will save me much embarrassment, and it might save you your head."

Ubar was abashed, and averted his gaze. "I am sorry, Sir Epsilon. I had not considered your reaction, but only the discomfort of my own mind. It was but a simple exercise of concentration, you see, a form of meditation taught to me by my master... benign magic, really. Though it has been but two short seasons since I was ejected from Empire, it seems a lifetime, and I had simply forgotten how fearful we were of magic there."

Splitting his attentions between the boy and the dangerous Wilderland woods, Epsilon quickly asserted, "I am not afraid of magic. I did not say I was afraid. It is merely strange to me. That is all."

"Of course, Holy Warfarer. And again, I offer you my most humble apologies."

"Well," he hedged, softening, "Do not fall over backwards, boy. You are the Royal, after all. I am but the Emperor's servant."

"Half-Royal," he was reminded gently. "And you seem to me much more than my cousin's servant. May I speak openly with you, sir, as a student might with his mentor?"

"We have naught but time, it seems." Another cargot darted out of the bush and back again, snatching up a milt corpse in mid-motion. "Speak as you may."

"My cousin is not fit to polish your boots, Holy Warfarer. He has the heart of a chicken, and the courage of a dainty robin. If not for the purging Ritual of Alcorde, your kind might have overthrown his kind long, long ago."

"Perhaps that is as it should be, Ubar. Empire is a land of peace, though it is an oppressive peace." Memories of Tesla and the Rite's Monastery there flowed through Epsilon's mind. "With my kind in dominion, I doubt very much this would be the case today. The Rite serves Nars, and Nars loves war. He could not sit long idle, while players of his keeping wield the might and authority of high office. Eventually, inevitably, armies would move and mingle, and the dogs of chaos would be loosed within the Wilderland Wall, even as they have long reigned without. No, I can see now how Empire is a genuine sanctuary in this world, though once I loathed it and its ruling elite."

"Then you do not loathe it still?"

"I would not return there happily. But I do not think I would like to see it undone, either. Except, of course, were mine the hands to unmake it."

"Why the distinction? Undone is undone."

Epsilon smiled. "I am the Emperor's Warfarer, am I not? Conquest is my one purpose, and that nation would make for the ultimate conquest."

"I wonder, what would you do with the reigns of government, once you had thrown my good cousin down?"

The Warfarer feigned nonchalance and shrugged his broad shoulders. "Me? I know nothing of governing a nation." On sudden inspiration, he added, "In such an event, I suppose I should install you as head of state. Emperor Ubar the First! How does that strike your... uh, your ears?"

The boy lizard laughed. "As sweetly as music, sir. Would that it should come to be."

"And perhaps it may."

"Such are dreams dreamt by dreamers, I fear. Largely air and of little substance." Ubar laid his head back against the roughly hewn granite wall, and thoughtfully scratched his pate back and forth. His scales rasped dryly with every movement, and the boy considered absently that it would soon be time for another molt. "First, we must necessarily survive the Wilderlands and all it contains."

"Aye, and that seems no more likely than the first dream, at the moment."

"I suppose I must agree with you for now. Until my master turns up, at any rate." The boy stopped scratching his scalp and licked his eyes with his tongue. "I wish I could remember more of the Rhymes of Wilderland Lore. I should have committed them entirely to memory by now, for Lady Pandolyn has recited the refrains often enough." He paused to clear his throat. Closing his eyes and mulling the words carefully, he chanted;

"Lilly lichen doth the bole betray--
fondling fingers find the poison whey,
on taking nibbles nods the wayward knave
never more to know the morrow.

Dragon's fire blooms in crimson sheaths--
begs the traveler to lie down and sleep,
amid sleepy meadows nods the foolish sheep
never more to know the morrow.

St. Michael's toad frond makes a lovely bed--
beseech the house marm to come rest her head,
on lying down find an awakened death

and never more to know the morrow.

Golden vestals sprouts the lovely Garth--
an handsome flower that imparts much mirth,
on scenting long lose your touch to earth
never more to know the morrow.

Upon the stream bank grows an unruly moss--
it stinging hates the feet that trod,
on stepping lightly there lay down your lot
never more to know the morrow.

One touch of Hag's Locks will do you in--
watch for it on the steaming glen,
on spying a death's head where leaf meets stem
never more shall you know the morrow.

Eat you not the crippled tree's fruit--
rather let you squash them beneath your boot,
on tasting pulp heave your stomach loose

never more to know the morrow.

Touch you not the barrow wights' gold--
sad lain in state so long of old,
on pinching pennies spendthrift your soul
never more to know the morrow.

It is a doomed fool that-- that-- that--"

Here, Ubar faltered and his recitation stammered to a halt. With a cluck of his tongue and a gnash of his fangs, the youth admonished his own fickle memory. "There are many, many more stanzas. Enough to catalogue all of this land's many evils, in fact. Shamefully, I remember nothing more of them. Nothing more save perhaps one;

Beware of words for words cast spells--
read nothing graven lest seek you hell,
on reciting tuneless let you lose your head
never more to know the morrow."

Epsilon had turned his attentions on the boy to hear the last of his words. When Ubar finished speaking, somebody applauded slowly, haltingly, as if in mockery of the lad's performance. Wounded, the adept glanced up at the Warfarer, thinking the man had been the source of the noise. But Epsilon's hands were folded over his breast to cup his elbows.

From beyond the obstructed doorway, Pandolyn called, "Well done, my young friend. You have failed with the utmost talent." And Helmcleaver offered a supporting whinny of agreement.

The Ritesman spun happily on his heel, suddenly giddy with joy. "Thou foul beast!" he cried, rounding on the stallion. "Thought you would up foot and away, eh?"

The wizardess stood on the lawn wearily; her scaly hide singed in places and lacerated in others. A particularly nasty wound glistened wetly above her blood-laced left eye. She held Helmcleaver's reins in one hand, and a tall, crooked staff in the other. Releasing the former that the steed might return to its owner, Pandolyn held forth the latter as though it were a sacrificial offering.

"This," she hissed, "Was the Eyestone's undoing."

Ubar had emerged from the stone hut to blink disbelievingly at the sights that filled his vision. Upon laying eyes on the staff, he gasped. "The Rod of Serpents!" he spat, cringing back and away from the proffered length of blackened wood. The boy hissed vilely and averted his gaze. "Ah, Master, it is foul! Destroy it, I urge you! Destroy it posthaste!"

Though he was glad to see his beloved horse alive and whole, Epsilon removed his face from nuzzling its ears to examine the staff more closely. Truly, it was a carved abomination. If its fashioning had been intended as art, it was a dark, twisted work at best. Its many etched skulls and writhing serpents were dismaying to behold, and perfectly suited to the black iron wood from which it had been painstakingly wrought. There were too many details to absorb at once, but one facet of its fell construction stood out plainly. At the top of the staff, a clutching hand had been carved, its groping fingers arrayed as horns pointing toward the heavens. The fingertips terminated in serpents' coils. Within that unwholesome grasp, a demonic skull stared down at him, its bony mouth agape, a strange and bloody glow shining from within its empty eye sockets.

"It is foul, to be certain. Yet I cannot destroy it any more than I can destroy the Eyestone of Bebblegeth." She retracted the staff to stare into the glowing eye sockets of its crowning skull.

"This Rod of Serpents is an unholy prize, but I cannot simply be rid of it once it has fallen into my hands. Its loss means too much to the Enemy to risk its return."

"But whatever shall we do with it?" protested the adept. "It hurts my eyes to look upon it, and my mind is seared by its presence."

Pandolyn nodded her agreement and rubbed her scaly temples with her one free hand.

"Soon enough I shall weave a spell of confinement to muffle its powers. First, however, I must wield it to our service, for it may tell us many dark secrets that the Enemy would not wish us to know."

To which Ubar mumbled an inaudible reply. Epsilon returned to the care of his lost mount. The meaty portions of its upper forelimbs were gouged and lacerated from a milt's fierce grip. Pandolyn had already treated the wounds, however, and, miraculously, they appeared to be nearly healed. All in all, Helmcleaver was in exceptional shape.

Of Pandolyn, he asked, "Where did you find him? Munching fodder at the edge of the lawn, no doubt."

"Actually, I found your wayward beast entangled in the orb web of a buffalo spider. I had only just effected Helmcleaver's release, when the web's master returned to its lair for a midmorning feed. I do not believe it found me as palatable as it might have hoped."

"And this Rod of Serpents? Where did you find it?"

The wizardess chuckled humorlessly. "In the hands of a common jetla. I am fortunate the devil was not greatly skilled in the ways of magic, else it might have slain me easily with such power."

"But what was a mere jetla doing with the Rod?" queried a confused Ubar.

"Apparently, nothing more than the prosecution of sneak thief camp raids and other petty crimes. It must have been ignorant of the talisman's greater power. Imagine," she grunted, shaking her head sagely, "Employing the infamous Rod of Serpents in a mean effort to steal rations. When it might easily have laid waste to an entire township." The wizardess laughed suddenly, brightly. "It is not unlike using a sledge hammer to crack an egg!"

Epsilon smiled. "I am happy that luckless jetla did not crack your head." More harshly, he added, "But you were foolish to run off on your own, my lady. An ill fate might have befallen you, thus us all, and no help to be had. If I am to be your general, it would seem wise to use my skills where they are best served. Which is to say, I did not hire on to mother an upstart boy lizard that plays with magic. He is your charge, and your responsibility."

"Of course. You are correct. I do apologize for my hasty decision, but there simply was no time to fully inform you regarding my intentions. Once I realized that the Rod was within reach, I was too stunned to do anything but lunge greedily for it. If you knew its power as do I, you would not admonish me for my actions. You would praise me, giving no thought to your meager human discomfort in my absence." Pandolyn carried her ugly staff to the center of the hut's tiny, cleared courtyard. "For what I have captured this day is nothing less than the vital source of Sin Apica's unholy puissance. Though how it fell into a lowly jetla's hands I could never guess."

"Something must have happened to Apica," breathed Ubar. "Has he fallen? Has the wheel turned once again?"

"No," replied the wizardess instantly. "No, Apica remains in place. Sin Supri has not found his master yet. But you are right, child, when you say something has happened to Apica. It must have been a horrible something, I wager, to make the highest, darkest wizard in the Wilderlands leave his most prized talisman afield. He must have fled with but his life scarcely intact."

Ubar inserted, "He has not been seen since Sin Supri threw down the walls of his castle keep. Perhaps the Rod was lost during that long ago battle, and the Apica wizard has since wandered aimlessly, powerlessly among the Wilderlands and its grotesque inhabitants."

"Perhaps," conceded Rit Merdian. "This would explain many questions and solve many puzzles." Her hand stroked the graven iron wood carefully, not with an affectionate or admiring hand, rather with a hand that would know the face of death in order to better avoid it in the future. "But come, let the Rod tell its own tale. Ubar, fetch the Eyestone."

And the boy, forgetting his earlier reluctance, dashed into the hut to do as instructed. With practiced ease, he uttered the heeling spell, then plucked the crystalline orb from the air as though it were fruit born of an invisible bough. Hurrying back outside with his fragile burden, the adept was brought up short by Epsilon's fierce glower. Since the Warfarer made no move to say or do anything, Ubar also held his tongue and returned to his master's side.

Pandolyn raised the Rod in both hands high above her head, then buried its butt deeply in the earth with a savage downward thrust. Tottering, it stood upright in the loamy soil.

Once she released it, the wizardess started chanting low and serenely. Her words seemed softly blurred and unreadable in Epsilon's straining ears. Her scaly purple hands worked up and down, back and forth, side to side, round and round, as she wove indecipherable symbols of conjure and enchantment in the air's thickening flesh.

"What tongue is that?" wondered Epsilon aloud.

"Shhhhh," hissed Ubar, intent on the magic before his naked gaze. He placed the Eye dutifully into his master's palm when she held it out to be filled.

Quite suddenly, the staff came to life. The serpents of its molded frame swelled and loosened their coils. As a rush of rootling tendrils, countless snake bodies coursed out of the base of the Rod, onto the lawn, where they writhed en masse all tangled together. Thicker and thicker, wider and wider grew this mat of black, scaly worms, until their contorted forms ultimately framed a square on the grass that was roughly a stick's length on each side.

Pandolyn had maintained her low chant, and now she held up Bebblegeth's eye above her head. "SEE!" she commanded forcefully, "BUT SEE UNSEEN!"

The mat of serpent bodies seethed and boiled until it was nothing more than a befuddled blackness lacking all but the most random of patterns. Then something changed. Flashes of color began to streak the reptiles' tiny scales here and there. Green and blue and white and gold and brown, all the colors of nature and the heavens. Swirling and roiling together, these hues spread out to cover the entire mat, but did not mingle or mix to form a single median color. Now the mat's surface began to assume a three dimensional shape.

When combined with the dappled colors already present in the vipers' scales, Epsilon was startled to see a panorama of bleak, stony hills spread out before his feet. A high ridge was raised up in the center of the display, and atop that a daunting castle with its massive walls. The colors moved subtly, increasing the scene's scope and definition. An army was encamped about the ridge-top keep. Epsilon could see where tall timber towers were being constructed alongside the

ramparts, and noted how many siege engines waited in the wings, ready to be brought into service. A horde of black jetlas and pale gray milts adorned the valley below the towers, and it seemed a million ugly faces were turned upward in anticipation, hungry for the slaughter that would inevitably come.

Pandolyn breathed deeply, and ceased her chanting. "Sin Supri's legions in bivouac about the walls of Jhid'Chajeck, a city of men," she announced softly. Her worn countenance betrayed her concern. "The madman's campaign is more advanced than I had foreseen. He is nearly come to battering rams already." She spat in disgust. "But that citadel should have been most difficult to win! I imagined it would be next spring before he had pressed so far."

"Expect the unexpected from one's foes," whispered Ubar.

Epsilon grunted and nodded his concurrence. "After seven hundred years of conquests, that old war dog must have learned a vital trick or two. It is an arid land, and that city is laid atop a high bluff. The defenders may be lacking for drink by now."

"Doubtless they are. But why do they hesitate to burn the towers?"

The Warfarer could only shrug by way of response. "Your snake stick sees much, but not all. Not enough to say for certain."

"So must it be, I fear. Any closer and we risk making the Enemy aware of our intrusion." The wizardess wove her enchanted hands and fingers together once more. In correspondence, the scene dropped away to a flat mat. All color fled.

Soon, another vision was wrought in the teeming display. It was of a fierce and bloody battle. As its shapes were better defined, Epsilon noted that the conflict seemed to fill the granite halls of a vast keep. Armored jetlas and their hordes of milts filled the great chamber from wall to wall. No men fought in this conflict, for it was a war among the Wilderland's inhabitants. Milt slew milt, jetla assaulted jetla, and there were other creatures thrown into the mix, all darkly colored and strange of form. The bloodletting was enormous, the combat a display of savagery such as Epsilon had never seen.

Even as he wondered, Pandolyn supplied the answer to his unspoken thoughts. "This is a portrayal of the Rod's last moments in the hands of its master. Obviously, this must be the final struggle for Sin Apica's capitol keep. But where is the High Wizard?"

"There!" erupted Ubar happily. "At the top of the stair! He is lofting the Rod of Serpents!"

Indeed, a lone figure stood upon a long, winding set of steps that hugged one of the hall's curved outer walls. It was doubtless a tower stair, or so it seemed to Epsilon. His estimation proved accurate an instant later, when, after a lopsided exchange of magic fire, a wounded Sin Apica retreated further up the wall, the Rod yet clutched in his right hand. Another bolt of magic fire chased after his fleeing form. It bit somehow, and the powerful wizard stumbled. Though he nearly tumbled free of the open steps, the unhappy figure managed to break his fall and scramble to his feet once more.

Apparently abandoning all hope of defense, Sin Apica surrendered the fight to retreat headlong up the stair. Up and up it wound. Up and up he ran. At ground level far below, the last of Apica's defenders were gutted and decapitated, and Sin Supri's demon hordes were set free to happily pursue the keep's master.

At the top of the winding way, Apica pushed through a squat doorway and threw a lever at his back as he passed. A heavy slab of solid stone settled down with a rumble, sealing the entrance to the tower rotunda irrevocably. Sin Apica was seen to pause here, trembling, apparently overcome by the sheer nature of his own harrowing escape. Then he dashed up a final flight of spiral steps and burst into the dim light of late evening. He rushed immediately to a loophole in the parapets, and let his gaze sweep the horizon. Flames illuminated the land for as far as the Eyestone of Bebblegeth could see.

"Ah," intoned Pandolyn, "The burning of Kesseldorne, Apica's capitol. I have heard that fires raged there for weeks after the fighting was finished. Nothing and no one survived intact, including Sin Supri's own forces."

Apica darted from one loophole to the next, but each vision of the falling night was identical. Every building, every tree, every structure was burning far below. All the world seemed to be alight.

Epsilon cleared his throat. "I think it safe to conclude he lost that battle."

"Oh, he lost much, much more than a single battle. In that failed defense, Sin Apica lost his world entire. All his conjures. All his wealth. All his arms and underlings. And somehow he

lost his key talisman, the Rod of Serpents. Now I shall learn how it happened, and what became of the wizard. We know what became of his staff."

As they watched, the lost wizard raised up his puissant Rod and shook it rhythmically. Though they could not hear his words, the wizard's mouth was working to cast an unknown spell. Stones and flaming arrows streaked over the tower parapets, shattering against the rotunda wall or skipping off its steeply sloped conical roof. It appeared that the besieged figure must ultimately succumb to the wealth of death buzzing all about his hooded ears, but somehow Apica survived. Pandolyn guessed her peer had employed a spell of protection.

But he had apparently done much, much more. An illdross dropped out of overcast skies and snatched the wizard off his high tower. On the instant his feet left the stonework, the parapets fell outward, the rotunda collapsed inward, and the tower's shaft crumbled to bits, crushing uncounted jetlas and milts beneath its undeniable weight.

This might have been the end of Sin Apica's trials, if not for a lone flaming missile that streaked out of the anonymous darkness to pierce the old man's form through and through. Apica was seized with a spasm in the instant of the arrow's passage, then he slumped over in the illdross' surprisingly gentle grasp. With much care and deftness, the dragon shifted its master's weight until Apica was more comfortably seated atop its scaly back between its leathery wings. He did not ride like a well man. Instead, his body rolled from side to side weakly with each movement. Though his pale hands yet clutched the Rod, the old wizard seemed to be failing rapidly with each

beat of his mount's wings. Far, far below, a hilly terrain scrolled in miniature, as though it were visible from excessive altitude.

Countless leagues passed in this fashion. Finally, the wounded mage slumped further over the illdross' back. One hand slipped from the Rod of Serpents. It slid sideways to dangle precariously on the verge of the abyss. Finger by finger, Apica's last grip slackened and failed.

The ornate ironwood staff tumbled away into the darkness. While its master disappeared into a high, rain blackened bank of cumulus...

Once more, the colors of the scene faded with its three dimensional form. The mat was nothing more than a writhing bed of serpents again. Pandolyn chanted and wove her ancient spells.

"And now Ilmacht," she supplied, watching the desired landscape rise from the tumultuous map.

A blasted, wasted landscape greeted their eyes, and all were filled with dismay, even the wizardess, who had traveled through Bac Tur many times. It was a volcanic land, where steam and fume rose from cracks and fissures in the hard basalt hills. Geysers blasted ill waters high into the sky, and, though nothing more than its texture and color were evidence of this, Epsilon believed those waters to be contaminated with all manner of vile refuse and toxic offal. A tall, jaggedly peaked mountain was rising at the center of the display. It seemed to be formed largely of blackened cinders and the spent tailings of some vast, hidden mine that plunged deeply into the wounded earth. Pandolyn pointed and intoned, 'Bulcan's Forge', apparently naming the peak.

Before the mount, a broad plateau stretched out for many leagues in all directions. Pandolyn named this 'Hades' Table'. At the back of the mesa, set up flush against the Forge's broad, stony feet, a walled fortress had been erected. Most of its inner defenses had been hacked directly from the mountain's basalt heart, while the outer walls were heavily laid with great stone blocks; a daunting work, even in miniature.

"Therein lies our prize."

Ubar made a revolting noise far back in the wet depths of his throat. "It is an ugly place. Ilmacht's architect should be drawn and quartered."

"That depends on the bias of your view," said Epsilon. "From an aesthetic point of view, you are most certainly correct. Yet to a general's eye, it must seem home safe indeed. This Ilmacht is a most defensible city. See how the superior cliff face rises in an overhanging slant? No scaling that en masse. And those walls. They seem thick and strong enough to withstand a month's long ramming. Providing, of course, that an assaulting army could draw in close enough to ram. Like as not, with but a small band of fierce horsemen, the Enemy would easily foil such attempts by sallying his cavalry onto those plains from hidden lairs in the crags. It would be a real fight to win Hades' Table, and a bigger fight to keep it long enough to lay siege. Especially when one considers the almost definite intervention of outside forces."

Epsilon rubbed his whiskers that needed shaving and moved around to Pandolyn's side of the mat. "If I know Vandegarte half as well as I believe I do, he will not have left his capitol totally unprotected. There must be other garrisons within easy march of Ilmacht, ready to come

on call to aid and bolster its defenses. In such a tactical situation as this, any slightest reinforcement of the Enemy's position could well prove disastrous for the attacking camp.

"Providing we achieved and held the Table, our retreat depends on holding its southern rim, all around here," he said, pointing out the geography in question. "With reinforcements at our backs, holding the rim against us, the nature of the conflict would swing about full face. Trapped between two armed camps and our retreat stifled, we could easily find ourselves cut to pieces."

The wizardess nodded her agreement. "Your words are well spoken, and your concerns justified, Sir Epsilon. There are indeed other garrisons scattered about Ilmacht's walls, though none are nearer than two week's forced march. Do not forget that Sin Supri is a vastly jealous and suspicious man. He would rather leave his capitol largely unguarded, with but a skeleton garrison and remote reinforcements, than return to find it held against him by some underling."

He waved a dismissive hand. "Two weeks is nothing." The Warfarer shook his head disapprovingly. "It would take me that long just to maneuver ten thousand men onto the Table, not to mention the difficulties of our march through Bac Tur. The Enemy's scouts might easily spy such movements, and rush in with a greater force to cut us off."

Here the lady lizard smiled toothily. "And if I said we will encounter no such difficulties? How would you feel about the campaign then?"

His eyebrows arched, his face disbelieving, he parried with, "Then I would say your army of ten thousand must needs be already in place atop the Table, encamped about the Enemy's walls prior to our arrival there."

"And? What then?"

"My very question of you."

"I have told you many times that I have a secret way of toppling Ilmacht's high walls all at once, without ram or engine. How can you remain so skeptical?"

"For one item, I do not see your army anywhere in this unholy display. For another, I necessarily wonder why you require my services, at all. With so much surprise and subterfuge on your side, it would seem the fall of Ilmacht is preordained. You do not need a general to let loose a horde of vengeful men on the guts of an unprotected and largely disabled citadel. Merely give the command to pillage at will, and all will work itself out in due time."

"Now you belittle my designs. I said the city would be largely undefended. I did not say it would be utterly defenseless. Many thousands of milts and jetlas and uglucks and shails and rhiners will remain behind their crumbled walls, quite prepared to fight us. It is not an unwinnable prospect, but neither will it be an easy one. I will have much need of a good field marshal to direct the many assaults and parries that will doubtless be required to clear the rubble. As for the absence of my army, I can only offer you my assurances once more that it will be where it is needed, when it is needed."

Epsilon smiled skeptically. "Hmm," he intoned thoughtfully, "I had not thought to wage a war with promises. It is a weapon strange to me."

"My master's promises are as good as deeds done, sire," inserted the all but forgotten Ubar, his tone surprisingly respectful.

"Well, then, what more can I offer or say? With all your ploys in place and providing your guile proves fruitful, I see no hindrance whatsoever in overthrowing Ilmacht."

"I thought not."

With a wave of her darkly skilled hands, the wizardess blanked the scene once more, and called the Rod of Serpents to heel. Without the slightest sound, the innumerable serpent bodies unwound and were drawn back into the base of the staff. The eye sockets of the apical skull glowed fiercely one final instance, and all was returned to its natural state. The Rod was nothing more than an evilly carved length of obsidian ironwood once again.

"Ach," groaned the boy lizard, "Thank the gods that is finished. Will you cover it now, master? Quickly, before I am sick."

"You must learn to tolerate the presence of Sin, Ubar. Else, how will you combat it when its minions draw in close all around you? Your innocent mind is like a babe's soft skin. Only time and much wear will dull it to harsh contact."

The boy whined piteously. "I have tried to be strong throughout this ordeal, master, but now I am come to my limits. The pain is blinding. Disassemble and cover the Rod, I beg you. Perhaps I will near it naked again later."

"What is the matter here?" queried Epsilon, puzzled. "I, myself, feel nothing untoward."

"You are not of the Wilderlands. Your mind is not adapted to the magical flux that envelopes this land. Very well," sighed the wizardess, relenting. "I will cast a spell of confinement over the Rod. Then we should be quickly on our way." She stowed the Eyestone away in its place, then reached for the staff to pluck it from the earth. "The force that raided us last night is greatly reduced and dispersed, but factions of it remain in the area. We are not yet safe, and should not bivouac in these parts another night." She paused to request a length of linen from her bags, and Ubar dashed to comply. Returning her attention to Epsilon, she added, "It is unfortunate that your animal is wounded. We will have need of all its strength this day."

She accepted the bolt of cloth when it was handed to her, and tore a length from it with her sharp teeth. Unscrewing the four threaded sections of the Rod, she wrapped them all around with the linen, tying the loose end around its middle with a tight, sure knot, humming a soft incantation all the while.

Epsilon drew close to Helmcleaver, intent on inspecting the stallion's wounds again. They were largely superficial, he noted, having scarcely punctured his mount's thick hide. With care, he thought they might make a long day of it, after all. When Pandolyn finished casting her confinement spell, he told her as much.

"Good. The beast will fare better with further treatment, then. I did the best I could for him in the field, but most of my gear, as you know, was left behind in the rush of my haste." They were all gathering their goods and baggage from the stone hut now, and she took the opportunity

to search for and locate a tiny black jar. "Here, Sir Epsilon, take this ointment and smear it liberally into the largest of Helmcleaver's wounds, one at a time. When the individual injury is coated, pinch the laceration together and hold it tightly sealed for half a minute or so."

The Warfarer accepted the treatment dubiously. "What is it?"

"A kind of glue. It will hasten healing and prevent infection, while at the same time easing a great portion of the animal's discomfort." When he paused to sniff it delicately, she heaved a disgruntled sigh. Pointing out similarly bound injuries on her own person, Pandolyn gushed, "I have used it on my own person, sir. Do you see? Here and here and here. It works without ill effect. Trust me."

"Oh, I do not doubt you, lady." He sauntered over to his mount to initiate the treatment. "I was merely curious. That is all."

The wizardess snorted, and finished gathering her things. Minutes later, their night's camp was finally broken, and the small troupe was once again eastbound on the ancient, overgrown road.

9

Half a Pint

That night, long after moonset, they pitched camp at the edge of the Empirical Forest. All were exceedingly weary, including the long-winded Helmcleaver, but they did not allow themselves to rest beyond the dawn.

At sunrise, the three travelers stirred to break camp, pausing only long enough to consult Pandolyn's maps. One of her scaly, purple fingers traced the eastern road through the forest to the point where it entered a large blank space labeled simply 'The Desert Ocean'. Just there, it ran through a multiplex of crossroads, the intersection of which was indicated by a large blot of ink labeled, in turn, 'Oreset'. It was situated on the verge of a long, irregular bluff that was named 'Earth's Rim'.

"A city of men," informed Pandolyn, indicating the ink blot. "Our kind is not welcome there."

Epsilon grunted. *I wonder why?* But he did not say this, instead he offered, "Then we shall go around. The city may be easily skirted, I imagine."

"Alas, we cannot avoid Oreset. We have business there," Pandolyn paused judiciously and sucked her forked tongue. "Or rather I should say, you have business there, Sir Epsilon."

"Why am I unsurprised?"

"Then you will go?"

"I am your general, lady. Order it, and so it shall be."

"Oooh," purred the large, purple lizard, "I like that. Then consider it an order. Oreset is an unwholesome cesspool, mind you, but I harbor no fears for your safety."

From the bush, where he was relieving himself none too discreetly, Ubar called, "But what of Oreset's safety?" He added an exaggerated cackle to pontificate his own weak joke.

"Never mind the boy, Sir Epsilon." She opened her largest satchel and removed a rolled length of parchment. "I will give this to you now, since we must part ways ere noontime. It would sorely delay our mission were I to forget it. Do not open its seal now. And if it should accidentally work open in your care, I caution you not to read the words written thereupon."

"A spell?" he enquired with arched brows.

"Precisely. One meant for a particular party. You will find his address scrawled on the outside of the sheepskin, here. That you may read."

Epsilon did so immediately. "Oreset Treasury; Precinct Four, care of Dellas Dembar's Son, Master of Deposits."

Pandolyn smiled broadly and applauded. "Well read! Are you as proficient at numbers? Excellent. For you will have need of your counting skills in this matter." She slid her finger back along the road to the west, where an empty circle was marked 'Falstaff's Well'. "We will part here. Ubar and I will bear south along a footpath that I know, which will carry us around the crossroads to Earth's Rim at 'Banshee's Gorge', here, where the River of Empire flows into the Desert Ocean. As you can see, the river's course carries it through this formidable canyon, then back around to the south and eventually the sea. We will not follow the canyon, however, but will turn north at the base of the Rim. Following this, we will press up as close as we dare to the eastern road, where it terminates in the desert, just beyond Oreset."

"How shall we find each other?"

