

CHRONICLES OF ARBORELL

# BLOOD AND IRON



AN EPIC ADVENTURE FROM THE  
CHRONICLES OF ARBORELL

WAYNE F DEPSLEY

# Blood and Iron



Written and Illustrated by  
Wayne Densley  
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## Prophecy



*"The days grow darker now, and in the solitude of my exile I sense that we have reached a cross-roads. The world is changing, and as it turns on its axis I can feel the movement in the stone. Loathing and hatred have risen again in the north, our Enemy scheming on our destruction, and as I write these words he sends forth warriors as messengers, to show the Nations of Men that they cannot be forgotten, that the Horde still has power."*

*"But there is more to these messengers of death than at first meets the eye, for they have a mission of their own, one separate from the cruel objectives of their Clavern masters. I see in the mists that they are in search of a key, something with which they can break the shackles of their own servitude. If we are to survive they must not have it."*

*"For long years I have searched the River of Time and it troubles me that I can see little except violence and death before us. Five centuries have passed as we struggle to make our way in this New World, and the malevolence of our Enemy has required that we hold our lands tightly within a vice forged of blood and iron. It has been our lot for these past centuries and all I have seen tells me that it will be so for the times yet to come. But there is hope. As I peer through these mists I can see that life for Men does not end, that all who walk these lands will have a place, and a purpose, worth the telling."*

*"Of only one thing can I be certain. A great darkness grows on our horizons, coveting the lands we hold and wishing us only annihilation. Already it moves in silence, spreading its malcontent and perpetrating its evil. If we are to hold that which we have gained we must resist its machinations, and if we are to survive we must prevail."*

*"And yet as I gaze into the River I see something else. It is but a movement in the mists yet it grows more defined as I await its approach. Someone is coming, and in his shadow my own destiny is no longer clear."*

*From the journals of the Maturi Hedj,  
Year of Settlement 517*

## Chapter 1 - Callenfrey



In the restless quiet of a warm night the port town of Callenfrey slumbered. The passage of a hot Summer had almost come to an end, but in its wake the lingering heat of those long days remained, the town sweating in the embrace of a night that promised no relief from the humid air that rolled onshore from the nearby sea. Townsfolk turned restlessly in their beds, and the few guards that maintained the watch upon Callenfrey's walls patrolled listlessly, weighed down by heavy armour and thick leather jerkins. Only the sounds of birds crying out in the distance broke the uneasy silence of a town trying to find rest.

Beneath the languid blush of two crescent moons Callenfrey sat against the shores of the Grey Sea, quiet and tranquil in the darkness. It was a port of some renown, its busy docks a debarkation point for cargo destined for the farms and settlements of Northern Kalborea. Its harbour was deep, its citizens surrounded by high walls and protected to the north by a range of hills. At all sides thick forest crowded up against the settlement, and but for the unusual warmth of the night hours everything appeared peaceful.

For weeks the coastal towns of Kalborea had been on alert however. All settlements from the wash of the Laneslem north to the Shan Valleys anxiously watched for a possible Horde attack. Rumour had put a large force of Hresh warriors moving southwards in search of plunder and slaves, and garrisons along the entire coast had reacted to the concern of their citizens, even though there had been no positive sighting of such a warband on the move. As a precaution the alert had been raised, and because of it the townsfolk of Callenfrey slept a little easier. The guards that walked the walls of the port town that night were not as content, and for Armen Albright and Janen Greel in particular the dark hours had proved a hard shift.

"I tell you Armen there is no good reason for us to be walking the battlement this night. The Horde is nowhere to be seen and we're just wasting our time."

Armen looked at his companion and shrugged his shoulders. "Whether we are or not isn't really the issue is it? We've done this same patrol for the past week and I'm getting well tired of it. Have you had any word from the Watch Commander when we'll get a

change of roster?"

Greel just grunted. He had forgotten to ask but simply didn't wish to admit it. His friend had an irritating habit of nagging relentlessly if things weren't going his way. Instead he decided to change the subject. Armen had been having a lot of trouble with his new equipment and it offered an opportunity for Greel to evade the question.

"By the Fates Armen, will you stop fidgeting. How can a man concentrate on his job when you're constantly jerking your shoulder around like that? What's wrong anyway? I bet you didn't report to the Armourer did you? I swear, you complain all night about that blasted shoulder strap and then do 'aught about it."

For Armen it seemed an unfair aspersion. "Look Greel, I told the bludger to adjust the straps, but he just looked at me like I was stupid. Expects me to fix it myself. The old gear worked just fine and I didn't want to give it up anyway. This new chainmail is too loose across the shoulders. Keeps slippin' off every time I move my shield arm. I tell you though, if there ever was any trouble here I'd spend more time pulling up this blasted mailcoat than fendin' off the Horde."

Greel could see the mailcoat had been too broadly fitted and told his friend to stand still whilst he adjusted the strap himself. All it needed was a few extra holes and it could then be properly secured. For just a few moments the guards took their eyes away from their watch as Greel worked quickly on the recalcitrant strapping. Focused on the adjustment they did not see the three furtive shadows that slipped silently over the battlement, and then disappeared into the town's dark streets below.

In the forest that ringed the port of Callenfrey the night was neither quiet nor restful. Beneath its thick canopy a large number of Hresh Warriors moved purposefully, taking up predetermined positions within the undergrowth. Highly disciplined, they lived for combat and the spoils that came from conquest and violence. Before them lay a great prize, and they were hungry for the treasures that might be found within its high walls.

For three weeks the Hresh Warband had endured forced marches and half-rations to arrive within the fringes of the trees that surrounded the town. From the wastes of the Sanhar they had come, crossing the treacherous passes of the Great Rift, slowly infiltrating through the forests of the Shan Valley until they had found their way to the coast. Now four hundred pairs of dull green eyes peered carefully from the undergrowth, and made preparation for the attack

that had been the sole purpose of their journey.

The Hresh Chieftain Ansolon'Denmar knew the town would be unprepared, the small garrison no match for their number. For two days they had lain within the forest edge, watching the guards, checking the timing of patrols, and determining the numbers of guardsmen rostered for the early hours. Ansolon's *crue* leaders had all agreed, Callenfrey was a target that begged assault.

Hidden within the shadows Ansolon checked the disposition of his forces and then motioned to his brother, who stood quietly at his right shoulder.

"The *vehmin* remain unprepared, Alladil."

His brother nodded as he surveyed the town's defences. "Yes *Tuan*. Their walls are high but they are under-manned, and vulnerable because of it."

Ansolon agreed. "Call the *crue* to battle order. The bidding of our Masters must be done here but remember brother, what we need can be found here as well. When you find the ones we seek bring them to me unharmed."

Alladil'Denmar stood to attention then disappeared into the surrounding trees. In the quiet that followed Ansolon considered the battle to come and felt his heart race at the expectation of it. This was the purpose that they had been created for, instruments of violence that enjoyed no concept of mercy or defeat, and he could sense in the eyes of every soldier in his *crue* that same ruthless anticipation. He was not going to make his Hresh'na wait any longer.

With a single word of command his warriors quickly formed an extended line at the forest's edge and in the shadows waited for the signal to move forward. It had to be a quiet advance. No war-cries, no beating of drums, just a determined rush for the few guards still at their posts, and then the systematic slaughter of the townspeople within. Some would be taken but most would die, the town burned to the ground. It would be a statement the Nations of Men would not be able to ignore.

Ansolon watched as his scouts climbed silently over the walls. Without cry or alarm they stole into the town and made for their positions along the harbour foreshore. It would be their job to torch the fishing boats and cargo scows that crowded the dockside for no-one would be allowed to escape by sea. If all went to plan their assault would be more than a simple attack, it would be an extermination.

When the Hresh Chieftain saw his scouts safely within the walls he signalled to his crue commanders to move forward. The rustle of hundreds of heavy-shod feet moving through the undergrowth was like that of the wind in the trees. As a quiet black wave they crossed the short distance between the borders of the surrounding forest and the high walls of the town's defences. In a series of carefully practised movements cloth-covered grappling hooks arched over the defensive wall, and were then pulled tight against the battlements. With almost no sound the attackers began their climb towards the unsuspecting guards, and in the gloom of the night hauled themselves over the parapets.

Ansolon'Denmar was the first Hresh to make the wall. He knew his crue understood exactly what they had to do, the most crucial objective to get the entire warband over the walls before the first alarm could be raised. If they could achieve this the town would be theirs for the taking.

As he watched, the numbers of his dark warriors grew upon the battlement. The wall was high but not very wide, and it did not take long for the parapets to become crowded. Only then did he give the signal to move into the town itself. In groups of five his warriors descended the narrow stairs to the hard cobble of the streets below, each squad fading quietly into the shadowed lanes and alleys.

Greel was the first to see the Hordim. At three bells in the morning only five guards were stationed upon the battlement, and two of those manned the guard post at the main gate. The Hresh had timed their attack well, when only one guard stood alone upon the north wall and he had died instantly, an arrow piercing his chest. As the Hresh spread out, one group made directly for the gatehouse and silently cut the unsuspecting guardsmen's throats. There had been no sound, only the muffled struggle of a short, lethal attack. It was as the Hresh warriors left the gatehouse that they were spotted by Greel. He had completed his patrol of the south wall and had stopped at the gatehouse palisade to wait for Armen to meet him there. Each had a section of the battlement to watch and most of the conversations they had were just quick words spoken when their patrols crossed. As he waited the dark shapes moving through the shadowed streets below immediately caught his eye.

For a moment he hesitated, unsure whether lack of sleep had affected his vision, but as the creatures began to move further into the town he could not doubt that Callenfrey was in real danger. Quickly

he unfastened the horn he kept at his belt and trumpeted a loud signal that broke the night air like a thunderclap.

The effects of the alarm were immediate. Lights came on all over the small town, the guard barracks suddenly alive with desperate guardsmen attempting to ready their equipment. In the face of their discovery the Hresh kept to their orders and made no sound. Although the town was coming to life at the cry of the alarm they knew that as long as they made no noise neither the town's people, nor its guards, could know how many they were, or their position as they spread through the streets. That was at least until the real fighting began.

Greel could see from his vantage upon the main gatehouse palisade exactly what the Hresh were doing. A large group were making directly for the guard barracks, other smaller groups spreading through the narrow cobbled streets before disappearing quickly into their shadows. He estimated there were hundreds of the Hordim and despaired at the small number of soldiers that could be raised to meet them. He knew then that if the town of Callenfrey were to survive it would be up to its citizens to beat back the Horde attack.

With sword in hand Greel ran down the stairs that led from the main gate to the street below. His friend Armen was nowhere to be seen and he could not be concerned with that now. Inside the gatehouse stood a small armoury with crossbows and a good supply of bolts. He had no chance against such a force alone, though a few well-aimed bolts might even up the numbers.

At the run he made it to the gatehouse door and pushed hard but it would not open easily. The body of one of the guards lay prone across its threshold, and it took all the strength he had to force the door wide enough to gain entry. Once inside however, he sheathed his sword and took up one of the crossbows. With two belts of cross-bolts in hand he ran quickly from the gatehouse and made his way back up to the main gate's battlement. From that vantage he had a clear view of the entire length of the wall and a good portion of the town as well. Carefully he loaded his crossbow, but he knew that he had far more targets than his supply of bolts could possibly bring down. He resolved to use them all to good effect.

The large group of Hresh making for the Barracks were his first target. In quick succession he felled three of the warriors before a small group detached from the main force and moved back towards him.

“Oh cripes”, he muttered under his breath as the Hresh ran straight for his position, a look of murderous determination in their green eyes. He brought down two more before they reached the steps at the base of the gatehouse, but he had run out of time. Throwing down the crossbow he drew his sword and stood fast upon the battlement. At least there, within the narrow confines of the parapet, he would stand some chance against the fearsome creatures that now closed in upon him.

It was as he waited that the world seemed to slow down, his attackers illuminated in red as the world erupted before him in flames. The town was alight, the Hordim throwing flaming torches in all directions, burning everything they could reach. The cries of women and the sounds of combat were now rising above the crackling roar of houses alight and shops ablaze. Beyond the town he could see a dull red glow lighting up the sky, the harbour burning as brightly as the town itself, and everywhere there were the Hresh, killing indiscriminately as they moved from house to house.

The first warrior that made it to the parapet did not have to wait for Greel. At a rush the guardsmen slammed into the creature and threw it back onto the stone floor of the battlement. The second Hresh tripped upon the thrashing body of the first and both went down as Greel swung his sword. They died where they lay but the rest of the Hresh did not hesitate. Jumping the lifeless bodies of their comrades they fell upon the hapless guard, trying to force him against the wall where he might be pinned and killed. Greel was having none of it though, swinging his sword in a wide arc he kept the warriors at bay whilst slowly moving backwards. Behind him lay another set of stairs and realising that there were simply too many of the Hordim he retreated, his intention to make a run for the narrow streets below. If there were to be any organised resistance given to the Hordim it would be found in the town itself, and he knew that would be where his duty lay.

Suddenly from the darkness emerged another shape. Along the parapet behind Greel the glowing fires of Callenfrey illuminated another figure, shorter than the Hresh it ran straight at Greel, the glint of steel flashing in the firelight.

“Get down Greel!” shouted a welcome voice. It was Armen, holding a long cavalry lance and aiming its razor-sharp blade directly at the first Hresh at Greel's front. The Guardsman flattened himself against the wall as Armen drove the lance straight through the first Hresh

and into the second that stood behind. Armen pushed both backwards into the remainder of the Hordim and toppled them all onto the parapet. Avoiding the writhing morass of arms and legs Armen grabbed his friend and pulled him towards the other stairs.

"By the Fates, this is gettin' out of hand!" Armen shouted as he hauled his friend down onto the cobbles below. At a run the two guards raced into the streets and only stopped when they were sure the Hresh had been left behind. As they tried to recover their breath, they looked at each other and Armen shook his head in disbelief.

"Not exactly my idea of a quiet night by the seaside, eh?"

Greel smiled but he was too breathless to answer. Instead he looked to the east and the rising smoke that was quickly obscuring the sky overhead. In such times their duty was clear. Defence of the town meant finding what remained of the garrison and then driving the Hordim out. At that moment it seemed to the guardsman easier thought about than actually done.

