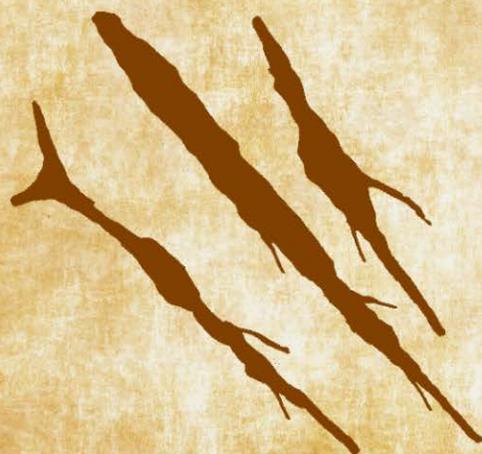


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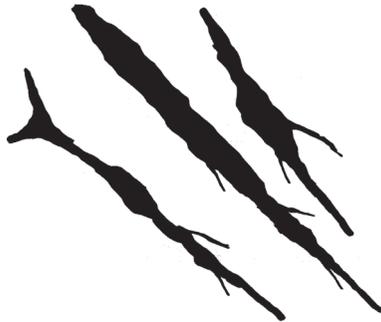
THE BOOK OF SCARS



A MYTHOLOGICAL TALE FROM THE HISTORIES
OF THE OERA'DIM OF ARBORELL

WAYNE F DENBLEY

The Book of Scars



Written and Illustrated by Wayne Densley
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The Book of Scars



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

I remember well the night of my death...

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



The Fall

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Gates of Hallen'draal

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Pillars of Dissolution

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I nodded to the Arbiter and he was soon lost in the red mist of his

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



The Trial Grounds

From the immensity of the Pillars the path of roughly hewn steps led upwards, ascending in a series of jagged levels that were hidden within the blood mists. From these heights the sounds of the Hapless were muffled by the thickening red fog, but Eshalon knew where we were going and kept to his course. We were rising towards the upper reaches of the cavern when there appeared through the clinging vapours the first signs of an opening, of a passage out. As the pillars ground remorselessly into their foundations I found myself and my companion leaving them behind, only to enter into a wide passage cut into the stone. Within this long corridor the walls were made of the most pure crystal, and within its clear surface I could see dozens of Jotun, encased and immobile.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In the space before me there lay another wide cavern, enormous in its reach and without feature except for two objects, one immense, the

other brilliant in its illumination. In the roof of the chamber I could barely make out the edges of a perfectly cut circle of light, one that poured its brilliance down into the space below. Immediately beneath the light there stood the unmistakable shape of a pyramid, made up of hundreds of steps and shining golden in a pool of reflected light. Although it was hard to judge, the pyramid stood more than a kilometre high and was rotating slowly upon its foundations. But this is not what appalled me.

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

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

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

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

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

I looked down at the base of the pyramid and could see the truth of Eshalon's words. The grounds surrounding the pyramid were a maze of crevices and ravines, choked with struggling Jotun as they

fought to negotiate the fractured stone and make the base of the monumental structure. Every metre was hard fought, each step forward measured against the next adversary to be overcome.

It was a vicious melee that left me breathless with its violence. Even as I tried to draw my eyes away from the seething mass of bodies and spattering blood I could see the infrequent winking of light atop the Pyramid's summit. Within the battle there were those who were indeed finding their way through. I could only imagine what must await them on the other side of the light.

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

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

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

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

"Understand this Jotun and mark it carefully. To save the world the Silvan Tree created the Underworld to balance that which had been wrought Above. The forces of Life that had come into being in such vast multitudes had to be countered, and it is this place that provides the weight to do so. What you see here is the opposite of what it

means to live Above. There can be no apologies made for the fact that for some of your kind it is a harsh solution indeed.”

I considered Eshalon's words and could see no fault in the logic of it. The world of the Oera'dim was built on foundations that require balance in the powers of EarthMagic to survive. Long the Silvan Tree had laboured to counter the excesses of the Trell'sara, and the belief that the hard lives of the Oera'dim would be tempered with rewards in the Afterlife was a powerful reason to follow the Code. None of my kind could conceive however, that to break it would bring such dire torment.

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

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

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

I turned to find Eshalon gone, only the frantic backdrop of the Trial Grounds remaining as a blood-soaked reason why I should move on. I cannot say why, but I stepped over the threshold and was

immediately wrapped in a blanket of suffocating darkness. As I walked forward into the encompassing void I began to feel my thoughts beginning to wander, the focused concentration of my mind being drawn out into the nothingness. It was as if my consciousness was expanding to fill the space that grew about me, but there was nothing to be found. At least that is what I thought.

The Pain Shadows

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

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

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

was the only way we could resolve the fight.

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

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

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



The Stone Forests

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



The Thralls

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the Dreya and subjugated to her will. Is it not also fitting that those who were once your masters, and who created such imbalance in the world, should now serve your every need as well?"

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

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

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

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

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

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



The Dreya Tree

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

the afterlife?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Tell me Jotun, what is your name?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

were no more questions.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



The Horns of Gorgoroth

I turned my back on the Dark Tree and waited for my return to the world Above. About me the void remained its dull grey, but from its roiling borders I could see the faintest of movements. Like vapours writhing within a wind-blown fog the edges of the void began to spiral, turning on a great axis as I waited at its centre. Behind me I felt the presence of the Dreya lessen and then disappear. Alone in the centre of a sphere of rushing wind and cloud I struggled to maintain a footing upon the stone circle. It came to me instinctively that I should not fall from its hard surface, and as the noise of a great maelstrom built within the void so did its energy grow more violent. Rushing vapours quickly became bands of speeding mist, spiralling about my position in an ever tightening coil of unrestrained power. From about its edges there arose great arcs of lightning, and the crash of endless rolls of booming thunder that echoed within the sphere, as drumbeats heralding my return to the World. Accosted by such forces I knelt upon the stone beneath me and held on with all the strength at my command.

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

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

For a long moment I lay upon the ground, collecting my thoughts as vertigo clung like a parasite to my head. I knew exactly where I was, for all Jotun find the first glimmer of their consciousness in a similar manner. My new span of three hundred years and a day had begun as all others had, disoriented and covered in dust between the peaks

of Gorgoroth. Here were the Birthing Grounds of the Oera'dim, and all who had been given their time within the halls of the ancestors continued the cycle of life between these sacred peaks. But this time it was different. Unlike all previous Jotun of all the ages of the world I returned from the Underworld with my memories intact, and with the mission of the Dreya fresh in my thoughts.

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

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

THE END

THE BOOK OF SCARS

HERE CAN BE FOUND THE ACCOUNT OF THE TRUE WITNESS, GIVEN IN HIS OWN WORDS, AND RECORDED IN THE MEMORIES OF THE LIVING BOOKS FOR ALL ETERNITY.

FROM THE GATES OF HALLEP'DRAAL TO THE MAJESTY OF THE DREYA TREE, THIS IS ONE JOTUN'S JOURNEY THROUGH THE WORLD BELOW AND HIS DELIVERANCE BACK INTO THE LIGHT OF DAY.