"Once you leave Oreset, the manner of which departure I will explain presently, you will bear directly east for as long as it takes to be shed of all human contact. Then you will turn south for a short time, and finally back again to the west. As you near the Rim, look for a sign in the heavens. Beneath it, you will find Ubar and myself waiting patiently for your return."

"Signs from the heavens, Lady Pandolyn? Are the gods to play a part in this conquest?"

"I did not say 'from the heavens', I said 'in the heavens'. You will look for a great, high circling of carrion birds. If you miss it, turn north first until you near the road once more, then back again south. You cannot pass us by in this manner."

"And where will you pitch your tents in the meantime?"

"Here." Her talon lingered just south of Oreset, on the desert side of the Rim. "The detail does not show on this broader map, but a lesser river pours through a crag in the bluff in this vicinity. The water does not flow long in the desert ere it is devoured by the thirsty sands, but it forms a rare oasis all the same. It is a pleasant place to rest."

"You do not expect to find men there?"

Pandolyn shook her reptilian head. "Perhaps, but I largely doubt it. Men do not love the hot sands or the burning sun. Though it is a beautiful spot, there are more hospitable sites at the top of the Rim, and that is where your kind prefer to remain. Besides," she growled softly, "If I find it occupied, it will not be occupied for long."

"I see." Epsilon hurriedly scanned other details of the map, committing as many of them as possible to memory. "This Oreset, what sort of town is it?"

"I will not lie to you, sir. It is a foul, reeking place. Nothing like what you are used to in Empire. Its people are a mean, greedy, self-serving sort. They have survived the Wilderlands by maintaining an isolated and violent existence. Though its inhabitants do engage in trade with travelers from other lands, they are primarily pirates and scavengers. Because it is surrounded, as are all pockets of humanity, by the Wilderlands and its strange beasts, there is little free land to support crops and herd animals. Ildross are understandably a constant problem, you see, and, though they have developed some rather, ah, innovated defenses, the people are generally starving. Starving and packed together like rodents in a warren, fighting for every scrap, every

inch of space. Nothing is easy there, not even a simple trade. As I am certain you will soon discover.

"Watch your pockets and pouches, and do not make friends. Though your cloak and tunic are in tatters, your dress will seem royal to that lot, and every makeshift ne'erdowell will be at your heel, lapping for scraps. Tolerate them as you may, but do not be afraid to state your character at the edge of your blade. Murder is a rare crime in Oreset, though many men die by the sword there."

"I know how to comport myself, m'selle. Thank you, just the same."

"Oh, fine, of course you do. I only meant to prepare you for the city's laws."

"And what are they, chiefly?"

"Chiefly? There are none. But the unwritten rule is the same as it is in any jungle. The strong survive, the weak die. If you choose to fight, Holy Warfarer, be certain it is a fight you can win. Ubar and I would be sorely disappointed, were you to miss our reunion."

"Is there no king in this city? No king's men?"

"No king. It is a self-governed city state. Laughingly, they call it a 'democracy'. In reality, a round table of criminals rule the place, and they owe nothing of their right to rule to the people they so mercilessly subjugate. A petty lot, those criminals would cut each the other's throat for a well done steak, if not for an uneasy balance of power and undeclared truce of arms. Though they scuffle like starving curs to divvy up the city's meager profits, Oreset's warlords at least concur on the maintenance of its walls and defensive strength. But for this one stand in the

realm of sanity, that divided citadel might long ago have gone the way of so many other man-cities. Beyond this one metropolitan endeavor, however, there is nothing of set government in Oreset. There are no courts, per se, as most justice is dealt by the individual hand, and the monarchy is long dead. It is a democracy of anarchy, I suppose you could say, in that any man with a knife may rule while he wields the blade."

Epsilon smiled. "It is too good to be true, I think! An entire city of worthy opponents, and no law to deny my hand!"

"Now you make light of the situation. I suppose you may find diversion there, for the city is rife with vice and corruption. Partake at your peril, and do not forget where you are. The Wilderlands cease inside Empire's Great Barricade because it is enchanted. Oreset enjoys no such safety. Daily, citizens are plucked from the streets by roving illdross, and snatched from their beds by marauding velsets. Magic lurks there."

"I see. Do not fear, my lady, your charge is safe with me. What is it you would have me do?"

"As it is unlikely you will enter the city walls much before sundown, you must first find shelter for the night. Do not drink the water and be wary of the food. Though the former is drawn from the Empirical River, which is generally safe enough, and the latter might seem good, there is always a chance of contamination."

He shrugged. "I have my own rations."

"And be careful where you stay. I have never been allowed to enter the city in visible form, so I cannot offer you referrals, but I would caution you to pick a place that is clean inside and out, something near the top of the hill, perhaps. I hear the town masters sometimes let the old Royal Palace. Wherever you rest, beware of squalor and pestilence, for these are the sire and dam of disease."

"I will sleep with Helmcleaver. Atop his back, if need be. And on the morrow?"

"When the sun rises, you will proceed into the business district at the center of town. Its gates will be locked until the market opens for the day, but you may enter early at the cost of a piece of gold. Bribe any guard, it is a sort of custom. Ask for the Precinct Four Changing House when you do so. You should be directed to a large, deteriorated building that was once well made. Once you have come to its locked doors, enquire after M'sieur Dellas of the guard stationed there. Another bit of bribery will undoubtedly be required. I hope you have an ample supply of gold... excellent, for I have none, myself.

"It should be little trouble to get an audience with Dembar's Son, as he does a good bit of the Treasury's business during off hours, if you know what I mean."

"I think I do. Should I offer him the parchment right away?"

"As quickly as you find a private place to do so. Once the man reads it, he may act strangely, but do not interfere. When all is finished, you should be presented with two bona fide letters of credit, each for a rather tidy sum, and the certificates of deposit for the funds backing

that credit. In effect, our good servant Dellas will kindly have allotted you a large portion of the city's cash reserves."

The Ritesman stiffened. "For what purpose? I am not overly fond of larceny."

Pandolyn scoffed and rolled up her maps. Stuffing these away among her many bags, the wizardess replied, "What larceny? It is blood money, money gouged from the prostrate and poor. You will merely redistribute some of it to the rightful, needful owners." When he did not seem convinced, she dismissed his reluctance with a wave of her hand. "You will see. Ten minutes inside that cess-pool's walls and you will understand my intentions." His face remained stony. Pandolyn waxed indignant. "Really, Sir Epsilon. I am no petty criminal. I will not keep the money for my own personal gain."

"Then what will you do with it?"

"The question should be; what will *you* do with it? And my answer to that is this," and she offered him another bit of parchment, unsealed. On it was written something, but Epsilon was careful not to read it without the wizard's instruction.

"Ah," she breathed, smiling. "You are learning at last. But these words are also safe. It is another name and address."

Epsilon read, "Captain Tipper of the Swooning Dragon, a Public House."

"Captain Tipper," repeated Pandolyn darkly, rolling the syllables of the stranger's name across her tongue as though they were a vile phlegm. She smacked her lips in an unsavory

manner, and said, "An unwholesome sort of character. A drunkard and a thief. A liar and a cheat. A pirate and a scoundrel. You will take one of the letters of credit to him."

"Why should I do that?"

"Because he owns the *Lucky Lady*, and we have need of her. She is one of the largest and fastest sandboats to ply the Desert Ocean, and I have determined only that craft, of all the vessels to be chartered in Oreset, is capable of seeing us and our cargo safely across to the eastern mountains. So, as disagreeable as it may be, you must deal with that ruffian. But deal with him sternly, I urge you. If need be, slay him and take his boat. Whatever your method, we must have the *Lucky Lady* and its crew, or our cause will undoubtedly fail."

"No other craft will do?"

"None."

"As your general, lady, I shall see it through. But what is this cargo you speak of?"

"I come to that presently. Let me finish instructing you regarding the good captain. He will want to haggle the price, naturally, but the letter of credit should put an end to his greed, once he sees it. The sum promised therein will be enough to buy ten *Lucky Lady*'s, and he will have no choice but to accept. Withhold the certificates of deposit until the sandboat is securely under your control. Beware of treachery." She rearranged her many burdens thoughtfully, adding, "I suspect he may try to convince you that he, and he alone, is capable of sailing the boat successfully. If he balks when you insist that he stay behind, so be it. I will deal with him when

the time comes, if you do not find cause to deal with him sooner." Pandolyn rubbed her forepaws together happily. "A debt lies between us, you see, and I would happily repay it."

As Ubar had returned from the bush and Helmcleaver was saddled and ready to go, the wizardess indicated her general should mount and ride. They would continue their discussion on the road, breaking their fast individually from dried stores.

Once they had all settled into a comfortable trot, Pandolyn rejoined her spiel. "After you have made arrangements with Tipper, return to the market place and barter for goods. The second letter of credit should include a sheath of vouchers, which any of the local merchants will accept in lieu of cash. Purchase any dried goods you can find, and plenty of water. I will purify what you purchase later. Again, eat nor drink nothing until I have ensured its safety. Also, you will need to buy ten thousand pounds of polished niter. The people of Oreset use it to increase the fertility of their meager lands. It is to be had cheaply and in abundance, so you should encounter no problems in securing it. If you are asked why you should be transporting so much niter into the wastes, tell the Oresetians that you are intent on farming a garden in the desert. That should be good for a few laughs."

"Is that what we will do with it, then?"

"Not hardly. But it should be good for a few laughs. Make certain you arrange to have these goods securely loaded onto the *Lucky Lady*. Let no intervening hands breach the casket seals or switch your purchases. You will be too busy with Captain Tipper, I imagine, to keep

proper guard yourself. My advice to you is to hire the lowliest and most sober wretch you can find to serve as your watchman in these matters."

"Oh? Why the lowliest?" The other part of her advice made sense, at least.

"Such a man will do much for next to nothing. Offer him a small fortune, and he will serve you beyond all mortal expectations, providing you do not pay him all up front. In which case you would receive nothing more than a humiliating lesson in the trustworthiness of human nature."

Epsilon nodded his head sagely. "Perhaps I will test your theory. It sounds plausible enough."

"As long as he stands to gain more from you in loyal servitude than he does in stealing from you, or allowing anyone else to steal from you for that matter, our supplies should be safe enough. At any rate, once the *Lucky Lady* is loaded and ready to sail, bear east then south then west again, as we have already discussed. Ubar and I will be waiting for you at the oasis."

"And no need to hurry," chimed the boy. "We shall find idleness and fish aplenty there in your absence."

They rode on in silence for a time while Epsilon mulled over what he had been told to do. At length, he enquired, "What if there is coin left over? What should I do with the remainder?"

"To be sure, you will have plenty left from the second voucher. Enough to feed a thousand starving children for a thousand nights, in fact." The wizardess stopped speaking to

remember the horribly oppressed street children of Oreset. "Perhaps that is what you should do with it. I will leave this matter to you."

The three traveled on in silence from there, until they came to Falstaff's Well. All along the way, the forest had thinned noticeably. From where the dry well stood at the center of a hilltop park, Epsilon could look east and see Oreset brooding on the far horizon. The Empirical Forest surrounding the highway thinned to nothing in the distance, though the road itself remained adequately covered. A green ribbon of life, it descended toward the Rim as an accusing finger, pointing the way to corruption.

With the greater forest absent on the lawn's wooded flanks, Epsilon realized that the airborne threat of the illdross would only increase from here forward. Nothing more than a thin canopy would stand between his head and the devouring heavens. *What of the Desert Ocean? How will we survive those gods awful open spaces?* He shuddered involuntarily to consider it, and hoped Pandolyn had already formulated the answer to this question.

Standing around the well, the small, brief company made a final parting. Each bade the other good fortune, and promised to safely arrive on the far side of the Earth's Rim within but a few day's time.

Casting a quick spell of protection over her general, Pandolyn turned to follow a stony path into the thinning trees. This would lead her along the edge of the remnant weald, across the northbound roads to Oreset, and finally right up to the Rim's very brink, near where it intersected

with the river. Ubar offered a final, quick wave, then hurried to follow after his master, lest he be lost.

Addressing Helmcleaver with an affectionate stroke of the stallion's corded neck, Epsilon said, "Now that they are gone, I find myself wondering if the whole experience has been a dream. But no," he added, patting the comforting bulge beneath his mail shirt, "The parchment is still in place. As are your wounds. If this experience has been a dream, then we have lived it in two worlds." The horse raised its head and coughed.

Epsilon kicked his mount forward, and they were in pursuit of the road once more. Though it rolled a bit from hilltop to hilltop, the terrain fell in overall descent from the vantage of Falstaff's Well, so it seemed to plunge suicidally toward the brink of Earth's Rim. The Warfarer followed the east-west road uneventfully for many hours after his parting with Pandolyn. He paused only to rest his mount and relieve his own body, for he somehow sensed it was important to arrive at Oreset's gate before sundown.

With less than an hour of the sun's arc to spare, Epsilon crested a final knoll. After mounting its low summit, the road ran straight and true in a shallow grade directly up to the city walls. To his dismay, the Ritesman saw that the trees thinned to nothing where the pavement crossed the valley. The last several hundred sticks were all but exposed to winged hunters. Shrugging his shoulders, he resigned himself to the passage, and started down the slope, anxious to quickly be done with it, one way or the other.

Just beyond the rise, the road curved sharply around the base of a gigantic boulder, which jutted out of the ground like an exposed bone of the earth. Epsilon saw evidence that the road's original engineers had attempted to remove the massive chunk of granite, only to surrender the ordeal to lay their cobbles around it instead. Momentarily absorbed in examining the ancient hack-marks in the stone, wondering what tools might have been used there, the Warfarer did not immediately notice the three men standing in the road.

In fact, it was Helmcleaver that made the discovery first. The horse came to a sudden halt, shaking its protesting head against the reins and stamping nervously for its master's attention.

"Well met, stranger!" called the man at the center. He was the biggest of the lot, if biggest meant fattest. And the filthiest. Most of his teeth were missing, and those that remained were indecently stained. His countenance was a riot of unkempt whiskers and bangs. Dressed in rags and bits of hide, the big man wore a rust-spotted blade at his hip, while a large knife (no rust there) was tucked into the front of his belt, beneath the bulk of his girth.

"Are ye bound for Oreset, mate?" chimed a smaller fellow on the right. He was armed with a brace of knives, and they were rigged for throwing, not fencing. Though his frame was slight, something about this man's eyes told Epsilon he was the greater threat of the three. His face was mean and nasty, had been wracked with disease at some time in his youth. Being ugly, this man must have led an ugly life. He would not be queasy about killing.

The third man chose not to speak. He wielded an ancient but deadly infantry pike, which seemed too heavy for a man of his size. Indeed, on closer examination, Epsilon understood this

was no man but a mere boy. His knees were quivering, and his toes pointed toward the forest and flight. He would be no trouble.

Effecting an easy air, the Ritesman shifted his weight in the saddle ever so slightly, as though making himself comfortable for prolonged intercourse. He laid his right arm and his reins across the saddle horn and leaned over them like he was weary from the long journey.

"Oreset," he huffed, "Aye. It will be my first visitation. And you?"

The fat one replied, grinning like a hungry hound, "To be sure. We have just come up from fishing the Empirical River, and had hoped to reach the gates just after dark. But," he guffawed stiffly, "As you can plainly see, sir, we are arrived much too early. And now we must wait for sunset."

Epsilon looked for fishing gear, but saw none. He was not surprised. "Oh? And why is that?"

"Do you not know?" gasped the fat one, affecting an exaggerated expression of shock and amazement. "Then it truly must be your first pilgrimage to fair Oreset!" He hitched his belt higher beneath his ample gut (loosening his large knife in the process, making it nearer to hand). Nudging mean-face with an elbow, he gushed, "Did you hear it, Beege? He is ignorant of the way!"

"Yes," dummied Beege, "The way!"

"Why, damnation, m'sieur, it is a fortunate thing you happened upon us, ere you rode down the hill! A fortunate thing indeed! Eh, Vernin?" he queried, nudging the other lad with his other elbow.

Vernin flashed a big, fake grin and shook his head nervously, "Uh, so right, Grithen. Yes, sir. A fortunate thing!" But as soon as he stopped speaking, the boy's face waxed grim again, and his sweating palms reasserted their grip on the pike's long wooden haft.

The Ritesman averted his gaze, that the three highwayman might be spared his own sardonic grin. *If only they knew...*

But he feigned ignorance, and enquired, "Why a fortunate thing, good citizen?"

"The dragons, of course! It is much too dangerous to dare the open end of this road during daylight. You must wait for sundown." Grithen indicated his small company with a jovial sweep of his left arm (his right stayed near to his ready blade). "I have had an insight!" he declared, "Come and stay with us! We will make the trip together when it is time!"

"Yes," giggled Beege. "When it is time."

"It is dangerous, you say? Hmm. I had thought to simply make a run of it." The Warfarer paused a moment and pretended to consider the fat man's offer. "No, I think it will be safe enough, ere dark. Safer perhaps."

"But stay," demanded Grithen, his all but toothless smile fixed falsely in place. His tone, however, was anything save friendly. "Stay and visit. It is long since I met with a western man.

Oreset does not enjoy many travelers from Empirical lands. I would hear news of those shires before you pass on."

"Give us the news, mate," from mean-face.

"I have no time for news," stated Epsilon flatly. He was about to add further, when a noise sounded from the brush to his right. And yet another disturbance emanated from above his head to the left, a sound of scuffling movements atop the boulder. These were the flankers, then, the two intended to surprise him from behind when the fore three made their move. The robbers' net was closing, it seemed. "On second thought," he added diplomatically, "I do not suppose it would greatly delay me to share a few brief words with you. Will you join me in a drink of wine? Have you each a cup?"

Before he could reach for his empty skins, Grithen growled softly, "We want none of your wine, mate. What else have you in those sacks of yours?" The three started moving slowly toward their intended prey. Epsilon heard the flankers also stir, in preparation for the final pounce, no doubt. "Gold, perhaps? Expensive steel weapons? What else have you? Let us see."

"Yes," chimed Beege, "Let us see."

The Warfarer caught a flash of movement in the left corner of his eyesight. Nonchalantly, without rising from his relaxed posture, Epsilon gouged Helmcleaver forward a sudden step.

This slight motion had a twofold effect. First, the brigand leaping from atop the boulder missed his mark, and landed face down on the rough cobbles with a thud and a gush of wind.

Second, the other thief charging from the brush at Epsilon's right flank wound up behind

Helmcleaver instead of beside him. Without being told, the warhorse let loose a savage kick.

Another thud and gush of wind told all.

As the rock-leaper was already struggling to regain his feet, Epsilon urged his stallion backward to trample the hapless bastard. The stillness when all was finished spoke of dead men.

Epsilon pretended not to notice what had happened. He heard no more rustling at his back. Responding to the fat man's earlier question, he said, "My belongings are my business, good citizen. But I would gladly share with you a sup of wine, ere you depart. All condemned men deserve a final drought. Here," he selected a nearly empty skin and tossed it down.

The three had halted their advance on the sight of what had happened to their friends. Now they all had a strange look on their faces. It was an expression Epsilon had seen many, many times. It was the face of a doomed man pondering his fate... or escape. But there would be no escape for these three. Epsilon imagined that they all realized this deep, deep down in the pit of their individual stomachs.

Grithen swallowed hard to find his voice again. "Uh, uhm, no, sir. We are just leaving." And he made motions to take a step backward, his right hand dropping away from his belt.

Helmcleaver surged forward a pace or two. Grimly, Epsilon intoned, "Verily are you leaving, citizen, but not by your feet. Now pick up the wine and drink. All of you. NOW!"

And they scrambled to comply. The boy dropped his pike in his haste, and did not pick it up again.

While the youth waited for his turn at the skin, Epsilon asked of him, "You, boy, what is your age?"

Vernin was reluctant to answer at first, not out of guile but for fear. With Grithen's obviously painful prodding, however, he eventually supplied, "F-fourteen, sir."

"Four and ten," drawled the Ritesman. "It is a tender age to engage in this business of death, son. Have you nobody at home to care for you, to teach you right from wrong?"

"No, sir," came the instant reply. "It is I that care for my three sisters and two young brothers."

"Is that the truth?" he demanded skeptically of the fat one.

Wiping a run of wine from his hairy jowls, Grithen provided, "Why, yes, lord. It is. Vernin is a good lad, says I."

"Then they will expect you back tonight, with money or food?"

The boy averted his gaze to his bare feet, which were scrabbling in the dirt. "Yes, sir." His tone was miserable, the weight of his own impending doom heavy on his heart.

"And what will they do when you do not return?"

Vernin shrugged his shoulders. "Starve, I guess."

Epsilon grunted impartially, and weighed the boy's life in his hands. "How old is the oldest beneath you?"

"Seven."

"And the next?"

"Six, and on down to the littlest. She is but a babe, fresh from swaddling." Vernin accepted the skin when it was offered, and sipped a drink with a sour face, as though it were the most foul drought of his entire life. He returned it to Beege, who finished its contents noisily.

"Tell me, young Vernin, do you know a trade? Have you any interest in business, at all?"

"W-what do you mean, sir?"

"I mean to say, what is it you would do with your life, beyond highway robbery?"

The boy glanced uncertainly at his confused partners, who could but shrug their shoulders and wonder where the stranger's strange speech was leading. "Well, I had apprenticed for a smith down on Bad Castle Row. But he died of the grit lung, and all his tools went missing."

"Hmm. I see." He turned back to Grithen. "You, there! If the boy had a shop and tools, could he make a fair living at smithery?"

Rubbing his grimy whiskers with a judicious palm, the thief nodded his head slowly. "He was a fair hand at it, as I recall. Yes, I believe he could."

"And you, pock-face? What is your opinion?"

Beege's eyes went owl wide at his address, and his face paled. "Oh, well, to be sure I would side with Grithen, here. The boy could make a go of it, I think."

"Is there business of this nature to be done in Oreset? Is there a shortage of smiths?"

"No shortage of smiths, so much," came the instant reply from Grithen. "More, it is a shortage of good smithing tools that keeps the demand so high."

"But a smith with tools can earn a fair wage? Enough to support a large family?"

"Aye, and easily so."

"Good. Then you shall have redemption, Vernin." Epsilon drew a purse from his belt and emptied a few gold coins into his palm. "Approach me. No, do not fear. I mean you no harm. Come, take this money. Return to Oreset with it and feed your family for the night. Feed them well. Tomorrow morning, search me out at the, ah... damnation!" He stopped to search for Pandolyn's unrolled parchment. From it he read the name of Captain Tipper's saloon. "At the Swooning Dragon. Do you know it?"

"Yes, sir. It is situated on the Rim."

"Right. Search me out there before noon, and I will supply you with all the funding you need to establish yourself in the smithing trade."

Grithen and Beege were dumbfounded to hear it. Their mouths snapped open in unison to gape comically. Trembling, the boy neared an impatient Helmcleaver to accept Epsilon's coin. To his amazement, gold enough to house and feed his siblings for a year tumbled into his calloused palm. His mouth worked, but Vernin could find no words in the labor of his lips.

"Go now, boy, and quickly. Do not look back for fond Grithen or happy Beege, as they will not be along. This night, or any other."

Needing no further encouragement, the youth spun on his heel to dash back around the boulder and safety beyond. At the verge of the forest, however, he came up short. Straightening, he turned to face his odd benefactor. "Why?" was all he could manage to say.

"I know death when I see it, son. And I do not see it in you. These other men... they are a different story." He turned to face the subjects of his speech, his expression dour and unforgiving. "I can see in their eyes a love of murder. It would not have satisfied your friends Grithen and Beege to have simply robbed me. No, they are not interested in mere money. Their reward this night would have been the letting of my blood. As ghouls, they would have bathed in it, dancing, as they have doubtless done on other nights, in the commission of other crimes. I can find no cause for redemption in their hardened wolves' gazes. None at all."

But the boy was already disappeared. Which left the other two yet standing in the road, dreading their further intercourse with this stern man that would judge them.

"I-I once learned the ways of potter making," hedged Beege softly, hopefully.

"Be silent, filth! You were not addressed!"

The fat one cleared his throat anxiously. "Now, hold on, sire. Let us get a grip on this goose's slippery neck, ere it gets away. May I speak freely here?"

"You may, but only briefly so. I must arrive at Oreset before dusk, and this foul business is not worthy of much delay."

"Well and good, for briefly may we settle this matter. It does not strike me as fair, sire, not fair by half, that you should let the boy go while you hold us under threat of death." He and his thinner partner were edging for the lengthening shadows as Grithen spoke. Epsilon guided Helmcleaver with his knees to follow. "Was he not guilty of our same crime? He would have robbed you, same as us. Why does he, then, go free?"

"Yes, free." Beege dared a glance at the harboring forest. "And with money to boot."

"What was the boy to you, Fat Grithen? Or you, Beege the Ugly?"

Grithen bared his palms and shrugged. "Naught but a boy."

"Yes, a boy."

The Ritesman scoffed, and urged Helmcleaver around to cut off his prey's escape, to force them back up against the boulder's bulging waist. "Naught but a boy, eh? And you had no special plans for him in this matter? None at all?"

"He was to help us rob you," admitted Grithen, backing up against the wall, before the stallion could trample him flat. "That is all. I swear it. What else would he do?"

"First you are infinitely wise in the ways of this country. You would protect me from the fierce illdross. And now you claim to be but a mere bungler at robbery." Epsilon clucked his tongue as he dismounted. Helmcleaver would keep the two thieves herded up against the stone, preventing their escape into the woods. Standing free now, the Warfarer swept his cloak back behind the pommel of his sword and laid his gloved hand upon it. Beege whimpered. Grithen fingered his greasy beard nervously. "What is it that a coward needs most when it comes time for bloodletting? Hmm?"

"I-I do not know."

"Of course you know, good citizen. He needs a warm body to absorb the blade that would slay him. The coward needs a young fool before him, a young fool that would carry so heavy and useless a weapon into battle as Vernin's pike. A weapon that would make the over

burdened fool an easy mark for your frightened victims. And while the boy was being slain, what would you do, Fat Grithen? Hmm? You would dash off into the forest like the coward that you are, leaving the assassins at the rear to work your murders. That is how you had it planned."

Epsilon glowered sternly. "Now call me a liar."

But the fat one said nothing. All semblance of civility was wiped from his stained countenance. Grithen spat savagely by way of answer, and farted more savagely still.

"Then what of it, Good Beege? Is that how your master would have it?"

Perhaps the mean one expected mercy for his testimony. For true or false, he offered, "Aye, that was the way of it. And when it was finished, Grithen said we would hurry back to Oreset for the--OOF--" and Beege fell, doubled over by the fat man's jabbing elbow.

"For the what? What did young Vernin have back it Oreset that a fat man might covet? Hmm? Money? No. Property? Doubtful. What then, I wonder?"

From his place on the ground, Beege gasped breathlessly, "The little ones!"

Whereupon Grithen drew his knife suddenly and plunged it deep into his mate's chest. The mean one squealed like a rabbit, drawing his own brace of weapons by force of long habit. As Epsilon had guessed earlier, Beege was a thrower rather than a fencer. With a quick THOCK! THOCK! both of the smaller man's blades were seated home, and the fat slayer was himself slain. Grithen toppled over, gargling and coughing up blood.

The Warfarer approached the gasping Beege where he had collapsed on his back. Epsilon shook his head sadly. "You are done for, I fear, slain by your partner's hand. It is a bad way to die, Beege, betrayed so awfully. But then, I suspect you are a very bad man, and deserve it."

Beege nodded, his face pale and eyes wide. He seemed to be struggling to draw breath. When he finally did so, it was with a long, bubbling wheeze. Through his own hearts blood, the thief choked, "I have committed unspeakable crimes." A fit of coughing wracked his body, or perhaps it was morbid laughter. He spat up a surge of clot at the end. "It is well that I am slain at last. But what of my soul...?" More coughing. More gore. "What of my soul...?" And he was dead.

Epsilon left the remains where they lay. Once he was comfortable in his saddle again, the Warfarer wheeled Helmcleaver around to address the corpse. "Perhaps you will fare better in the next life, thief."

Then they were away. A quick glance at the declining sun told Epsilon he had wasted too much time with the highwaymen. *I should have slain them right of... but the boy... the boy's eyes would have haunted me, had I acted hastily.*

Whether Vernin was an innocent or no, Epsilon felt certain the youth was no mad killer. He did not really understand why he had promised the boy a smithery, other than that it had seemed the thing to do at the time. *Perhaps he will settle for the gold, and avoid me at the Swooning Dragon.* Somehow, though, the Ritesman did not believe this would be the case.

The others had met their fates justly. Epsilon could spare no compassion for them whatsoever.

While the role of judge did not naturally suit him, as the Emperor's Holy Warfarer and Prefect of the Wilderlands, he was commissioned to dispense justice where and how he saw fit. In effect, he was master of all these lands, empowered as a king might be over a vast kingdom. If anybody ever was, Grithen and his ugly partner had been deserving of some form of justice. Still, Epsilon was more than a little happy that he had not been forced to execute them, himself.

He returned his full attention to the road. Knowing his warhorse was tiring from the long day's ride, Epsilon gouged him into a steady lope all the same. It was a gentle downhill grade, he deemed, and should not overly tax the animal.

Pace by pace, they raced the setting sun. Several hundred sticks short of the city walls, the road was laid bare of tree cover, and he was exposed to the open sky. The long rays of the declining daylight made it difficult to see into the heavens, but the Ritesman was certain he could hear an illdross' call above the rolling thump of Helmcleaver's hooves.

A few urgent applications of his spurs urged the stallion into a full sprint. The rider laid down low over the horn of his saddle, avoiding the wind. Helmcleaver blew and snorted, his maned head rose and fell rhythmically.

Daring to turn his attention skyward, he saw the dragon in descent, its claws extended. Glancing back at the walls, then back up at the winged serpent, the Warfarer judged it would be a close race indeed. Seeming to sense the danger, Helmcleaver laid the last of his iron will into the

endeavor, and stretched for all he was worth. They seemed not to touch ground for seconds at a time. They seemed to verily fly.