Greel looked at his comrade, "Any idea where the Watch Commander is?"

Armen shrugged his shoulders. "The last thing I saw was the Barracks under attack and the Hordim swarming around it. If he is still alive he ain't gonna be a happy man."

Greel knew this would be the last night of their lives. All around them the town burned, bodies littered the streets and a terrible cry arose above the sound of the conflagration. If any of the garrison had survived they would be wherever the main body of Hordim were. To find them would be their objective as well.

With swords at the ready the two guards moved through the streets, passing burning buildings and the pitiful cries of their inhabitants. Carefully they negotiated their way to the Barracks and there found the remainder of the garrison. In the open square that fronted the small Barracks building a battle was ending. The garrison, caught unprepared, had been cut down as they had raced out onto the cobblestones. Only a few had survived and were now under siege, having fought their way back to the building itself. All around it the Hresh hammered and smashed at its walls with their scimitars, tearing at the windows and doors, trying to bring the structure down.

Greel looked at his friend and took a stronger grip upon his sword. "I guess this is as good a time as any to do something stupid, eh?"

Armen nodded. If they were going to die then there could be no better place than alongside their comrades. Without hesitation both

guardsmen charged the Hresh, shouting wildly as they ran. As they raced towards the Hordim a thick pall of acrid smoke descended upon the square and they disappeared into it, their weapons flashing red in the reflected glare of a hundred raging fires.



Within the forests that surrounded Callenfrey all remained quiet, the violence of the Hordim attack a distant murmur quickly lost within the dense undergrowth and tall timber. For Mallen Cael, slowly following the southern road as it wound its way to Callenfrey, it was almost the end of a long night. Two days travel from the town of Kal Mannion had left him sore and fatigued and he had only one desire, to find a comfortable rest in his own bed. Usually he would not be out on the road at such an hour. His business abroad had left him delayed and travelling in the dark, but another half hour would see him home, and he was eager to see his brother.

Mallen was tired but his mind was full of the past day's events. He had always done his best thinking upon the road, and as he made his way through the dense forest he went through a careful checklist of what he needed to do in the coming weeks. There were debts to be recovered, and a long line of small jobs and other tasks that would need his attention. In the quiet he let his mind wander freely and in doing so he found it settling upon his younger brother. It was not an important thing but he hoped Tomas had remembered to close up the shop. He was always leaving it for Mallen and it could easily slip Tomas' mind if he was not reminded. Still, he had good news for his little brother. Another successful trade with the Mining Guild had placed in his hands enough copper plate to keep the shop in stock for the next year. It would be good to get home and tell him of his success.

In the still of the night the steady rhythm of his horse's hooves against the trail was mesmerising. It was dark, only the thin edge of the waning moons throwing any light onto the dim forest ahead. Upon this quiet path his senses were still alert though. He had travelled the roads of the North Coast for most of his life and he

appreciated the need to remain on guard. It was an unfortunate truth that the forests of this region harboured more than just the odd bandit.

As he travelled he considered the next move he should make. His metal-goods shop had been a huge success in the port of Callenfrey, and there was a good chance that further opportunities for the same type of establishment might be found elsewhere. All he needed was a bit more money and a few more trusted staff. He smiled when he thought about his brother's opinion on such ambitions. Given the chance Mallen knew Tomas would be quite content with the one shop, for he had no greater plan than to live life and die happy. It was a simple objective, one that Mallen fully understood, but it was not all that he wanted. He had greater ambitions and a greater need to succeed.

Their parents had died when they had been no more than youths. Without family to rely upon Mallen had taken his brother and together they had journeyed the roads of Kalborea, finding work where they could and living the hard life of the itinerant. Mallen had worked as a labourer, tracker, hunter and metalsmith. Any job that would put food in their mouths had been good enough for him and somehow, after many years travel, they had ended up in Callenfrey. The shop had been Tomas' idea and the simple pans and jugs they had produced had been eagerly traded within the town and then along the entire coast. Success was a sweet thing, something Mallen believed he deserved. For now at least he was happy.

It was upon a crest in the road ahead that a movement to his right abruptly brought Mallen's thoughts to a sharper focus. With no wind the forest was still and the slight flicker of light against a few moving leaves put all his senses on edge. Immediately his horse felt the change in its master's posture and quickened its gait. With hand resting lightly upon the hilt of his sword Mallen searched the undergrowth, looking for any sign of trouble. He did not have to wait long for it to find him.

From out of the darkness two Hresh scouts burst from the edges of the road, one reaching for Mallen, the other barreling into his horse's side. Taken by surprise the horse faltered, rearing backwards and twisting sideways as it tried to escape its shadowed attackers. In the sudden assault Mallen Cael lost control of his mount and the horse reared awkwardly into the undergrowth at the roadside, rolling over its rider and skidding down a long embankment into the shallows of a

small stream.

In a fit of terror the horse bucked and grunted as it tried to regain its footing, and as the animal heaved itself upright it rammed straight into the pursuing Hresh, launching them both into the ferns at the stream's edge. In the confusion that followed Mallen scrambled deep into the shadows of the gully, his breathing stilled as he waited for the Hordim to regain their feet. He dared not move a muscle lest he betray his position to his attackers.

Lost within the dark undergrowth Mallen laid still as the two Hresh crashed through the bushes looking for him. Each creature yelled low guttural oaths at the other as they searched for their intended victim, pulling up bushes and threshing the long grass as they went, but Mallen remained still, preferring the shadows of the dense brush to any open confrontation with the two Hordim. In the gloom beneath a thicket of giant ferns he watched as the Hordim became more and more agitated. In the subtle light of the moons he could see their eyes glowing with a green-edged tinge as they scoured the embankment looking for him. The closest scout stopped only a few metres from where he lay and remained close enough that he could hear the Hresh's chest heaving with the exertion of the assault.

It was only then that Mallen was able to have his first good look at his attackers. Through the thick ferns he watched as the Hordim searched the gully. Each of the Hresh were only lightly attired but their equipment was well-made, simply cut jerkins and breeches covering bodies well muscled and slick with sweat. Shrouded within the shadows their faces appeared not unlike those of men, but their features were heavier and less distinguishable. He came to realise quickly that he could not tell the Hordim apart, their faces identical, even to a tattoo of three tear-shaped marks beneath their right eyes. As Mallen hid he could see the creatures' skin colouration changing as they moved, merging between dark grey and a silvered green as they thrashed the gully's floor. The Kalborean had heard rumours of this strange ability but had never seen it for himself. Beneath the canopy of overhanging trees it rendered them practically invisible.

Upon the Hordim's bodies only two things did not change. In the shadows their hair remained jet black, cut to a single ponytail falling from the nape of their necks, and upon their right arms a complex series of tattoos ran from their shoulders to their wrists. Mallen could see however, that each of the Hordim's tattoos were different and he wondered if this might be the only way that the warriors could

recognise each other. Most noticeable however, were their ornately engraved scimitars. In the moonlight they shimmered like polished silver, gleaming razor sharp as the Hordim hacked at the vegetation about them.

With the smell of damp earth in his nostrils Mallen lay unmoving as the scouts searched the other side of the stream. Both were frustrated by their inability to find him, and the young Kalborean had no doubt that if they did he would die.

By a chance of fate it was his horse that saved him. From somewhere along the stream it called frantically to its master, and with grunts of cruel anticipation the creatures charged off after it, leaving Mallen alone in the dark. It was an opportunity he was not going to let pass. When the Hordim were a safe distance further down the gully he raised himself to his feet and carefully climbed back up to the roadway. A quick check of the road showed it to be clear, and without looking back he ran desperately in the direction of Callenfrey, the warmth of the night no counter to the chill in his spine that compelled him forwards.

Watching carefully for any further sign of danger Mallen raced for the safety of the town's high walls. In his mind his thoughts were a patchwork of fear and confusion. He had only ever seen Hresh once before in his life, at a time when the Hordim had been raiding along the fringes of the plains in the west. The possibilities of what they were doing within the forest left him in a deep state of anxiety for his brother's safety.

Through the trees he moved quickly. His horse had been lost to him but at least he was alive and he intended to remain that way. He could only wonder though, at the reasons why such creatures had found their way to Callenfrey. In his mind he knew there must be more, for the Hresh could only have made their way so far down the coast if they were part of a larger group. Long experience with the Hordim had shown Men that there was always a reason for what they did, and that they always worked to a plan. The creatures that attacked him were in the forest for a purpose, and that meant everybody was at risk.

When Mallen finally broke from the trees he stood upon a high hill looking down towards the port of Callenfrey. Ahead the road twisted its way into a small valley, which then opened up into a flat area of farmlands and the port itself against the sea. The town was surrounded on three sides by forest, nestled beneath a series of hills

that protected it from the strongest of the north winds. The high wall that encircled it shone in the dim moonlight with a grey edge and it should have been a familiar sight, but this night what confronted Mallen Cael took his breath away.

The town was on fire. A great conflagration tore and swirled through the port. Buildings were aflame and a huge pall of smoke hung as a veil over everything. In the harbour boats of all sizes wallowed, burnt to the waterline, sinking slowly into the black waters. And above it all was the chilling sounds of people crying out, of sorrow and anger mixed in torment. Mallen ran, it was all he could do. His brother was somewhere within the ruins of the town, his only thought that he must find him.

## Chapter 2 - Firelight



Tomas Cael awoke with a start. Wide-eyed, he stared at the roughly hewn timbers of his bedroom ceiling and tried to bring his thoughts into focus. The humidity lay like a heavy blanket upon him and he groaned as he realised that it was still dark, the night not yet over. Sweating in the unusual warmth of the season it had taken him until the early hours to finally find sleep, and he was not happy that it had retreated from him once again. A frown creased his brow as he determined quickly that whatever had awoken him had better be important.

Strangely though it was quiet, the breeze off the sea as warm and as uncomfortable as it had been earlier in the evening. Because of this his window had been left wide open, and he listened intently for any sound in the streets below that might give him some clue to his wakefulness. In the solitude of his room he searched for sounds of discord and could not ignore the unease that was growing within him. Years of travel upon the roads of Kalborea with his brother had sharpened his instincts, and he had learned that he could not dismiss them lightly. It was only a feeling, but he could sense something was wrong, something terrible about to happen.

As he waited in the dark of his room he began to hear the first signs of a commotion brewing in the narrow streets. Heavy footsteps rang dully upon the cobbles, and when the light clink of metal upon metal filtered its way up to his room he knew then that something unusual was indeed happening below. Quietly he got out of bed and moved over to his window. It looked out over the street and even though he could not see directly below; Mallen had installed a canopy over the metal shop's entrance only a few weeks before, he could see clearly to the left and right down both sides of the lane. He sucked in his breath as he saw a number of dark shapes moving eastwards, along the lane towards the harbour. These were not Guardsmen, they were altogether too quiet and too purposeful, his first thought that they must be bandits.

"Damn it!" Tomas muttered to himself. He had forgotten to close up the shop properly and if Mallen found out there would be hell to pay. It would be just his luck that on the one occasion he had neglected to lock up the town would be subject to the unwanted attention of a

band of thieves.

Turning quickly Tomas looked for his clothing. It had been spread haphazardly around the room and in the dark it took a few moments to find what he needed. Once collected he dressed hurriedly as he listened for any sounds downstairs. As he pulled on his boots the quiet of the night broke upon the loud sounding of a horn from somewhere near the main gates.

It was an alarm that had an immediate effect. Up and down the street lights came on in windows, and dogs began to bark as townsfolk stirred from their beds. Tomas rushed back to the window but could see nothing further. Still tucking his shirt into his breeches he followed the corridor from his room to the stairs that led to the shop below. Carefully he descended the staircase, all his senses on edge. Only when he reached the door to the shop itself did he realise he had brought no weapon with him. Anxiously he looked about him and found a mattock handle Mallen had placed against the door frame. He had been intending to make a new blade for it in his workshop but had forgotten to put this piece of wood away. For the moment it would have to do.

Clutching the handle in one hand Tomas tentatively opened the door and peered through into the shop. He drew a sigh of relief when he saw the double doors at the front of the establishment were still closed. With weapon in hand he ran to the entrance and firmly settled the mattock handle into a set of brass fittings that his brother had built into the doors. With a cross-brace fitted the doors were effectively jammed shut but he could not leave the shop in such a state. He would need to find the key and then he could lock up properly.

The Brothers Cael Metalgoods Workshop and Store was large, a cornucopia of brass and copper, metal dishes and bowls, jugs and eating utensils; all hung from beams across the ceiling, arrayed upon shelves and carefully arranged within a series of large oak cabinets. It was a testament to the two brothers' hard work and industry but it now presented the younger Cael with a dilemma. In the dim interior of the shop he could not remember where he had put the keys.

"I swear Tomas, if Mallen finds out about this you ain't going to hear the end of it for a month." He whispered anxiously as he tried to place where the keys might be. At that moment he was not overly concerned about the possibility of the shop being robbed. He had no doubt that with the sounding of the alarm the Town Guard would be

out roaming the streets, and any criminal element would have already made good their escape. What Tomas was more concerned with was the reaction of his brother if it came out that he had not locked up. A half truth would suffice if he could only find the keys and get the front doors firmly deadlocked.

Suddenly the sound of breaking glass nearby brought his earnest searching to an abrupt end. The front windows looked directly onto the street and as he turned to investigate he could see dark shapes moving across the walls, projected from beyond the glass by the glare of a rising tide of flame and smoke. Quickly he made his way to the window and stopped dead in his tracks. Upon the cobbles of his town a large group of creatures stood lighting torches, before hurling them onto the rooftops, through the broken panes of ground-floor windows or into open doorways. For a moment he couldn't believe what he was seeing, but the cold reality of his situation came home quickly. They were Hresh. The town of Callenfrey was under attack, and it was not by bandits.

Tomas crouched below the level of the window sill just as five of the Hordim came to his shopfront. In a shower of glass shards the windows exploded inwards and a number of powerful arms reached in, grasping for the mattock handle that held the doors firm. Tomas was not about to stay around. He was unarmed and no match for any one of these creatures. Turning about he ran for the stairs, thinking quickly as to what he should do.

First, he needed a more effective weapon. Mallen had an old sword in his bedroom cabinet and his first thought was to find it before the Hresh below realised that there was someone in the building. He would not have long though. As he reached his brother's bedroom door the shop below erupted in flames, a red glow flickering against the walls at the base of the staircase. He could now have no further concern for their business. Buildings could be rebuilt, businesses restarted. Now he needed to save his own life and be quick about it. As he rummaged through his brother's belongings the sounds of heavy feet thumping up the stairs brought a new urgency to his search.

Under a set of blankets he found what he was looking for, and once he had the sword in hand, pushed the cabinet across the doorway to block any access to the room. Even as it fell to the floor the Hresh crashed up against the entrance. Fists slammed against the flimsy timbers and scimitars cut deep into the door's wood. The Hresh were

tearing it apart in their frenzy to get at the young Kalborean and he knew it would not last long. Tomas had to get out quickly. There was only one other exit from his brother's room and he made for it as the Hresh hammered at the door. Taking to the only window, he crawled out onto its narrow sill and took a deep breath.

Some two metres from his position stood the roof of his next door neighbours, the Ballens. With all the energy he could muster he leapt across the gap as the Hordim burst into the room and made for his precarious perch. By an arm's length he cleared the distance and fell heavily against the shingles of the opposing roof. He could not stop there however. As he cleared the roof and took shelter on its far side a small dagger whistled through the space between his arm pit and his waist, embedding itself into the timbers of the home behind him.

Tomas stopped only for a moment to extend to the Hresh a gesture of defiance before disappearing below the roof line. One more leap to the next house found him far enough from the shop, and the Hresh, to stop for a moment and take stock of what he was going to do. All about him the town was going up in flames. Huge pyres were erupting in the Harbour area and he could hear desperate fighting beginning in the streets. Screams and shouting filled the narrow alleyways, and from his lofty hiding place he knew he needed to decide quickly what he should do next.

He had no doubt the shop would be lost to him. Regardless of what the Hordim might take, it was going to burn, just as most of the town around him would. Given this he decided that only one thing remained in Callenfrey that he needed to protect, and that was his fiancée Shemwe. He had known her since he had first come to the port, and had courted her for years before he had finally mustered the courage to ask for her hand. He was not going to allow these creatures to destroy the only person, apart from his brother, that meant anything to him.

Resolved to this course he first had to find a way down to street level. Shemwe lived some four blocks from the shop, close by the harbour warehouses. If he was to reach her quickly he would need to take his chances in the street.

Carefully he peered over the edge of the roof for a way down. One look was enough to dispel any notion of climbing down the outside of the building. Three storeys high, it had no external guttering or convenient window ledges upon which he might be able to make a safe descent. Instead Tomas took his sword and smashed a hole in

the roof, tearing away at the shingles until he had an opening big enough for him to drop through. The room below was a bedroom, and it proved an easy task to jump down onto a small bed that lay directly beneath the hole. He landed awkwardly, the bed collapsing under his weight, but he was inside and that was a start. With all his senses on alert he surveyed the room and found it empty. It was a child's bedroom, crowded with toys and colourful wall hangings. As he took a moment to catch his breath he could feel the sweat dripping from his hands, loosening the grip he had upon the leather hilt of his brother's sword. In the darkened room he pulled one of the covers from the bed and dried his palms.

As he wiped away the sweat he paused for a moment and shook his head in disbelief. About him he could hear his comfortable world quickly disappearing into chaos, when only moments before his greatest concern had been the wrath of his brother over an unlocked door. The thought of his brother however, sent a shiver across his shoulders. He did not know where Mallen was, he only knew that he should have already returned home. The thought of what might have happened to him passed through his thoughts as a thousand scenarios fraught with violence and disaster. For Tomas it was unthinkable and he quickly pushed the images from his mind, focusing instead on what lay ahead. With a firm grip restored he began a careful move towards the bedroom's only doorway.

The room was veiled in shadow, dark except for a meagre light that shone down through the damage he had done to the ceiling. In its scant illumination he found the door slightly ajar and was about to step through when he heard a soft scraping sound coming from a small cupboard to his right. Carefully he pushed the door shut and with sword at the ready crept towards the source of the noise. With his free hand reaching out for the cupboard he was sure that he could hear something moving about within.

With one quick movement he opened the door and found the source of his curiosity. A small girl lay in the base of the cupboard, concealed beneath a pile of toys and scattered clothing. She was shivering with fear. Tomas pulled away the clutter so that he might have a better look at her. He could see she was no more than six years old and was dressed in a colourful set of summer pyjamas. In her arms she clung to a small stuffed animal and the look on her face was one of abject terror. Tomas didn't know this child but he could not leave her to be found by the Hresh. The fact that her parents had not run to her

defence as he smashed through their roof only pointed to the high possibility that they were already dead. He had no time for kindness but he had no choice either, his conscience told him that this girl was now his responsibility.

“Hello, what might your name be then?” He talked softly, trying to seem as calm as possible.

The little girl looked at Tomas and then at the dull glint of his sword. She said nothing until he placed the weapon down carefully on the floor of her bedroom.

“Janielle. My name is Janielle.” Tomas took her in his arms and picked up his weapon.

“Where are your parents Janielle? Are they downstairs?”

The little girl nodded her head. “Mummy woke me up and put me in the cupboard. She said it was a game and I shouldn't come out until she came back to get me. She hasn't come back yet.”

“Well I tell you what Janielle, we'll play a game too. Let's go downstairs and see if we can find your Mum and Dad. If they're not in the house I know a nice place you can stay until they come back. Sound all right?”

Janielle nodded her head once again, and leaned close against Tomas' chest as he opened the door to her bedroom. Beyond the small room the home was brightly lit. All the lamps in the house had been turned on, blazing brightly in every room and hallway. Tomas said nothing to the girl, but he knew this had been done deliberately by her parents, the purpose to make it more difficult for an attacker to find their child in her darkened hiding place. It would be easy to miss something if your eyes were not accustomed to the gloom.

The house was quiet, and Tomas took care to make no sound as he made his way down the stairs and into a large living area at ground level. The front door of the house had been smashed in and to his dismay both parents lay dead at the doorstep. Bravely they had attempted to defend their home but had met a violent end instead. It was something he did not want the young girl to see.

“We're going to play another game Janielle. Can you keep your eyes closed for a few moments? Don't open them until I say so, all right?”

Janielle nodded and Tomas carefully stepped over the bodies of her parents then made his way out into the street. He did not let her reopen her eyes until they were out of sight of the house and well on their way towards the first corner. With smoke billowing about them Tomas stopped to get his bearings. The girl was becoming restless so

he put her down on the cobbles and quickly surveyed the immediate area. For the moment the streets were clear. Tomas crouched down and brushed out the girl's long brown hair with his fingers. He did not know whether he had made it any safer for her by taking her onto the streets with him, but he was sure he couldn't have left her behind. If the Hresh were to return she would have been defenceless.

Tomas wiped her face and smiled.

"There, that's better isn't it? From now on Janielle I'm going to get you to walk with me. Will that be all right?"

The young girl nodded once again and took Tomas' hand, and together they made their way down towards the Harbour. The Hordim had already smashed a path of destruction through this part of the town, bodies lay about the streets and fires burnt brightly from most of the houses. From within some of the burning dwellings he could hear the splintering of glass and the collapse of overburdened structures as they gave way to the flames. There was nothing that could be done however. The Hresh had done their murderous job well and Tomas' only hope was that they had somehow missed Shemwe's house.

Through the fires and dense smoke the two figures made their way eastwards. Tomas had a strong hold on both the girl and his sword, and together they negotiated a path around piles of fallen debris, the bodies of hapless townspeople and heaps of personal belongings left thrown into the street by the looting Hordim. For her part Janielle did not seem to recognise what she was seeing. The dark of night and the flickering shadows thrown by a multitude of fires had turned the normal order of the narrow streets into something surreal, something almost dreamlike. Tomas concluded it was a good thing that she passed by such horrors without recognition. The morning would no doubt bring with it a true measure of the disaster the town, and this little girl, would have to face.

Tomas did, however, have a plan. Finding Shemwe was his first priority, removing the Horde from Callenfrey next on his list. Janielle would have to stay with Shemwe and her parents. His only hope was that they were all still alive.

Through the burning streets they walked, carefully trying to avoid any chance of an encounter with the Hresh. Tomas could hear the wails and cries of distress rising within the township, but above these sounds of anguish he could hear something else growing. From the direction of the Barracks there came the clang of metal upon metal

and it was becoming more urgent. A battle was developing, one that he would need to join as quickly as possible.

In one fluid movement he scooped the young girl back into his arms and made a run for Shemwe's house. They had come far enough that only a single turn in the street remained and Tomas ran with all the speed he could muster. Through the choking smoke and falling timbers he made his way, holding Janielle close. It was a headlong dash that ended abruptly only a short distance from Shemwe's front door.



The creature that appeared out of the smoke did not see Tomas until they were too close to avoid each other. In a sickening crash the two collided, a shower of plundered booty cascading onto the ground as the Hresh tried to avoid a heavy fall. Tomas had no such opportunity. With Janielle in his arms he could do nothing but roll onto his back as he fell, taking a heavy blow to his shoulders and the back of his head as he hit the street. Momentarily stunned he struggled to regain his feet but his head swam, his vision darkening as he struggled to remain conscious.

“Run!” was all he could yell, pointing to the narrow lane they had been making for. Janielle understood and took flight as Tomas turned to face the Hordim. Luckily the Hresh was having troubles of its own. Enmeshed in a long piece of coloured cloth, the Hordim was trying to untangle itself even as Tomas stood shakily before it, struggling to maintain his balance. Fortunately for Tomas the dizziness passed quickly, and both combatants stood ready at almost the same moment. The young Kalborean had to take a step backwards though. The Hresh was huge, powerfully built and equipped with an ornate metal breastplate and dark leather armour. His multicoloured skin shimmered in the red firelight, and his heavy features ground into a sly smirk as the warrior realised what had run into him. Tomas had no idea how he was going to fight such a beast, but he stood defiant nonetheless.

From the Hresh's belt the creature pulled a long curving scimitar, its

blade honed to a razor edge. Flicking it once in its hand the Hordim warrior advanced, ready for anything Tomas might attempt, but he had no real clue how to defeat such a creature. It was simply too powerful and too well-armed, and as the younger Cael shaped up to defend himself he knew that he would not be able to overcome it alone.

The Hresh moved forward, scimitar ready. Tomas slashed out at the creature, trying to keep it at arm's length but the Hresh parried the strikes easily. It was a trained killer and it knew Tomas would be no match for it. In two quick strokes of its weapon the Hresh disarmed him, sending his sword skittering across the smooth cobblestones. Tomas watched as his only hope came to rest too far away for him to retrieve it. Completely outclassed by the warrior he could do little but wait for the inevitable strike that would rend the life from him.

In that instant however, he decided that he would not go quietly. Scooping up a piece of burning timber he charged directly at the Hresh. The Hordim raised its scimitar high above its head ready to deliver one final, fatal blow when suddenly it let out a piercing shriek. In a spasm of pain the warrior's scimitar fell from its hands and it grabbed awkwardly at its throat, a wet gurgling sound rising from the Hresh's mouth as it tried to turn to face a new, unseen assailant. Only then did Tomas notice the spear tip protruding from its neck. As he watched, the Hordim fell onto one knee and then collapsed to the side, dead. Looking past the crumpled form he could see the smoke-wrapped form of a Guardsman standing quietly in the semi-darkness.

"There ya go me young fella. That'll teach the blighter to make sure somebody ain't creeping up behind him, eh?" The Guardsman smiled and then cocked his head in the direction of the town Barracks. "I don't know what business you might be about on such a fine night as this but you'll be required at the Barrack's Square soon enough. You'd better retrieve that sword and see if you can find any survivors who can fight. They'll all be needed shortly."

Tomas strode forward and shook the man's hand.

"Thank you friend. My fiancee lives but three doors from here and I must ensure her safety first. Be assured that you will see me again at the Barracks Square within the next few minutes."

The Guardsman seemed content with his promise and disappeared back into the smoke as Tomas turned to find Janielle. He could hear the soldier calling to the townspeople of Callenfrey to arm themselves as he searched for the girl. Janielle had not gone far though. She had

sought shelter behind a set of stairs and ran out to Tomas' side as he went to collect his sword. With the girl in tow they made for Shemwe's house, and to his dismay found the front door smashed in, her father, Master Sandofel, cut down at the threshold. In a panic he ran inside, unsure what he would do if any of the Hresh remained, but he needed to find Shemwe. That was his only concern.

The ground floor living area was brightly lit, Tomas could see that the Hordim had ransacked the downstairs but there was no sign of Shemwe or Madam Sandofel there. He left Janielle upon the staircase and ran upstairs, searching each room as he went. He found nothing. Her room was empty, he could find neither Shemwe nor her mother within the home. Then he remembered the safehold.

Many homes in Kalborea still had them, an unfortunate legacy of years of violence and war. Hidden behind a false cupboard or built into a wall space, they were small rooms where the residents of a house could take refuge in times such as these, hidden from view and hopefully to pass unnoticed. Many people did not even bother building them any more but Tomas knew that Shemwe's house was old enough to still have one. He need only find it. Carefully he re-checked each of the upstairs rooms, and found what he was looking for behind a large bookcase in her parent's bedroom. It was an easy matter to find the lock and haul the bookcase aside.

In the absolute dark of the safehold Tomas stepped forward and called Shemwe's name. An older voice answered. It was filled with terror and loss, a fearful whisper in the gloom.

"Who is it?" Tomas recognised the voice. It was Shemwe's mother, Madam Sandofel.

"It is Tomas. I am looking for Shemwe. Where is she?" He could not help the nervousness that his words carried. He was deathly afraid of the answer he might hear.

"Shemwe? She's off for the night, staying with her friend. You know, that girl Adelaide, daughter of the Seamstress in Abbot's Lane."

For a moment relief washed over him but then he realised his task was not yet done. If Shemwe was still in Abbot's Lane then she was almost on the other side of town. He would need help to get there. Carefully he drew Shemwe's mother into the light. He was always surprised by the marked similarities between his fiancée and her mother. Both had the same ferocious red hair and he had learned quickly that they had the tempers to match. It came to him in that moment that her hair had been what had first brought Shemwe to his

notice. He also had the same flaming red hair and had used it as common ground to start talking with her, though that seemed a very long time ago. As he looked at the older woman's frightened visage he knew he needed her mother's strength now.