Ahead of him, Oreset's gates were closing. Epsilon cursed fluently.

"I knew it! I knew it! They seal their walls by night!" *You failed to mention that, Pandolyn.*

A din of many alarmed voices sounded from the high barricades, but Epsilon could not discern what was being said initially. As he neared, and the opening between the locks narrowed, the shouts and catcalls took shape in his ears. He heard; 'Five on the illdross!' and 'Ten on the rider!' and 'I wager fifteen shecks that Londel gets both of them with the gun!' This last remark elicited much laughter. A few were shouts of encouragement, such as; 'Hurry on, lad! Hurry on!' and 'It flies at your back, but you have room! Do not stop!' Epsilon decided these were gamblers rooting for their bets. Torches bobbed at the parapets, their flickering light betraying an array of shadow-marred faces. Passing beneath the wall to penetrate Oreset's gates, Epsilon thought they all seemed ghouls up there.

With but inches to spare, Helmcleaver darted between the closing doors. The Warfarer brought his mount up sharply just inside the walls, curious to see what befell the illdross.

He saw it in the last moment, as it flared to veer away from the earth, screeching its frustration. Then he heard a loud twanging, as of great bow strings. The hum was maintained for many long seconds, but the darts were quick to fly. One struck the dragon true in the breast, and was embedded there. It was an arrow the size of a small tree, and it brought the monster down in

a hurry. All flapping leathern wings and curling talons, it crashed into the brambles lining the road to twitch in death. The massive portals slammed shut at that moment, and all was obscured. An immense roar of approval and disappointment rose up from the battlements in the same instant.

A crowd surged up around him quite suddenly, appearing from nowhere. It was all groping hands and clutching grasp, and Epsilon was thankful that he had taken the time at Falstaff's Well to seal all his bags into a tightly bound, impenetrable canvass wrap.

When one of the anonymous grips sought to snatch a purse from Epsilon's belt, he gouged Helmcleaver into a rear, and hauled hard right on the reins, driving the animal in a lethal circle. The mob was gone as quickly as it had come. All save for a few persistent souls, who lingered at a respectful distance thereafter.

One of them, a haggard young man dressed in badly cured hides called, "Will you sell your share of the salvage, sir?"

To which he returned, "What salvage?"

"Of the dragon. By rights, it is twenty percent yours."

Epsilon was confused. "And what would I do with twenty percent of a dead illdross?"

"Salvage it, of course. For oil and meat and scaly hide and bone. I will offer a hundred shecks for your share."

"A hundred shecks? Is that a large sum?"

The scrap monger shrugged. "It is a fair sum, but you will not be rich when we part ways. It is enough to buy a meal and a cheap bed. A cheaper whore, perhaps, if you have low tastes."

"I do not. But you may keep your money. And you may have the salvage rights, gratis."

"Gratis? Really? Damnation, sir, let me buy you a drink, at the least! Come, we will-"

"Go nowhere together, much to my infinite regret. I have urgent business within." He spurred the stallion forward, "Now, if you will excuse me."

But he had not traveled far before he was hailed again. "You, there! On the horse! Halt!"

As ordered, Epsilon reined in. A tall man dressed in ancient, battered armor was leaning out from the inside parapet of the wall. "I, Old Bob, Master of the Western Gate, would have a word with you, traveler. Hold there while I come down!"

"As you say, citizen. I will stand fast." Since his horse was still blowing from the flight, the Warfarer dared to dismount while he waited. Using his gloved fingers as a brush, he stroked the animal's lathered fore and hindquarters stiffly, massaging the jittering muscles underneath. As he worked, he cooed softly, praising the stallion for its fierce heart and fleet gait.

From the corner of his gaze, he watched the armored man maneuver along the top of the oddly roofed wall. Ultimately, the stranger arrived at a cut-back stair that descended along the sheer face of the barricade to ground level. Huffing and puffing, his face red and shiny beneath the brim of his ancient and much corroded helm, the official hurried over. Though he effected an air of importance, the man's swagger betrayed his drunkenness.

As he neared, the gent belched, "Just you hold up there, m'sieur! What is your business in Oreset? And why are you come so late?"

"I beg pardon, citizen. We were waylaid at the crown of that last hill."

"Oh? Got your purse, did they?" The guard sniffled, and rubbed a run of mucous from beneath his nose with the forefinger of a filthy gauntlet. "Are you hurt?"

"Me? No, I am unscathed. The cargots will eat well tonight, though. Four brigands, there were, and all are dead. Two by their own hands, each having murdered the other."

"Each murdered the other, eh? How would that happen, I wonder?"

"Quickly, you can be sure. Now what business do you have with me this night? I am weary, and would have a bath before I sleep."

"You would, would you? A bath? Never heard of it!" a few straggling eaves droppers laughed. "But describe these brigands first. Mayhap I know them."

"One was fat and gross. He was the leader, and they called him Grithen. Another was slight and mean of countenance, and answered to the name of Beege. The other two I could not describe. They stumbled beneath my stallion's stride, you see, and were too messy in the aftermath to look upon. Did you know them?"

"Aye. Grithen, I know well."

"Knew well," corrected Epsilon automatically.

"Quite right. Four of them only, you say? No more?"

"No more."

"That is puzzling strange, I think."

"And your business with me?" To keep clear of the crowd that was forming once again, Epsilon led his mount deeper into the city. The guard followed absently.

"Oh, yes, that. It is a simple matter of taxes and fines and penalties and duties and tariffs and... and that about covers it."

"How much?"

"How much have you got?"

The Ritesman laughed heartily. "Your bribe will be forthcoming, Old Bob. But it must be a fair amount, else I might grow angry. As I was angered so freshly by your friend Grithen."

"I did not call him my friend."

"You did not spit at his name or call him your enemy, either. And I thought I saw a tear form at the corner of your eye, just when I revealed his untimely death."

"A tear? In my eye?" the tall man was dismayed. He wiped at his crows feet self-consciously. Then his face wrinkled further, and he cackled toothlessly. "Ah ha! You jest, sir! You jest!"

While the haphazard guard was busy with his own witless mirth, Epsilon took the opportunity to more closely examine Old Bob's rusty armor. Right away he noted that it was a hodgepodge of issues, with the standard of one troop emblazoned on the breast plate, another on the helm, and yet a third on the pommel of his corroded blade. Of particular interest were the clasps of his ragged cloak. These were obvious signs of rank, though the drunkard wore them casually for their utility and not for their symbolism.

On impulse, the Warfarer stopped walking abruptly, and extended an arm to pause his chuckling host. Brazenly, he reached for one of the clasps and pulled it into the dim torchlight. A more thorough assessment of them told him more of their history. They were not only symbols of rank, they were symbols of personal valor, as well. A series of minute details lined the circumference of the ornate, roughly oval brochettes. Though some of the details were obscured by grime or scuffed away, enough remained to tell Epsilon much about the man that had once worn the clasps.

His had been a long, illustrious military career. The unknown hero had won many battles and commanded more than one army in more than one war. At the time of the record's apparent termination, the lost owner seemed to have held a high defensive post. There was mention of wars with monsters, and one detail included a horde of horned jetlas.

"What matter here?" whined the guard. "Am I soiled beyond reason?"

"You are that, but I was admiring your cloak pins. Where did you get them?"

"What? Those things? I found them, I did, out on the cap of the Rim."

Epsilon sniffed derisively, releasing the brooch. "They once belonged to a brave man, I think, a man worthy of Nars' honor. You are not fit to wear them. Take them off."

"Huh? Hades you say."

"Take them off at once. I will buy them from you. What is your price?"

"Oh, well. That feather tickles differently. Here, take them," and he handed the pins over, letting his tattered cloak fall, forgotten, to the muddy street. "We will add their cost to my bribe. What other service would you have of me, then, that we may settle the final tally?"

"I am in need of information mostly, Old Bob, and you seem just the man to ask. I wager nothing cooks in Oreset, but you have a hair in the mix."

Old Bob laughed dutifully and tried to look abashed. "It is my duty, you understand, to keep my ear to the wall, my nose to the breeze, so to speak. I am the gate keeper, charged with the collection of taxes and fines and penalties and duties and tariffs and... and that about covers it. If you enter or leave Oreset, you got to pay. And since everybody must pay me, naturally, I just happen to know everybody!"

"Of course. Then tell me first, what was this city's royal name?"

"Oreset."

"No, its ancient name. Its name before the Wilderlands."

"Oh, that name. Er, eh, uhm... I would have known it, had you not asked! But, uh, OH! Yes, it was called Khaffir once upon a day. The Kingdom Khaffir. You see! Old Bob knows everything, as well as everybody!" And he laughed over long at his own nonexistent joke.

Epsilon raised the pins he had purchased up to his direct vision. "Khaffir," he whispered fiercely, gazing into the wondrous golden detail of the brochettes' facades. "Yes, it is here, signed in the ancient way! This man was of the Rite!"

"The Martial Rite, you say?" The tall, toothless man paled suddenly. "Ooh, I am ill. Hold me, sir, for I fall!" And he fell!

Naturally, Epsilon made no move to catch the drunken buffoon. Instead, he tucked his prizes safely away, and led Helmcleaver on down the street. Old Bob caught up presently.

"It shakes me to my core, that fell business! Blech!" he spat a stream through the gaps where his two front teeth should have been. Rising his eyes piously to the heavens, he declared, "By Nars, I swear I knew not what I was doing! Have mercy on an ignorant man!"

The Warfarer growled, "Do you speak ill of the Rite, citizen?"

"Ill? Gods no!" Old Bob blanched nervously. "It is a great crime to wear guise of the Rite falsely! I am lucky no other man before you could read those signs!"

Epsilon made a dismissive motion with his free hand. "Your secret shame is safe with me, Old Bob. I will say nothing of it, if you will not."

"Oh, I will not."

"Good. Now I should like to find a clean place to sleep. A place with a bath and laundry, preferably. Do they still let the palace?"

Old Bob shook his head slowly, his loose jaw wagging. "The palace burnt down. Nothing stays up on the hill any longer, except for swine and cockle flowers. But I know a nice public house with a room to let. I believe it also has a bath, though you may have to dust it out a bit ere you use it."

"Are its beds hard or plagued with bugs?"

The guard shook his head. "It is the cleanest sleep in this city, sir. I have never heard of pests there."

"What is the name of this place, then?"

"Er, eh hem! Yes, well, there is a matter of a bribe that has yet to be made." Bob held forth his left hand, rubbing his thumb and forefinger together in the familiar fashion of counting coin. "You would not want to break your trust with me, stranger, be warned. It would sorely wound my heart to have to arrest you on the spot for deceiving a city official."

Epsilon feigned great concern. "I would not have you angry with me, Old Bob. Here, take this and consider it but a down payment. When I am satisfied with my quarters, you shall have more. Are you happier now?"

"Oh, yes," he cried, biting into the Empirical gold piece. "Yes, indeed. The public house you want is called the Swooning Dragon. I will show you the way." Pushing ahead, he shoved a crippled and unarmed peasant to one side and shouted, "OUT OF THE PATH! CLEAR THE ROAD! CITY BUSINESS COMING THROUGH HERE!" though the street was only sparsely populated.

When the last miscreant was dutifully cleared from the Warfarer's path, Old Bob sidled up again, huffing importantly. "I need me a badge, I do. These vagabonds might pay me more respect and move a little faster, if I had a badge of office."

"It takes more than a badge, citizen. Now tell me while we walk, who rules Oreset?"

"Ha," barked the tall man. "Who rules Oreset, asks he? Nobody rules this town, except maybe raw, naked steel."

"Yet you hold office. Office of government."

"I am the gatekeeper."

"Then who pays your wage? Who is your employer?"

Old Bob laughed long and loud at Epsilon's first remark. "Who pays me? I pays me! Myself, Robert the Long Shanks! I collect the tariffs! I collect the taxes! And the fines! And the penalties! If you have a mind to enter or leave Oreset by the West Gate, then I am the man to see!"

"And to pay, apparently. What does the average citizen get for the money he spends with you?"

"Depends," avoided the tall man, wrinkling his face.

"Upon what?"

"Well, for instance, how big they are, and how well armed. It depends on how friendly they act, and what their business is with Oreset. What they get depends on many things."

"I see. So you simply declare yourself the gatekeeper, and pocket a profit for accosting the city's visitors?"

Bob laughed again. "Ah, would that it were all so easy. No, sir. To get to be keeper of the West Gate, first a man must volunteer for the Home Guard, which pays nothing more than

board. Then he must needs be assigned to the west wall. Then he must draw gate duty. Then he must vie for the privilege."

"Vie how?"

"Oh, the usual way a man advances in this world. By his fists, mostly. Sometimes by his wits." Old Bob puffed out his chest broadly, "Me, I prefer my fists. None scrap better in West Company One than Old Bob. Just you ask anyone!"

"I believe you, Old Bob. I can see by the shape of your nose and the marks on your face that you have fought a round or two. Still," he snorted chiding-ly, "Disfigurement is no trophy of victory. Not always."

"I see no need to boast in your company, sir, but it is plain that I am collecting your, ah, fees, and not another. Fact is, it was a scramble atop the wall to claim you, once it was clear you would escape the dragon. Of all those assigned gate duty, I alone prospered to stand by your side. And not for lack of competition, I can assure you. More than one upstart pup will to home this night with boxed ears and an aching skull!"

"As I understand it, then, you have appointed yourself gatekeeper, merely by virtue of your ability in a fight."

"That sums it, sir. The Home Guard issues no pay, you see. All I get for my service is an issue of armor, a draw of weapons, and a place to sleep at night. Oh, and a bowl of less than palatable gruel if I cannot scrape other sustenance for myself. So, naturally, the collection of

duties is the Company's only source of income. Without it, the Guard would waste away, and the city would fall defenseless."

Epsilon guided Helmcleaver around a gaping hole in the street. The entire place, he noted, was neglected and ill kempt. All the stonework was cracked and crumbling, and nothing was painted. Here and there, in a haphazard manner, torches burned within brackets to light the streets, but this seemed to be the total of Oreset's civic accommodations. As Pandolyn had described, it was a reeking, sordid town, its people all wastrel scarecrows that looked as though they might kill for a crust of bread. Children slept in the filth of the street, all but naked and rife with pests. Dead dogs and cats and chickens littered the curbs, left to rot where they had been run down. The Ritesman noted with horror that some of the rotted corpses appeared to have been harvested for flesh by human means. Long, fat rats chased through the offal, brazen and unafraid of discovery, while vendors were selling these same carcasses from stalls on the corner. And making a brisk business of it, apparently.

They passed more than one human corpse sprawled on the cobbles. Dogs and rats seemed to be the only public sanitation services available. When the garbage piled high enough, the Oresetians simply burned it where it sat. Many such fires lit the night, and the reek was terrible.

Of Old Bob, he asked, "How does the entire company profit, when the money goes directly into your pocket?"

"Oh, we share everything among ourselves. Most everything, at any rate. By rights, I must give thirty parts per hundred to the round table. And five parts per hundred go to the

Company coffers, to pay for maintenance of our arms and barracks and such. The rest, we divvy up at the end of day."

"The rest? Equally?"

"Well, I stand to get a bit more in this exchange, since it was I that collected the coin in the first place. Everybody keeps a finder's fee, you see. How much depends on how much comes in. But everybody shares in the end. Everybody. If a man refuses to share, well, we just beat him to a bloody heap. Once or twice is usually enough to instill the golden rule, believe me."

"It sounds to be a good system, Old Bob. And I can understand your contribution to the company coffers. But why does this 'round table' get thirty percent of everything you do? What do they do?"

"I know not, precisely. The Guard receives nothing for its homage. I suppose we divvy them in out of a sense of tradition."

"And this round table commands the Home Guard?"

"Ha," scoffed Old Bob sarcastically. He snorted and spat an obscene wad of mucous onto a crumbling masonry wall, taking obvious pride in his accomplishment. "They like to think they do! But just you watch those lily chickens start clucking when the Home Guard goes on strike! One dragon is all it takes, and here they come running, begging for the gunner to take up his guns!"

"I see. Then you really are, in effect, self employed."

"Now you understand. If you ask me again who runs the place, who really runs it, then I have to say we do. The Guard. Only we issue no orders to the citizens, nor do we make decrees. Neither do we police them. Not since the king was thrown down and the round table took his place, declaring all his Royal Decrees invalid."

"Have you rid yourselves of all law and order?"

"Oh, we have laws aplenty. But no order. The round table is forever making up new rules, but the Guard will not enforce them."

"Why is that?" The Warfarer grimaced sourly and kicked a bloated rat off the street.

"We remain loyal to the king, sir! The Home Guard did not throw him down! We did not behead him! We opposed the coupe, and oppose it to this day! And now, you see, the round table is reduced to what it really was from the beginning; nothing more than a pack of blatant criminals wearing the guise of office!" Bob spat, and indicated a change of direction with an extended and inviting arm. "This way, sir. The Swooning Dragon is not far now."

"I am confused, Old Bob. Enlighten me further. Why does the round table not raise its own troops to enforce its authority? And if it does not, how does it maintain authority, at all?"

"They have tried, sir. But the first time one of them raises ten men, the others raise ten men of their own, then ten men more. So the first raises another thirty, and it goes back and forth, back and forth, until the next thing you know each precinct boss has a thousand armed thugs in his camp. As you know, thugs cost money every day, and they are useless when they are

not out busting heads to earn their keep. Sooner or later, the fighting starts, and the streets run red. Before you know it, everything is back the way it started."

"And how is that?"

"With the Home Guard on top! We do not muck about in the affairs of the city. As long as we have the wherewithal to combat the monsters and maintain the walls, we care not for what becomes of the damnable, bloody round table and its murder loving crime bosses. And since we leave them alone, they are content to leave us alone."

"Except for the matter of a thirty percent levy on your graft. That is a dear amount to pay, when you receive no obvious benefit from your payments."

The tall man was abashed. He kicked at a bit of filth as he waddled along. "Yes, well, that was an unfortunate affair. A black stain on the Guard's long and illustrious history. I do not like to discuss it openly."

"Surely you feel free to confide in me, Old Bob. I was the one that saved you from those cloak pins, remember?"

"You did, at that." Old Bob scratched at his stubbled chin and feigned a conflict. "Curse me, I will tell, but only for you, sir. I trust you will, in turn, remember my loose tongue come settling time." He shook his head, bemused. "By the gods, I have never met so inquisitive a man. Some in this town might not like your asking these many questions, you know."

"It is good that we are fast friends in this regard, for friends may be most generous with their tongues when speaking among themselves."

"And generous with other things, as well, I warrant," Old Bob insinuated slyly, hooking his fingers in his belt. Then he harrumphed officially and cleared his throat to tell his short, demeaning tale. "It was back before I was born that it happened. And a good thing, too, for none of what I am about to relate would have transpired during Old Bob's watch, of that you may be certain.

"It started with a dispute over land, as these things often do. We, of the Home Guard, claimed that all free lands outside the wall should belong to us, since it was our steel and guts that saved it from the Wilderlands and the illdross each day. The round table had dropped our ration quota, you see, and we were closer to starving than usual (not that our ranks are well fed, even to this day). When the city denied our claim on the land, and refused to raise our quota back to its original value, plus an increase as penalty, the Home Guard struck. We refused to defend the walls, and left the gates wide open each night for every Wilderland beast to penetrate at will.

"As the story was told to me, chaos reined in the weeks that followed. Many people were slain on the streets by day and snatched sleeping from their beds by night. Oreset verged on ruination. While the death toll climbed, we, of the Guard, were naturally kept safe inside our walls and defended barracks. We had the guns, you see, and the armor. The round table and its ilk had nothing.

"On the fifteenth day, they tried to storm their own walls to take command of our silent defenses, but the Guard easily turned their assaults aside. For three days we fought them, brother against brother, son against father, until it was invariably decided that the Guard wielded the true

authority in Oreset. When the round table raised flags of parley and met with our High Command, the villains offered to reinstate our original ration plus a penalty payment, as we had initially demanded. But by now this was not enough to appease us. Many of our best men had been slain in the fighting, and we were angry. Command reverted to its original demands that all free lands outside the walls be delivered into Home Guard control. We would allow the peasants to farm and maintain the land, as before, but they would necessarily be forced to pay us a heavy dividend for their usage. This, it was thought, would ensure that the Guard would never again find itself in the unenviable position of begging for food.

"So it was and so it was settled. The lands were handed over and the strike was stricken. With the walls once more defended, and the city streets safe again, the Home Guard looked for the city's business to revert to a semblance of normalcy. In this matter, however, they were sadly disappointed. For the High Command fell victim to their own tactics."

"The peasants struck," guessed Epsilon.

"Precisely. It was they that had borne the brunt of the city's casualties, you see, not the round table and its haughty minions. Their wives and sons and daughters had perished by the drove, and now it was their turn to be angry. Of all the city's inhabitants, these merest peasants alone had a surplus of food, having skimmed a generous bounty from the previous year's harvests, so they alone need not fear the winter. When they refused to return to the plow, the fields fell fallow and that autumn's crops perished on the stalk. Both the round table and the Guard starved through the freezing months, while the common folk enjoyed bread and meat as usual.

"It was a hard year for us, sir. We lost twenty five percent of our strength outright to hunger and the cold (for no firewood had been chopped that fall, either), and what was left could not have mustered for battle to save their lives. I do not know how it affected the round table's jackal membership, precisely, except to say that the next spring there were half a dozen fewer seats at the table.

"When it appeared that there would be no planting the next spring, our ranks broke file and petitioned the High Command for a retreat. The officers would hear nothing of it, unfortunately, and instead ordered a general raid on the city's pantries, which attack was attempted and easily repulsed. The Guard was so sickened with starvation and disease, you understand, that is said our men were beaten to death in the streets by vengeful old maids and orphaned children. Needless to say, it was an abysmal failure and a shaming defeat. When the Guard mustered again back at the barracks, it was found to have suffered fifty percent casualties. Those men that remained were incensed by the needless losses, and they rebelled, slaughtering the High Command and every commissioned officer they could find. To this day, nobody in the Home Guard holds a rank higher than Top Sergeant."

Old Bob sighed forlornly and fingered the jiggling pommel of his rusting sword as he walked. "In the end, it was the peasants that won. Both the round table and a reconstituted High Command sued the farmers for peace. Which peace they accepted only after we, of the Guard, ceded all our newly won lands to them, and the table promised to forego collection of monthly rents on their homes. At the same time on an aside, it was agreed between the round table and

the Guard that the former would rule the interior city and its many vices, while the latter would maintain the walls and collect all the taxes and fines and penalties and duties and tariffs that said maintenance entails. So, you see, it was an equitable arrangement for all."

When it seemed that Old Bob had finished his narrative, Epsilon prodded, "It was a fine tale, citizen, but you have neglected the matter of your thirty percent debt to the round table."

"Ah, yes, I had forgotten. It would be silly of me to waste so much breath without addressing the subject of your inquiry. My speech would have been much like the disjointed boy that kicks and kicks and kicks at the playing ball but never contacts it. Eh?" And he added a hearty chuckle to pontificate, which noise eventually lapsed into an obvious silence.

"Well? I am waiting still."

"Still?" parried Bob, "I would have thought you might have left the matter for now. Well, you shall have the whole of it eventually, any way. I suppose it best you get the story from Old Bob, first. What happened, you see, is that during the aside negotiations it was discovered, much to the Guard's chagrin, that our reconstituted High Command was nowhere near a match for the table's cunning negotiators. Our useless officers had enjoyed an unknown use, after all, it seems. And, well, we were... how shall I say it delicately?... we were buggered! Buggered like two shekel whores!"

Epsilon smiled and restrained an impulsive laughter. He did not think Old Bob would accept his merriment lightly, and a fight might ensue. Through clenched teeth, he asked, "And since? You have not tried to negotiate a more equitable arrangement?"

The tall man lowered his gaze, his face red from embarrassment. Softly, he supplied, "Indeed we have. Twice. Er, eh hem," he coughed, clearing a throat that needed no clearing, "That, sir, is the black stain I mentioned earlier. The original tithe was but five percent, you see. Our attempts to erase the debt have only added to it. Naturally, we are reluctant to try again."

"From five parts per hundred to thirty." Epsilon whistled appreciatively. "That is a sizeable increase."

"Yes, well, as I said, sir, they of the round table are slippery tongued and slick witted. Negotiating a contract with that lot is like treading water against a strong current. You feel for all the world as though you are running full speed forward, when you are in fact falling further and further behind with every stride. Believe me, I know. I know all about it."

"It sounds as though you speak from experience, Old Bob. Is it possible you were once a participant in those failed negotiations?"

Bob sputtered and spat and stumbled at the Warfarer's apt words. "Shhh. I try to forget that unpleasantness. Let us discuss another matter instead. For an instance, perhaps you can tell Old Bob what business you have in Oreset."

But Epsilon ignored the query. Instead, his attention was distracted by a raucous disturbance in the street up ahead. A throng of citizens had gathered about what was obviously a boisterous and unruly fist fight, which was pouring out of a particularly tall, ramshackle building on the right side of the dimly lit street. One large, hairy gent hoisted another large, hairy gent off

the wooden walkway and tossed him bodily into the crowd, toppling the bystanders to the dung-strewn cobbles. The thrower then leapt after his victim to propagate his act of mayhem.

"Ah, it smacks of home, it does. There you are, sir," Bob announced with a sweep of his arm, "The Swooning Dragon and some of its livelier patrons. Now, if you will excuse Old Bob, I must be going. Once we settle my final bribe, of course." And the tall man held out a lone, grime encrusted hand expectantly.

"Must you hurry off so quickly, Old Bob?" wondered Epsilon, reaching for his purse. "I had thought we might share a cup of ale and a further exchange of the news."

"Much as it would thrill me, sir, I must be going. A gatekeeper may escort his charge no further into the city than his primary destination. After that, the round table and its minions get to, uh, pluck the pigeon, so to speak. Ah, fine, sir," he breathed biting into yet another Empirical gold coin, "That is fine, indeed. And a good night to-"

But the Warfarer had extended a restraining hand before Old Bob could hurry away, "It is an indecently generous wage you have been paid, friend. I trust that, should I require them in the future, your further services at the gates will be readily forthcoming."

"Aye, of that you may be certain. Robert the Long Shank never forgets a slight or a favor or a friend. And he is always on duty. Just pound on the gate and call me by name. I will hear!" he called as he strode happily away, humming a song of bar maids and freely flowing wine. At the far corner, he stopped beneath the flickering shine of a street torch and called, "Good night, stranger! Be certain the hand in your pocket is your own!" and, laughing, Old Bob was gone.

Epsilon turned at the sound of a woman's shrill scream. One of the struggling men had struck a blow that missed its intended mark, striking the woman instead. When the Ritesman first saw her, the less than dainty damsel was on her back in the street, her feet sprawled in the air. All too quickly, however, she was up again and raging like a crazed Amazon. From a spectator in the crowd she snatched an evil looking iron cudgel, and with this commenced to dish out a beating of her own. As he led Helmcleaver through the fringes of the crowd toward the saloon's main entrance, Epsilon thought he heard more than one bone break beneath the cudgel. By the time he reached that entrance, the fight was over and both aggressors were laid out on the cobbles, unconscious.

Applauding the woman's ferocity and her bloodied nose, the mob swapped dirty jibes as they dispersed. Half returned to the pub, while the remainder wandered off to find other doorways and shaded stoops along the length of the filthy street.

The Warfarer paused at a row of crooked and rotting hitching posts that stood outside the entrance along the street. They did not seem to be much used. When he glanced up and noticed the hopeful fools gathered upon the walk, he understood why. One of the wretches actually licked his lips in anticipation of the theft of so fine a horse. He was crestfallen when Epsilon led Helmcleaver directly into the pub.

As he suspected, other men had quartered their mounts inside, as well. One rider was actually sharing a sup of foaming ale with his sway backed donkey, as they sat together at a far corner table.

On this ground level, the saloon was a single great hall. From stone wall to stone wall, it was one gigantic open space, with a billowing fire burning smokily at the center. There, a handful of serving wenches and cooks tended sizzling braziers and red hot ovens, shoveling raw food in and cooked food out at a prodigious rate. And with good reason, too, for the place was full to capacity. Epsilon had not seen so many people gathered together in one place since leaving Tesla so many months earlier. The smells were overwhelming, both good and bad. The earthy scents of fresh dung mixed with the fermented smells of beer and baking bread. Heady smells of unwashed armpits mingled with the sweet scent of perfumed, bawdy women, of which there seemed to be a shocking surplus. A circular bar enclosed the cook fire, and it was liberally laden with all manner of casks and corked bottle. Half a hundred surly, burly men hunkered around it, all of them with their thick, greasy arms wrapped protectively around a huge mug of liquor. Outward from the bar, a sea of tables and chairs and stools and benches cluttered the remaining open spaces, and almost all were occupied by loud, drunken patrons.

All save one, in fact. It was crouched against the far wall, near the rear entrance and a set of empty windows. Epsilon set his sights on it, and pushed through the crowd to make way there, Helmcleaver in tow.

No one else seemed to notice the vacancy, as he had no competition in claiming the empty table. When he tied his reins loosely around the arched back of one of its heavy wooden chairs, however, a throat was cleared purposefully at his back.

He turned to confront a midget wielding a beer soaked platter of empty mugs. Lowering his gaze, he asked what the short man wanted.

"Just to save your life, is all. That there is Big Jod's table. He sits there every night with his brother, Big Nod." The dwarf's voice was strangely base in a squeaky sort of manner. With reddened face and puffy cheeks, he insisted in a friendly tone, "They are just outside. You had better find a place to stand before they get back."