"Madam Sandofel, I need for you to do something for me." Tomas turned and called for Janielle. She had been sitting upon the stairs and had not moved since they had entered the house. She came at his call and when the girl was by his side he introduced her to Shemwe's mother.

"Janielle, this is Madam Sandofel. She is going to look after you whilst I go on a short errand." He then turned to the older woman.

"This girl needs someone to look after her for the time being. Keep her safe until this danger has passed."

Mrs Sandofel nodded her head and took the young girl into her arms. Tomas found a small candle upon a near table and gave it to her.

"I am going to find Shemwe. Re-lock the safehold until morning. I am sure the danger will have ended by the rising of the suns, but if it hasn't I will return to you at dawn and we can then find a safer place for yourself and the girl."

As he turned to leave a strong hand grabbed his arm. Madam Sandofel held him tight and looked earnestly into his eyes.

"You find my daughter, Tomas. Promise me you will do this."

Tomas did not hesitate. "While there is breath in my body I will keep her safe. Take care of this young one. She needs a soft voice about now."

The older woman patted his arm and bade him go.

"May providence keep you Tomas Cael. I will watch the girl. You find my Shemwe."

With that Tomas closed the safehold and took up his sword. With Janielle safe he stood alone in the empty hallway and took stock of what was now before him. Shemwe was on the other side of town, only a short distance from the Barrack's Square. He resolved to keep his promise to the Guardsman. The only way Shemwe, or anybody else, could truly be safe would be when the Hordim had been expelled from Callenfrey. The Barracks Square would be his next stop.

Quickly he made his way back downstairs. He stopped only for a moment to cover the body of Shemwe's father and then moved out into the fire-lit streets. Luckily the Hordim had not fired Shemwe's street or any of the town to the east. Apart from the harbour which was

burning furiously, the Hresh seemed to have let it be. They probably felt they had done enough to ensure everything burned eventually, but the lack of the creatures on the street left Tomas wondering what might have happened to them. Above the crackle of the flames he could hear a great uproar to the north and as this was the direction of the Barracks he set off at the run, sword in hand.

It was not long before he encountered other townsfolk also making for the Barracks. By the time he had made four streets he found himself one amongst more than fifty men and boys, armed to the teeth with whatever they could lay their hands on. With pitchforks and machetes, axes and makeshift lances, the townspeople had risen to take back their town but he could see the effect the attack had drawn on the faces of all of the Men. Black with soot, or bloodied with sprays of red, there was an underlying grimness that tried to conceal the horrors the Hordim had visited upon each one of them. Like himself they had all been caught unawares, property and family taken from them by the assault. It made Tomas angry and as they raced for the Square he could only hope there would be enough manpower gathering to turn the Hordim away.

Together the mob ran for the Barrack's Square. Through great plumes of smoke they charged, winding their way through a tangle of wanton destruction and death. The town had been assaulted in such an efficient manner that the young Kalborean had some difficulty recognising exactly where they were. Great piles of rubble from collapsed buildings blocked the narrow streets, the entire shop district had been reduced to tortured mounds of charred wood, and smoking drifts of smashed brick littered the cobblestones. Everywhere was the smell of death and in the midst of it all townsfolk stumbled about, stunned by the ferocity of the attack. It was not yet over, however.

When the ragtag militia reached the Square they were confronted by a thick wall of smoke. There was no clear sign of the Hordim but the townsmen came to a halt at the edge of the parade ground and formed a series of ranks across the width of the street. A breath of wind parted the fumes and as they cleared the Barrack's Square exposed itself to the waiting men. Across its length lay the bodies of Guardsmen and Hresh, the Barracks itself a shambles, smashed almost to the point of collapse. To the north were the Hordim, hundreds of them reforming for the next phase of their assault. Only a few Guardsmen remained alive, fighting a losing battle against a unit of Hresh that had bottled them up inside a small stone armoury.

It was only a matter of time before they would also fall.

Tomas was in the first rank of a militia that had grown as they stood to more than six ranks deep. As they waited for the battle to come more men were arriving at the rear of their number and each new face bolstered the courage of them all. Any fear Tomas had felt previously evaporated before the horror of what he had seen on the Square. It was an unavoidable truth that the Hresh had to be destroyed or they would all lose their lives. This absolute certainty freed him from any concern for his own safety, his only wish to survive the coming battle long enough to make it to the eastern side of the Square. If Providence favoured him it would be there that he would find Abbott's Lane and Shemwe.

The Hresh noticed the townsmen immediately. In a chorus of shouted commands the Hordim formed into four lines and began a deliberate advance towards the militia. The Hresh were a disciplined fighting force and Tomas could see in their eyes an expectation of unbridled violence. Chillingly he could see no sign of fear amongst the warriors, their advance a series of quick rushes followed by a raucous display of insults and taunts, each step a pounding crash of hundreds of heavy iron-shod boots in unison upon the cobbled square. For some of the townsmen it was too much. The creature's advance left fear grinding in all their chests and the ranks began to waiver as the Hordim came closer.

Tomas could feel it too. The Hresh were engaging in a deliberate process of intimidation and it was going to work if nothing was done. Quickly he looked at the street in front of him and found a plate-sized piece of crumpled brass. With this in one hand he began to hit it with his sword, shouting and swearing at the Hordim as they surged closer. It was an idea that took hold quickly. Within seconds anything that could be brought to hand was pounded in a deliberate show of defiance. It was a crude strategy but it kept the Men together.

For almost a minute the two opposing forces hammered at each other's will until a horn blast from within the Hordim sent the entire crue charging forward. As one the militia stood their ground awaiting the inevitable clash of arms.

From behind the ranks of the Townsmen a number of youths took up a position atop one of the buildings that overlooked the square. Armed only with slingshots and lead fishing weights they unleashed a hail of heavy shot into the Hresh. Howls of pain erupted from the ranks of the Hordim as the lead struck home. Bones fractured and

faces were torn by the heavy missiles, Hresh fell under their own ranks, but nothing could stop the momentum of their charge. The Hordim hit the first rank of the Militia as a dark armoured wave and completely crushed it beneath their number.

Tomas went down with the rest of the first rank and thrust upwards with his sword as a Hresh attempted to step over him. Pain flared in his shoulder as a nailed boot smashed down upon his upper arm but the sword found its mark and the Hresh collapsed, blood pouring from its side as it fell. Above him Tomas could see little except a melee of stabbing metal and sprays of blood as the two forces ground into each other. The Hresh were larger and better equipped, the Militia desperate but fighting for the safety of their homes and families. It was to be a battle that neither side would retreat from.

The second rank collapsed beneath the vicious assault but the third held. Composed mainly of men wielding spears and axes, the remains of the militia stabbed and hacked at the Hordim, bringing them down as they advanced. Caught now in the confines of the street the townsmen fought desperately so as not to be overrun. Tomas however, was pinned beneath a surging tide of nailed boots and heavy bodies. The Hresh he had killed lay across his torso and he was held firmly by its weight. His sword was gone, kicked out of his hand by the tide of dark warriors advancing around him as they pushed the townsmen back. In the smoke and desperation he lay still, and in the chaotic struggle went unnoticed by the Hordim as they passed.

Inevitably the sheer number of their enemy began to force the town militia into the streets south of the Square. Retreating slowly they kept their ranks intact, but the Hordim were beginning to wear them down, scimitars and armour too powerful a force to be held at bay by pitchforks and axes alone. As the battle moved slowly southwards Tomas had the opportunity he needed to haul himself from beneath the dead warrior. Only just in time did he find his freedom. From the east another group of townsmen were advancing towards the rear of the Hordim. Obscured by the billowing smoke none of their number had yet seen the desperate battle being fought in the confines of the street to the south. Quickly Tomas realised they now had a chance to turn the tide against the Hresh. If they could cut off the creatures in the narrow streets they could surround them, and then destroy them.

Tomas picked up the first weapon he could lay a hand upon and shouted at the second group, waving his hands above his head and pointing at the Hresh that were on the brink of breaking the militia's

ranks. They saw him immediately and broke into a run. As a tide they passed Tomas and crashed into the rear of the Hordim. This group of townsmen had armed themselves with spears and lances, no doubt found in the gatehouse armoury, and they used them with deadly effect against the unsuspecting Hordim. It was then that the battle turned.

Caught between the two groups of militia the Hresh reformed and took up a defensive position. Attacked from the north and the south they fought desperately to regain the Square but found themselves trapped and unable to break out. Still their discipline did not falter.

From the centre of the crue a single command was shouted and as one the Hordim turned their backs on the southern group and charged at the militia to the north. Overwhelmed the Townsmen broke and the Hresh kept up their charge, running directly for the Barracks and straight towards Tomas. Providence had kept the young Kalborean relatively unharmed but his luck was about to run out.

From the main gates a horn blast trumpeted across the Square. Immediately the Hresh veered to the west and raced for the walls, the remains of the town's militia hard on their heels. One rank of the Hordim held back, fighting a rearguard action as the rest of the crue made for the parapets. They were in retreat but their job had been done. The town burnt freely now, its skyline a sea of flame and choking smoke. From the recesses of this smoke another smaller group of Hordim, summoned by the call, barrelled into Tomas, knocking him to the ground once again. Winded, he managed to roll back to his feet just as one of the Hresh lunged at him, flicking the scimitar from his hand with a quick upward stroke of its own weapon. On the downward stroke the warrior was going to kill Tomas but then a flash of recognition stayed its hand. Instead the Hordim turned the blade as it fell and hit Tomas with a sickening thud across the side of the head, knocking him senseless. Mallen's younger brother fell heavily but was caught, scooped up in a powerful arm by the Hordim as they raced to the walls. His last thought as he passed into unconsciousness was that he had failed Shemwe's mother. Then everything went black.

## Chapter 3 - Ashes



Mallen reached the gates of Callenfrey just as the first sun of morning gleamed red against the horizon. It had taken the remainder of the night hours for him to make the distance to the gates, and as he approached the walls of the town he was filled with an aching fear of what he might find within.

As he had followed the winding road from the forest to the high stone battlements of his home he had witnessed a vision of devastation unfold before him. In the warmth of the night he had run, the fires of Callenfrey burning brightly against the darkness of the forest and the cool shimmer of the Grey Sea. He had watched the Harbour fires grow, spreading outwards in a firestorm of flame and smoke that consumed building after building as the conflagration raced through the narrow streets. From his vantage upon the hills he had seen it all, and in those few desperate hours had felt anxiety gnawing deep within him. He could be sure of only one thing as he ran, everything he held important lay within those burning walls.

At the gates of Callenfrey he stopped, breathing heavily and light-headed from the exertion of his run. Before he would enter the town he needed to regain his breath, and in those few moments try and shake the fatigue that was threatening to overwhelm him. Looking about, he could see in the morning light that the walls were still intact. From a number of points upon the western battlements there hung long black ropes, the bodies of a few Hordim lay slumped over the parapet, a few more upon the narrow area of cleared ground that separated the Walls from the forest that surrounded them. It was as he stood there, struggling to regain his composure that he noticed the glint of something metallic at his feet. Bending down he found the object of his distraction to be a small, long bladed dagger, embedded to its hilt in the soft ground. Carefully he pulled it free and wiped it clean upon his sweat soaked tunic. The grip was crudely tied with leather thong but the blade itself was finely engraved and honed to a sharp edge. It was old and worn but he took it, in the back of his mind the thought that Hordim may still be within the town and this might be his only protection as he searched for his brother.

Carefully he made his way to the gates and found them ajar. They were too heavy to be moved by the strength of a single man, the

gatehouse held a set of mechanical gears that could be wound to open and close them when necessary. On this morning however, they were open, forced apart and hanging precariously by their pinions. There was just enough room to get between the two huge gates and Mallen squeezed through, his intention to make straight for his shop and hopefully a quick reunion with his brother. He was met on the other side of the gates by the glint of a razor-sharp spear tip.

“Who goes there!” The challenge sounded loud in the morning quiet, but the voice was hoarse and full with the heaviness of fatigue. The Guardsman who stood before him was covered in soot, his eyes red-raw with the irritation of smoke and ash. There was little wonder in Mallen's mind as to why he was not recognised.

“Greel? Is that you man?” Mallen met the challenge with a softer tone. He had known most of the Guardsmen since arriving in Callenfrey and could greet most by name. Greel was a better friend than most. He was also a good customer as well. Quickly he moved to the Guardsman's side and helped him to a barrel near the Gatehouse. The soldier looked like he was about to collapse.

“It's Master Cael isn't it? I'm sorry for the affront but we don't know if the Hordim'll be returnin'. As you can see we ain't in no state for another fight.” Greel pointed in the general direction of the harbour and Mallen could see clearly the damage that had been done in the night. To the left of the Main Gates lay the Barracks Square. Upon its cobbled surface the few remaining Guardsmen were laying out their fallen comrades and the remains of those militiamen who had died fighting off their attackers. Other townsmen were hauling the bodies of dead Hresh into a central mound and it struck Mallen that there were not many Hordim here. The Hresh attack must have been as swift as it was deadly to have caught the town's defences so unprepared. He had no doubt however, that more of the Hordim would be found within the confines of the town's streets and laneways. The young Kalborean was under no illusion that the toll on the inhabitants of Callenfrey would prove to be far greater.

Looking eastwards, he could see clearly the smoking remains of the commercial district and the still burning pyres of his neighbours' houses. Mallen surveyed the whole scene with a growing anger and it shocked him to realise that somewhere within this mess of collapsed buildings and ruins could be his brother.

Quickly he found some water within the Gatehouse and moistened a rag for Greel's eyes. He could not help but notice the bodies of a

number of soldiers lying within its walls. One was Greel's friend Armen. When Mallen returned to the Guardsman's side the older man saw the look on his face and quickly dispelled any concerns he might have had.

"Don't worry about Armen, he survived the battle only to fall from the parapet as we were chasing the Hordim off. Landed on his shoulder and has to lay absolutely still until the surgeon arrives to set the bones. He's not saying anything but I know its driving him crazy."

Greel smiled and leaned closer towards Mallen, his voice subdued as he spoke. "Truth is, a great harm has been committed here this past night. The Hordim were over the walls before any of us knew any better, and quickly within the town in greater numbers than we could possibly defend against. They had almost complete freedom for a good twenty minutes before the Townsfolk came together to chase them off. A great toll was taken and as you can see Callenfrey is a shambles because of it."