Epsilon thought a moment, and rubbed the whiskers grown long on his chin. "Big Jod and Big Nod, you say? Are they two great hairy fellows, one with only half a left ear and the other missing several front teeth?"

The midget screwed up his face in consideration. "Jod has but half an ear, his brother bit the other half off two years ago. And Nod was missing one of his front teeth, here," and he pointed to his own missing right incisor, "But only the one, as I remember."

"He will awaken missing a few more, I think." The Warfarer pulled out a chair for himself, despite the midget's protesting countenance. "Jod and Nod will be gone for some time, citizen. They have had a falling out, it seems. In the meantime, I shall keep their seats warmed and well served. Bring us a large bowl for my master, here, and me a mug. Both empty."

"Have you your own victuals, then? That is fine, that is good, but the inn's proprietor charges twenty five shecks for the use of his tables and wares. You must pay first."

Once more, the Ritesman reached for his deflating purse. "I will want a good room for the night and a bath, as well. And fodder for my master. How much for all?"

His expression confused at the Warfarer's odd remarks, the midget performed a quick calculation in his head. "One hundred twenty shecks for a good room. Two hundred for the best. We throw in the bath for free, as it so rarely used. Again, you must pay first."

"Of course. I have not yet visited this city's coin changers, as I arrived just ere sundown, but I have gold." He handed over an Empirical coin. "Will this do?"

The midget's face went from confused and mystified to enlightened all at once. "Yes, sir! That much will pay for our finest room and board, as well as entitle you to sit in the Captain's Room for the evening! Just as soon as space is made available, of course." He accepted the coin and bit into its soft metal suspiciously. "Right and right again. A bowl and a mug, empty! On its way! Anything else, sire?"

"Not for the moment."

"Fine and good. I will fetch your wares right away." The short, dumpy man turned to rush off, but stopped abruptly. "And to arrange for a table in your name within the Captain's Room!"

"Do not forget to make space for my master, the horse."

That confused expression returned again, but the midget eventually nodded and waved. In the next instant, he was disappeared into the larger crowd.

A fat, rancid old man with one peg leg and a scraggly, lice infested beard leaned across the space between tables. "Your master, the horse? That is passing odd, stranger! I never heard of a man having his own good mount for a master."

Many heads turned discreetly at this remark, baring many interested ears to catch the exchange to follow. Epsilon had noted the many looks of lust and envy that his proud stallion had elicited in the crowd. He had also noted how those same envious men all too frequently nodded their heads together in the shadows, doubtlessly engaged, as they were, in making fruitless plans to steal the animal at the earliest possible moment.

So when he next spoke, he spoke loudly that all might hear clearly. "Strange though it is, the animal is nonetheless my master. I am but his hand-catcher, and proud I am to be simply that."

It was the rank old man's turn to wax confused. "His hand-catcher? What is a hand-catcher?"

"What the name implies. I am kept in my master's company to catch the hands that seem to fall from the sky wherever the stallion passes. It is a freak act of nature, I suppose, but the horse tolerates it as best he can."

"Here, now," inserted the old man's table mate. "What are you on about? What talk of hands falling from the sky? I have never seen it."

Epsilon shrugged and stretched himself out comfortably in the chair, arranging his large sword to lie across his lap, ready for his grip. "Nevertheless, that is what happens. Wherever my stallion passes."

The old man retorted, "Then why have we not witnessed any such thing this night? I see no hands falling from the heavens." And he raised his eyes skyward, palms up, in the common

manner of searching for rain. "Do you, mates?" he cackled, addressing his drinking companions. They all agreed that no rain seemed apparent.

Smiling ruefully, Epsilon insisted, "I stand by what I say. Perhaps you have not been a witness simply because nothing has provoked the phenomenon. But test it for yourself, if you are a skeptic. Reach out to stroke the stallion's flanks, if you do not believe. Go on," he urged, "There is but one way to find out."

Haltingly, the old wretch leaned over to extend a palsied, uncertain hand. Nearer and nearer, it approached. Then it stopped. And was retracted abruptly.

He cackled again, "You make sport, sir! You make sport! Who is to say it will not be my hand that falls from the sky?"

"And it may be. I, myself, have never sought the source. It is not my duty. I am merely the hand-catcher, once the hand has already fallen." He feigned to have a sudden insight, and added, "Perhaps you should try it with your spoon first. At worst you stand to lose but a bit of wood."

Rather than risking one of the Swooning Dragon's good (and expensive) spoons, the old thief extended his peg leg across the aisle. Epsilon thought the fool would surely halt his approach as before, since he recognized the obvious sport for what it was. But, no, it was a test. A test of Epsilon's resolve. Of his courage. Of his skill. Glancing quickly from face to face, it seemed the entire pub had fallen silent to observe his reaction. If he drew now and failed, if he stumbled or faltered, the mob would be at him like a pride of lions on a wounded wilderbeast calf.

Before the anxiety and stress of the situation could overwhelm his senses, the Warfarer took a deep, settling breath, and practiced a mental meditation. When the old man's peg leg came into contact with Helmcleaver's sleek flank, the motion was like a searing point of ignition in his gaze. It was a white hot flame on a field of pure sable.

Thus ignited, his reaction flared with a flash of steel. In a span of one sheer heartbeat, he rose to a crouch and drew and swung and re-sheathed his ceremonial sword, then sat again, as calm as nothing had happened. Before the audience could gasp their astonishment, a sound of something flying, spinning, through the air became audible. Epsilon extended his right hand, palm open and facing upward. The old man's peg leg, or half of it, fell neatly into the Warfarer's waiting grasp.

The Ritesman arched his eyebrows suggestively. And he said, "It is good you did not use another more viable appendage, I suppose. Now you can see my master's need for a hand-catcher. It is a most curious thing, do you not agree?" His words fell on a silent room. All eyes were wide and astonished. The old man's mouth gaped open, so the fag he had been smoking tumbled lit into his ample lap. Epsilon reached out to return the severed peg. "I believe this belongs to you, citizen."

Accepting it, the rancid gaffer nodded his thanks, and turned back around to tend his own affairs. Not long after, he jumped up suddenly, having discovered the burning cigarette in his lap, only to forget his newly shortened stature. When he straightened to stand, the effect was less than

flattering, as he lurched abruptly to one side and went flying into his partner's lap. A swell of laughter followed the old criminal's fall, and the mood of the room lightened all at once

Epsilon decided he had proven himself sufficiently, and had allayed all doubt as to his skill and prowess at swordplay. In the aftermath of the display, as the audience turned back to their conversations, ales, and stew bowls, the Ritesman noted fewer covetous glances cast in his direction. This was the desired effect, and thus satisfied, he turned his chair to more directly face the table.

In that moment, the midget returned, bearing the wares Epsilon had requested. "Here is your mug and bowl, quite empty and clean, sir. I know you asked for fodder, but, since you are bound for the Captain's Room before long, I had thought you might wait to feed your mount then. It will be but a short wait, I think." As he laid out a porcelain mug and bowl, the dwarf cast a nervous glance back over his shoulder, seemingly intent on a recessed foyer in the southeast corner of the pub, which led to a broad set of ornately carved oaken doors. "They are dispensing with a bit of unsavory business, I believe, and should be finished shortly."

"And who might 'they' be?"

"The captains, sir. Traders. Explorers. Adventurers. Gamblers. Thieves. Vagabonds of the wind. Sandboat captains. You understand?"

"Aye."

"I hope to gods you do, stranger, for they are a difficult lot. Friendly and thick as family one moment, and at each the other's throat with daggers the next." Ever the professional servant,

the midget eyed Epsilon's tightly bound pack and noted the ready to hand skins dangling from the horn. "I imagine you will want one of these, master. Say which, and Half Pint will fetch it down for you!"

"I think not, citizen. It is a tall beast and you are so..."

"Short! But let me fetch it down, sir! I am not afraid! And I am not too short!" upon which declaration he jumped into the nearest stirrup and snatched down a sloshing full skin of wine, one of Epsilon's last from Mary's house. "Here you are! Fancy that, and no hands falling from the sky!"

"Well done, brave Half Pint. And just the bladder I would have ordered."

"I always know what my customer wants, sir. Especially one that tips so well as you." Half Pint hefted the nearly full skin and tilted it to fill the Warfarer's cup. "As you can see, I have delivered our finest crockery for your pleasure. Not the splinter-ridden woodenwares reserved for the ruffians.

"And I have called for special preparation of your boudoir." Now he turned to fill Helmcleaver's bowl, seemingly unafraid of the stamping, blowing stallion that was not so accustomed to close intrusions. "It is a ground floor room in the inn around the corner. All the wall drapery has been taken down, and the superfluous furniture removed. I have ordered that your bed be stripped of its frilly dressing, and redressed with unadorned white linens. These do not hang to the ground, as it please you, to conceal would be assassins beneath your bunk. There are but two sets of windows to the room, and I have had them nailed soundly shut, with the

shutters secured outside as if for a heavy blow. A single door services your quarters, and it is provided with a heavy bolt and lock." Huffing a deep breath and corking the now half empty bladder, the midget added, "I trust this is all to your satisfaction."

"It sounds fine, just as I would have it. Except for the care of my master, here."

"You may keep him in your room. The appropriate gear has been provided, should you have a lack of it. Arrangements will be made to provide your mount with adequate fodder."

"And the bath?"

"Simply call for it, sir. Hot water will come at a trot."

Epsilon smiled. This Half Pint ought to have been born in Tesla, for he was suited to the attendance of royalty. "You have, indeed, thought of everything, citizen. I thank you."

"There is more, sire. I am instructed to make a special space for you in the Captain's Room. It is your Empirical dress and coinage, I believe, that has interested them. Men of the west are all too rare these days, and they would have words with you." Conspiratorially, the short man drew close and let his voice fall in pitch and strength. "But let me caution you. The captains are in a fell mood this evening. It is the weather. The Desert Ocean is turning, and the crossings have been fierce. More than one of their comrades have gone missing. So I warn you in advance, sir, if it is bargaining you have come to do, save your business for the morrow, when it may be better received."

Epsilon nodded. "I will keep your words in my thoughts. I thank you again, Half Pint."

The dwarf smiled happily and bobbed a quick bow before darting away. Reclining stiffly against the firm back of his heavy chair, the Ritesman watched his stallion drink noisily, even as he himself sipped at Mary's finest fermentation. Life continued as usual within the Swooning Dragon's main hall. From time to time, loose women of the night approached to casually offer their services to the Warfarer, but all were refused. His vow of celibacy aside, they were an unwholesome crew, all pock marked and filthy. He would not have wished their questionable affections on his worst enemy.

Shortly after he had poured his second crock of wine, Big Jod and Big Nod turned up. They stood swaying unevenly at the empty side of the table, rubbing their lumpy skulls and spitting clots of blood onto the straw covered floor. Standing shoulder to shoulder, they made for a solid wall of man flesh. Their combined bulk and brawn was impressive, but their slack jaws and empty gazes betrayed the brothers' lack of wits.

"You must be Jod and Nod, I suspect. Which is which?" quipped the smaller Ritesman.

The one with half a left ear growled, "I be Jod." He hooked a hairy thumb at his mate's bulging chest. "He be Nod. And this here be our nightly table."

"I know," enthused Epsilon. "I have come to settle this matter once and for all."

Jod and Nod exchanged puzzled looks. Jod, apparently being the smarter of the two, returned, "What matter? We have no business with you."

"No, not with me. Rather, with one another. This matter of who may best who, it is an old affair, I think, and long overdo for final settlement. What do you say?"

"What's he going on about, Jod?" queried Nod, scratching his knotted head.

"I know not, Nod. Here, what are you on about, m'sieur?"

"It was an inadequate display. An incomplete test. Your conflict was resolved prematurely by a third party, and we do not have an ultimate winner." Epsilon shrugged cavalierly. "Now I have heard that Big Jod is the stronger of the two. And I have heard the opposite also, that Big Nod is the better fighter. It is unfortunate that we shall never be certain which camp has the right of it."

Jod swelled noticeably and belched, "Nobody in this town would have said Little Nod could best me. Everybody knows I am his superior."

Nod bristled at his brother's boast. Before he could open his mouth, however, Epsilon leapt in with, "It is true that traditionally you have been the better of the two. Yet, if I am not mistaken, it was Nod that had tossed Jod from the Dragon's porch. I do not mean to imply he would have won, but it certainly seemed as though he were winning at that exact moment. Then the little lady stepped in and put an early end to the debate. It is a shame." He clucked his tongue piteously. "We shall never know."

"What is there to know?" bellowed Nod, his words whistling through the gap in his front teeth. "As you said, I had thrown him from the porch. Nobody could recover from that, not even Little Jod! I would have been the victor!"

"No, it would have been I!" counterclaimed his sibling, adding a jab of his elbow.

Nod doubled over with a loud 'OOF!' Upon seeing Nod's head down, Jod took the opportunity to add a blow to the base of his brother's skull. Nod went all the way to the floor this time, and did not immediately rise again.

"There," boasted Jod, "You see how easily Nod may be undone. I am the final victor!"

But Nod was not yet finished. Shaking his head foggily, the younger man rose unsteadily to his knees, and from there into a low crouch. At a leap, he took Jod's feet off the floor and bore him down in a struggling heap. They rolled through the filth toward the main entrance, then out the front doors again.

"You handled that well, sir," spoke Half Pint unnoticed at Epsilon's elbow. "Your space in the Captain's Room is available now. If you will just follow me." The midget led the way, sweeping their empty wares from the tabletop as he moved past. Epsilon followed, Helmcleaver in tow. "Stalls are provided for your mount on the ground floor. Your table is on the balcony, but do not fear, you will be within sight of your beast at all times, even when ascending the stairs. I think you will appreciate the arrangements I have made for you, sire, as the Swooning Dragon is hosting a special guest this night. The Beautiful Selena will perform in the Captain's Room shortly." Half Pint rolled his eyes and smacked his lips delightfully. "Ah, such sweet perfection of flesh. A dream, sir, made real and breathing, a goddess come to earth to thrill our hearts and tickle our... well, our fancies."

"She sings?"

"And dances, among other things. Hers is a unique performance, m'sieur. She is a contortionist that has applied her limber body and heavenly voice in a shocking display of ability. You will be surprised, I think, and pleasantly so." Half Pint preceded them into the foyer at the far corner of the main hall, but there he was stopped by a bustle in the doorway.

A large man backed through, wielding a cumbersome weight like a barrow. It was only after he had completely emerged from the portal that Epsilon saw he was dragging a freshly blooded corpse. The dead man's arms spread out above his lifeless head in a broad 'V'. His tongue lolled blackly from a gaping mouth, and the Warfarer noted the unmistakable signs of a cut throat. After the first came another in much the same condition.

At a concerned glance from the dwarf, Epsilon enquired, "The captains' earlier business?"

"As I said, they are in a fell mood this evening. But have no fears, sir. Those were two of Cap'n Kresh's sandboat crew. They were brought in from the Rim in chains just hours earlier to be held over for the tribunal. As I understand it," he began, stepping aside again when yet a third man emerged from the doorway, this time to scatter fresh straw and sawdust to soak up the trail of blood. "Kresh is newly arrived after passage up from Roanoake. There was an attempted mutiny on his boat, and those two were the last of his disloyal crew, the rest having been tossed into the desert wastes. It is customary in such cases to return with trophies of the defeated coupe, that they might be paraded before the Maritime Tribunal and publicly condemned. Once condemned, they are then publicly executed."

"Naturally. A privately cut throat would serve no deterrence."

"The captains' exact thoughts on the subject. This way, sir. Your table awaits."

Epsilon drew Helmcleaver through the high double doors, and into what was, for all intents and purposes, a stable. Once, long, long ago, this portion of the pub seemed to have served as a theater in the round. Indeed, a small circular stage yet stood at its center, and the balconies seemed to have remained in good repair. But this lowest arena was a sty. Though the straw littering its floor was kept fresh, the stench of manure was strong in the air. Stalls lined the room's circumference, and most were filled with one type of animal or another.

A groom wearing stained livery approached to arrange for Helmcleaver's care. They were directed to an empty booth and the stallion was installed within it. Fodder was provided, and Epsilon saw that every bite was fit to eat.

"You see, sire, there is your table," announced Half Pint, pointing out a corner space in the balcony. "If you will fetch your gear and saddle, the groom and I will help you carry it up."

"I will leave it for present," stated the Ritesman. "My master will mind it for me." At the rumbling urges of his stomach, however, he was forced to un-strap the canvas coverlet securing his baggage, and rifle its contents in search of rations. These he carried with him around the stage and up a flight of curving stairs to his reserved space.

Though he was suspicious of the friendly halfling's assistance, Epsilon deemed the chosen location safe enough. The ceiling was high, leaving plenty of room to fight if need be, and it was but a short leap down to the stage and Helmcleaver beyond. If treachery was afoot, he felt certain it would be nothing he could not overcome. And the overall atmosphere of this portion of the

pub was much improved over that of the main hall. Though the reek of animals was strong in the air, it was not nearly so overwhelming as the Ritesman had anticipated it would be. Cleverly designed openings in the high, conical roof let in a constant, fresh wind, which was exhausted through other openings in the outer wall. At his left, facing due east, a high, broad set of paned windows opened on a panorama of breathtaking proportions. Despite the night, a moon's full glow washed the landscape, painting all in soft hues of pale blue and deep purple. Mere sticks away from the Swooning Dragon's east wall, the Earth's Rim dropped away into a moon washed void. Beyond lay the Desert Ocean, a flat expanse of horizon that was boggling and daunting to behold, even in darkness. Storms stirred out there, it seemed, that were not driven by the heavens, for there were no clouds to be seen.

"Awesome, is it not?" queried half pint, replacing Epsilon's crocked mug on the table, and adding an empty platter beside it. He reached for the bladder and refilled his master's cup. "I thought you might appreciate this view, sir, so I cleared it especially for your pleasure."

"Why should I appreciate it?" asked the Warfarer casually. Though he did, in fact, appreciate the gesture greatly.

"Something tells me you are bound east, sire. And east is a hard way to go. Here, have a look at the beast that would consume you." The midget laid the wineskin near Epsilon's booted foot, and climbed the window sill to stand silhouetted in the dull glow of its panes. Half Pint pressed his face to the surprisingly fine glass and sighed. "Have a look and be dismayed. Not to imply that you are a fearful man, master. I merely meant that no man alive looks upon the Desert

Ocean without being awe struck, if that man has in his heart intention of voyaging there. Do you see the swells of sand stirring on the night's wind? There the desert is turning. Hot gases are belching up from the earth's guts to blast the dusts into the heavens. Some say it is dragons' breath. Others say it is a devil's. Either way is just as bad, if you ask Half Pint."

Suddenly animated, the dwarf rose up on the tips of his toes and pointed off to the south. "There! Do you see it, sire? A whirlowind! The Hydra has reared one of her many heads to hunt the sky! Do you see? As a serpent it writhes, slinking, to destroy the desert! But you cannot slay the great slayer, lady! The desert sand knows no killer but itself!"

The halfling fell silent abruptly, and Epsilon waited for him to come down again. But he did not, immediately. Instead, he added in a wistful tone, "So many bones lie lost there, sire. So many souls haunt the dunes. My own father's. And three of my good brothers'. No, they were not all half-men, as am I. They were all strong and wise. But no matter. She does not care. She does not heed orphans' forlorn cries or widows' pleas for mercy. Once submitted to her grasp, whether by his own hand or fate's, a man can but trust his life to the fickle lots of destiny and the Desert Ocean's whimsical negligence. Intelligence will not waylay conquering thirsts. Mere mortal strengths cannot defeat devouring sands. Once you trod there, you are doomed, sir. Doomed. And you come out alive again on this side or the other, count yourself redeemed from hell. For it is hell there. It is Hades' heart. All that voyage there are devils of one kind or another. Those that return to tell tales of their voyages are but the lucky devils.

"And so you will find these captains a taciturn lot. They waste little spit to make conversation, unless it be to tell a drunken tale. If one offers his hand in friendship, master, you may take it willingly, for there are no friends fiercer in all the world. And if one offers you his hand in slight, be warned; there are no enemies more foul." Half Pint turned and hopped down. "Be careful, dark stranger, in this world and that. Herein you will find the vagabonds to take you across the sea of sand. Out there, you will find deaths that not even an Empirical Warfarer may evade."

Saying this last, he was gone quickly and silently. Epsilon toasted the curiously informed little man, and returned his attentions to the crowd. A quick check of Helmcleaver's rump showed the stallion to be safe as houses.

Feeling a shocking sense of personal satisfaction and relaxation, the Ritesman eased back in his chair and reached for jillroot. As he considered his current place in the world, Epsilon was amazed to find himself sitting so comfortably within a lost city of the Wilderlands. Mere days earlier, he had fancied himself a dead man walking. Now he was general of an unseen army, and charged with the overthrow of yet another lost city somewhere across this great desert. And here he found himself sitting among people, *real people!* Not milts. Not wizardesses or their scaly progeny, but genuine people. Even if they were a bit gamy and ill kempt, the mere presence of a viable population amid the Wilderland wastes was a disturbing revelation. It was in many ways more disturbing than the magic he had witnessed in the forest.

And in other ways, he was reassured by it. He had envisioned the wastes to be utterly inhospitable. He had imagined the lands to be infested through and throughout by corrupting magic and its feral beasts. They were, of course, but the magic was not unmanageable. The beasts were not invincible.

Here was living proof. These simple, backward citizens had managed to live and procreate as a society, despite three hundred years of Wilderland magic, despite six hundred years of Sin Apica's rule. It could be done. Was being done.

What had Empire's Great Barricade salvaged? A way of life that was as archaic as the wall that harbored it safe. Perhaps it, too, should fade, and the Emperor with it.

These people had cast off their royal overlords. Whether for good or ill, they had done it. And they had survived the experience. Somehow, regardless of the anarchy that seemed to reign, Oreset managed to maintain its walls, to keep the monsters at bay. Somehow they hacked and tore a meager sustenance from the land each day. A sustenance that was not poisoned or tainted by evil influence. Though they could not be said to be prosperous, they were alive and living. All without benefit of an enchanted barricade.

Quite suddenly, a flare of light leapt onto the small stage below the balcony. A hushed attentiveness swept through the room, as the boisterous merriment was stilled and wayward gazes were fixed on the torches lighting around the platform. Many of the tabletop candles were snuffed expectantly, that the occupants might better see the performance to come.

A gaudily dressed woman pranced up the steps and onto the deck. When she curtsied low, it was with a vast gush of cleavage that had every man's eyes bulging delightedly. Up she bounced, then down again, lower. They dangled. They jiggled. She intentionally bounced them all around by pretending to have found unsteady footing. Up then down again she went, several times over. The display never grew old to Epsilon's love starved gaze. Now she turned around to face the opposite half of the circular room, and repeated her numerous curtsies. The applause increased in volume, as each side of the room realized what it had been missing during the previous movements. Whistles were added as she dipped lower and lower. Epsilon thought he had never seen such thighs and buttocks in his life. Was that a hint of dark, curly hair in the shadows between her legs?

With a last bow, Selena danced to the center of the platform and raised her arms to monger adulation. A roar of delirious approval stormed the arena, and every man was suddenly on his feet, even the stalwart Epsilon. He wanted to keep an eye on Helmcleaver, after all... among other things.

From somewhere above, a drum started to tap out a rhythmic beat. Soon, a tambourine added its jingling rattle. Then a twang of stringed instruments that were played by experts. The effect was deliciously alluring. The music was a lively parasite that worked its way into his body through every pore of his skin, that settled into his joints to assume control of his appendages, which in turn tapped out time to the tune unbidden.

Selena began shaking and jiggling herself deliciously, each ripple of her supple flesh marking the beat. The many colored veils that adorned her frame rose seductively as she leapt about, only to settle frustratingly around her admirable body once more when the motion was completed. At a set point in the routine, she began to sing;

rattle, tattle

Nars plays his trumpet

laughing, laughing

red face fat gloating

while the score

of his decadence

is ever compiling

a disastrous tune

set well to the tones

of a tattered, rattling

sounding of drums

so Nars plays his trumpet;

so legions are dashed;

so whole fleets are savaged;

so field marshals fall

their armies forsaken
entire cities sacked;
yet on rattle, tattle
this music for feet
for feet fond of marching
when marching for Nars,
who all the time laughing
proud plays his trumpet
with no thought of his losses
with no hope that he'll win
for it is enough that he plays
even as the drums
sound his din

It was a bawdy recital, with much leaping and bowing and jigging and brandishing of the woman's various appendages. Selena's voice ranged in pitch and timber as she sang, from that of a high, pure falsetto to a throaty, guttural base. Altogether, the performance was quite stirring. When she had finished and fallen into a false swoon to accept the joyous applause, Epsilon found his heart was racing and his breath coming fast. He felt as though he had just fought a horde of raging black jetlas.

The plug of jill forgotten on the table, Epsilon upended his mug and enjoyed a long drought of wine. Then another. While the warm burn of alcohol readied his gut for feeding, the Ritesman selected a bit of dried beef and a last crust of crumbling biscuit from his sack. His rations were all but gone, he noted, save for Mary's jerked venison. As he chewed and chewed and chewed at a bit of meat, Epsilon watched Selena toss veils into the air and found himself hoping that Pandolyn could indeed remedy his need of fresh victuals. At this rate, he would be toothless inside of five further feedings.

While he ate, Selena shed her gaudy clothing bit by bit until she was quite naked on stage. Once naked, she performed another song, this one about the Desert Ocean, and finished with a lengthy exhibition of contortions. Epsilon was genuinely shocked and amazed to discover a human body was capable of such impossible poses. More so a female body. He had sights of feminine flesh that were so deep and intimate he could but respond with boyish blushing.

At the end of it, money was tossed onto the stage, some of it Empirical coin, and the torches were extinguished. In response, candles were relit in the theater balconies, and the patrons rejoined their previous night's business. Epsilon assured himself that Helmcleaver remained safe, and brushed the crumbs of his meager dinner from his lap.

When he glanced up again, a short, stocky man of swarthy appearance and leering grin was standing at the table, his hand resting casually on the hilt of a heavily jeweled dagger. "What is your business in the Captain's Room, stranger?" he enquired in a heavily accented tongue.

"Dinner. A song. Some wine."

"Are you not come to trade, then?"

"I have nothing to trade at present, citizen. No, I thought merely to relax a while before sleep. I have this good jill and this fine wine, as you can see, and need nothing more for now."

"For now. Eh, it is just as well I suppose," he confessed, reaching for the chair opposite Epsilon's, "I am in an ill temper to barter and haggle. You, Half Pint!" he called suddenly, "Fetch me ought to drink. And whatever the Westerman will have!"

"I prefer my own brew, citizen. And I do not share drink with men I do not know."

"Ah," he soothed, "It is a good rule, and mine also. Yet my name is Andrietti Vespuzia, of Bahia Sud. Now you know me. As for your preference of drink, allow me to assure you that your superfluous mug will not go lacking attention, should you choose not to partake."

As he did not want to be the first to offer insult, Epsilon conceded softly, "I will drink with you, Andrietti Vespuzia, but of my own cup."

"Then may I have your name, sir?"

"Epsilon Three. I am of... of the west."

"Of Empire, you mean to say." Andrietti laughed heartily in the face of Epsilon's evasion.

"And you are also of the Rite. I know of no other sect that names their kind by the days of Nars' calendar, with but a number for a surname. And even if I did, your tattered finery and that coat of arms emblazoned on your breast stands out like a hazard lamp on a foggy night. But do not be shy to declare yourself, Sir Epsilon. You are among your kind, here. We are, all of us in this Captain's Room, adventurers at arms, fugitives and outcasts of one state or another."

"It is no wonder that I feel so at home, then. Your words are well met, Southerman."

Andrietti settled more comfortably into his chair, finding that he had been initially accepted, and reached for his drink as soon as the halfling set it upon the table. Epsilon offered up his cake of jillroot, which the southron accepted with much gusto. Once both their jaws were filled and they were chewing nicely, each man eyed the other across the table in a habitual estimation of the opposite's abilities. The southern man was shorter, but more powerfully built, while the Ritesman was longer of reach and was perhaps the more agile of the two. Still, it was plain to see from the many scars on both faces that either man was a veteran of countless bloody combats. Neither would make for an easily defeated foe.

Leering happily, the southron pushed his chair around a bit until he could also get a view out of the broad east windows. "Beautiful, is it not, Ritesman? And, as with so many things that are beautiful, quite deadly. Like the exquisitely adorned death adder that has bejeweled scales upon its back. So beautiful... the robin cannot resist the adder's sparkling invitation. Descending, the doomed bird can but envision bliss in the presence of so much dazzling brilliance. Even as it reaches out to possess the untouchable, to encompass the joy it hoped to know, death strikes unanticipated." Andrietti laughed suddenly. "How must it feel on dying? Shocked? Astonished? Confused? A bit chagrined, perhaps?" He tucked his hands beneath his armpits and flapped his elbows like a chick on take off. "Squawk! Squawk!" cried the southron mockingly, "What has become of my soft, downy world? Alas, had I but listened to my fondling mother! Oft she warned how all that sparkles is not foil!"

Epsilon chuckled politely. When his drinking mate had stilled once more, he stated, "Perhaps the robin feels its sacrifice was both worthy and wisely made. Few of the gods' creatures may touch heaven on this side of the River Styx, after all."

"Ah, you have a poetic soul, Epsilon Three. My impression of its fate, exactly." Andrietti heaved a weighty breath and spat to the floor. "The Desert Ocean is the jeweled death adder. I am the dazed robin. Voyage upon voyage, I have landed on the serpent's back, only to fly away. One crossing sooner or later, the sand sea will curl over to strike me down, m'sieur. For nothing is more certain in all the world than death to the living. Especially in the midst of that damnable Desert Ocean."

"Why do you return?"

"Why does the robin land on the adder's back? Who can say? I cannot. Many men look at that sparkling lure and are repulsed. They see the monster behind the dazzle. I do not see the monster. But tell me, Sir Epsilon, look on this scenery and tell me; what do you see? The serpent? Or the promise of destiny?"

The Ritesman chewed thoughtfully, and eyed the moon washed seascape beyond the Earth's Rim. It was entrancing beyond description. It was an undefined void that begged discovery. Its boundaries were the boundaries of manhood. Its limits defined the reach of aspiring imagination. To voyage there. To travel to the far side unseen. As Half Pint had put it, to penetrate into Hades' heart and be redeemed.... Ultimately, he answered, "I do not see the serpent, Vespuzia. Am I doomed?"

"Aye, that you are, mate. For I suspect you will all too soon set foot on one sandboat or another, its prow pointed east. You will stand at the bow and be rocked by the surges, and your heart, as so many hearts before yours, will be captured by the goddess, held ever near the flame but not to burn. Not to burn until the serpent rolls over to strike. Then you will die in her arms, and happily so."

Epsilon shrugged and chewed. "Perhaps. I do not anticipate my own death."

"Yet we all die. Do you not wonder at the hour and manner of it?"

"No, for I am already dead. This flesh you see sitting before you is nothing. Nothing more than a dream."

"Ah, yes, the teachings of your Martial Rite. You believe this, that you should have no fear of dying in battle. It is clever indoctrination. But tell me, Epsilon Three, how can a man live without a soul? This part of your beliefs I have never understood."

He replied defensively, "It is not for you to understand. Animals do not have souls, yet they live."

"So you live as an animal in the name of your religion?"

Now the Ritesman bristled. "If not for that grin stretched across your face, citizen, I might believe you have come to insult me."

Andrietti waved his mate's animosity aside. "Words mean nothing, friend. In this Room, I have grown accustomed to free speech among comrades. If you are closed to religious debate, however, we should discuss other matters. That is all."

"I am closed to nothing that is free, Vespuzia, especially free speech. But let me first ask you, what gods do you worship?"

"You have asked a most appropriate question, Westerman. Andrietti is all too happy to tell you and explain himself. Long ago it became apparent to me that, there being so many gods, a man should have discretion as to which he would support and which he would oppose. I was not born into a set caste, unlike yourself, and encountered many kinds of worship during my youth. Initially, I chose the god that was most powerful, the father of them all, Zooth, reasoning that absolute power was the ultimate aspiration of all fierce men of war. Yet age and greater reason have taught me that power alone is not enough to rule the world, or even a small sandboat. The brutal tyrant is ever despised and conspired against.

"No, what this world respects most is the gentler side of human nature. Any sheer brute may deface the stone mountain, but only a true man could fashion from that granite peak a vast and elegant castle keep. Any pig may scratch in the soil, but only artistic man could make of the scratching a portrait. No, friend, it is not hate or the mongering of war that will win the world, but love. Scoff if you will, but think of what I say when you are finished. Few things are so jealously coveted in this world as a man's loves are coveted. Think of it. What, more often than any slight or disrespect, draws a man's hand to the hilt of his sword? Eh? Love. Defense of love. Prosecution of love. Pursuit, quest, desire of love.

"Not hate. Not death or dying. But love. And so I worship Afrodyte, the Lady of Love. She is not vengeful when she is not spurned, and demands a delicious sacrifice of her adepts."

"Hedonist."

"Aye, and proudly so. But tell me, what advantage does your way have over mine?"

"Careful, Vespuzia. Discussing opposing devotions among strangers has also led many men to reach for their weapons. We should proceed cautiously in this matter. I will simply reply that love is weak, where anger and even hate can be hard and enduring."

"Love does not endure, m'sieur? Love is not strong? Ah, but you are mistaken. You did not think, ere you spoke. I know of nothing stronger or fiercer than passionate love. What of your affection for the Martial Rite and its druids? I wager you would up and cut my throat without thought, were I to spit on their memory and good name! But no, I would not tempt your hand so. Relax, friend. I only sought to drive my point home. You see now how fiercely you love your religion. So much so that you would instinctively kill for it, or die for it if need be. It is not a hatred that drives you in this direction. It is a love."

"Yet a man cannot love his enemies to death."

"No, he cannot," conceded Andrietti Vespuzia.

"A man cannot cast petunias in the face of maces, or rely on the use of garland shields to turn lances. No cherry hearted woman ever dashed onto a field of battle to rally the day, and I have never heard of a siege succeeding with good will loaded into the catapults."

Andrietti laughed. "You mock me now by reading my words backwards. It is not love of the enemy that drives the triumphant army, but a love of homeland. The stronger love determines the ultimate winner, not the stronger hate. Think of it a moment. Review your martial histories

for hate mongers that have lived to old ages." The southron paused a moment and smiled, raising a single cautionary forefinger. "You can think of one, I warrant, but we will leave black wizards out of this discussion. Can you name another? No? And now think of men that have mongered love. There are many martyrs in that group, it is true, but there are infinitely many more old men. Love does not harm, but neither is it weak."

Epsilon harrumphed and cocked his head skeptically. "It is funny, citizen, to think that I had pegged you for a killer and not a lover on first sight." He clucked his tongue playfully and shook his head. "Such a gentle man trapped in so rough a package!"

More laughter, and louder this time. "Most are surprised to hear it. Still, you must see the wisdom of my beliefs."

"Aye. It would be foolish to deny what you say, for it is all true. Though I am not moved from my relationship with Nars. Nars is a god that is unconcerned with love and hate, except when these emotions play some vital role in his campaigns. I monger neither state of being."

"You simply monger war," provided the southron, finishing his own mug and reaching for the second that Half Pint had delivered. "To my mind, hate is nothing so much as it is the prosecution of warfare. How do you justify this?"

"I do not need to justify it. Warfare is not hate. It is... the jeweled adder, crouching in the sand. Often have I landed there, and always flown away."

"Touché, m'sieur, and well said. Yes, I can see where you lead, now. My lure is the Desert Ocean. Yours, conquest and campaign. For, you are the Emperor's Holy Warfarer!"

Andrietti finished in a violent hiss, and dropped from his seat to one knee, bowing. "Long live the war!"

He rose chuckling drunkenly, sputtering his merriment. "Long live the war!" he added giddily, slumping to the table top.

The Ritesman remained silent while the tirade continued. Presently he demanded, "Well? What of it? What is humorous in this?"

"Ah, pardon me, sir," heaved the southerner, "It is the jill. I have not often enjoyed its pleasures. I meant only to inform you that there is no war to monger! Not in these Wilderlands! Here, only wizards may raise armies and march openly, and you are not a wizard! Among these cities of men, you will not find one heart with enough courage to march through the wilderness, bound for distant conquests. You will find no armies, and without armies you will fight no wars!"

"If you know enough to recognize me for the Warfarer, then you must understand something of my duties. War does not need to be a vast undertaking. It can also be a personal matter, on a level of one man facing another, and no armies involved."

His drinking partner waxed crafty. "Is that what you have come for, then? Personal vendetta?"

"I have come for no reason other than to fulfill the demands of Exodus. Originally, I believed these to be immediately mortal demands. Now... now I am uncertain. Life in the Wilderlands is an easier prospect than I was led to believe it would be. When you claim there are no wars to fight here, you are wrong, Wise Andrietti Vespuzia. I could find a dozen causes to

defend within even Oreset's tiny walls, and I could muster men to serve at my side in prosecution of that defense. No, conflicts evolve wherever society evolves. One cannot live without the other, and so Nars' business is as ubiquitous as the men that would worship him. The trick is to pick the right fight."

"You mean to say the winning fight," and the southron returned to his mug for a noisy sup.

"No, my words stand. The right fight. To imply that I would choose a combat simply on the basis of odds for success is to imply that I hold my life dear. Which is not the case."

"Then you are a crusader, set loose on the Wilderlands to right all its wrongs?"

"Hardly." Epsilon chewed thoughtfully and watched a heated argument across the room turn into a violent, bloody fight, as if cued by their words. Andrietti minded the commotion not at all. "This land is too wrong for that. Perhaps I will choose no fights at all, one way or another."

Andrietti appeared to disbelieve. "What of your charge? No Ritesman could deny a Warfarer's duties. You could not simply pass into this land and be forgotten. Therefore, I suspect you have already found a conflict to occupy your attentions. This is why you have come to Oreset. Is it not?"

The Ritesman maintained a neutral expression. "I will not share my private affairs with you, citizen, merely because we have shared drink."

"As you please. Still, you must understand my asking. An Empirical Warfarer's entrance into this forgotten outpost is much like the fierce eagle's exit from its lofty eyre. All the meager

creatures of the forest must glance nervously skyward and wonder; where is he bound? Why has he come this way? Such a thing cannot pass unnoticed, m'sieur."

"You honor me too much, I think. I am merely a man, citizen. Not a god."

"Yet the Warfare's legend is akin to that of a god's. I tell you now, Warfarer, half the morons in that other room yonder would fall down on their knees in praise of you, were they not so ignorant and unable to read the sign on your breast. The other half would up and run away, screaming like frightened hares, and they would not stop until their hearts burst from the sheer terror of their experience. In these parts that have remained so closely related to Empire in ways of lore, the Holy Warfarer is a monster to frighten wayward children to sleep. He is a prophetic promise to forward-looking fools that would yearn for salvation from tyranny never to be. His is a tale of greatness that timid men may tell around a campfire's fickle light, adding at the end a boast of how they once personally encountered a Warfarer during the long course of his tragic Holy Exodus. And survived to tell the tale."

Andrietti laughed and spat to one side, slapping his knee. "If only those fools out there had half a brain! When you shortened that old beggar's peg leg, their bowels might have let loose all at once to think they had angered an Empirical Warfarer in their midst!"

Epsilon patiently waited for his affable mate's gales to subside. "You obviously do not share this superstition."

"But I was not born in these parts. Remember? I am from Bahia Sud! We know very little of Empire away down there. To us, the Great Barricade is as much a myth as the fabled

Pillars of Nerkule and the golden wings of Icari."

"This being the case, I find myself wondering how you learned to decipher Empirical symbols. Or did you have help from a certain halfling we both have come to cherish?"

Andrietti laughed. "Well," he hedged, leering, abashed, "It pays to pay the right people, if you understand what I mean. Half Pint and I enjoy a mutual understanding. When I am in port, he comes to me first with items of interest."

"What does he receive in return? An absence of broken bones?"

The southron waxed suddenly angry. "*Peshau me'leu!*" he spat venomously. "You dishonor me! I would not harm the little man, nor would I tolerate his abuse in my presence. Every captain in the room knows this!"

Epsilon bowed his head slightly, stiffly. "Accept my apologies, citizen. I did not mean to offer insult."

"Your words were not the insult, sir, rather it was the implication of your tone. Half Pint comes to me from respect and friendship. He comes to me because he knows I am the most honorable man in this sty! When I am in attendance in this hall, he knows no other man will dare trip him up or poke fun at his stature unless they long for a taste of my steel!" Despite his harsh tone, Vespuzia's posture was calming. He eased back into his chair more comfortably as he continued. "Do not make the mistake of judging a man by what you see of him on the outside, m'sieur. I have known large men with characters the size of peas, and mere boys with the hearts

of elephants. Half Pint is just such a man. He has the body of a small boy, but the heart of a raging bull elephant."

"Not to mention the learnedness of a wily old fox. It was wise of him to read my badge in the first place, but wiser still to have contained his revelation so well. A duller man might have shouted it out for all to know."

"You see? His wits alone belie his small size. It is a character of his entire family."

"His father and brothers, you mean."

"Aye. His father was well renowned in his day. And I have sailed with two of his lost brothers, personally. They were good men, and died happily in her ladyship's loving arms." The southron rolled his dark eyes to stare out of the windows. "I was there when his eldest brother, Stefan, died. We crewed the *Nefarious* together under Captain Doole, and were returning from far away Lostock when it happened."

Sensing Andrietti had more to say on the subject, and having nothing better to do for the moment, Epsilon felt compelled to ask the inevitable question. "When what happened?"

The trader spat his spent bolus of 'root onto the floor and rinsed his mouth with the last of his wine. As soon as he slammed the empty crockery to the tabletop, Half Pint was there with refills. Two of them. "The *Nefarious* was lost. Gods, that was a hellish voyage." He added a shudder to pontificate.

"It is a long haul from Oreset to Lostock on the best of boats with the best of captains to navigate. The *Nefarious* was anything save the best of boats, and its master was a sodden,

slovenly man that was lax at his books and charts, and overly fond of the cat." Andrietti paused to add another gulp of wine to his already swollen belly.

"Cat?"

"Cat-o'-nine tails. The mariner's hated scourge. It is a sort of whip, with nine lengths of savagely knotted leather for the strap. The lengths are a stick long, generally, and wrap neatly around a man's ribs when he his being whipped. It opens the flesh less than a bullwhip, but this only means they can deliver more blows before you are undone. Mind you now, though it is a cruel device, there is not a sand sailor worth his salt that would crew a ship without at least one of the damnable things aboard. Sand sailing is a profitable business, but it is a harsh one. One that requires much discipline of the men that would conduct it.

"A sandboat is a delicate thing in all respects, sir, you must understand this first. It is delicate in its construction, and requires a delicate hand to work its halyards and capstans. At the same time, its very existence atop the dunes depends on a delicate and precise balance of shape and form. For illustration, without the blind sheets set just so, without the constant vigilance and maintenance that is required to keep them perfectly in place, an orbiting illdross might easily pick the boat out for prey and attack. Then there are the skates. These must be kept on just the right camber, with just the right amount of spring tensed against the runners. Let too much out, and the boat is top heavy. Too little, and she breaks up on the surges. If the camber is too narrowly maintained, a crosswind can bear her down. If too wide, the skates might snap off at the hull,

leaving the boat to flounder and its crew to slowly perish beneath the sun. Many things can go wrong with it, in many ways. Even navigation is a precise and delicate matter.

"How does a man cross five thousand miles without landmarks to guide him? The Desert Ocean is a bleak, flat place. Its winds are constant, but unpredictable. In tacking one short day, a sandboat can become hopelessly lost. Unless a master navigator is ever at the helm. A navigator that never sleeps, but keeps an incessant vigil on the variables that govern the course of any voyage across the sand sea. He must watch his compass and keep the log to the minute and mile, and he must never err in doing this. His performance must be perfect. He must be godlike in practice of his art. Because a single tiny mistake, one fraction of a degree or one hundredth of an inch, can see a boat lost without a trace.

"And so a sandboat requires discipline in order to survive. Strict discipline, from the lowliest rope monkey on up to the captain, himself. Most sailors both love and loathe the cat for this reason. They love it for the unspoken deterrence that its threatened embrace provides, and hate it when it actually embraces them. They love the cat when it saves their water ration from a thief's uncaring lips, but hate it when they are punished for drinking another man's water. Do you see the dichotomy?

"Of course you do. You must. But note that I did not say harsh or unjust discipline is required. It is not. While most sailors are scurrilous rogues shipping out to avoid the local magistrate, they can also be a surprisingly well mannered lot. Something about the Desert Ocean does it to them, I think. For the first few days, until all thought of high land is dissolved from

their minds, they are an unruly species. Yet even the greeners come around after about the third day out. While standing watch, they have nothing more than the wasteland's infinite reaches to occupy their minds, and it has a heady effect. Grain upon grain, the ponderous weight of the Desert Ocean settles in around them and crushes their souls to dust. In that moment they realize there is only one way back home. The sandboat.

"And in the next, they realize that the sandboat IS its crew. The former cannot exist without the latter, and visa versa. They realize every man must do his part or all perish. Thus, even the most rebellious crew member will eventually submit himself to the captain's absolute authority. Either that, or he will toss himself over the side in despair.

"Thus, it is not usually necessary for a captain to wield a heavy hand with his men. Oh, he must maintain order at all costs, but the cat should be reserved for the most serious offenses. Water theft or mutiny or the like.

"Captain Doole, however, did not adhere to this practice. He was not a graduate of the usual school. As I said, he was a sodden man, overly fond of his drink. And while in his cups he was a petty, mean little son of a pig. He used the cat for every smallest slight, and sometimes for no reason at all. Needless to say, the crew quickly grew to hate him.

"Now it is five months out from Oreset to Lostock with good weather and good luck. But we were seven months gone on that voyage, and still tacking against a strong headwind when we passed Midpointe Rock. You have no idea how hard it was, Ritesman, to stand watch on that blasted, pitching deck, with mouth and lips cracked from thirst and halved water rations, and to

fully realize the import of what yet lay ahead and what had gone behind. To have spent seven months fruitlessly in that hell only to wrest a scant twenty five hundred miles from the demon... to realize that twenty five hundred more remained... and only enough water left for three months longer, even at quarter rations... it was too much... it was an unendurable misery.

"Yet we endured. We endured the lacerating, gale driven sands. We endured the merciless heat. We endured intense thirst and the mortal fear that goes with it. And we endured Captain Doole. With each day that passed after rounding the Rock, his temper deteriorated and his love of the cat grew. He drank heavily of his wine, while we fought for a mere mouthful of rancid water. As you can imagine, the navigator is the single most important man on the boat. His wellness of mind is so vital to the success of the voyage that he is afforded certain special privileges. Still, he should not exercise those privileges in full gloat before his starving men. He should not stand at the wales, laughing at the wine running down his chin, while his crew weakens moment by moment from lack of drink." Bitterly, as if in spite of past abstinence, Andrietti reached for a fresh mug and downed it in a long, throat-bobbing drought.

Belching and wiping his mouth with the back of his free hand, the trader slammed his mug down triumphantly. "Inevitably, as such difficult times would have it, rumor of mutiny developed among the crew. Somehow, that rumor made its way from the forecastle to the poop deck, and hell became infinitely more hellish. Doole was incensed, and, though the allegations were never verified, had several of our number tossed overboard in a violent rage. I think the captain was

poised on insanity's irrevocable descent then, and might have gone over after his crew, if not for a gods sent change in the wind.

"It came up all at once, that blow did, and when we jibed to, it was with a smart crack of filling sail. Ah, I can remember that wind's sweet scent and cool touch, even to this day, Epsilon. It was a breath of life, exhaled from the breast of Lady Love herself. For it not only drove the *Nefarious* at speed to far Lostock, but loosed Captain Doole's hand from the cat as well.

"So we arrived at our destination believing our luck had changed for the better. Being mere mortals, we could not foresee that our ill fortunes had, in fact, only just started. Our luck had indeed changed, but not for the better.

"While in port, two of our remaining crew were slain, and four others skipped ship, failing to turn up for final muster on embarkation. By then, some five weeks after making landfall, Captain Doole's reputation had been mauled all over town, and we could not find extra hands to save our lives. Captain Doole grew increasingly impatient and frustrated with his efforts to recruit a full team, as we were already overdue back in Oreset. Winter was coming on by this time, and that is an unwholesome season in the Desert Ocean. A man burns by day and freezes by night. And always there is risk that the skates will chill to brittleness and shatter in mid-voyage. No captain, not even Doole, is fond of sailing in such weather.

"But sail was our only recourse. The City of Lostock, much like Oreset, starves in the cold months. There is rarely enough to feed the townspeople, much less a scarecrow crew tossed up from some unknown, far away shore, so the port authority decreed that we should depart

within a week or forfeit our boat. We could not stay, yet we could not go. Not with a mere four mariners on deck. It is impossible to properly sail a sandboat with so few. Or so we thought.

"Doole, meanwhile, was coming to another conclusion entirely. On the thirty-seventh day of our maroon in Lostock, the captain issued orders to weigh the catch spurs and make ready for sail. Stefan and I were dismayed, but we had learned better than to gainsay our unhappy master. We bent un-fondly to our tasks, rigging the blind sheets and mainsails with the trepid movements of doomed cadavers marching to their graves. And when we looked back from the poop at Lostock's high bluffs receding in the southern distance, it was with a longing for safety and a certainty of doom that makes my heart ache simply to remember it. Voyaging out of that safe harbor was like crossing over the River Styx.

"I recall the skies were crimson all that winter long, and the storms were fierce. Each dawn gave rise to a fresh tempest blown in from a different horizon, and each tempest drove Doole deeper and deeper into his drink. Five days out, the cat reappeared in that madman's hand, and our misery was compounded beyond the endurance of our flesh." He paused to shudder again, and wipe a calloused hand down the length of his weather blasted countenance. "We had no sleep and no rest from the halyards. And, though we had plenty to eat and drink, we had not the time to partake, kept busy as we were with the constant gales. It was a nightmare of waking, sir, and its devilish visions have not left me yet.

"Were I to close my eyes in this very moment, I would see Captain Doole standing at the stern, his fists upon his hips, feet splayed, and in his grip the cat o' nine. Were I to put my fingers

in my ears to still the din of this crowd, I would hear his bear's voice growling to shout us down. It is always there, in my hearing, a soft ringing that will never expire. In my dreams, I am powerless to deny it, and nightly Captain Doole stands at my back in crimson silhouette, raging and barking orders like a gods awful devil, snapping the cat about my shoulders... snapping... snapping... snapping the cat."

Suddenly, Andrietti lurched drunkenly to his feet, raising the half empty mug that remained him. "Gods damn the Terrible Doole! May his voyages beyond Styx be a slave trade among pestilent lands!" and he drank sloppily. "I curse his soul and spit to mention his foul memory!" and he spat. Then he simply stood there, swaying unevenly, blinking his wide eyes repeatedly as a sleepy owl. Andrietti seemed to wait for encouragement from the crowd. When none was immediately forthcoming, his knees bent as though he would retake his seat. Only to straighten once more, that he might further declare, "His mother was undoubtedly a most wretched whore that spawned freely with beasts, taking them into all her ports of entry, only to give birth to the vile, half-animal bastard out of her arse in a full latrine!"

Somebody across the way, possibly another of Doole's ex-crew members from another voyage, added a shout of agreement, and there was a general toast raised throughout the room to Andrietti's words. This story, it seems, was well known among the captains.

Epsilon lofted his own mug in support of the cause, and drank deeply. By the time he was finished, Half Pint had come and gone, depositing fresh ale and a platter of hot, steaming roasted meats. The Ritesman's stomach rolled and protested, but he did not enjoy so much as a tiny

nibble of the stuff, recalling Pandolyn's words of caution. It was a sore temptation, too, watching his drinking mate tear into all that fatty flesh as a ravenous wolf, without sneaking so much as a fingertip of gravy for himself.

As he ate messily, the southron finished his sordid story. "I am surprised, sir, each time I relate this tale, to say how far we sailed from Lostock, and just four able bodies on deck to battle the unabated weather. How we managed it, I cannot say. Neither could I claim the ability to manage it again. Perhaps it was a matter of Doole's sheer, brutish, driving will... that or the familiar touch of his cat... I do not know, except to say we were rounding Midpointe Rock when the real trouble began.

"Stefan was standing watch on the skate tenses, while I was at the steering boom. The other two of our mates, a crusty old dog named Jum and a youth whose name I cannot recall, were standing alongside the halyards ready to make tack, one on either outrigger. While my eyes were busy on the dunes, Half Pint's eldest brother apparently fell asleep at his post, which negligence did not go unnoticed by Captain Doole. I know not how long the bastard whipped Stefan before I heard his cries. By the time I glanced around to the tenses, Stefan was cut and bleeding in stripes all over his body. I was horrified to see his skin hanging from his upraised arms in tatters. In tatters, I say! Long, gory strips that flapped in the wind!

"By the gods, it angered me to my soul! I was enraged! As were Jum and the boy. Before I knew what happened, I had tied off the boom and all three of us were piled on top of the demon, beating him mercilessly. Somehow, I came up with the cat." Here, Andrietti's leer

returned, but more viciously so. He smacked his lips, and not from the greasy meat. "How the little tyrant rolled about on deck, screaming, begging for mercy! Him that could deliver up the blows, but could not stand for their return! Ah, the miserable bastard... I fondly remember how I beat him and beat him in those final moments of his life, how the cat's tails sliced and cut and blooded him, and how he wailed to see the ruin I was making of his flesh. But I was not selfish. I let each of Jum and the boy have their turn. Of us all, it was the boy that wrought the most damage, for he seemed to be the angriest. Doole must have done something particularly vile to the youth, something of unspeakable nature that required unrepentant vengeance. For the captain was so disheartened by the boy's treatment of him, that he finally stood against the assault, only to throw himself over the side.

"Which action served to add further fuel to our rage. I dashed back to the boom, while Jum and the boy took up the halyards, and we tacked the damned *Nefarious* around in a tight circle. All the while, the dying Stefan kept a sight on his tormentor amid the shifting sands, and called out the bastard's bearing with the last of his breath." Andrietti's expression was a ghoulish mask of sadistic delight. His bloodthirsty gaze spoke volumes of his hatred for Doole. "Have you ever seen a man run down by a sandboat, Ritesman? No? Ah, now there is a punishment most painful. In the hands of a skilled pilot, a sandboat's sharpened skates can undo a body with satisfyingly messy results.

"I caught the wretch with the starboard skate on the first pass. The runner passed neatly over his ankles, cutting his feet clean away. The captain screamed like a woman, and we all laughed, laughed heartily, to hear it.

"Next, I brought the boom around to port and again we circled. Again, Stefan kept an eye on Doole's bearing. And again I ran him down, this time taking off his lower legs just above the knee. By the time we came around again, he had perished, so I diced him with the dual center runners and dusted my hands of the affair.

"What happened immediately afterward might have been the bastard's dying vengeance on us, since the disaster's timing and manner were so ironic in every regard. I had turned back to see how far the catch spurs might drag Doole's guts, and so had taken my eyes foolishly off the murky horizon for a merest of moments, when we ran suddenly aground.

"It was a violent impact, that tore Nefarious' legs out from under her and sheered her masts below decks. Her cargo nets ruptured, spilling trade goods out as the contents of severed entrails. Her outriggers snapped at the hull, and all three skates were undone. We hit the dunes at speed, and the forecastle shattered like it had been constructed of splinters. Jum and the boy were ground up in the ruins, standing so far forward as they were, while Stefan and I were tossed high up off the poop deck and flung bodily into the wastes."

Andrietti stopped speaking, breathless from his tale. For many seconds, he stared into his drink with blank, haunted eyes. Epsilon waited politely for his recital to continue, and kept his eyes fixed on the far away Desert Ocean moonscape, lest he witness another man's unbidden tears.

But the southron was not crying. Rather, he seemed to be reliving Nefarious' gods awful last moments in the back of his mind. The Warfarer could almost hear that long ago wind raging out of Vespuzia's head, and see the remains of a doomed sandboat scattered across the liquid pools of his dark eyes.

It seemed a crimson light glowed from the whites of his orbs when he raised his morbid gaze from his cup once more. "It is a most miserable feeling, sir, to lose a ship. In many ways, it is worse than dying. In the aftermath, I remember searching through the debris for my mates, only to discover Jum and the boy all broken and torn amid the wreckage. I remember kneeling over their messy corpses and thinking how they had been lucky in the matter, they that had died when the boat died. For Stefan and I, the end would not come so easily.

"Yes, I found Stefan, Half Pint's Brother. He survived the disaster well enough, but he would not survive the night. I cradled his head in my lap and ministered to his pain as best I was able. Just before dawn, he drew a deep, sandy breath, bade me take care of his family, and expired with a rattling gasp in these very arms. It was Doole that killed him. Doole and the cat." Heaving a long, blowing sigh, the trader reached for and popped a savory chunk of beef into his mouth and shook his head dourly. "Then was I there, stranded in the middle of the Desert Ocean and winter coming on. Alone.

"With the sun's cool early morning light shining down on my back, I fashioned a tent from Nefarious' rent sails and gathered as much of her stores as I could find. Fortunately, I was able to recover all the water and the still, as well as most of her dried rations. Much of her trade goods,

however, were useless to me, being as these were expensive baubles, crockery, and mundane household items that could serve me little purpose. Still, I gathered up what I thought might save me, and covered the pile with a bit of brightly colored sail cloth that I might easily find it after the day's storms had passed.

"Then I retired to my tent to tie bits of the boat's savaged hull to two of her outboard skates. Adding a length of boom for a mast to this arrangement, I was able to complete a crude sort of wind driven sledge, all before dusk. Which sledge I loaded with as much as it could carry and set off for Midpointe Rock, then only a few league's distance. I made several trips back and forth that night in a hurried attempt to save as much of the *Nefarious* as I could, including her wooden hull, which I intended for firewood. On the dawn of the next day, a raging storm blew in from the north, bringing with it such cold as I had never before endured. My sledge was borne away upon the wind and dashed to pieces on the rocks." Andrietti shrugged, wiped his hands upon the cuff of his stained cloak, and pushed the nearly empty platter away with a satisfied belch. Half Pint was instantly there to bear the wares away and fetch more to drink. "But the loss was no disaster. The remainder of *Nefarious'* goods, along with her shattered bones, were consumed by the shifting sands that day."

When the southron returned his attentions to the window-bound view of his beloved wastes, Epsilon guessed his tale had come to coda at last. Intrigued to have the rest of it, he asked, "How long were you stranded there?"

"All the winter long. Fortunately, winter is a brief prospect in those sandy lands. Within six weeks, I sighted the sails of an early spring trader rounding the rock, and a week after that I was able to signal one that needed an extra hand badly enough to stop. Thus, I was rescued. And the *Nefarious* was lost. And Stefan Emmal's Son was committed to my Lady's loving arms." He sipped from a freshened mug, but more calmly than before. Morosely, he added in a harsh whisper, "Gods damn the scurrilous Captain Doole!"

The Ritesman raised his warming drink in supporting salute. "Gods damn all incompetent commanders. May they perish bloodily in the wake of their own errors."