As Greel wiped the ash from his forehead Mallen asked the only question that now mattered to him.

"Have you seen Tomas since the attack? I fear that he has been caught unprepared and lies somewhere within this destruction."

Greel thought hard but could not say. "I cannot remember seeing him at all Master Cael. In the confusion of the night I could not say for certain who I might have seen. I am just glad that the morning is here at last."

In this Mallen was in agreement. The night had been terrifying but the morning had brought with it a new set of fears, and he needed to move on quickly.

Mallen stayed only long enough to ensure his friend had some water and a clean rag to douse his eyes, then made his good-byes and started off for home. Just beyond the gatehouse lay a small junction of streets and lanes that then spread out into the town proper. His usual route home was completely blocked by mounds of smoking brick, and he found it difficult to gauge exactly where he was within the lines of charred buildings. It was as if he had stumbled by accident into someone else's town and could not find the way, but a few landmarks still stood and after a number of wrong turns Mallen found what remained of his store and workshop.

For a moment he stood quietly, taking in the mangle of what was once his home and livelihood. The fire that had destroyed his small world was still smouldering, a few blackened timbers still alive with

flame. The conflagration that had reduced his home to ash had passed, but in its wake the debris had remained hot, very hot. The brickwork shimmered with heat and piles of partially melted copper and bronze lay within the ruin. He could not believe his brother could be within this mess but he knew he must look. Only when he had lifted every piece of rubble would he be satisfied that Tomas had not perished here.

In his heart he knew that because Tomas was not standing by his side at this moment that something had happened to him. They knew each other too well. If he had remained uninjured after the Hordim attack Tomas would have been here waiting for him to arrive, probably with Shemwe on his arm. The fact that he was not could only mean that Tomas was either dead, or trapped somewhere within the destruction that surrounded him. It was a thought that Mallen shook quickly from his mind before it could overwhelm him. He resolved instead to move quickly.

As the suns of morning rose in an orange glow above the horizon, Mallen set to work. With a stout piece of timber and a set of rags tied to his hands he began the laborious task of searching the debris. It was a search that would take most of the morning, hard grinding work which would turn up nothing more than a few blackened possessions and the twisted remains of his shop's stock in trade.

As he worked he noticed the faces of his neighbours as they passed. Most were still in shock, the few he asked about Tomas knew little, their words edged with the grief of their own losses. He had not slept but he worked feverishly, tossing aside broken wood and pushing through piles of debris as he worked the remains. In the end he found nothing that would help him. He decided then that he must be looking in the wrong place.

With no sign of his brother he stepped back from the ruin and thought on where he might have gone. If the Hordim attack had been as swift as Greel had said then the shop would have been one of the first buildings to be torched. Its prominent position in the street would have ensured its destruction. The fact that Tomas' body was not here meant that he had got out of the building before it collapsed. With the shop aflame Tomas would have moved on without a second thought. Mallen had no allusions as to his brother's commitment to the shop. His brother saw the business as merely a way to make a living. He would not have stayed to defend it and that meant he would have moved on. The only other thing of importance to Tomas in Callenfrey

was Shemwe. If he had survived the attack then that is where he would have gone.

Throwing his makeshift tools down into the smouldering dirt he wiped his face and began the short walk to Shemwe's house. It struck Mallen as somewhat remarkable that so many people had survived the devastation of the night. All about him the usually tidy streets and lanes of Callenfrey were strewn with rubble, people's personal belongings lay in heaps awaiting collection, and the bodies of dead animals still smoked where they had fallen. But everywhere he could also see his fellow townspeople, somehow alive and beginning the long task of rebuilding their shattered lives. People were missing though, he had heard from one of his neighbours that the dead had been removed earlier that morning, laid out within the cooler confines of Callenfrey's Town Hall for formal identification. A number of people were still unaccounted for and Mallen resolved himself to the grim task of searching for his brother there if he did not find him at Shemwe's.

Through the streets he walked, negotiating the mounds of rubble that threatened to block off most of the access streets to the Harbour. Shemwe lived with her parents close to the warehouse district that bordered the docks. It heartened Mallen to find that even though the docks had been burnt, most of the houses at their edge had survived, the fire spreading to the west and north, leaving the eastern section of the town relatively intact.

At the third house from the corner of a small lane, Mallen found the front door to Shemwe's home. It had been smashed and unhinged, victim to a battering that had crushed it inwards. He could not remember how many times he had ascended the three stone steps that led to Shemwe's door in search of Tomas. Never in his worst nightmares did he expect to be doing so under such circumstances. Quickly he pushed past the entrance and found the ground floor a shambles of broken furniture and upturned belongings. Blood lay splattered over the walls near the front door and a large pool of blood had barely dried upon the floorboards. With anxiety grinding into his chest he called loudly into the recesses of the house for his brother.

"Tomas! Tomas, are you here. It's Mallen!"

Almost immediately there was the sounds of movement from up stairs. Mallen could hear someone, or something, moving across the second floor's wooden boards, towards the staircase that led downstairs. Grabbing his dagger from his belt he crept to the base of

the stairs and waited with weapon poised.

What he found was the stooped shape of a woman, her voice thin with age and mired in sadness.

“Is that you Mallen?” It was Shemwe's mother, Madame Sandofel. Mallen raced up the stairs and grabbed her just as she appeared to faint. She was a large woman and he could only help her to sit against the wall of the narrow corridor that connected the upstairs bedrooms. She did not look well at all. Mallen needed to know what happened to his brother and his soft spoken words could not hide the haste with which he needed an answer.

“Madame Sandofel, do you know where my brother is?”

Shemwe's mother stared at Mallen for a moment and then replied. “In all truth, Master Cael, I do not know where your brother is. Tomas arrived here at the height of the Horde attack looking for Shemwe and left just as quickly when he found that she was at a friend's home over on Abbots Lane.” Her voice held a terrible loss trapped within its folds and she almost broke down as she went on.

“I tell you Mallen, he was alive when he left me here. My poor husband Garen is dead and I feared for Shemwe. Tomas promised me he would find her and bring her to safety. But I have heard tell of a great battle fought at the Barracks Square and now I fear for them both. Neither have returned and there is talk within the town of people having been taken by the Horde.”

Mallen grabbed a hold of her arm and looked her squarely in the eye. “Who told you of this?”

“It was the men who came to collect Garen. All casualties of the attack have been taken to the Town Hall for certification. When I asked whether anybody had been brought into the Hall with red hair they just looked at me queer like, and said that they had not seen anyone like that. It was rumoured though that some people were missing, taken as prisoners. A number of families had come forward to say they could not find sons and daughters. I am deathly afraid that something terrible has happened.”

Mallen could see that Madame Sandofel was afraid for her daughter. He knew wherever Shemwe was, Tomas would be there too.

“Have you gone to the Hall to search the bodies for yourself?”

“No Mallen I have not. Tomas left a small child here with me last night. As we talk she sleeps in the far bedroom, exhausted from the horrors of the attack. I must wait for her relatives to collect her. The Town Administrator is trying to track down her nearest family but

with so many orphaned children it will take time. Could you go and look for me? It would be a service that I could entrust to few else.”

Mallen smiled and agreed immediately. “I will search the town until I find what has happened to them. Look after yourself Madame Sandofel, and look after Tomas' foundling. It's just like him to find a stray even in the worst of times.”

Madame Sandofel gave him her best wishes and sent him on his way. It was not long before he again found himself upon the streets, and he was surprised to find that they were beginning to return to life. The shock and sorrow of the morning had given way to anger and determination. The Horde was not going to cower the survivors of Callenfrey. Work gangs were already at work clearing some of the more important lanes of rubble. Others were collecting piles of clothing and personal effects that had been dropped by the retreating Hresh. As Mallen passed by one of the gangs he considered the hard fact that such work might give him the employment he would need to get his business going again. He could see a long road ahead, but it was one he had travelled before and he was not afraid of it. To do it again however, without his brother Tomas, was unthinkable.



The Town Hall was situated in the eastern part of Callenfrey, a tall stone building large enough for most of the ceremony and administration that a town of its size required. As he walked down the debris-littered streets he could see the bell tower rising ahead through wisps of lingering smoke. He had plenty to think on as he went.

Mallen was now piecing together what might have happened to his brother during the night. Attacked at the shop he had made his way to Shemwe's house, picking up the girl on the way. Not finding Shemwe there he had then gone on to Abbots Lane, but something had happened and now he was missing. He was not looking forward to the job at hand, but it was the only thing left that he could do. It seemed the longest walk of Mallen's life as he made his way purposefully to the Town Hall. There he would find the gruesome job

of certification under way.

It was one of the burdens of life in the Kalborean Union that everything done by its citizens was under continuous scrutiny. Although most lawful residents of the Union still enjoyed a level of personal freedom everything was recorded, the bureaucracy of the State a heavy hand on most Kalborean's lives. A person's life was certified at birth, recorded as they lived and then certified again upon their death. For the Guild of Administrators this was a necessary function in the orderly administration of Kalborea. Most often it was seen as a hindrance, but in extreme circumstances such as this it could also prove essential. Given time the Town Administrators would officially identify every person who died in the attack, and then appropriate help would be offered from the Town's coffers to the surviving relatives. Mallen's hope was that his brother was not one of the many bodies that would be laid out in the Town Hall.

Callenfrey's only municipal building was an imposing structure, if somewhat unremarkable in style and design. Built of stone and brick it towered over the closely spaced residences around it. Mallen could see that the Town Hall had not come through the night's attack unscathed. As he climbed the worn steps at its entrance he found large scorched areas on its doors and across the entranceway. A fire had been started here but had not taken hold.

At the open doors he was met by a Guardsman, one of the Town's few remaining garrison. He looked in desperate need of sleep but went about his duty as efficiently as he could. Mallen explained his need to enter and was allowed to pass into the cool interior of the building. The Town Hall was essentially a large meeting area surrounded by a few smaller annexes. Banners, and the complicated heraldry of the twelve city states of Kalborea hung from the walls, the floor worn by years of service to a dull sheen. On long wooden plaques, the rolls of Callenfrey's most honoured citizens were displayed at the far end. The only furniture that remained at that end of the hall was a long table, about which resided twelve large ceremonial chairs. It was in this meeting place that he found a gruesome business under way.

Across the length of the hall lay row after row of bodies, covered with sheets and tagged at the ankles. In the midst of these white rows were men and women, checking each of the bodies in turn, looking for family members or friends. Mallen was not sure he was capable of such a search, and it was with some relief that he noticed a large list

that had been scrawled with chalk upon a near wall. It was a list of the dead.

Other townsfolk had crowded around the casualty roll looking for any sign of their missing. More than one hundred and fifty names were marked as identified, some ten more were unknown. Mallen carefully checked the lists but could not see his brother there. Shemwe was not listed either. He would need to check the faces of the unidentified if he was to find either his brother, or Tomas' fiancée.

Looking around he found one of the Administrators working at a small table, diligently completing the certification process of the fallen. In the midst of the dead the bureaucrat seemed unmoved. Dressed in the green robes of his Guild he performed his work, quill in hand, somehow disengaged from the horrors that surrounded him. Such a man held the information Mallen needed. If he was to look at the unidentified bodies he would need to know where they were placed. Steeling himself for the gruesome task to come he began to walk over to the Administrator's table, but was stopped by the sight of the Guardsman Greel motioning to him from the entranceway.

Struck by the urgency with which Greel was gesticulating, Mallen turned and walked back out to where the Guardsman was standing.

"What can I do for you Greel?"

The Guardsman had cleaned up since their last meeting and was obviously anxious to speak with him.

"It would seem young Master that I have some news on what happened to your brother." He pulled Mallen over to the side of the entranceway and his voice became softer. "The Town Administration does not yet want it known but a number of Townsfolk were taken in the attack. Your brother was one of them."

Mallen was silent for a moment as he tried to fathom Greel's words. Questions crowded his mind but the Guardsman had more to say.

"During the attack the Hresh burned and killed everything they could find. They stayed their hand though on a few of the townsfolk that they encountered. Kidnapping them instead, they took them over the walls as they retreated, none of them have been found here or outside the walls. Your brother was seen at the Barrack Square, but he got no further. The Hresh took him."

Mallen couldn't believe it. "How do you know this? Did someone see him taken? Why should they take my brother when so many others were killed?"

Greel looked squarely into the eyes of the young Kalborean, the

answer to Mallen's last question made no sense to him either, "He was seen at the Square and was felled by a blow to the head. This I now know from one of the survivors of that battle. The fact that they took him is evident because his body has not been found. If he had indeed been killed at the Square his remains would be amongst the dead or injured. But the strangest thing of all is that all the missing have something in common and I'll tell you now I do not understand it."

"What is it Greel?" Mallen's voice was full of a growing anxiety, the stress of the day starting to overwhelm him.

Greel scratched at his neck and replied, "All the missing have red hair, whether young or old, they all have the same flaming red hair. Your brother Tomas was seen at the Square and now he is gone. But young master, this is not your only concern."

Mallen could see tension written all over the Guardsman's face as there was a harder truth still to be told.

"I do not know whether your brother is still alive, but the Hordim had a purpose in taking him, and that should give you hope. They would not encumber themselves with such unusual prisoners if not for a very good reason. Your brother's greatest danger lay in the what will happen when the Hresh war party is caught."

The young Kalborean considered the Guardsman's words but could not see what he meant. "I don't understand. Why would my brother's rescue be a danger?"

"Mallen, the Kalborean Union does not take such attacks lightly. As we speak the word is going out to all the garrisons along the coast. Both soldiery and militia are being mobilised and it will only be a matter of time before the Hordim are cornered. The first thing the Hresh will do when they are is kill all their prisoners. They do not allow those that they capture to escape, no matter the circumstances. As soon as the Hresh realise they are trapped your brother will die."

Mallen stared for a moment at the cold, hard stone of the entranceway and then looked out over the smoking ruins of the town. His business had been destroyed, his only family in the hands of the Horde. It took only an instant for him to decide what he must do. He would go after his brother and bring him back. No matter how long it took, no matter the dangers that might be faced, he was not going to leave Tomas to the mercy of the Hordim. He would need Greel's help though.

"Greel, I am going to find my brother and bring him back, but I need your help. I have no money, no food nor equipment, but if I am

to track the Hordim effectively I am going to have to start now and pick up the warband's trail before it goes cold."

The Guardsman rubbed his chin and smiled. "I think we might be able to get you geared up pretty quick. Come with me and let's see what we can find."

Greel took Mallen down the steps of the Town Hall and into the street. Quickly they made their way back to the main gates and the Gatehouse that lay beside them. Within the Gatehouse Mallen found piles of clothing and other personal belongings that had been collected from the streets. Greel looked quite pleased with himself.

"Have a quick look through this lot Master Cael. I'm sure you'll find most of the things you might need for travel right here."

The Guardsman was right. As Mallen sifted through the belongings he found clothing, a well used travel cloak and all the personal equipment he might need for a journey. Greel gave him a backpack and a small pouch full of coins. It was more kindness than Mallen was used to, or could tolerate.

"No Greel, you have done enough this day. I do not know how I shall ever begin to repay you."

Greel pushed the money into Mallen's hands and would hear none of his remonstrations. "I think Master Cael that you will need every bit of help you can find at this time. But there is one thing that you will need that cannot be found in this pile of belongings."

With that he disappeared into the back of the Gatehouse. As Mallen packed his new-found equipment into his backpack Greel returned, holding a sword in one hand and a new leather scabbard in the other. "For personal protection", was all he said as he handed the weapon over.

Within the hour Greel had somehow managed to provide Mallen with all the equipment he would need for his journey. From stout boots to rope and a sword, the soldier had scrounged everything that he required and by mid afternoon Mallen found himself ready to depart. Greel had one final word for the young Kalborean.

"Within the day a unit of Rangers will be arriving in Callenfrey with the express orders of hunting down the Hordim. If you are to save your brother you will have to find him, and take him from the Hordim, before the Rangers catch up with the warband. At most you will have a head start of maybe 24 hours."

Mallen put his hand out and Greel accepted it. "I guess I'd better get a move on then," he said. Grabbing his pack and a wide-brimmed

hat that he had found within the piles of clothing he made for the door, and was soon standing before the gates of Callenfrey. He took one final look at the town and then remembered something important.

“Greel, can you do one final thing for me? Madame Sandofel needs to be told that I could not find her Shemwe. Tell her what I am doing. Tell her that if her daughter was taken by the Horde then Tomas will be with her. I would appreciate it.”

Greel nodded and helped Mallen through the gates. The Guardsman watched as the young Kalborean walked out into the afternoon sunlight and then disappeared quickly into the forest.

## Chapter 4 - Trails and Deception



Mallen entered the trees at the run. The Hresh Warband had made no attempt at covering its tracks and this made it easy for him to pick up the trail. He could see that the Hordim had reformed at the edge of the forest, and then moved into the woods as one group. With the tracks fresh in the soft earth there was no need to take the time to study the ground. It was evident the warriors were heading due west, straight into the thickest parts of the forest that surrounded Callenfrey.

In the afternoon light the Kalborean followed the Hordim deep into the woodland. The trees were closely spaced, the forest a series of lightly rolling hills covered with Pine and Elm. There was not much in the way of undergrowth and the imprints of hundreds of heavy-shod boots made for easy tracking. Mallen ran hard, trying to make up as much distance as he could. He knew that he would have a hard time matching the speed with which the Hordim would travel. They were on the run, sure in the knowledge that their raid had made them the sole target of every Army unit in this part of Kalborea. He was not sure how they expected to escape, but whatever their plan, he would have to follow them until he could attempt a rescue of his brother.

Within the hour Mallen broke from the forest and found himself at the edge of the southern road that led to The Wash. In less dangerous times the road would have been busy with traffic, but word of the attack on Callenfrey had spread quickly. It was deserted, for good reason no-one would risk travel until the all clear had been given and the roads reopened. For a short time he waited in the safety of the forest's shadows and searched the opposite side of the road for any indication that the Hresh may have left a rearguard. It was the perfect place to ambush pursuers, and Mallen did not wish to be the unwitting victim of an anonymous but well-aimed arrow.

The road itself was wide, an important thoroughfare that was broad enough for two wagons to pass without difficulty. Bordering the road was a further wide strip of cleared grass and Mallen could see that he would need to run across more than thirty metres of open ground before he would meet the trees on the road's western edge. He waited for a time, searching the shadows for signs of movement but could see no indication of trouble. When he had satisfied himself that

all was well he placed his life in the hands of Providence and made a dash for the safety of the western forest. To his relief he made the other side without incident and quickly recovered the trail of the Hresh, their passage unmistakable against the undisturbed ground of the woodland. As he ventured into the gloom of the forest once again, he realised that the scouts who had attacked him on the previous night had waylaid him only a short distance to the north. There was every chance that they had rejoined the Warband as it had moved westwards and Mallen found this reassuring in a way. It was a small piece of coincidence that strengthened his belief that he was following the main group of Hresh, and that Tomas would be with them.

Steadily he followed the tracks as they continued westwards. As the afternoon wore on the forest became thicker and a burgeoning undergrowth began to obscure the trail he was following. As the suns fell slowly to the horizon Mallen found he had to temper his need to move quickly, the broken light of the evening covering everything in shadow. For a time he kept on, using the last rays of sunlight to continue his journey but eventually the light disappeared. As dusk fell he decided he must rest.

Coming to a halt Mallen considered how far he had travelled. He was still deep in the forest but he knew it extended for almost forty kilometres to the west of Callenfrey. The Hordim were using it to remain out of sight but the trees only went so far. Beyond them lay the open plains and hills of the grasslands. It did not seem logical that they should go this way, but there was no doubt that the Warband was heading straight for the open plains beyond. Only time would tell what their real intentions might be.

Mallen found himself a comfortable position to rest in the lee of a large Elm and made ready to eat. The provisions Greel had found for him were not much but they were appreciated. As he ate some bread he looked about the forest and reassured himself that the Hresh were indeed long gone. The trees themselves had taken on a purple tinge, the undergrowth darkening as the shadows of sunset grew into an all encompassing gloom. He was not sure whether he could make much headway in the dark of night but he was not going to stop just yet.

About him he could hear small animals moving about in the brush, night birds beginning to stir as evening set in. These sounds were very familiar to him but it had been some time since he had experienced the deep forest at night. It was both comforting and relaxing, an affirmation that some things remained the same no matter how much

the world may have changed. In this quiet place the sounds of approaching night affected him more than he realised. He had stopped to eat but Mallen had misjudged the length of time he had already been awake. Two days had passed since he had last slept, and even as he considered how long he should rest the fatigue and stress of the day took a strong hold upon him. In the increasing dark of evening he fell into sleep.



It was not usual for Mallen to dream. His life had been one of work and long hours, and he found that sleep came quickly to him and passed just as swiftly. As he lay against the exposed roots of the Elm the world about him darkened, and in that world of shadows vague images grew and manifested themselves. Perhaps it was the forest. It had been a long time since he had found need to sleep rough, and the sounds of the wild could conjure fears in the night that could not be found in a soft bed. His dreams this night grew quietly into nightmares.

Out of the deep recesses of his mind images began to flow, happy scenes of his brother and himself when they were younger. They had spent their lives on the road and it had been hard, but there had also been many moments of joy and comfort. These images flooded out, a patchwork of visions and feelings, until they were a rapid succession of sights and sounds flicking through his thoughts. Then they changed.

Abruptly the familiar vanished. In its place he found darkness and the smell of ash. From within the dark he began to see movement, vague shapes shifting within the void. Fire sprung from nowhere and then he could see buildings aflame, people running, death and destruction visited upon them all. As he dreamt one shape came into view, focusing clearly into a huge Hresh Warrior, dressed in black armour and wielding a long curving scimitar. Before Mallen it stood, surveying a scene of devastation then turning towards him. With malice in its eyes the Hresh advanced and at the last moment he could see it clearly, screaming in triumph over Mallen's torn body. Then all

was quiet.

In a sweat Mallen awoke to find the dark of night his only companion, his hand firmly grasping the hilt of his sword. For a moment he stared into the canopy of the trees above him, and fought to bring back to his memory where he was and what he was doing. His first cogent thought as he struggled to wake properly the overwhelming relief that it was only a dream.

Rising to a sitting position Mallen stretched his arms and tried to determine what the time might be. It felt late, probably sometime after midnight and he searched what he could see of the stars for a clue. Through the branches of the Elm he spied Shabel, the first moon of evening, risen almost directly above him. This told him it was indeed near midnight and even though he was disappointed that he had fallen asleep, it did not surprise him. The sleep had done a great deal of good and now it was time to move on. Collecting his few borrowed possessions he organised himself for the journey ahead and repacked his food and equipment. The light of Shabel would give him the illumination he would need to continue on and Mallen had a need to get moving.

As he shook the last remains of sleep from his eyes he shouldered his pack and returned to the trail. Even in the frugal light of the first moon Mallen was able to see the tracks left by the Hresh and set about following them. At a half-run he set on their trail as a hound might on a scent. He felt much better for the sleep but hoped that this had not placed the Warband now further ahead than it might have been before. Surely even the Hordim needed to rest. It was his hope that they did.

For a while the tracks led westwards, the terrain flattening out as the trees began to thin. The going became easier, the sparser tree cover allowing more moonlight to fall on the floor of the woodland. A doubt was nagging at him though. Beyond these trees he knew the ground became open and any pursuit could run down the Hresh without difficulty. Without horses and encumbered by prisoners the Hordim were at a considerable disadvantage. Mallen could not see how they might hope to escape, but he had no doubt that they knew exactly what they were doing.

The Horde had planned their assault upon Callenfrey carefully, escaping all detection as they moved from the Rift Mountains in the far north to the coastal ports of Kalborea. Mallen could not see such planning ending at the attack. They must have a plan to get back to

their own homes safely. It was a mystery to him though. In the end he decided he would leave such matters to Providence and the vagaries of Fate. Time would show what the Hordim were doing soon enough.

Mallen did not attempt to hide the sounds of his passage as he ran through the thinning trees. The tracks were clear and it was more than probable that the Warband was now at least a good day's travel ahead of him. His only concern was to make up as much ground as he could, and hopefully overtake the Hordim before they were cornered by the Kalborean Army.

Such was his concentration to his task that he did not notice the figure crouching in the bushes ahead of him and to his left. He had his eyes firmly set upon the trail and the bandit caught him completely by surprise. Jumping from the shadows of the undergrowth the man hit Mallen squarely in the side with the full weight of his charge and sent the Kalborean spinning off into the scrub. Mallen had little time to react but he did his best. Quickly he rolled back to his feet just as the bandit came barrelling after him, dagger in hand. In the moment he had left before his attacker was upon him, he unsheathed his sword and stood fast, polished metal glimmering in the moonlight.

For his part the bandit came to a grinding halt. He had not seen the sword his victim had been carrying and that changed the nature of his assault immediately. Instead he flicked the long-bladed dagger from side to side, testing the reflexes of his quarry and circling Mallen to put him off balance on the uneven terrain. Mallen was having none of it. Carefully he retreated into a small clearing within the trees and stood his ground. He had more important business than this, and it angered him that he should be delayed by such unwelcome attention. He decided however, that a cool head survives such encounters, reason would be the better option. As they circled each other Mallen began to talk.

"Well here we are. Going round and round in the dark like goldfish in a pond. Do you not think my friend, that there are better things we might be doing than this?"

The bandit remained silent. Mallen could see however, that he was making no move to attack. The dagger was no match for Mallen's sword and the bandit knew it. Mallen tried logic one more time.

"Come now friend, we cannot remain like this all night. Let us put away our weapons and go our separate ways."

The bandit smiled, "Why should I do such a thing? What might be

in it for me?"

It was Mallen's turn to smile, this man's unwanted assault had vexed him at first, but as they faced each other he had gotten a better look at his opponent. The man appeared to be only a little older than himself, dark haired and of medium build and he was in a bad way. He must have been living rough for some time within the forest, living off the land and taking what he could from unwary travellers along the road to the north. He did not seem to have done very well at all, and it showed in his ragged clothes and unkempt appearance. He realised quickly however, that this rogue had something he needed.

"If we do not come to blows then I will forget we have met and go on my way. That should be enough for you."

It wasn't. Even as Mallen's words faded into the surrounding trees the bandit attacked, striking out with his dagger in an attempt to open up Mallen's defences. Mallen pulled back and then struck out himself, hitting the end of the dagger blade and sending the man's arm swinging off to the right. It was all the opening Mallen needed. In one quick movement he thrust the sword forward, driving it close to the bandit's exposed chest. In his haste to get out of the way of the blade the man overbalanced and fell back against a large Pine. In an instant Mallen was on him, sword tip poised just a finger's width from his assailant's throat.

"It would appear," Mallen hissed into the bandit's ear, "that you are about to have a very bad day indeed."

With his free arm the Kalborean pushed the bandit to the ground and placed his foot squarely on the man's back. Then, taking his rope, he tied the bandit's arms and legs and pushed him upright against the tree. It occurred to Mallen as he did so that the smell of pine in the clearing was especially strong. He had heard somewhere that the survivors of lethal combat often said they noticed a particular smell or sound most keenly after the fight. It was a curious thought, what people remember from such circumstances, but in this case he was not in a good enough mood to appreciate it.

"All right my friend, you have something I want and whether you live or die will depend on whether I get it."

The bandit looked more than dubious. "I have nothing of value that you can take, nothing to offer for my life."

Mallen grabbed the man by the shirt and pulled him further upright.

"I know your kind my friend. You keep to your own small piece of

territory and only return to the towns infrequently. It's my guess you've been out here for at least the last week. Is that right?"

The bandit nodded. "Four days and its been lean pickin's at best."

Mallen did not doubt it. This bandit had chosen a less than well travelled territory as his thieving ground and prospective targets would have been very rare indeed. It explained why this rogue had accosted him without identifying more closely the weapon he carried. In a way Mallen could identify with that level of desperation, the Fates knew he had been in such a place himself on more than one occasion.

"Listen carefully, I am going to ask you a couple of simple questions. If you answer me truthfully I will let you go unharmed. If you speak falsely I will slit your throat as you sit here. Do you understand me?"

The bandit nodded again, sweat beginning to pour down his face. Mallen had his attention and he phrased his questions carefully.