Andrietti rapped his knuckles on the tabletop. "Here," enthused the suddenly animated southron, "I will show you something. They are my souvenirs of that miserable, devil spawned bastard. Do you see?" he verily cried. And pulled aside the collar of his leather jerkin and linen shirt to expose a tortuous mass of scars that seemed to cover his entire back. "They run all they way down to my arse, and all around my ribs. And the scars do not stop at the depth of my skin. No, they penetrate through and through me, and permeate my every aspect. I am a freak for his malignant stewardship of my flesh!

"Bah!" he belched at last, his leer returning. The trader shrugged and sipped at his ale, his eyes on the crowd. "What of it? Eh? I am alive, am I not? With all my parts in place. What more could a man want? I tell you, mate, I should not complain. Rather, I should praise Captain Doole and his treatment of me. I should rejoice to recall the lost *Nefarious*."

"Oh?" wondered Epsilon, his brow arching skeptically, "And why is that?"

"For the greater love of life I now enjoy. Doole's cat was a vicious, brutal teacher, but for it I have learned to savor each moment of existence in absence of the whip. Every minute of freedom is a lifetime in lack of pain. I do not take one breath for granted, not one heartbeat. And I tell you one thing more that the devil hath spawned in me; I no longer dread crossing the Desert Ocean. Its hot sun is not so hot. Its cold nights are not so cold. Its vast, unreasonable distances do not seem so great, and are no longer daunting to consider. Beneath Doole, every inch was a mile, every day a lifetime. In his wake, hours seem but mere minutes to me. Nowadays, the crossing from Oreset to Lostock is a short, happy passage. Each time I round the rock, coming or going, it is like rounding my own tombstone. My own tombstone that stands above an empty grave. For there I died, Ritesman, and left my soul behind. So I, like you, do not fear my death, as I am already dead."

To which the Warfarer returned, mocking, "Then tell me, sir, how may a man live without a soul?"

"But, you see, I do not live without a soul. I have Captain Doole's immortal spirit to keep me company. It resides here!" he said, slapping his own mangled back, "And here!" pointing to his skull and his brain beyond, "And here!" indicating his fiercely beating heart, "And here!" his strong right arm, "I have taken HIS soul into me, at the displacement of my own. It was I that slew him, and I that inherited his iron will. This is our way. Thus, I am a captain and master today. I am Doole."

"And how do you pilot your boat, captain? With a so called 'cat' jutting from your right fist?"

The trader laughed derisively. "I said I inherited his iron will. I did not claim the darker side of his nature." When Epsilon's gaze pressed for further answer, he added reluctantly, "My crew respects me well enough, of that you may be certain." Before the Ritesman could ask, Andrietti confessed, "Yes, I have a cat onboard my boat. And, yes, I have been known to use it. Yet the whip is not the source of their respect for me. My men love me as a brother, because that is the way they are treated, as my brothers. We may quarrel and disagree, but there are no summary executions on my ship. No crime short of mutiny is capital, and nothing but the worst offense is punishable by the cattails. At the least, not one of my men has ever stepped off my deck with this," he slapped his back again. "And, by the gods, none ever will."

"It is a valiant boast."

"It is the truth."

"Of course it is, Andrietti Vespuzia. I-" but Epsilon's remark was cut short.

A long, sinister shadow fell suddenly across the tabletop to lie between him and his mate. The Ritesman glanced up to see a huge, well armed man standing over them, with three other smaller men lurking snidely at his back. All were dressed lightly for combat, as they were carrying small bucklers and short swords, with fencing daggers tucked into their broad belts. Epsilon saw chain mail on one, plate mail on two others, and the big fellow was wearing a full breast plate. Atop his head was a stout helmet that was well wrought with strange symbols from a foreign land.

While his extremities were shielded by thickly padded leather that had scale male fixed to it. Without being told, the Ritesman knew this large, angry man had come with some sort of mortal business on his mind. The men at his back were not nervous or anxious, but neither were they lax or nonchalant. They were simply professional killers, come to tend an ugly affair. Epsilon could not possibly guess how that affair might involve him.

As it turned out, it had nothing to do with him at all. The big one, the obvious leader of the bunch, stuck out his chin and growled, "*Eshte wah te'leu! Lelmalti eh cos a lalte! Mas toa mekshiltemu, Vespuzia. ACH TOA!*"

The trader feigned a nonplused expression and shrugged his shoulders, leering as always. "*Net. Nie mekshlteme. Pera ex mekshiltetu, Osgarthe, por mavor. Ex mekshiltetu, pan dela, eh tu, eh tu,*" he finished, pointing out the men in the back, "*Eh tu. Ex mekshiltetudes, pan dela. Por mavor!*"

"*NET! Mekshiltemu, Vespuzia! TOA! ACH TOA!*"

Andrietti fingered the hilt of his weapons demurely. "*Mavor, Osgarthe. Lemme nie sangrini este Leah. Mekshiltetudes, pan dela. O yoa eh nechtememe,*" he said, indicating Epsilon with a nod of his head, "*Sangriniate pan dela. PAN DELA!*"

"Hold there, citizen!" protested the Ritesman, raising his left to halt the southron's tongue, even as his right fell instinctively to the safety of his weapon's ornate haft. "Do not offer me up for your-"

But it was too late. With a scream of rage, Osgarthe snatched up his heavy, stubby blade and smashed the table to kindling with a single blow.

As the big man recovered his reach and his men spread out behind him to contain their prey, the Warfarer whipped his steel from its scabbard and demanded, "What did you say?! What did you tell them?!"

"Nothing," responded Andrietti with a crazy cackle. He scrambled back against the wall, arming himself, and added, "Nothing but the truth!"

One of the hired killers, the one wearing chain mail, swung on Epsilon from his right flank, which blow the Warfarer dodged in a scramble. "The truth? What truth?!"

Vespuzia darted up onto the broad east window sill, parrying Osgarthe's heavy blows. "That you were my good friend, and that any death they had come to deal should be shared equally between us!"

"The devil you say!" bellowed an enraged Epsilon. "I am not your good friend! And I would not share your death." He was forced to pause when a second opponent leaped in close to deliver a fresh assault. "Tell them! Tell them now!"

The rogue laughed and ran lithely along the sill, with Osgarthe and the third goon in tow, tossing tables and chairs and patrons angrily aside as they rushed to follow. Over his shoulder and between bursts of merriment, he called back, "I should try, but, alas, I do not think they would believe me! You are welcome to tell them, however. I hope your Sudanese is well polished!"

Seeing that he was left alone to finish the fight, whether he wanted it or not, Epsilon muttered under his breath, "Bloody hells," and leapt down the short flight of steps to the balcony rail. He sought room to fight... then he began fighting his two opponents in earnest.

10

Among Rogues and Vagabonds

Epsilon stood at the foot of the stair in a crouch, watching his opponents warily as they descended. One moved around to the right, while the other went left. The Ritesman realized he had surrendered the high ground, but he had also abandoned a position that enjoyed no retreat. With the balcony rail at his back, he could easily leap over the side onto the stage below. Or he could maneuver to either side.

Glancing in both directions, he determined that both ways remained open for the moment. The crowd was stirring, but had not surged into the aisles.

He tried, "Hold your hand, citizens. I have no quarrel with you, and I have no wish to defend Andrietti Vespuzia's honor in any matter."

The swordsman to the right, the one wearing chain mail, declared, "Vespuzia narcassi!" and he spat vehemently. "Vespuzia san eeho et cargot!" Whereupon he raised the small buckler

attached to his left forearm defensively, and, squatting behind it, fell on Epsilon with a fury of blows.

Epsilon defended himself skillfully, turning the first assault aside with his blade and dashing around the balcony to his right. This put both foes on the same quarter, and now he could come about to face them squarely.

He might easily have slain the hasty one on first contact, as this one's swing was wild and unchecked, yet the Warfarer was reluctant to do so. It was not necessarily a wise decision, but Epsilon realized that he did not know these men. He did not know their purpose. For all he could ascertain, Andrietti Vespuzia might be the most vile criminal on the face of the planet. Perhaps Osgarthe and his crew were basically good men, come to deal justice. Perhaps slaying them would be a great wrong. At any rate, this was not his fight and these were not his foes.

Backing away from his opponents' advance, he tried again, this time using his free left hand to sign for truce as best he could manage. "This is not my concern, citizens. I do not wish to kill you." But they maintained their slow, creeping advance. Apparently, these men had not been present in the Swooning Dragon's great hall earlier. "Vespuzia is not my friend! I spit!" and he did so, "I spit on foul Vespuzia!" and he spat again.

The man in plate mail appeared to understand. His approach slowed, and he nearly rose from his attack posture. Then his mate barked something rude, and both were returned to their bloody business.

Very well, conceded Epsilon mentally. *Perhaps another demonstration is called for here.*

A loud bark to prevent the other dog's bite. With a jerk of his body, he snapped into a parade posture and presented his ornate sword sharply. At warning of a base shout, the Ritesman began exercising his right arm in martial display. His steel whistled and hummed as it danced. It flashed in the lamplight, faster, faster, faster still... so fast that the eye could not see its individual movements. Epsilon's weapon was a blur of potential death that cycled above his head, behind his back, from side to side, around and around. As robins that have landed on the death adder's jeweled coils, the assassins stood frozen, enthralled, their eyes wide and mouths agape.

At the end of his effort, Epsilon took two quick steps forward and brought his sword to stillness. Its shimmering point was laid across the nearest goon's buckler, where it just nudged the underside of his stubbled chin. The shocked man swallowed hard, as did his partner in succession.

In the silence that followed, a sound of splattering liquid greeted the Warfarer's sensitive ears. Looking down, he was startled to see that the assassin had shamed himself liberally. A growing pool of urine was depositing around his left boot.

The Warfarer clucked his tongue and shook his head gently. "And you were doing so well," he scorned. "Now that I have your unwavering audience, let us overcome this cultural barrier." He lowered his steel with a quick, whipping movement, and drew its tip near the scabbard's mouth, as though he would put it away. "If you will allow me the courtesy, I will surrender this arena posthaste, without pressing a decision in this contest. Leave me to go my way, and you may go yours. Do we agree?"

Whether it was his broad, overly friendly smile or the threat of his skilled right arm, the Ritesman's opponents both nodded their heads and lowered their defenses. Epsilon returned their nods respectfully and seated his blade home. Then he gripped the balcony rail (without really diverting his attention from the as yet armed men) and levered himself over the edge.

As he landed atop the small, circular stage and made his way cautiously across its diameter, the assassins watched him go, but made no move to offer further insult. Their expressions were a mixture of profound relief and utter shock.

Noises of scuffling and foreign shouts of anger sounded from the far end of the theater. Andrietti had apparently made good his escape from the confines of the Captain's Room and was now running amok outside. A woman screamed and a sound of shattering crockery followed. With his astute hearing, the Warfarer followed the southron's flight around the outside wall of the theater, where it no doubt eventually turned into the street somewhere further along. Presently, all indication of the brawl faded away.

Paying his soiled opponents no further heed, Epsilon dropped down to the straw covered floor of the sty and called for Half Pint to lead him to his room. The midget appeared out of nowhere with the groom at his arm, and Helmcleaver was quickly drawn out of his stall. More money changed hands for the care of his animal. Whereupon Epsilon was led along the row of stalls and back around the circular stables to a broad, high set of doors on the northern face of the building.

Through these and along a dank, poorly lit hallway, they encountered yet another set of doors. This pair opened back to the west, and entered into a short hallway lined with numbered rooms along both sides. At the end of the hall, a final door led them outside and onto a sheltered porch. Epsilon's intended quarters opened onto the porch separately in such a way that it appeared to be the theater's forgotten bursar's office. Indeed, a quartet of off colored squares in the masonry showed where the clerks' windows had long ago been bricked over.

Half Pint unlocked the iron bolt and pushed the heavy door open. "It is prepared as I told you it would be. I have moved the bed aside to allow ample room for your animal. If the beast should make a mess, just leave it if you wish, or call for a groom to clean up right away. Or maybe you carry the proper gear, even better. However you prefer." He waited on the interior for Epsilon and Helmcleaver to enter. A lamp was already burning in each corner of the tiny apartment. "As you can see, the chamber has sturdy walls and sturdier bolts. There is a view window in the door that will allow you to see outside before you open up to anyone. I think a man of your renown should be safe enough here."

"Aye," agreed Epsilon, examining the room's interior with a skeptical expression. "It should prove to be the most affording quarters I have enjoyed since Alcorde. And the bath..." he strode over to it happily, "You have hot water?"

"As hot as you can stand it, sire."

"Then bring it, ere I disrobe. And return with it yourself. I would have words with you in privacy, Half Pint." And he turned a steely gaze on the midget.

Who swallowed with difficulty and averted his gaze. "As you wish it, so shall it be. I return presently."

When the halfling was gone, Epsilon shut and bolted his door, then turned his attentions to his mount. Helmcleaver blew and snorted nervously to be cramped in so small a place, but the Ritesman soothed him with gentle strokes and gentler words. When the stallion's deadly hooves were stilled, Epsilon retrieved the bulk of his gear from the saddle, including his buckler, helm, and as yet assembled crossbow, and hung these from wooden pegs that jutted out of the stone wall. Next he removed the saddle and finally his baggage sling, leaving Helmcleaver unburdened for the first time in days.

As he brushed down the animal's sweat stiffened hairs, the horse's muscles rippled and twitched reflexively. Too long had passed since its last grooming. Epsilon apologized to his horse sincerely for so abusing it, and promised to better service its needs in the future.

He had just fixed its feedbag in place, when Half Pint called again at the door. At Epsilon's invitation, the short man entered with a brief train of servants, each carrying a pair of steaming buckets. The attendants filled the high backed, ornately molded tub hurriedly, with many fearful glances over their shoulders at the stern Ritesman standing in the doorway. All hunched backs and tucked tails, those meek men filed out of the chamber at a stumbling trot, leaving only the halfling behind to face Epsilon's apparent wrath.

After bolting the door, he removed his tattered cloak and wide sword belt, and hung them from a peg. Next followed his cross braces with their many pouches, and then his rent baldric and

tunic, which exposed his naked mail armor to the flickering lamp light. This was so brightly polished that Epsilon seemed to be wearing a garment sewn of white diamonds. Each link sparkled with every slightest movement, and jingled softly as he stalked across the room to sit upon a long bench. There, he held out one booted foot and turned an expectant eye on his man servant.

Half Pint straddled his shank backwards to ease off the reluctant boot, and repeated the action with the other foot when it was time. Epsilon lay back against the rough stone wall and heaved a deep, blowing sigh of relief, rubbing his sore arches gratefully. "Martyrs' blood! It has been days and days since my feet were last shed of those damnable things. You have surely earned your money now, Half Pint, if you had not before."

"Thank you, sir. I am pleased to be of assistance."

The Ritesman grunted softly. "Perhaps you assist too much."

"You are referring to Vespuzia, of course."

"None other."

"I only meant to help, sir. I swear it."

"Help how? Help who?"

"Everybody. You. The captain. Myself. Mostly myself, in fact. But what of it? I did not arrange for the trouble you met. Nor did I expect it."

Epsilon unfastened his goiters and rolled his stockings off. Next followed his lower mail and pantaloons. Finally, he shed his mail shirt and laid it out neatly beside him on the bench.

Fluffing his undershirt to rid it of his own body heat, he asked, "You obviously enjoy some sort of Empirical education, so it must have been you that read the sign upon my baldric. Do not deny it. Why did you tell the trader who I am, then, and he alone?"

Half Pint cleared his throat and picked up his master's stockings to lay them across the tops of his boots. "Despite what happened tonight, sir, Vespuzia is a good captain. No, he is the best. And I thought you would want the best."

"The best for what? Why should you think I have need of a sandboat captain?"

"Do you not? Why else come to Oreset from the west? Surely you do not intend to stay." Here, the midget's tone waxed sarcastic and derisive, as though choosing to live in Oreset was akin to volunteering for hell.

"For a time, perhaps. Certainly not forever."

"And when you leave, if you are bound east, that stallion of yours will not last out the Desert Ocean, however fierce he may be. You will have need of a sandboat and its captain, sure as I stand before you. You will have need of Andrietti Vespuzia."

"Perhaps. And perhaps the trader will have sailed long before I need him." He stripped off his final garment and stood, all but naked and ready for the bath.

"Somehow," supplied the halfling, presenting a towel and soap that had been placed atop the tub. "I do not think this will be the case. He owes a sizeable debt on his boat in this port, and the harbor master will not let him sail without first paying. You could buy his services for a song."

"Has this famed captain no fortune of his own?" enquired the Ritesman, accepting the towel to wrap it around his waist. Only then did he remove his underpants.

"Of course he has. Back in Bahia Sud, where he is currently an outcast. Here, he is destitute. The captain is fond of gambling at stakes, you see, and lost all his coinage at the games three nights ago. Now he must monger fares and cargo wherever he can. It is a potentially profitable situation for you both. You stand to get the best boat and pilot for a cut rate, while Vespuzia stands to be redeemed from this hell."

"I see. And you had no knowledge of those men and their business with Vespuzia? None at all?"

"None, sire. I swear it."

Epsilon approached the bath and raised one foot to test the steaming waters. And hesitated. He was suddenly recalling Pandolyn's admonishments. She had said not to drink the waters, but she had said nothing of bathing in them.

Noticing his master's hesitance, Half Pint said, "The water is safe enough, sir. It was hauled up from the Empirical River only today. I have tested it, myself. See?" To prove his point, the midget scooped up a palmful and drank it. "We test all our water in this town. Especially at the Swooning Dragon."

The Warfarer weighed the midget's words cynically. "Test it how?"

"We pay a taster to sample it."

Eyeing the water longingly, the Ritesman relented and plunged in, discarding the towel to one side as he submerged. He ducked his head to wet his hair, but was careful to keep the water from his mouth, eyes, and nostrils. Back up again, he squeegeed his face and asked, "What happens if you get a bad batch?"

"That hardly ever happens in the dry season."

"And when it rains?"

"There have been unfortunate incidents among the testers, to be sure. It is a risk of their profession." Half Pint offered up the soap again, and picked up Epsilon's towel to keep it dry.

"When one transcorporates into a milt, it is ejected into the Wilderlands to live with others of its kind. Such are the lots of life in this land."

"I might have guessed." Epsilon commenced to lather himself liberally with the coarse, gritty soap. "Tell me how you came to these lands, Half Pint. You do not seem as though you belong among these harsh, uncultured people."

The halfling blushed. "I thank you, master, for your words most kind. Unfortunately, you are mistaken in this matter. I was born in Oreset, as were all my brothers and my father."

"And your mother?"

He shrugged cavalierly. "A wanderer. Watermen fished her out of the Empirical River when she was but a girl. Nobody knows for certain where she came from. Neither did she."

"Yet she must have had an Empirical upbringing. She taught you to read, no?"

"Yes, she taught me to read your language. And something of the Emperor and His Martial Rite."

The Warfarer was quick to insert, "The Rite is not ruled by that boy. It is not his."

"Certainly it is not, I only meant... well, at any rate, she taught me many sacred things. She taught me that wit could be a greater thing than tall, straight bones. I know not how wise she was, for my head has never won a fight. It has, however, saved me from many unwholesome situations. And it has allowed me a certain kind of access to persons such as yourself."

"And Captain Vespuzia."

The halfling blushed again and sat on the edge of the bed, his eyes averted. "Andrietti Vespuzia and I are as close as brothers, sir. You will forgive me if I show preference to my family in matters of commerce."

"Family, you say? I know nothing of family or of family affairs. Still, I suspect it is best that a man honors his kin whenever he may." The Ritesman's tone was approving.

Half Pint nodded and wiped at his nose with the back of his hand. "That business back in the Captain's Room was unfortunate, but I do not believe Andrietti planned it or even foresaw its happenstance. I hope you will not hold a grudge."

"Hold a grudge?" the Warfarer sounded astonished. "No, I will not hold a grudge. Why should I? The man only attempted to have me killed, and ran off to leave me fight his battles alone. I see no capital offense in that." He stopped speaking to dunk his soapy hair. "What was it all about, anyway, Half Pint? Who is this Osgarthe, and what did he want with Vespuzia?"

"I am not certain, master, but it has something to do with a maiden he left in Bahia Sud. Or rather, an ex-maiden, to put it bluntly. Andrietti was promised to wed the daughter of a powerful land owner in that country, but took his pleasures prior to the alter and ran off with her honor instead. Now there is a bounty on his head, and he is an outcast in his own lands. Hence, his current predicament and your encounter with the Sudanese. As for Osgarthe, I know not who he is exactly, except to guess that he is a southron bounty hunter. He and his men. Mercenaries hired by the disgraced father, no doubt, sent to fetch Andrietti back to Bahia Sud, alive or dead."

To which Epsilon retorted. "Judging by the big man's style, it is more likely to be dead than alive. I wonder if he has won his pay yet?"

"I would not wager against Andrietti Vespuzia. He has survived many lethal threats in his time."

"Such as the *Nefarious'* final voyage."

"He told you the tale? Of course he did, I heard him cursing Captain Doole from the kitchen. He only does that in his cups, as his mind wanders the Desert Ocean near Midpointe Rock, where his soul was lost."

"His soul and your brother's, if he told me correctly."

"It is all true enough. They crewed together aboard the *Nefarious*, and the boat was indeed lost with all hands, save for Andrietti Vespuzia."

"And you do not doubt his version of events?"

The midget was appalled. "I have no need to doubt him. Why should he lie?"

Epsilon shrugged and scrubbed the sole of his right foot. "Men lie for many reasons."

"Yet I believe him in this matter. What of his scars? What of his rescue from the Rock?"

"As you would have it. I was taught to rarely trust what I see, and never what I hear."

He scrubbed his other foot. "Especially when I hear it from men of Vespuzia's character."

"To be honest, master, I cannot vouch for the man's character. He is a creature of these lands, as are we all. They are harsh lands, and require harsh men to live in them. Nothing is easy here. Nothing. When a man's belly is empty, he will lie to fill it, or worse. And we have all suffered from empty bellies, time to time. Thus, we are all liars. We are all thieves. Yet even among thieves there are the good and the bad, the better and the worse.

"Though nothing is sacred in Oreset, some men still worship honor. Vespuzia is such a man. Most of our heroes were all slain long ago, you see. Them and their sons and the sons of their sons. All that is valiant was bled from our people during the great slaughters, and it is most difficult to get blood to return to the veins from whence it flows. So we are all but pale reflections of our grandfathers, and they of their grandfathers before them. Except for men like Vespuzia and some of the other captains. Their hearts ever beat with a rare courage, even if their characters are somewhat... unsavory at times."

The Warfarer knew not how to reply to the midget's words, so he made no reply at all. He could not, after all, reassure the little man that his world was right and good. Yet neither could he concede that all the fire had burned out of these people. Though they seemed to lack scruples and moral direction, they were nevertheless a fierce breed. They must be. Despite their

shortcomings, Epsilon thought he could storm all of Empire with a mere division of such men, provided they were well trained. But what could he say of these thoughts to a halfling barely three feet tall?

After an awkward silence passed between them, Half Pint rose to gather up Epsilon's soiled and tattered raiment. The midget cleared his throat and offered, "The Swooning Dragon keeps a darning lady, sire. I could run these rags over to her tonight and she could have them sewn up again and laundered come morning."

The Warfarer nodded, smiling. "Ah, it is too good to be true. A bath and clean clothing. All in the midst of these Wilderlands. I tell you freely, Half Pint, I fully expected to be dead by this late date. Dead and consumed for carrion."

Half Pint grinned boyishly, suddenly warming to his master. "It is well for me that you were not," he enthused, patting the lump of his purse. "And I must say it will be a sad day in the Swooning Dragon when you leave."

"It will be a sadder day for me, citizen. Yet I thank you for your flattery." Epsilon finished bathing and stood into his linen towel. "Now I should like to rest. Call for me at first light, if you will. I have early business tomorrow." He moved to let the midget out.

"Aye, sire. At first light."

"And, Half Pint?"

"Yes, sire?"

"Keep your education to yourself in the future. Hmm?"

"Of course."

Epsilon bolted the door and returned to his baggage. From this, he fished out fresh underclothing and stockings, and dressed. Lastly, he donned his chain mail and boots, and only then retired to bed.

It was made up with clean linens and a single quilt. He climbed in with his sword belt and crossbow, laying the former item alongside him while the latter was leaned against the wall close at hand.

Sighing contentedly, the swordsman interlaced his fingers behind his head and closed his eyes. Behind his lids he discovered a world of darkness, and in that world of darkness, a nation of dreams. He was asleep before he could resist.

11

All the King's Gold

Epsilon was up and standing beside the door, sword in hand, before he was fully awake. A second rapping at the heavy wooden slab rendered his mind fully aware, and he suddenly recalled where he had slept the night before.

Half Pint's squeaky base voice called out, "Master! Master! Are you awake? The hour is already well past dawn!"

"Well past dawn?" repeated the Warfarer groggily, lowering his weapon. "Why have you let me sleep so late?" and he reached for the view window to verify that his man servant was alone.

"Beg pardon, sire, but I have called twice previously this morning. You did not awaken, though I knocked until my knuckles were bloody." He glanced up when Epsilon opened the little window, and held forth a small but apparently heavy little pouch in one hand. "I have brought

you change for your Empirical coin," then he presented a neatly tied bundle of clothing, "And your dress, freshly cleaned and darned."

The Ritesman grunted and yawned. Scratching himself obscenely, he unbolted the heavy door and pulled it wide. "Why should you want to change my money for me?"

"You said you had business to conduct this morning," huffed the little man as he pushed inside. "And I was horrified to think that you should go around overpaying the people of this town with your good gold."

"By people, you mean people other than Half Pint, of course."

"Of course, sire. But you have been grossly generous, I think. Too generous." He laid Epsilon's garb across the bed and offered up the bag of coins. "Here I have ten thousand shecks in various denominations. It is a fair change for just one of your Empirical gold pieces."

Reaching for his tunic, Epsilon queried, "Ten thousand, eh? I had not realized my coins were so valuable. It seems I have already made several men very wealthy during my short stay here."

"Several men and at least one woman. This," he said, holding up a scented scrap of paper, "Is from Selena. I imagine it is a special invitation to a private performance." The midget's brow rose and fell suggestively. "If you know what I mean."

"I think I do," he replied, accepting the paper. Fluttering it open, he discovered it was exactly what Half Pint had guessed it might be. "Do you think she will be disappointed when I fail to show?"

"Beyond human endurance, sir, I am sure."

The Warfarer grinned, abashed, and held up his baldric for examination. Its many tears and tatters were sewn together with an expert's skill. So fine were the new seams, that Epsilon could scarcely see them. And his coat of arms was perfectly repaired on the front. New strips of crimson cloth had been added where pieces had been torn free.

"It is fine work!" he declared, pulling the baldric over his head. "Remove fifty, no, one hundred shecks from the bag for your darning lady!"

"But, sire," protested the midget.

Epsilon cut him short with, "Blood! You are right, citizen. Make it two hundred."

"But, sire, the typical fee is a tenth of that amount."

"Really? Then make it three! Does she have children?"

"Children? Er, uhm, yes, I believe she does. Ten or twelve."

"That many? It must be hard to support so large a family on a darning lady's wages. Give her an even thousand, Half Pint. With my compliments."

The slight man sighed in exasperation and counted out the coins. "As you would have it, sire."

"I take it you do not approve, my small friend? And why not? On such a glorious morning, would you deny small children candy? Would you deny a mother the pleasure of seeing her children well fed? Hmm? If it makes you feel better, you may remove a thousand for yourself."

Half Pint paused counting to seriously consider the offer. Ultimately he only shook his head and continued fingering the coins. "No, sire, I could not take your money in such a manner. Your kindness shames me for my greedy spirit."

"Good!" he thundered, fastening his cross braces and sword belt around the outside of his emblazoned baldric. Next he added his black cloak, fixing it in place with the clasps he had purchased from Old Bob. "What do you think of these, Half Pint? Fetching, are they not?"

"Aye, sire, if a bit crusted with grime."

"It is a grime of ages, and nothing to bring shame. These brochettes belonged to one of those long slain heroes you were bemoaning last night. Most likely, he lost them when he lost his life out there on the Rim, in vain defense of this city's walls. Otherwise, they should have been lain in state with him."

"If you say so, sire. I know little of the history of this town, and less of the men that lived and died here three hundred years ago."

"More is the pity, citizen. More is the pity. A man should know the history of his place in the world. How else is he to know from whence he came or where he is bound?"

The halfling shrugged without replying. Epsilon straightened his fresh attire with an air of finality, and set to tidying his camp. Once he had offered Helmcleaver water from the yet filled bathtub, he loaded the horse with its standard burdens, and they exited the tiny chamber to blink widely in the harsh light of a rising sun.

To the east, they saw Earth's Rim and the Desert Ocean beyond. It did not seem nearly so inviting in the blazing glow of a raging sun. The expanse of it was utterly flat and broad beyond the meager penetration of his mortal sight. There were no high dunes of sand, merely slight, regular ripples that shifted one way and another on the winds, much like waves of water. In the great, hazy distance, Epsilon spied a quartet of sharply angled, triangular sails. A sandboat labored underneath them, running before a giant, rolling wall of sand that towered into the otherwise clear skies.

Half Pint noticed his attentions, and informed, "The Ocean is turning out there. Do you see the storm coming in?"

"Aye, and it is a strange storm indeed. There are no angry thunder heads above it."

"It is not a storm borne of the heavens, but of the desert, itself. As I said, the Ocean is turning. Vast gushers of noxious subterranean gases are boiling up out there, tossing the lighter dusts high into the sky and churning the heavier sand into a blinding, bone grinding frenzy. It is this phenomenon that keeps the sands flat and sailable, but it is also the greatest scourge of all sailors everywhere. Do you see that sandboat running before the gusts? They are running for their very lives. Once the storm overtakes their boat, only the gods may save it from disaster."

Epsilon squinted his eyes to watch, dismayed. "And I would go there..." he mumbled softly.

"Beg pardon, sire. What did you say?"

"Nothing, citizen. Nothing it all." The Ritesman guided his mount off the porch and into a small, litter strewn courtyard that had a roundabout at its center. After entering and leaving that loop, the lane passed out of the yard beneath an arch of the Swooning Dragon's main building. Pointing this out, Epsilon enquired, "Is that the way to the street? And once in the street, which way to market?"

"Just follow the street along to the right. A mile or so east of here, the way will branch. Take the left way, back toward the center of town. Presently it will pass through a low wall constructed of bloodstone. Within that wall you will find the marketplace, though it will not open for several hours, yet."

"And what of the Fourth Precinct Treasury? How would I arrive there from the main gates?"

"Once through the gates, bear directly left again, and follow that way around the inside of the bloodstone wall. Just past a headless statue, turn right and climb the ridge. The Treasury building sits at the summit on the, uh, the left side. I think. Or it may be the right."

Epsilon waved off the small man's uncertainties and jumped into his high saddle. "I will find it from there, citizen. Thank you."

Half Pint waddled after him as he spurred Helmcleaver forward. "Will you be returning, sire? Should I hold your quarters for the night?"

But the Warfarer offered no response. With a clatter of steel shod hooves, he passed beneath the arch and disappeared into its shadows.

The stallion seemed eager to be on its way, wherever they may be going. It fairly burst out of the alleyway, into the avenue beyond. A handful of children scattered, screaming, at first sight of the magnificent beast. Helmcleaver reared and neighed joyfully, thrashing its fore limbs playfully in the air. By the time he came back down on all fours, the street was largely empty and the way to their right greatly cleared. They started off at a blowing, stomping canter.

"Aye," laughed Epsilon, drawing on his gauntlets, "It is good to yet be among the living. Prance if you will, but carefully so. Those filthy cobbles appear slick and treacherous."

His advice was not well taken, however, and the animal continued its uneven gait nearly to the first branch in the path. The Warfarer heeled his reluctant steed around to the western way, and pulled on the reins until its canter was reduced to a sensible walk.

"It may be a long day, mate. You should save your strength. Do you not recall that only last night we were driven before the illdross as hares before the hound?"

As they proceeded deeper into Oreset's interior, the buildings on either side of the street grew taller and taller, until they completely blocked the low light of sunrise. In the shade, Epsilon passed alternate piles of refuse and human filth. Disease ridden and pock marked whores propositioned him brazenly, adding their cackles to the echoes of misery that sounded all along the lane. Signs of poverty and over population were everywhere to be seen here. For here seemed to be plenty of nothing, save garbage, and even that miserable abundance was a resource to these unwholesome people. Children rummaged amid the offal for scraps of food and useless, broken artifacts. Hundreds of children. All filthy, starving wretches. They mobbed him as he

passed, begging for change, for ought to eat, for simple, sweet mercy. Epsilon thought of the shecks he had changed with Half Pint. Enough to feed them all once, perhaps, if it were evenly distributed. And he thought of emptying his purse by the handfuls, he thought of tossing the coins into the street. Then he considered the mayhem which would inevitably ensue. These children might tear themselves to pieces in the frenzy to feed. And those that survived were bound to be preyed upon by the thugs and miscreants he spied lurking in the shadows of doorways and alley entrances.

No, this was not the sort of charity the situation required. One day's meager rations would save none of this sordid lot. A mere handful of coins could only serve the cause of damage, rather than that of redemption.

So he turned away from their pale, excrement smeared faces, and kept his eyes focused sharply on the road ahead, the walls beside, and his wake behind. He kept his gaze focused anywhere except upon those pathetic pools of need that were hungry orphans' eyes. Something ought to be done, he knew, but he could not say just what. And he had more pressing matters to consider.

Not the least of which was the presence of a large group of men that had separated from the shadows to one side of the street. They moved toward its center slowly, arms crossed upon their breasts, as if they were resolved to block his way.

Epsilon reached for his helm and strapped it on quickly. Then he hefted his buckler with his left, and cleared his cloak from the pommel of his sword with his right hand. Helmcleaver continued on without slowing, guided as he was by his master's pressing knees.

A line of forbidding figures stood across the street now, stretching from one side to the other, and still the stallion's pace did not slow. Though the Oresetians' threat was real and clearly present, Epsilon did not draw his blade. More than a call for confrontation, their maneuver seemed to be a test of his courage, a prod of his resolve. Would he falter or turn to run? Would he stop and try to bargain for the right of way? Or would he show weakness by offering to pay them away? What would he do?

In the end, he did nothing more than press on to the marketplace. Their ranks parted without exchange of words as he passed, and the men returned to their individual cracks in the walls.

Glancing back, he saw that the children had stopped following at last, apparently surrendering all hopes that they might find safety in his shade. As ants caught in a sudden downpour, the mob dissolved at once, and its component members scurried back to the piles of refuse they each called home.

Rounding the next bend, he was presented with a cleared space that abutted a wall built of blood red stones. It was a low wall with a rough, uneven upper surface. Once it had no doubt been much higher, but years of neglect and theft of its materials had left it no taller than a large man. Judging by the smoothness of its outer face, Epsilon decided it had once been an interior

defensive structure, possibly of an ancient fortress or royal palace. Now it served no purpose greater than that of repulsing vagabonds and apple thieves.

Arriving at the poorly constructed gateway, the Ritesman saw it was nothing more than a broad, collapsed portion of the barrier, which had been cleared and barred by a wooden construction that served as a gate. He halted Helmcleaver before the barricade and waited patiently for the gatekeeper. When one failed to immediately turn up, Epsilon spurred his horse high up on the ribs so it neighed gratingly.

Presently, a fat, slovenly man stepped into view, picking at something between the few of his front teeth that remained. He was wearing rusted upper armor that was several sizes too small, and a pair of leathern breeches that were much stained and discolored at the crotch.

The gatekeeper scratched his rump and farted and spat through a gap in his teeth, all at once. "What do you want, outlander?"

"The Treasury of Precinct Four. I have business there."

"You do, eh? And what of it? As you can plainly see, the market is closed! As is this gate."

"Is it? How unfortunate. I suppose I shall have to bribe another gatekeeper further along the wall."

"There are no other gates."

"Then I shall have to bribe you." And he reached for Half Pint's purse.

The keeper's face bunched up angrily. "Here, now. You take an awful lot for granted, stranger."

"Oh, I see. You seem to be the sensitive type. Honest through and through." He appeared to pause and consider his dilemma seriously for a moment. Then he reached inside the pouch for a handful of smaller coins, as if on inspiration. "What if it were to suddenly rain coins out of the sky? You would undoubtedly be so busy scooping up the windfall that a single rider might pass unnoticed at your back."

But the gatekeeper shook his head dourly. "I want no part of that, mate. These old knees of mine do not like to bend or stoop. If you have money to discard, you may discard it directly into my waiting palm." The sloppy man blew a wad of mucous from his left nostril by pinching off the right. He wiped at his nose with the back of an unclean hand, and approached the gate. "But do not think it will pass you through this gate. Only I, the keeper, can make that decision, and I have not yet made it."

Epsilon spurred Helmcleaver forward to make the payment. "That is as should be, for I have not yet paid to prompt your thoughts."

The sloppy one only grunted and counted out the coins in his hand. His brow rose higher and higher with greater and greater appreciation of the amount he had been offered. The gatekeeper whistled softly when he was finished. "There's more than I can count. Must be a month's good eating here." He glanced up suspiciously, his eyes squinted nearly shut. "What's this all about, anyway? What kind of skullduggery have you been up to? And what's your

business at the Treasury? A man that pays so well for trifles must have little need for banks and bankers."

"Yet just the opposite is true, m'sieur. Men with money often have need of money changers. In fact, you can aid me further than opening the gate by directing me on to the Treasury from this point."

"I could? And what if I should decide not to let you pass, after all?"

The Warfarer let his gaze and tone wax icy and lethal. He leaned forward across his saddle horn and growled, "Then I should be forced to storm your flimsy defenses and lop off your stubborn, greedy pig's head for a trophy."

Flustered, the gatekeeper hastened to secure his fee and draw back the barricade. "No call for that kind of talk, outlander. No need for idle threats."

"If you knew me at all, citizen, you would know that my words are never offered idly." He kicked the stallion forward angrily. "You would do well to move that gate a bit faster, fat man, ere I wax irritated and take off your ear in spite."

"I do not dawdle, m'sieur. You must forgive an old man his squeaky knees."

At last the gate was drawn aside, and the way was cleared. Epsilon passed through the wall into a crossroads beyond. He eyed the way directly left, that which Half Pint had indicated was the proper way. And then each of the other ways in turn. Of them all, the route straight ahead seemed to be the least wholesome of all. It passed into a narrow alley crowded with tall

buildings on either side, so much so that it seemed a ravine and was deep in shadow. Any manner of death might be lurking in that forever darkness.

So it was with obvious surprise that he received the gatekeeper's parting words. The sloppy man spat and grumbled, "You will find the Treasury House of Precinct Four straight on from here." He added a jowl jiggling nod to point out the dank, dark alleyway. "Climb the hill and bear right. You will find it at the summit... rich man." This last was added softly, only after he thought Epsilon was well beyond earshot.

Suddenly curious, the Warfarer let Helmcleaver narrowly approach the alley's gaping maw. There he paused to listen intently. Was that a hushed garble of whispers? Or a slow sigh of wind? The longer he monitored the distraction, the more certain he was that men waited just beyond the threshold of light, whispering plans of ambush back and forth. Shuddering involuntarily, he cast a quick, hot glance back over his shoulder at the gatekeeper, who was yet standing in the gateway, an anxious expression on his face.

When Helmcleaver's head came about, and they trotted off to follow Half Pint's directions instead, the fat man grimaced dourly and cursed inaudibly. Epsilon smiled to see the stupid one's frustration, and hurried on to tend his business, feeling for the comforting lump of Pandolyn's rolled parchment at his breast.

It was there. Upon contacting it, he found himself wondering what magical words it must contain. What would happen when he presented it to Dellas, Dembar's Son? As always, a sneaking, snide voice whispered of traps and intrigues, but Epsilon pushed these thoughts aside.

For reasons he could not name, the Ritesman believed Pandolyn to be sincere in her objectives and honest in her employment of him. He had no reason to doubt her descriptions of the document's functionality. Still, he was curious as to how that functionality might operate. How could a man cast a spell on himself, simply by reading what another had written? Having no experience with the practice of magic, Epsilon eventually decided he could not guess how such things might work. It was enough that it did not work on him, he considered, and left the debate there.

At the headless statue (it seemed to be of an athletic youth), the Ritesman bore right and climbed a low rise. The buildings lining this avenue were all multi-tiered warehouses. Many were ancient and crumbling, fit to topple onto the cobbles at any moment. Almost all were empty, save for skulking vagrants and rustling pigeons.

The stallion's footsteps sounded hollowly on the stones, and echoed long in absence of acoustical competition. Thus preceded by the drum roll of his passage, Epsilon Three of the Martial Rite arrived unannounced at the changing house of Precinct Four in Oreset.

It was a three story building constructed of marble and solid granite blocks, each elaborately carved. A perfect rectangle, it lacked windows on its ground floor, and had an ornately adorned, leaden roof. Where its few windows were bared to the outside world, thick iron bars had been fixed into place. That several seemed to have been pried apart at some point in the past was testimony to their utility. Presumably, a door stood at each end of the building, one in back and one in front. No readily obvious signs stood on the walk or above it to specifically

indicate this building was the precinct changing house. But, as he neared closer still, Epsilon was able to read an inscription above the recessed doorway that had been originally engraved into the marble facade. When translated into the common tongue, the words were; ROYAL GATHERING HOUSE OF SURPLUS HARVEST GOODS. And below that in smaller type; HIS MAJESTY'S STORES, DISTRICT WEST.

From this, he gathered the squat building had once served the dilapidated warehouses that clustered about it, which in turn had serviced all the kingdom's harvests from its western lands. During better times past, no doubt, these silos and depots had been filled to capacity with sun ripened grains and fruits and dried, smoked meats. And now nothing of that gone glory remained. Naught but spiders and spiders' webs prospered in those dark rooms.

Epsilon dismounted at the top step of a semicircular descent, which led into the archway above the changing house's recessed, heavily reinforced doors. Holding his mount's reins tightly in his left fist, the Warfarer drew his long fencing dagger and used its heavy haft to rap upon the door. He waited patiently for signs of an answer, then rapped again. And again.

As he raised his knife to knock a fourth time, a sliding window snapped open, and the wedge-shaped visage of a thin, studious man appeared in the light. His eyes went wide at sight of the dagger, and the little door slammed shut immediately.

Epsilon sheathed his dagger with a soft curse. "Hold there, citizen! I have business with Dembar's Son! Honest business." Receiving no response, he jingled his purses and added, "Will you at least fetch him to the door?" Still no response. "Tell him I have Empirical gold!"

The little window popped open, and that same wedge-shaped countenance reappeared. "Empirical gold, you say? Empirical gold? Show it, then!" Epsilon fished around inside his own purse for one of his few remaining Empirical coins. When he raised it to the light, that thin face rolled back so the nose all but jutted through the tiny opening. Its nostrils flared, sniffing. "Pass it through!" demanded the uncertain voice on the other side of the door.

But the Ritesman palmed the gold instead, and removed it from the thin man's sight. "Fetch me down Dellas first."

"Fetch me down Dellas! Fetch me down Dellas!" cried the little man, mocking. "Everyone has business with Dembar's Son this day, yet he is an extremely busy man! Too busy! No, he can not come down. You must deal with me instead."

Before the thin, pinched face could retract, Epsilon abruptly thrust his strong right arm through the tiny opening, his fist clenching savagely. It met soft resistance, and the Ritesman recognized the feel of a supple, vulnerable throat. He jerked it back against the door, slamming the little man on the far side hard up against the wood grain. This not only brought his subject closer, but reduced the exposed length of his arm to nothing, lessening the risk of injury. All he could see of his prey was a bit of flushed cheek.

Through gritted teeth, he growled, "Listen carefully, m'sieur. I have had my fill of your kind. As I said earlier, I have business with Dellas Dembar's Son. You will now introduce us. Reach for and unfasten the bolt." He heard the tell tale clicks and clatters of this action. "Now slowly swing the door open as wide as it will go. Very good." Epsilon chocked the door open

with his right boot and drew Helmcleaver in after him, all the time careful to keep the portal held firmly against his unknown host's soft, yielding body, which was in turn pinned against the wall beyond.

It was not forced back against him, and neither was he met with a surprise counter attack from the shadows of the foyer. Once he was fully installed within, Epsilon let go his hapless victim's throat, and the door rotated slowly shut.

Cowered against the wall was a short, thin, bookish sort of man. He seemed timid and weak, but quick of mind, much like a twittering house mouse. His eyes darted rapidly back and forth, as though he were calculating and carrying numerals from place to place every moment of his life.

"Who are you, citizen?" demanded the Warfarer sternly.

"Do not slay me, sir! Take what you will, but leave me be! I have done nothing to deserve a bloody death!"

"Be that as it may, you shall certainly suffer one if I do not have an answer quickly."

"I am Dellas! I am Dembar's Son! What business have you with me, beyond robbery?"

Epsilon was taken aback. "You are Dembar's Son? Well, why did you not say so in the first place?"

"I am busy, as I said. A busy, busy man. I have no time for robbers!"

"No time for robbers? Man, if I was a robber you would have all the time in the world for me. The rest of your life, perhaps." Epsilon backed away to give the little man a bit more room

to fidget. In doing so, he moved beyond the foyer into the main room of the ground floor. It was a single, large, cluttered room that comprised the entire building. Skylights in the roof let in a multicolored light through ornately dyed panels, which shone straight down to the floor in a rainbow of colors. All along the walls, the balconies were filled floor to ceiling, wall to wall with bins and shelves, which were in turn filled with all manner of stuffs, from yellowed scrolls of paper to great sheets of stretched parchment. The Warfarer caught glimpses of maps and coats of arms and strange symbols painted on the surfaces of these last items, and wondered why a counting house should have need of such things. Sarcastically, he added, "I see your rush. There seems to be a glut of patrons this morning." For the room was, in fact, quite empty of human beings.

"Yes, indeed. Patrons of one sort or another," came Dellas' enigmatic retort. He eased away from the wall hesitantly, and skirted around Helmcleaver to exit the foyer well out of Epsilon's reach. "Certainly I have no great need of highwaymen and their horses at the moment, so you will undoubtedly find yourself in lack of company here. Perhaps one of Oreset's many brothels and saloons would better serve your needs."

Epsilon frowned suddenly. He did not like the little man's tone. It was scathing and disrespectful. And there was no slightest trace of fear in it, though the man seemed to be quite terrified. "I am no highwayman, m'sieur. As I said at the door, I have legitimate business with you. It is unfortunate our acquaintance was so poorly met, but I would not have handled you so roughly had you confessed your identity without guile. If a falcon squawks and flies like a duck, it should not be surprised when it is slain for a duck."

Dellas laughed shrilly as he pressed by the Ritesman to enter more deeply into the building. "And neither should the hunter be surprised when the false duck takes out his eye with its cruel talons!"

Letting go Helmcleaver's reins, the Warfarer followed his diminutive host between rows of towering shelving, apparently bound for a broad stair in the center of the room. As he walked, he eyed Dellas' back suspiciously. Something was not right with the small man. There was something strange in his manner. Though he dressed in ill fitting clothes and affected a submissive personality, something about Dellas Dembar's Son spoke of confidence and... power. But how could this be? The man's arms and legs were twigs. His body was soft and lumpy from long years of laboring at a desk. What power could he enjoy beyond the powers of reason?

"Your words are aptly spoken, but I do not believe your webbed feet will be scratching out any eyes this day."

Upon finishing these words, a strange thing occurred. Epsilon had his gaze fixed on the floor before him, watching his footfalls, when he noticed Dellas' shadow within it. The umbra was cast down from skylights high above, so its shade was bloated and oddly shaped. As they walked, it changed. The Ritesman's eyes bulged with disbelief.

As soon as he had finished the last syllable of his remark, Dellas' shadow swelled frightfully. The shape of his head elongated and his neck all but disappeared. Where the outline of his arms had been, now there were wings. And scaly claws where Dellas' skinny legs should

have been. When the little man laughed at Epsilon's statement, the shadow eagle's mouth opened in accordance and its tongue worked in time to the chuckles.

Epsilon shook his head and quickly shut his eyes. Opening them once more, he saw that Dellas' shadow was returned to normal. And the little man seemed not to have changed at all.

"What troubles you?" enquired the slight one slyly. "Is something wrong with your eyes?"

"No," came the instant response, "Merely a trick of the light."

Both to take his mind off the hallucination and to further his cause, he retrieved Pandolyn's scroll and held it in his left hand, keeping his right free. Tagging along behind his reluctant host, Epsilon was becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the situation. Something, his instincts warned, was not right here. Except he could not say exactly what. Looking up, he saw how the interior of the building was open at the center, with a tall atrium surrounding the stairs that stretched three floors to the uppermost tier. A few archers on the balconies overlooking this ground level would surely pose a lethal threat, but this was not the cause of his discomfort.

Dellas stopped at the stairwell and turned to face Epsilon from the third step. Now the little man's gaze was almost even with the Warfarer's. His expression was sallow and impatient. "Well? Rob me if you must, then get going. I have much work to finish ere opening hour comes 'round."

Epsilon extended the arm holding Pandolyn's parchment woodenly. Was that a flash of raging flame reflected in Dellas' wide blue eyes? The Ritesman glanced over his shoulder to see nothing out of place behind his back. And nothing out of place when he returned his attentions to

Dembar's Son standing before him. The flicker of firelight was gone from the small man's puzzling gaze. Epsilon cleared his suddenly constricted throat, and croaked, "I have this for you."

The clerk raised his nose and sniffed aristocratically. "And what might that be?"

"Private matters for your concern." Epsilon pushed the rolled document harshly forward.

"Take it. Do you not see your name in the seal?"

For the briefest of moments, for but the span of an eye's blink, Dellas' countenance exploded into a red faced demon's mask. His eyes went from ice blue to crimson and back again, while the rest of his face contorted into a sadistic, hateful parody of itself. Horns spontaneously sprouted from the crown of his head, while gory fangs replaced the even, white teeth in his mouth.

The Ritesman shut his eyes tightly, briefly, and gently shook his head to clear it. Dembar's Son noted the action, and grinned devilishly. "It is a strange light that falls through the colored glass overhead. Men see queer visions in this building."

"Aye," groaned the Empirical Warfarer, his left arm dropping leadenly, as though it had wearied at holding up a ponderous weight. The parchment dangled at his side, momentarily forgotten. "It must be the light."

"It is the light." Now the clerk's voice was altered. It went from shrill squeak to a throaty base growl in mid-syllable. "But come. If we have business, it must be conducted above, in privacy. In the privacy of my... office."

Strangely, though Dellas had clearly said 'office', this last word had sounded like 'lair'. Echoes of it rebounded from the walls in overtones of a lunatic's erratic whispers. *Lair, lair, lair, lair...* came the insane reverberations. *Come into my lair.*

"Of course," was all the Ritesman could manage to say. And he mounted the stairs after Dembar's Son, unable or unwilling to turn away. As a robin enthralled, he trod the serpent's back in oblivious delirium. What was it that he had come to do? Had he a purpose here? Had he ever known purpose?

"He seems to have come a long way," muttered Dellas under his breath. "A stern man on a stern errand. With a great, glittering sword at his side. What business might Empire have with the likes of me? It is a dark place filled with dark minds that hate magic and all that is magical. What business might a Holy Warfarer have with meek little Dembar's Son? Eh?"

These words registered on Epsilon's mind intelligibly as, "...nunna nunna nunna nunna nunna nunna..."

Dellas topped the stairs and stood there, foot tapping, impatiently awaiting the slower man's dazed approach. He clucked his tongue and declared, "I will never understand the folly of a Warfarer's Exodus. This man is absolutely ignorant of the ethereal arts, yet he was sent naked and unarmed into these Wilderlands of Sin, where magic reigns, that he might conquer them single handedly. It is an act that transcends mere suicide. It is hysteria!"

Epsilon heard, "...nunna nunna nunna..."

"And now he has come to me." Dembar's Son stared up at the Warfarer's impassive face as the bigger man mounted the final riser. The clerk's expression was devious and deviant. It was a cat's expression that ponders a cornered rodent. "All the long, arduous way from Empire. All the way from Tesla, deep inside Empire's high, protective barricades. All the way from Alcorde." Shrugging and rolling his eyes, the little man turned onto the walk that crossed the atrium, and strode over to the northern side of the building. "Come on, then. This way. This way to decide your fate."

Epsilon heard, "...nunna nunna nunna... Come on, then. This way... nunna nunna nunna..." and he moved mechanically to do as he was bidden.

Dellas' uneven tirade continued while he stumped along the balcony, bound for a far corner of this upper level. They passed the terminal ends of row upon row of cluttered bookshelves and the occasional tarp-shrouded contraption. Ahead, a lone lamp flickered atop a large ebony desk that was heaped with papers and scrolls and delicate bits of mechanisms and machinery. A strange mobile worked silently to one side, its large golden spheres revolving fluidly about a larger central globe. Upon the forward face of its iron base, a dial transcribed with foreign runes clattered and clicked as it rolled and rolled and rolled.

"Probably some minor mage playing with his poems," muttered Dellas, his tone irritated. Then his voice waxed worried and he wondered, "Or could it be a greater mage? I thought it was at first, but now... now I am uncertain. Why send such a buffoon? Why plan an assassination to fail?" He clucked his tongue nervously. "What dangers have I failed to foresee here? Countless

dangers," he mumbled softly, stumping along, his skinny legs working inside his too short trousers. "Countless dangers. Measureless risk. I must work a stronger keeping spell at the door. No, it was not the spell that failed, but my judgment. I let him get too close." He cursed fluently, "It was the gold. That damned Empirical gold. No, not that, either. It was my own greed that nearly undid me. Martyrs!" his hunched shoulders shuddered violently, "With his brutish, stifling hand upon my throat, I could not speak enchantment, and neither could I sign it, blinded as I was by the door. I thought he was Sin Supri come to claim my meager resources for his own!"

Breathing heavily, panting really, despite the brevity of the walk, Dellas arrived at his desk and leaned heavily upon it. "I shall be more careful in the future. No more foreign gold for me!"

Epsilon stopped at a respectful distance from the table and stood there silently, awaiting further instruction from his new master. His body automatically effected an at-ease posture as he waited. There was not the slightest threat apparent from his stance or bearing.

The clerk moved around the edge of his desk and collapsed into a thickly padded leather chair. He withdrew a stained kerchief from a one ink stained cuff and wiped at the sweat upon his lightly wrinkled brow. "Gods, this is a dangerous business. Who would have considered it yesterday? A live Warfarer standing in my laboratory! Come to call at my door! I am dumbfounded, really. It was like opening the outhouse door to find a bear squatting inside, grinning hungrily. What should I say to him? What should I do? Let me think a moment... Ah,

yes! The parchment!" Dellas raised an exclamatory finger and leaned forward sharply. "He claimed to have a document for me. Let us see it, but let us not read of its runes."

Epsilon heard, "...nunna nunna nunna... let us see it, but... nunna nunna nunna..." He extended his arm and dropped the rolled hide in front of his waiting master.

Dellas made an odd noise with his mouth, then simply sat waiting, staring at Pandolyn's scroll as though it were a deadly serpent and might suddenly strike. At Epsilon's now empty left hand, Dellas' golden spheres rotated and revolved, and the dial went round and round and round.

Presently, a small monkey came scampering through the shelves of books to alight upon Dellas' narrow, bony shoulder. Its prehensile tail curled lovingly about the scrawny man's neck.

"There you are, my familiar," cooed the mage, stroking the creature's thick, musky fur. "I am sorry to disturb you from your morning apple, but we have a matter of business on the table. I thought you might help." He nodded at Pandolyn's parchment. "Will you first tell me if it is safe?"

Incredibly, the monkey scratched its head and buttocks thoughtfully (and simultaneously), and ultimately clarified, "Safe? Safe touch?" Its voice was guttural and awkward, but readily intelligible.

"First. Is it safe to touch?"

Obligingly, the monkey scampered down the mage's arm and onto the his desk. It approached the rolled hide cautiously, its nose twitching curiously. Delicately, warily, it neared

the suspect document in a roundabout manner, its tail curling and uncurling impulsively. It sniffed. It touched. It tasted.

Then it declared, "Safe touch," lofting the scroll happily. It tossed this back and forth, and chattered, "Safe touch! Safe touch!"

"Excellent," enthused Dellas, offering up a bit of jillroot, which the small monkey seemed to relish. "And now, read the inscription that surrounds the waxen seal. Would you be so kind?"

"Read? Safe read?" It cocked its hairy head to one side and scratched sedately. As if on inspiration, it abruptly turned the document around until the seal was apparent. "It say; 'Oreset Treasury; Precinct Four, care of Dellas Dembar's Son, Master of Deposits.'"

"And how do you feel now?"

"Feel? Now? Safe." It scampered back onto Dellas' shoulder to chew another bit of 'root, which its master had offered up.

The Ritesman watched this transpire with a blank, slack mask of oblivion fixed upon his countenance.

Dellas softly muttered an esoteric spell of keeping and tapped the scroll with a feather light touch of his finger. When no monsters sprang out of the floor, he deemed the parchment was safe enough. On the outside, at least. And he picked it up. The monkey screeched and bounded off into the cluttered shelves.

"Now for the tricky part," he mused, turning it this way and that curiously. "How to get at its insides without letting what is inside get at me. A most frustrating dilemma."

His gaze ultimately fell upon the Warfarer. "Tell me, Ritesman, what is scribed herein? Eh? What sort of mayhem or devilry do you bear from far Empire?"

Epsilon opened his mouth to make a flippant remark, but something else entirely came out. As if in a dream, he heard himself say, "I know certainly nothing of the document's contents. It is not borne from Empirical lands."

"Not Empirical? Oh, that IS disturbing. You have it from some Wilderland creature then?"

"Yes."

Dellas clucked his tongue and turned pale. "Who could it be? Who? A rival, perhaps? A hated enemy? And why now, of all times? Does it involve my work here?"

The Ritesman heard, "...nunna nunna nunna..."

Eventually, the mage fell silent to ponder his thoughts alone. "Well," he apparently concluded, "There is but one way to find out, and that is to ask." Which he did.

"A lizard lady named Pandolyn charged me with its delivery," responded Epsilon.

"Pandolyn?" repeated the clerk, blinking his eyes confusedly "Pandolyn? What sort of wizard is a Pandolyn?"

"She is a lizard lady, as I have said."

"Of course she is! You have already told me so. What I want to know now is, did she give herself a title?"

"She is also called Rit Merdian."

Dembar's Son gasped, and a finely boned hand snapped up to cover his gaping mouth. "Rit Merdian?" he breathed, incredulous. "Rit Merdian. First a Holy Warfarer and now this! It seems the surprise grizzly bear in my outhouse has come bearing tokens from a goddess!" Now he wrung his hands and jumped up excitedly from his soft chair. "What am I to do? What am I to do?"

Near at hand, the mobile of spinning spheres worked silently, while Dellas paced about, muttering feverishly. "Perhaps I should kill him out of hand. Yes, kill the Ritesman and burn Rit Merdian's parchment without breaking its dubious seals. The gods only know what might become of me, once I have opened it." He stopped pacing abruptly, and turned an appraising eye on the tall Warfarer. It was the appraising eye of a cook measuring which rooster to behead for dinner. Then he seemed to reconsider, shaking his head. "No, no, no, no. That is no good at all. If he is a high wizard's envoy, he must be protected in some manner. The very fact that I can detect no enchantment on his person speaks of the breadth and guile of Merdian's powers." Dellas made a high pitched, squeaking noise far back in depths of his throat. It was a rabbit's squeal of terror. "But to send an Empirical Warfarer! Gods, she has sent a sledge hammer to drive home a pin nail!"