"First off, I want to know your name."

The bandit squirmed but gave it up. "Huwel Mac. Third son of Ubarius Mac of Longreach."

Mallen smiled at this, there was a ring of truth to his response. The rogue was obviously convinced enough of his motivation that he had given up the one thing a thief holds close, his identity. He had no doubt the remainder of his questions would be answered truthfully as well.

"In the last two days a large group of Hordim came this way. Is that right?"

Huwel Mac nodded. "Yes, it has been at least a day since."

"How many where there?"

"Probably two hundred, maybe more."

"Did they have prisoners? Speak truthfully now..." Mallen raised his sword and ran its edge along Huwel Mac's throat.

"Yes. but I only saw maybe three, a man and two women."

Mallen stood away from the bandit and re-sheathed his sword. As he did so Huwel Mac visibly relaxed. It looked like he was about to be sick though.

"You're lucky Master Huwel, I have no intention of doing you harm. Just a word of advice though . If you're going to make a living from thievery make sure you know who you are mugging and how they are armed. Another man, one not wishing pleasant conversation, would have killed you on the spot."

With that he untied the rogue and pushed him to the edge of the

clearing.

“Go now and don't turn back. I swear if I see you even glance in my direction I will chase you down. Understand?”

Huwel Mac, son of Ubarius, nodded and disappeared into the trees never to be seen by Mallen Cael again.

For a moment the young Kalborean stood in the clearing and considered how lucky he was. He should have seen the attack coming, his focus on the trail had made him an easy target, even for the incompetent. But he had found out much from the rogue. The Warband was very large and that would mean it was not going to be moving quickly. The Hresh still had prisoners and that would slow them down even further. All things considered Mallen realised that he was in with a chance.

Looking around the clearing Mallen found his own equipment scattered through the undergrowth. Huwel Mac's initial charge had hit him hard, the contents of his pack spilling into the brush as he fell. Quickly he collected it together and got himself ready for the return to his journey. It was only as he was shouldering his pack that he realised he still had Huwel Mac's dagger. It was a fine weapon, nicely engraved and razor-sharp. He had a smaller dagger of his own but decided this one was too good to throw away. Instead he wrapped it in a cloth and placed it in his pack. For the moment it would be just so much dead weight, but on a long journey it might prove useful.

Shabel had passed westwards to the horizon as Mallen regained the trail of footprints and began his hunt once again. It was now the late hours of the pre-dawn and Mallen ran in the cool air following the heavy impressions of the Hresh. Ahead the forest had thinned to a sparse woodland, a scattering of trees carpeted in a thick layer of leaf litter and pine needles. The trail of the Hordim remained plain even to an untrained eye. They had so far made no attempt to mask their passage and in the pre-dawn hours Mallen had no difficulty keeping their trail in sight. Then he hit a series of stone hills and his luck changed.

His passage through the forest since being waylaid by Huwel Mac had been straightforward. Now the trail began to thin. The ground underfoot becoming harder and more stony. The Hresh had changed direction also. Now they were moving slightly north of west and in doing so, began to rise into a series of bare hills that rose above the surrounding forest like the balding heads of old monks. Here he was forced to exercise skills that he had not needed for years. The

footprints fell away upon harder ground and he had to look to other sign to ensure that he was still following the main body of Hordim. Broken tussocks of wire-thin grass, disturbed ground cover and upturned stones now became his guides, and it slowed him down considerably as he was forced to take greater care.

When the glow of dawn finally began to brighten in the east Mallen found himself descending again into the forest, heading north-west into an area of thick woods and heavily overgrown gullies. The Hresh had veered further north and in doing so had moved into some of the densest bush that could be found in this part of Kalborea. It was terrain unknown to him, a piece of the old forest that once covered most of Arborell, but which had gradually been disappearing in these northern climes. The trees were of a type he did not know and the wildlife within called out to the dawn as if lamenting something lost. He decided he would feel better when he was once again out in the open.

As he continued his tracking he could see the ground rising ahead. There was not much in the way of hills here but he could sense the way the terrain was ascending in a series of shallow inclines. As dawn broke and the first sun of morning rose above the horizon Mallen could see where the trail was leading. Through the trees and their thick canopy he could see a wall of stone rising up before him. The Hresh were making straight for a cliff-face and it extended for some distance to the right and left of his position. If the trail did not veer off in either direction before he reached the stony barrier then Mallen wondered if he might be in for some climbing. It was an idea he did not relish. He had a deep aversion to high places.

Mallen met the base of the cliffs an hour after dawn. In the full light of morning the wall of rock was an imposing barrier. It was not high, probably no more than twenty metres above where he stood, but it was a cragged affair, an outcrop of ancient stone full of fissures and areas of unstable scree. As he looked at the cliffs he wondered how hundreds of Hresh might have overcome them, and began a determined search to find the answer.

The Hresh had congregated at the base of the cliffs, all the signs showed that many creatures had pressed in where the trail met the solid rock, but Mallen also found tracks along the ground that bordered the cliff. Like himself the Hresh were looking for something, and Mallen found it deep within one of the many large fissures that split the rock face along its length. It was an ancient set of stairs,

carved into the stone and cunningly arrayed as a safe ascent to the lip of the cliff above. The amount of stirred earth at the base of the stairs left Mallen in no doubt that this was how the Hresh had got over the rock wall. Looking up he could see they reached right to the top in a series of short climbs and landings. The steps were narrow though. It would have taken the Hresh at least an hour for all to make it to the top single file. For Mallen it would not take that long.

Given time he would have liked to explore these stairs more fully. At each of the landings he found small passages that ran off into the stone of the cliffs. There were secrets here that called to Mallen to uncover but he kept instead to his task. None of the passages showed any sign of use, all the Hordim had made directly for the top of the cliff face and that would be his path as well. He resolved instead to return to this place at another time. Perhaps he could satisfy his curiosity then.

When Mallen reached the top of the steps he found himself only a short distance from the edge of the cliffs. From their vantage he had a wide survey of the countryside about him. To the east he could see where he had come from, the thick woodlands he had travelled and the distant plume of Callenfrey still billowing as a haze into the clear blue above. To the west he found yet more forest, and a sloping terrain that ran down to a wide grassland beyond. He could see no sign of the Hordim. From where he stood to the far horizon there was nothing. They had somehow disappeared into the ground itself but he was not about to give up.

Quickly Mallen picked up the trail again. The Hresh still made no attempt at concealment and he followed their trodden path as it wound deep into the forest ahead of him. It was here that the Hordim changed the manner in which they travelled. The Warband had spread out since leaving the top of the cliffs. On the sloping ground it was easier to travel as a more dispersed group, and Mallen began to find the number of tracks growing fewer. Nevertheless he was able to keep to their trail and followed it as the creatures made their way westwards.

Within the first hour of morning he came upon a small creek that ran briskly from the north and disappeared just as noisily into the south-east. He forded it easily for it was only ankle deep, and soon found tracks leading off again to the west. For a short while Mallen rested at the creek's edge. Here was fresh water and a pleasant aspect, and he took the time to take water and eat a small amount of

his food.

As he watched the creek quietly purl its way southwards he tried to construct some type of plan for retrieving his brother once he had the Hordim in sight. Mallen readily came to the conclusion that he had no realistic way in which to get him back. He smiled to himself when he realised that he didn't even know how he was going to feed himself after his small food bag gave up the last of its contents. One thing he was sure of though. He was not going to stop until he was either dead or in possession of Tomas. Everything else would have to take care of itself.

Once he had finished he carefully covered any sign of his rest and began again to follow the trail of heavy bootprints. Near the creek the ground was soft and the prints were clear. As he followed them further into what had become a thinning woodland a disquiet began to grow within him. Something was wrong. The tracks had become far more dispersed, the number of bootprints thinning rapidly as he got closer to the grasslands. By the time he reached the edge of the forest and gazed out on a sea of rolling hills and browning grasses he knew he had been duped. The footprints, and any sign of the Hordim had vanished. The trail had gone completely cold.

Cursing at himself he looked out at the grasslands and wondered at the ingenuity of the Hresh. For all intents and purposes a couple of hundred Hordim had just disappeared into thin air. But he knew this was not so. The Hresh had simply worked one of the oldest tricks in the book and Mallen had fallen for it. In his haste he had not noticed the change in the nature of the trail until it was too late. The Hordim had diverted somewhere back along the trail, but had sent some of their number crashing off in this direction so as to draw pursuit away from their real position. It was a neat trick, the only problem for Mallen was now finding the point at which the larger group had split. He would have to backtrack and pick up the trail again.

For a short time he rested in the shadows of the trees and surveyed the plains that spread out from the edge of the forest to the far horizon. In cooler months the plains would have been a sea of green. In the wane of summer they had begun to dry out and the deep green had been replaced by shades of brown and yellow. As he rested Mallen noticed also the first signs of weather to the north. The day had grown fine and clear but a thin line of grey upon the far mountains told him that it would not remain so. By evening it would be raining.

With no choices left open to him, he began the laborious task of backtracking the trail and searching for any sign of the Hordim. Back through the forest Mallen went, scouring the surrounding bush but by the time he reached the creek he had found nothing. Frustrated, he sat down at the edge of the running waters and considered what he should do next. In his mind there grew a nagging doubt that the main group of Hordim may have broken away at any point along the trail, and he had not been skilled enough to pick it up. If that was the case then his quest to rescue his brother had been doomed almost from the start.

As his eyes wandered over the creek's babbling waters he considered his shortcomings and resolved himself to be more appreciative of the capabilities of the Horde. He would not underestimate them again. Standing, Mallen began a careful search of the banks of the creek. Apart from his own bootprints he found little but then, just as he was beginning to despair, he discovered a sign that made his heart pound loud in his chest. He had overlooked it before but now it shouted at him to take notice. In the soft earth, right at the water's edge, there was a scrape mark. Innocuous in its way, it was the definite imprint of a small boot being dragged by the heel for no more than a finger's length. A careful examination of the mark showed it small enough to be made by a women's shoe, and the direction of the mark pointed north, along the course of the creek bed.

Quickly Mallen grabbed his pack and began an earnest search of the crumbling banks on either side of the creek. Some forty metres further up he found another sign, and then a third upon a series of stones in the rivulet's centre. With hope rekindled he began to run. He kept to the west bank and watched closely for any indication that the Hordim may have left the watercourse. The Hresh had used the creek as their dispersal point and had then followed its winding path northwards. As long as they kept within the bounds of its shallow flow they could pass without notice or sign. There was no doubt in Mallen's mind that these Hordim knew exactly what they were doing, but he would not allow them to elude him again.

For the remainder of the afternoon Mallen followed the watercourse northwards, searching its banks for sign and climbing with the creek higher into a series of shallow hills. As expected the cloud bank he had seen earlier had grown, and propelled by a growing wind was spreading southwards. It did not have the ominous look of a storm, but there was rain in the clouds and he took

the time to put on his travel cloak before continuing the chase.

As the creek wound its way higher into the hills Mallen began to see more sign of the size of the Horde Warband. In parts the creek narrowed and the heavy footprints of the Hresh became clear once more. In the damp earth they appeared very recent indeed and Mallen drew his sword as a precaution against any possible surprise attack. As he followed the rushing waters the forest crowded in about the creek. Trees and brush pressed the narrow banks and Mallen found himself quickly enclosed within a solid barrier of green on both sides. In this world of gurgling waters and greenery he pressed on.

As evening settled quietly upon the world the expected rain began to fall and in the ensuing gloom Mallen made slower progress along the creek bank. It was a bleak dusk, filled with depthless shadows and the soft patter of rain as it fell in waves upon the surrounding forest. Caught within the walls of green he could not find any worthwhile cover so he pressed on, moving ever higher into the hills.

In time the rain passed over and the sky cleared just enough for Mallen to pick up his pace. Shabel and her sister-moon Elanna had risen with the dusk and in the light of both moons the forest was awash with a silvery glow that turned the trees grey-white in colour. It was under this ghostly illumination that Mallen Cael stumbled upon something quite unexpected.

Without warning the creek opened up at the height of a small rise, and as Mallen crested the lip of the hill he found a great ruin before him. At his front a wide pool sat languid in the moonlight. At its far end a set of three waterfalls spilled from a plateau above and cascaded down a series of rock-strewn levels before falling into the black waters below. Thick scrub bordered the waters on all sides except for a small break to the right. Within this cleared area rested a temple, a ruin of broken stone and fallen pillars, strangled by vine and a spiny grass that grew from every break and fracture of its structure. In the pale moonlight it was a beautiful vision, an ancient garden that rose in stepped levels to a height of four storeys before him.

Mallen stood for a moment and considered what he had found then returned to the task of finding the trail of the Hordim. This again proved to be easy. The Warband had emerged at the head of the creek, upon a dam of stones that held the waters of the pool at bay. At the right of the dam lay a grassy verge that showed all the signs of many feet having trampled its blades underfoot. The trail led directly towards the temple.

Mallen held his sword at the ready and moved carefully towards the ruin, unsure as to whether the Hordim may have left any rearguard in this place. Very quickly he found his fears to be correct. Upon the second level of the temple sat two hunched shapes. Quiet in the night they sat as shadows framed vaguely by moonlight. There was no doubt in his mind that they were Hresh.

As quietly as he could he retreated to the nearby undergrowth and crouched within its shadows, watching as the Hordim stood sentinel over the pool. He could not understand why they had not raised the alarm, he had been clearly visible as he had crested the hill and had made no effort at concealment until he had seen the sentries. As he watched he noticed something else. They were not moving, they were absolutely still.

“By the Fates, Mallen,” he murmured to himself. He had made a mistake, one that had delayed him unnecessarily. Standing, he picked a small stone and threw it at the silent shapes. The rock glanced loudly off the side of the nearest form and bounced down into the bush at the temple's base. He shook his head and wondered at his lack of insight. They were not Hresh, just statues.

Assured that no threat remained he moved quickly over to the temple and had a closer look. Yes, the statues were Hresh, but made of stone nonetheless. As he looked at the worn statuary he could see the power of the Hordim depicted. Oversized and with ornately worked armour they were a depiction of everything that Men feared. His own recent encounter had been a testament to the fear such creatures could invoke. Ruthless violence tempered with cunning and cruelty, that was their essence and he was on their trail, his task to somehow outwit them and retrieve his brother. It was a daunting prospect.