Suddenly angry, he stalked up to his spellbound victim and demanded, "Why should Rit Merdian want to kill me? Eh? What have I ever done to her?"

"I do not know that Pandolyn wishes you dead. She said nothing of this to me, or of what you might have done to attract her interest."

"Oh, fine!" belched the little man, throwing up his arms in exasperation. "Why am I asking you? You could be enchanted to say whatever that mighty wizardess wishes you to say.

"Damnation! I must decide, to one end or another. Yet I cannot decide without knowing what the consequences of my decision might be. To find out, I must decide. It is Lyacine's Paradox, an endless circle without beginning or end. No place to start save the middle..."

Dellas wandered back to face the tall, stern, blank Epsilon. "Tell me, Holy Warfarer, as a master tactician, what is the proper move here?"

"I could not say without more information. What is the tactical situation?"

The mage paused to reflect on the implications of this question. Several times he made as though he would speak, only to shut his mouth impotently. At length, he returned to his desk and sat in his chair. He fingered a strange toy that flew a shockingly long way when he tossed it over the balcony rail.

"I think I have it," he eventually offered. "Though it is a complicated situation in reality, I will summarize my predicament for your convenience, using as few words as I can manage.

"View this scroll here as a powerful weapon. It has entered irrevocably into my camp, and I must deal with it hastily. I cannot send it back or ignore its presence altogether, neither can I abandon my position around it. Thus, I must take some sort of action regarding the parchment, even though the consequences of said action will undoubtedly be unpleasant and far reaching. What should I do?"

The Ritesman's first question was, "You cannot negate the weapon's impact? Have you no armor or defensive structures of sufficient strength?"

"No, nothing of the sort. I am a powerful mage, but I am a mere insect when compared to a Synod Wizard's authority." Something in Dellas' tone spoke of lies and mockery, but they were strange mage's lies and jests and far beyond Epsilon's understanding.

His second question; "Have you no means of gathering intelligence regarding its function and utility?"

"No. This is, in fact, my quandary. To fathom all it entails, I must activate the weapon, which I am loathe to do."

"Yet no other option remains you, according to my understanding of the plot."

"Precisely. What would you suggest?"

"If you are bound to die, Dellas Dembar's Son, do so with courage. Pray to your gods and activate the damn thing at once."

Still, the mage did not react immediately. He pouted, sniffing softly. From time to time he could be heard mumbling about not wanting to die, but all Epsilon could discern of it was, "...nunna nunna nunna...." Presently, however, his remorse turned into gloating, relieved laughter.

Within the laughter, he commanded, "The solution to this puzzle is absurdly obvious, though I could not see it for looking. You will open it, Ritesman! Break the seal and read me of the scroll's contents."

But all Epsilon could hear was, "...nunna nunna nunna..."

"Did you hear? Open the scroll and read, damn you!"

("...nunna nunna nunna...")

From a distant corner of the building, Dellas' familiar screamed shrilly. The mage stood, and his shadow was misshapen at his back. It was a grotesque form of reptilian limbs and raven's wings, sewn together from the stuff of night. His face was that of a devil's, and his eyes shone with a flaring, crimson glow. When he opened his mouth, it was to roar bestially, rather than to speak.

He bellowed, "*Sh'lot a kos ama sh'kelt! Faramoor mal ama sh'kelt! Aka, aka, aka!*"

The Ritesman suffered a disjointed sensation, and felt his feet leave the ground, though his body had not moved. His head spun sickly. He seemed to lurch forward to fall, and was tossed into a headfirst dive. Still, his body had not twitched in reality.

Dellas was calling, "...*aka, aka, aka...*" and suddenly Epsilon found himself back at Alcorde, standing in the center of a bloody arena.

The stadium was filled with the roaring of an enthusiastically bloodthirsty audience. He could hear individual catcalls mixed into the din. All were calling for violence of one sort or another, as though their many voices were the products of a single mind. And they were shouting his name. *Ep-si-lon! Ep-si-lon! Ep-si-lon!*

Movement to his right caught the Ritesman's eye. He ducked and wheeled around instinctively. In the course of this movement, Epsilon realized he was wearing full body armor of the heaviest gauge. A thick shield was permanently affixed to his left arm. A sword was similarly

welded into the steel gauntlet of his right hand. His vision was impaired by the close visor of a fully visaged helm.

Panting from the effort, he spun about as agilely as he could manage, bringing his sword arm about in a wide arc. He knew he was striking out blindly, but the blow followed the course of his adversary's passing charge. Thus, Epsilon hoped to cut his adversary's knees out from under him. Instead of meeting with resistance, however, the tip of his blade just missed the backside of his foe's leg. Its angular momentum brought Epsilon in full circle, as he followed through with the swing. Finishing the action with a flourish, the Ritesman came up in a ready crouch behind his shield, and held his weapon high. His opponent assumed a similar stance, and the two combatants began circling warily.

Without taking his eyes off the armored man before him, Epsilon let his attentions fall upon the bunting and banners that adorned the arena wall beyond. Their colors and patterns indicated this was the Fifth Circus of Alcorde. Thus he was fighting in the semi-finals, just two victories shy of winning a Warfarer's coat of arms.

Yet how could this be? Had he not already fought and won at Alcorde? Was he not now on Exodus? Or had he simply dreamed his passage into the Wilderlands, in anticipation of wins to come? What was the truth? Which state of existence was reality?

...aka, aka, aka... nunna nunna nunna...

His foe charged again suddenly! He was a big, powerful man, with broader shoulders than Epsilon, and longer legs. When he moved, it was with such speed and agility that the smaller

warrior was shocked to see it. All too quickly, his foe grappled closely to deliver a series of ringing blows to Epsilon's shield. The Warfarer tried to strike back, but his assault fell on empty space. The incredibly quick man dodged aside, and lashed out at Epsilon's unprotected flank. Only a timely shift of the Warfarer's sword saved him.

In a flash of clarity, Epsilon had a deep glance into the eye slits of his opponent's helmet. With a pang of dread, he saw that his foe's face was that of a worm eaten corpse's. Its eyes were milky and shriveled, its cheeks all but devoured. Epsilon could see a grin of molded, stained teeth where portion's of the man's lips were missing. And yet there was something oddly familiar in that destroyed countenance. He enjoyed a pang of recognition that told him once he had known this dead man. He had known him well.

Then his vision was obstructed by a polished shield, which his adversary had raised in preparation for delivering a fresh rain of blows. The Warfarer turned this new attack with his blade and buckler, and bellowed, "WHAT MADNESS IS THIS? HOW CAN THIS BE?"

The weight of the cadaver's ferocious offensive bore Epsilon back and down. He collapsed to one knee, raising his notched broadsword to defend against the high blows, while holding his shield low to protect his vulnerable abdomen.

Despite the chaos of close combat, he managed to spy out the insignia stamped upon his rival's breast. It was Tau Nine's seal! Tau Nine, whom he had slain at Alcorde!

But this was impossible! His mind reeled, and a loud ring of steel sounded throughout Epsilon's armor to remind him it was not impossible. Even now the apparition was desperate to slay him.

Except there, at his foe's side, just where his carapace bonded to his breast plate, Epsilon could see the rend in Tau's mail shirt that had been the source of his death wound. *I ran you through, there, and you died in my arms, brother, bleeding and coughing up clot! You died!* Indeed, a dark stain lingered in the form of a dried ichor wash, which had apparently flowed all the way down his left leg to his armored foot. Flecks of dried blood remained in the chinks and fluting of his plate.

"WHAT TRICK OF THE LIGHT HATH DUG THEE UP?" wailed Epsilon, his tone wracked with remorse and guilt. He had not meant to slay his friend in that long ago arena on that long ago day. Oh, he had intended to win the contest, but not with a mortal wound. It was a freak stroke of fate that sent Epsilon's blade deep into his mate's belly, not intention. Beneath the dead man's assault, the Warfarer collapsed lower and lower, until he was forced to use his sword arm to keep himself from the soil and certain death. "WHAT MADNESS IS THIS?"

...aka, aka, aka nunna nunna nunna...

Before he could be pinned down with a lancing thrust of Tau's notched sword, Epsilon rolled and scrambled away. He sought his feet and ran across the circus. Had he been able, the Warfarer would have shed his weapons and plate as he fled. As it was, the armor sealing his hands was permanently fixed into place. Only a groom could remove his steel mittens, and then

only with the service of a hammer and anvil. So he was mired in the contest irretrievably, even as he was mired in that damnable shell of polished alloy.

Epsilon could hear the clattering stomp of Dead Tau's steel shod boots as he pursued all too closely behind. At any moment, the Warfarer expected to suffer a decapitating stroke, but none fell.

When he was come up hard against the arena wall, Epsilon turned and raised his arms defensively. Tau came charging in, as expected. The Warfarer leapt to one side in the last instant, while simultaneously lashing out with the blunt face of his tall shield. Tau was forced headlong into the barricade and nearly lost his footing in the stumble to recover.

The smaller Ritesman reacted immediately, and landed another unsteady blow with his shield arm. Tau was thrown against the wall again, but this time when he bounced back it was with an unexpected swing of his own shield arm that sent Epsilon reeling. Before the Warfarer could recover, his long dead friend was back on the offensive. Epsilon parried blow upon blow with his sword and shield. Finally, he unintentionally parried a high, vicious chop with the crown of his helm, and the world was plunged instantly into a numbing darkness.

He collapsed to his knees, his head bowed drunkenly. The roar of the crowd became a cacophony of disjointed and distorted whispers, which oozed through his mind as a red ribbon of blood flowing through a muddy sewer.

Weakly, functioning on instinct alone in absence of awareness, Epsilon felt himself raise his blade defensively. Somehow, despite the ringing in his head and his suddenly rolling guts, the

Warfarer managed to defend himself against the remainder of the assault. Tau grew weary at long last, and backed away to catch his breath. Tottering uncertainly from side to side, the smaller Ritesman fought to his feet and stood there, swaying erratically, as though he might fade at any moment. It was a perfect opportunity for Tau to finish the contest. A single sure strike could end it all.

But the bigger man did not strike. When Epsilon raised his head to discover why, he saw that Tau Nine was exhausted on his feet. From the way the corpse held his sword and shield dangling limply at his sides, the Warfarer realized his adversary's arms had been drained of strength by the demands of his frenzied attacks.

In Tau's weariness, Epsilon saw his own victory at hand. Yet he could not act on the opportunity, any more than his opponent could. Though his arms remained fresh, Epsilon's brain was rattled and his thoughts scattered by Tau's one fruitful blow.

As a pair of stunned rams that have knocked heads too harshly, the two combatants stumbled into a wary circling while they each fought to recover. The crowd became dissatisfied with the bloodless display, and their cheers turned to jeers as quickly as a fickle wind might change directions. Tau took notice and roared angrily, waving his arms, weapons and all, in a manner of warding off pesky gnats. Then he lowered his head to make a final charge.

Even as Epsilon's thoughts cleared. The Warfarer easily rebuffed the dead man's few weak, ineffectual blows, and landed several of his own. One of these took off Tau's shield arm at the elbow. The big man screamed defiantly, and rounded off again to attack. Again Epsilon

rebuffed the advance, this time removing one of his dead friend's legs below the knee. When Tau crumpled to the blood stained dirt floor, the Warfarer closed instinctively. Leaning heavily on the haft of his weapon, he drove its point through Tau's breast plate, into his body, and out the other side. The fight was finished.

Weeping, Epsilon retracted his blade and fell to his knees beside Tau Nine's twice slain corpse. "I am sorry, my brother," he wailed, sobbing, "Sorry for this offense and the first. Can you forgive me? Have you forgiven me?"

To which, the corpse's grating reply was, "I cannot forgive you, Epsilon Three. Whether you take it into your heart or no, you walk a walk of evil. Yours is a path of unholy righteousness, and so there can be no redemption for you, only misery and pain. But remember my words where you are going, as they may in time save you from your fate. Soulless, you are lost, my brother. Godless are you found again."

"What? I- I understand you not. Why have you no forgiveness for me? By the gods, it was an accident! I did not mean to slay you!"

"Yet am I slain by you," gargled the impossible cadaver, its ineffectual limbs twitching. "I can offer you no kind words of immortal succor, Epsilon, for the slain may not redeem their slayers. You have lived by the keenness of your blade, and so shall you die. But remember ere you perish, all is not finished in this world. Beyond the River Styx, an entire lifetime awaits. In it you are lost without a soul. As I am lost. As are all Ritesmen lost." The voice fell silent, and the corpse's twitching stilled abruptly. Epsilon thought Tau was gone again, but at the last he

croaked, "Do not die without a soul, my friend. Do not walk your path of evil to its indecent end..."

From the sides of his vision, Epsilon watched the approach of his grooms. They quickly set to work freeing him from his gear of war, starting with his fingerless mittens.

The fading Tau choked, "Remember... soulless you are lost... godless are you found again... remember..."

Now his hands were freed. Epsilon shoved the grooms aside. He gripped his slain comrade by the rim of his breast plate to lift the body into a sitting position. He shook it gently, calling his beloved enemy's name. But Tau only repeated his dire warning, which was, in the same words, a condemnation of the Martial Rite and all it held sacred. It seemed someone in the crowd was cackling madly.

...aka, aka, aka...

"Tau!" he raged, tortured. And he laid the body back again to reach for its shining face plate. He hooked his left thumb beneath the rim and was ready to push it up, when...

...nunna, nunna, nunna...

...when the arena and its babbling audience dissolved into nothing, and the face plate was rendered into Pandolyn's scrolled parchment. Epsilon found he had hooked his gloved fingertips beneath the seal, and was ready to snap it off. His grip was instantly relaxed, and his arms fell back to his sides to dangle loosely. At his left, the mobile of spheres spun and revolved and rotated silently. Its dial clattered and clicked.

Dellas, the man-form, was standing before him once more, mumbling softly. The mage's wedge-shaped face was upturned and entranced. His thin lips were working feverishly, all but silently.

Epsilon could hear nothing more than a distant whisper. "...nunna, nunna, nunna..."

And suddenly the transparent veil was lifted. Though he had not been sleeping, the Warfarer snapped awake. He registered, "...nunna, nunna, *m'sillini mal ashelt. Mok aush elletelt, sh'tlok-*" and recognized Dellas Dembar's Son standing before him. Recognized him for what he was; a mage weaving enchantment, oblivious that his charms had somehow failed.

Quick as a striking adder, his right arm lashed out and took the enthralled wizard by his bony little throat, once more, cutting him off in mid-syllable. In that same instant, the man-form was gone and the demon form of Dellas returned. It flapped its jet black wings unhappily, and scabbled claws at the wooden floor and Epsilon's mailed arm. The Ritesman's reach was greater, however, and so he managed to keep the monster at arm's length. A few savage kicks stilled Dellas' struggles altogether, and the mage was abruptly content to be strangled in peace.

Then it began weaving delicate, hypnotic movements with its scaly, clawed hands. The Warfarer averted his gaze to the wondrous mobile, and kept it focused on the central golden sphere.

"Damnable wizard, hold thee still!" he commanded, when Dellas renewed his frustrated struggles. "I should stifle you at once, here and now, for what you have done to my mind! And so I would, if it were not for my master's business."

Dembar's Son gagged and coughed. Epsilon had mercifully eased up on his windpipe to avoid complete strangulation.

Whereupon, the mage began to hiss a subtle spell at once. Epsilon clamped him off again, more violently than before. Those long, black wings beat ineffectually about the Warfarer's helm. He thrust his left hand into the fluttering disturbance, forcing the parchment up close to Dellas' beaked face.

"Take it!" he bellowed, "This instant! Our I shall squeeze out your vile, unwholesome life, and my master be damned!"

One taloned claw settled harshly about his straining wrist, while the other accepted the scroll. Dembar's Son choked and sputtered. His ravens' wings worked spasmodically. Epsilon squeezed harder still when the mage hesitated, easing his grip only after he heard the wax seal break. Dellas unrolled the hide and stretched it out, using hand and claw-tipped hind foot to effect the effort.

Again the wizard paused. "Read!" commanded Epsilon, adding a prompting kick to the demon's groin.

Dellas began to read. Things began to change almost immediately.

His demon form faded, and was replaced by Dellas, the man. The strange light at Epsilon's back, that which shone through the skylights, was bleached of its dappled, multicolored hues. All pattern was gone from those once ornate windows. Now they were made of nothing

more than clear panes. Much of the mystery and intrigue that had infested the building was dispelled, and only dust motes remained where whispering shades had lurked.

Experimentally, the Warfarer loosened his grip. When Dellas did not respond with foreign mumbling, he let go his hold completely and backed away.

The mage finished reading Pandolyn's scroll, and discarded it to the cluttered top of his desk. He bowed in deference, and made a sign of welcome by rolling his hands around one another. "I am your slave," he intoned. "I may neither deceive nor harm you in any way, Holy Warfarer."

Epsilon smiled broadly. It seemed Pandolyn was not without power, after all.

Dellas retired to his desk to rummage anxiously among its clutter. With an exasperated growl, he swept the papers and scrolls and bits of machinery aside until the table was absolutely cleared. Then he sat at his desk and appeared to stew.

"It is unfair! Unfair and unjust!"

The Warfarer wondered what happened to that business about being a slave. Was this how a slave addressed its master in Oreset?

Dembar's Son continued, his tone verging on hysteria, "All the wealth of a lifetime! My wealth! My lifetime! Each shekel of it gathered and hoarded, day upon day, year upon year, generation upon generation. Each shekel of it mine! Not yours! Not Rit Merdian's, but MINE!" He pouted and stuck out his lower lip like a petulant child.

Then he smiled suddenly. "Still, I am your slave. My purpose is but to serve." Now he extracted a sheet of blank paper from a pigeon hole and reached for a pen, "Even if it means my utter financial ruin!" The mage began scribbling furiously, and moaned, "Damnable hand! Treacherous arm! Do not! I beg you now, stop! Stop! STOP!" he roared at his own appendage. "You would sign my life away! You would reduce me to a pauper! Resist!"

The Ritesmen cocked his head curiously, but recalled Pandolyn's words. She had said the man might act strangely once he read the scroll. Now he stopped writing, and his left hand attacked his right. As two sparring serpents, his arms vied for control of the quill. In the end, Pandolyn won, and Dellas finished the first letter. Reluctantly, he reached for a second sheath of paper, and dipped his pen to write further.

The mage growled angrily, and the whole of his body shook with the strain of his resisting exertion. "Not fair!" he gasped, his right hand inching closer and closer to the paper's surface. "Not fair!" Dellas raised a tear stricken, beseeching gaze to Epsilon's dispassionate face. "Do you see how I am undone! Why should I give it up? Why? It is mine! Enough gold to buy all of Oreset ten times over, I think. More coin than I could count in a month! Why should you have it?" The pen touched down and began leaving a trail of runes as it scratched along. "Gods curse you!"

Epsilon could hold his tongue no longer. "Why should you have so much, wizard, when children starve in the street beneath your grimy windows? I can easily imagine how you came by such vast wealth, and the concept of honor does not enter into my thoughts." He paused a

moment to ponder the situation, and let his attentions be distracted by the wondrous sculpture working at his left flank.

The Warfarer heaved a reluctant breath. "Still," he gloomed, "I am loathe to take honest money from an honest man. Tell me truthfully how you came by your riches, and I shall decide whether you should keep it."

Dellas squirmed and made a foul face. His hand maintained its effort. "I would rather not, and it please you, master."

"It does not please me. You are undoubtedly enchanted to obey me in every way, and I demand that you tell me all. I would better understand this larceny I am perpetrating."

But the little man only squirmed. He whined and moaned piteously, muttering unintelligibly the entire time. At last he seemed to surrender the contest. With a sigh, he confessed, "It is not honest money, as you might have guessed. My monetary fortunes were amassed with the aid of magic. I have been skimming off the top of each day's counting. You might have noticed on your way in that the warehouse district is a bit, uhm, inactive.

"That is a direct result of my ingenuity. I established a system so insidious and subtle that five generations of Oresetian bankers have failed to detect it. Bit by bit, sheck upon sheck, I bled this district dry and came to own nearly all of its lands. Then I sat to work on the southern precinct until it fell, and next the northern. Soon it, too, will be bankrupt, and I will turn to the east and pluck the final apple."

Epsilon was aghast. "It is sheer madness! Chaos ever skulks just beyond this city's walls, and you would conspire to bring those walls down. Why?"

Dellas finished the second letter of credit, and halted prior to signing it. "For the sake of greater wealth. In the name of a higher authority. It was my plan to purchase all of Oreset and its surrounding free lands, using the city's own accumulated wealth. In so doing, I hoped to bring the entire population under the guidance of a single leader. A patriarch, if you will, to lead the people into a state of collective enlightenment."

"A tyrant, you mean, to lead them into slavery." The Warfarer was unexpectedly angry. "And while you hoarded, while you cleverly skimmed from the coffers, Oreset descended into blight and neglect. Its inhabitants starved. And now children live like rats amid refuse, unloved and un-cherished. Your greed has bred a nation of orphaned vagabonds!"

Dembar's Son flinched and hurriedly signed the second letter, adding to it a wad of vouchers that he drew from his desk. "This was not my intention. It seems I overlooked a few minor consequences of my endeavors, however, and-"

"Minor consequences?" repeated a stunned Epsilon. "Have you no shame? Have you no compassion? What is minor about new life? What is minor about an innocent child's hopes and dreams? While it was within your power to better their lives, you have instead reached out to do damage.

"They are all your little bastards, Dellas, and you have been a neglectful father. Well, gods help me, you will not deny them any longer!"

The little man shivered, and shrank back into his richly padded chair. "You have your money. Take it and go. Spend it where you will."

"Oh, I will have more than that, ere I leave. By rights, I should have your life. And I yet may, if you displease me."

"I should not like to displease you, Holy Warfarer."

"Good. Then fetch me all the deeds you are currently holding on Oresetian lands. All of them, Dellas. To the last number."

"But I am bound by Rit Merdian's spell only to sign over the coin," he squeaked, cowering still further into the soft upholstery at his back. "Your lady's enchantment said nothing of the lands."

"It is I that speak of the lands. And I am quite enough."

"No, you are not. You have no grasp of ethereal powers, and no authority to bind me in spell to anything I would not voluntarily do."

With a bright flash and ring of grating steel, Epsilon drew his sword and held it ready, point up and tilted slightly in Dellas' direction. "What you say is both true and irrelevant. Instead of debating what I may do, perhaps you should scrutinize what YOU may do. For an instance, is there anything in the world that could prevent me from cutting your miserable throat? Hmm?" He let his blade fall into place, and approached the mage casually. "Is your flesh magically armored? Would it turn aside this keen edge that has severed so many other throats in the past? And if I killed you, what is my loss? Nothing. I have everything I need." Now the point of his

weapon was buried nicely beneath Dellas' bony chin. "You, on the other hand, stand to lose everything. What need has a dead man for wealth or lands?"

"I- I can see your point," stammered the slight man. Indeed, he made a vain effort to swallow, but his bobber would not roll past the Warfarer's point.

Epsilon chuckled blackly and whipped his sword away and sheathed it. "But take heart, villain. You should view this unfortunate turn of events as a blessing come in disguise! Now your sleep should come a bit easier and your heart beat a bit more softly. Think of the good you will do!"

Dellas' smiled sickly, and rolled his eyes. He appeared to lose all sense of balance. His gorge rose, and the little man fought to chew it back. "All for naught," he whined, rising. "All for nothing. You have no idea what you undo here, Ritesman. You have no idea how much time, how much careful consideration went into possessing what you are about to steal. Lifetimes of labor undone in an instant," he wailed, moving away from the desk cautiously.

"It was a twisted sort of labor," growled Epsilon, following close at Dellas' back. The smaller man set off along the balcony. "It deserved a hasty, untimely end."

The mage spat. "What do you know of it? What do you know of my plans for this city and its people?"

"I know you neglected the most vital aspect of any city; its future. Without taking the children's needs into account, you can but sow harm into the world. And the Wilderlands, I think, has enough of harm to go around." When he noticed the wizard tensing to flee, he prodded the

slighter man in his bony ribs. "Hold there, slave. We will shortly right a great many of your compounded wrongs. Stay a while and be better for the experience."

"I am perfect as I am."

The Ritesman scoffed. "A perfect ass, perhaps."

"A man must have something to his favor."

Dellas crossed over the spacious central atrium at the skywalk, and continued on to the far end of the building. There, in the corner, set into a massive block of granite, they arrived at the gleaming door of a safe, which was constructed of polished, shining everwear steel. Its round door had no apparent locking mechanism, as the face was smooth save for a molded indentation at its center. Into this, Dellas fit the stone of one of his many large rings. Epsilon heard a sound of catches releasing and bolts sliding home. The door popped slightly open. Dellas reached for its rim to pull it wide.

But Epsilon extended a hand to stop the wizard. "It seems unlikely you will have left this horde unprotected. Before you open that hatch, I want your oath that nothing untoward will happen."

The mage squirmed and made a sour face. "Bah! Take it then, damn you! Just take it all!" and he opened the safe without activating the booby traps he had installed within.

Out poured an overflow of neatly folded documents. Many seemed to be quite old, and more than a few were stained with what appeared to be dried blood. Epsilon retrieved one of these and held it up accusingly.

"What is this, here?" he demanded, pointing out the stains. "Ink?"

"Yes, ink," quipped Dellas brusquely. Then he cackled madly, "The sort of living ink that writes the human word!"

Epsilon grimaced. "So magic was not your only wile. Some of these lands you have taken by force."

"What difference, how they were taken? Suffice it to say they were taken and let us pass on to further business." He gathered up the bundles by the arm load and carried them over to a small table and chair. Several trips were required to complete the transfer, and Dellas mumbled unhappily all the while. Bearing a final clutch of deeds, he growled, "The carrion's source should not concern a buzzard."

"No, but the stink of it may!" and the Ritesman added a shoving kick that pushed Dembar's Son rudely into his seat. "Now," he commanded softly, menacingly drawing near, "You

will sign each and every one of these deeds over to tender. And no spells and no trickery. Leave a blank space for the recipient's name. I will fill that in later."

"Why later? I could enter your foul name readily enough here and now," derided the mage, reaching for a nearby quill and ink well. "Epsilon Three," he raved angrily, "Slayer and thief. Betrayer of his brothers!" He signed the document to tender, and tossed it to the floor.

"Shut up, you!" demanded Epsilon, adding a savage cuff to Dellas' ear.

"Epsilon Three!" cried Dellas, signing over another deed. "Soulless ghoul! Dealer of death's shade!" and he tossed the tendered property to the ground, snatching up another. "Epsilon Three!" He scrawled a flourishing signature. "Stygian monger! Lover of hate!" And tossed the papers to the ground. "Epsilon Three! Fatherless bastard! Black hearted beast!" and "Motherless swine! Ignorant animal!" and "Foul reek of Hades! Beloved son of the underworld!" and "Unwholesome spawn of monsters!" and "Creeping murderer of babes!" and "Blood feaster!" and "Serpent!" and so forth until the last certificate was endorsed.

Quite suddenly, the mage fell silent and brooding. His head was hung and his shoulders hunched morosely. They bobbed and heaved, and only when he heard the squeak of sobs did Epsilon realize Dembar's Son was weeping.

"All gone," he moaned sickly. "Every sheck. Every acre. Mine no more."

"You have only returned it to the rightful owners."

Dellas snorted wetly and spat a wad of salty mucous onto the heap of properties. "There is your rightful owner, Damned Ritesman! Put it in your evening stew and eat it!"

Epsilon cautiously stooped to retrieve the soiled papers. He wiped them clean on Dellas' white linen blouse.

The little clerk was enraged, and leapt unexpectedly at Epsilon like a wild cat, all four limbs splayed. The Warfarer dropped the documents to draw his sword, but quickly ascertained that he did not have time. The quarters were too close. Instead, he brought up his left forearm to block Dellas' attack, and used his right to get a grip on the mage's shirt. Despite the maniac's efforts to bite his hand, Epsilon hefted Dembar's Son up and over his shoulder, and tossed him bodily across the balcony rail. Even as he did so, the clerk's physical form changed fluidly. The man was gone.

In his place, the raven winged demon was manifest. It plunged over the edge, only to rise again at the center of the atrium, flapping its broad, sable wings. Dellas the Devil screeched angrily.

It cawed, "You have spawned a black enemy this day, Epsilon Three! A black enemy indeed! Ever be ware and watch for Dellas at your heel, for I am become your shadow from this day forth!" And it rose with a frustrated roar, smashing through the skylight directly overhead.

Epsilon leaned carefully over the rail to watch Demon Dellas struggle into the heavens. A rain of glass like white diamonds fell sparkling in the wake of his passage "Where are those fickle illdross, now that I want one?" he wondered aloud.

Then he collected the deeds, along with his letters of credit and vouchers, into the hem of his cloak, and returned to ground level. Returned to Helmcleaver's side, he secured the wealth within his baggage and gathered up the stallion's reins to leave.

Pushing through the heavily reinforced doors, Epsilon met up with a man that had a look of business about him, who seemed intent on entering the Treasury building. The Warfarer smiled politely and nodded, as he led Helmcleaver up and out of the entryway.

Epsilon eyed the sky for winged monsters, then climbed into his saddle and said, "Do not waste your time here, citizen. Dellas Dembar's Son will not be cheating you today." He heeled his steed around to face the street. "I suggest you try Oreset's eastern changing house. The stink of corruption is sweeter there." And he gouged his mount into a gentle trot.