As he carefully studied the statues he was struck by an uncomfortable feeling of being a stranger in someone else's land. The temple was ancient, older than any remnant of Man's history. The Hordim had been in Arborell long before Men, yet had been exiled to the northern wastes after centuries of bitter conflict. There was little wonder that they were mortal enemies; the Hordim had lost something precious, and the Realms of Men were unlikely to give it back.

A quick survey of the temple showed up a number of tracks and other sign. The Hordim had lingered within the ruin for a short time, food scraps and other rubbish littered the upper levels of the temple

and a series of tracks led off in the direction of the nearby falls. Intrigued by this, Mallen followed and soon found himself on a well-trodden track that cut through the brush at the base of the lowest step of the waterfall. Close as he now was, the falls rumbled loudly, a fine spray of water obscuring everything as it crashed into the pool to his left. Holding his sword all the firmer, Mallen crept down the path and to his surprise found the trail disappearing behind the curtain of water. For Mallen it was a curiosity that begged both exploration and caution.

The damp earth on the path was churned up, a large number of Hresh had used it and they had been running. Dirt and stones had been sprayed into the brush at the path's edges, kicked up by hundreds of boots as they ground into the loose soil. It seemed that something had put the Hordim to flight. Mallen wondered as to what that might have been. He decided that he would not wait around to find out.

Following the path he quickly left the gloom of evening and entered a world of almost complete darkness. As Mallen kept to the narrow trail it cut in behind the falls and then veered into a passage that ran straight into the solid rock of the plateau. He had no torches, nor any other source of light, and came to an abrupt halt as he thought on what he should do. Waiting in the darkness his eyes became more accustomed to the gloom and it was then that he began to make out discernible shapes about him.

To the left of the passage he found a small barrel, resting in it a collection of old torches and oil lamps. The torches were ancient, the wood crumbling in his hands as he lifted a few out to examine them. The oil lamps were however, a different proposition altogether. Made of metal, some exhibited small wicks and they were still serviceable; all he needed was some oil. Slightly further within the passage there lay a collection of old bottles and other containers, a rubbish dump of great age. Perhaps he thought, something useful could be found here. Mallen searched the contents of the dump but could not find oil in any of the containers. He did find however, a small amount of alcohol, the leftovers of some very foul smelling bottles. A careful test proved that the liquid did indeed burn and he filled one of the lamps with the odorous concoction. It was with a small level of satisfaction that he found a weak flame come to life and saw the darkness of the passage before him retreat back a short way. It was not much but it would have to do.

Raising the lamp above his head Mallen found the passage reaching back some distance into the stone. It was really nothing but a crudely engineered tunnel, rough cut about its walls and filled with debris and sections of fallen stone. The floor lay before him as a morass of dirt and broken rock, however the trail of the Hresh remained clearly visible. The Hordim were still running, their gait showing no sign of slowing. As he looked into the shadows ahead he could not say what he might find. All he knew for certain was that he needed to get moving himself.

With the feeble light of his lamp illuminating only a small way ahead, Mallen threw what caution he had left to the winds and barrelled after the Hordim. The passage quickly veered towards the west and then began to slope downwards, searching deeper into the rock as it went. For an hour the young Kalborean chased after the Hordim, following the passage as it descended ever deeper into the bedrock of the world. He hoped fervently that the passage would soon begin to rise again. What he found was quite the opposite.

Almost before he could stop, Mallen ran out of the tunnel and into a huge cavern, that spread out before him as a dark open space that the light of his lantern could not fully uncover. Coming to a halt he instinctively drew his sword and waited for an attack. He did not know why but he could feel danger here. As he stood silently in the gloom the liquid in his lamp gave out, and with a strangled hissing sound the flame died. With no further use for it, Mallen dropped it at his feet and held his sword more firmly in both his hands.

“Great,” Mallen muttered to himself, “that’s all I needed.” With one foot he kicked the now useless piece of equipment to the side and heard it clatter a short distance to the right before falling off into a deep unseen space. In the dark he winced as the lantern bounced from rock ledge to rock ledge as it delved the depths of the chasm into which it had fallen. When it finally came to rest it did so in a flurry of dislodged rock and a resounding cascade of crumbling earth. With no way of knowing where he might now safely step he carefully checked his footing. There was a steep drop very close, and the fact that he could not see it only made his growing sense of foreboding stronger.

The feeling of danger grew with each breath he took, and he could feel the sweat beginning to bead on the back of his hands. Then he heard it. Somewhere ahead, maybe a hundred metres distant, there came the sound of something moving in the dark. Then from a greater distance came the hollow sound of voices calling from a passage

beyond the cavern. Mallen's blood ran cold as he realised they were not human voices, nor were they speaking any language of Men.

Suddenly Mallen felt another presence in the darkness at his side. Before he could react a huge arm closed itself about his neck, and an equally powerful hand clamped itself upon his mouth. Mallen could feel himself being dragged backwards into an alcove of some sort and he fought with all his strength to break free. Then the presence spoke and Mallen froze. It was a human voice.

“Be still you fool. Make one more sound and we're both dead!”

## Chapter 5 - Gremorgan Hedj



In the absolute dark Mallen struggled against the power of the massive arms that held him and despaired at their strength. Held in a grip that he could not break he was dragged backwards, away from the sounds of the approaching Hordim, and into the confines of an ancient rift in the cavern's crumbling walls. Wide-eyed he waited, fully expecting the huge arms of his assailant to tense and crush the life from him, but it did not come. Instead, the arms relaxed and he was pushed further into their hiding place, deep within the recesses of the crack. Here they both waited as the Hordim crossed the wide space of the cavern towards them. Mallen could see nothing and dared not move as he listened intently for any sign of their discovery. Whoever was with him kept silent, his only sense of the man's enormous size his inability to move any further into the wide crack within which they hid.

In the dark Mallen waited. Out of sight, somewhere to the right of where they had gone to ground, a number of creatures were engaged in an urgent dispute. The young Kalborean could not understand what they were saying but he had no doubt that they were Hordim, and that they had found his tracks clearly impressed into the dust. In the cold and damp he could hear them kicking at the debris that littered the floor of the cave, and moving about in the darkness searching for him. To his surprise the Hresh did not venture any closer to their hiding place, instead they spent their time in argument, quarrelling loudly over some point of dispute, before turning about and moving back towards the tunnel from which they had emerged. When the sounds of the creatures had diminished into the passages beyond the man at Mallen's back spoke. His voice was deep and gave emphasis to his size, but his words were not belligerent.

"It is unfortunate that I needed to lay hand upon you Kalborean, but you were in some danger of discovery. I doubt that we could have fought off that many Hresh if you had."

Mallen pushed away from the presence and turned to face him. He could see nothing, the dark within the confines of the rift disguising completely the man's identity and purpose. He would not easily call this man friend until he was sure of his motives.

"I thank you for your help but you have me at a disadvantage. For

reasons I do not understand you seem able to find your way within these caverns where I can see nothing. Give me your name and purpose here so that I might better understand why you accosted me.”

The presence laughed quietly and moved past Mallen, making his way carefully towards the opening of the rift. As he passed he thrust something into Mallen's hands. It felt both metallic and somehow familiar. The man appeared to have little time for discussion or explanation.

“Place the nightglasses I have given you against your eyes and follow me. Here you are in my domain and if you wish to live it will be wise to do as I say. Now hurry, the Hresh will be back shortly and it will be better for us if we have moved on.”

Mallen felt the object in his hands and realised that it was some type of spectacle, although of a construction that was unfamiliar to him. In the absolute dark it struck Mallen as being a strange thing to give to a man, and he considered for a moment that it might be some kind of jest, but the stranger seemed serious enough. He would put them on, as soon as he could work out how to do so. Without the benefit of sight it took a short time and he could hear the impatience of the stranger growing. The spectacles, or nightglasses as the stranger had called them, were heavy, possessing thick lenses of an unknown material, and a solid frame that extended around to the ears. He found also an elastic strapping attached to the frame that was strong enough to bind them closely against the head when put on. He fumbled about with them until he felt he had them in the right position and then placed them over his eyes. He could not help but exclaim in surprise as the cavern and his assailant were revealed to him.

Somehow the nightglasses cut through the impenetrable veil of the dark and exposed everything within the chamber as if it was bathed in a dull reddish glow. He turned from side to side and took in the expanse of the cavern and realised quickly how close he had come to falling to a gruesome end. Most of the floor of the cavern was missing, only a single bridge of stone spanning a wide chasm that fell away quickly on both sides. He could see clearly where he had stood when he had kicked away his lantern, and shuddered at how close he had been to the edge of the precipice. Two more steps and he would have disappeared into the depths of the chasm forever, never to see the light of day again.

His greatest surprise came when he turned to study the man who

had so roughly hauled him out of danger. He was huge, a tower of a man who stood a good head taller than himself, and who was built as sturdy as a tree of the deep forest. It was impossible to tell much of his face, the nightglasses were not that revealing, but he could see that he wore a long hooded cloak of heavy leather and sported a short sword held securely in a scabbard at his belt. The man took him close to the place where he had been standing and pointed to a small plinth of stone that had been set upon the threshold of the stone bridge.

“We cannot cross here my young friend, the Hresh have placed a Shieldstone to guard any further travel across the bridge. We will have to take another way.”

The stone the stranger referred to sat squarely upon the bridge and seemed innocuous enough. It was crudely carved and Mallen could see nothing about it that warranted care.

“What does it do?” he asked.

The stranger did not answer, instead he selected a small pebble from the ground near his feet and flicked it carefully into the air above the artefact, about waist height. In a flash of light and smoke the pebble disappeared, its ashen remains exploding outwards before settling back to earth. It was clear to Mallen then that some type of deadly veil had been thrown about the entry to the bridge. His question had been answered.

Mallen followed without remark, he could not say why but there was something about the stranger's demeanour that demanded obedience. The man was as sure-footed as the Hresh as he negotiated a path through the debris of the cavern floor, and Mallen struggled to keep up as the stranger turned to the western edge of the chasm, and then followed its crumbling boundary into a series of smaller chambers that lay hidden by enormous buttresses of stone. Soon the Kalborean found himself within a long passage, following a sinuous path that led deep into the ancient stone. Twisting and turning, it searched further into the rock and Mallen found himself losing all sense of direction as the passage was met by other branching tunnels and chambers. Steadfastly Mallen followed until the stranger stopped and pointed to a natural arch of stone that was set into the right-hand side of the passage. Where he would have expected to see a further passage or chamber beyond, there was instead a solid wall of stone filling the archway. Mallen came to a halt by his side and watched as the stranger stood before the arch and waved his hand over its wet surface. Immediately the stone shimmered then dissolved away and

the man stepped through. As he disappeared through the arch he called to Mallen.

“If you want answers they can be found here, but don't take too long making up your mind whether you should trust me or not. I am not a patient man.”

Mallen followed the huge man beyond the archway and found himself within a large chamber fitted out as both living quarters and workroom. As he stepped over the threshold the stone behind him closed, leaving the wall once again as solid as it had been found. The chamber within was spacious, but cluttered with all manner of rock specimens and other artefacts. The furniture was sparse, the room dominated by a huge shelf of stone that had been fashioned into a work desk against one wall. Upon its upper surface Mallen could see great piles of papers, scrolls and a number of iron-strapped boxes crammed with metal objects and tools. Whatever the man's purpose within these cold passages he had obviously been here a long time. The young Kalborean turned to his new-found acquaintance and took off the glasses he had been given. The room was unlit by lamp or torch but illuminated instead by a strange yellowish glow that permeated the stone itself. Mallen could feel his face frowning in disbelief as he tried to understand the strangeness of what confronted him. It turned to amazement when he saw clearly for the first time the stranger's face.

“You're Dwarvendim?”

The Stranger smiled and nodded his head, “I see I have before me a man who has travelled the wider world eh? Yes, I am Dwarvendim, a loyal subject of the Stone Kings and currently residing here of my own free will.” He put out a huge hand and waited for Mallen to accept it, “But those who know me call me Gremorgan.”

Mallen took the big man's hand and shook it.

“I am Mallen Cael of Callenfrey, Metalsmith and as you can see a traveller in a world for which I am little prepared.”

Gremorgan nodded his head once again and busied himself with putting flame to a large metal lantern that hung from the ceiling above them.

“Aye, it is a truth that you do not know your way here, but there are few that do. I should say that you might count yourself lucky that I happened upon you when I did. You were only moments away from meeting an untimely demise at the hands of the Hordim.”

Mallen backed up and considered the Dwarvendim's words. It was

true that in the dark of the cavern he would have had no defence against the Hordim, and he was grateful for the assistance he had been given, even if it was somewhat abrupt. He had many questions though, not the least a need to know what this man was doing here. For the moment however, he decided it would be best to see what information the Dwarvendim might give freely.

Gremorgan took down the lantern from its fixture and began to refill it with oil. He stopped only for a moment to look Mallen squarely in the eyes. He had the air of someone who had not been around other people for some time and was trying to get used to the idea.

“I do not know why you are here Mallen Cael. The world is harsh enough out there without trying to find your way in these dark caverns. When I saw you standing at the edge of the precipice I could only think that you were either a fool, or a man driven by some overwhelming need to take risks that no sane person would consider. Which of these you might be will no doubt become apparent with the passage of time. Would you like something to eat?”

Without waiting for Mallen to answer he swept away a pile of papers from a smaller bench in the centre of the chamber and began dragging boxes towards it. These were apparently going to serve as chairs.

“Please sit,” he said and disappeared into the recesses of the chamber's northern wall. Mallen had not noticed it before but the chamber opened into a second room, half hidden behind a wall of stone. There he could hear Gremorgan busying himself with pan and pot, and before long the heady odours of cooking wafted out, filling the room with a thin steam of rich-smelling stew. As Mallen made himself comfortable he looked about the room with a little more care. The lantern burnt brightly above him and Gremorgan's living quarters were revealed to him in much greater detail. He knew a bit about metal ores and geology, it was a part of the knowledge of his trade, and he could make a good guess that the Dwarvendim was some kind of prospector or miner. Rock samples littered the floor and piles of old books were stacked untidily against one wall, a series of large-scale maps hung loosely from another. It was the man himself that intrigued him most though.

Gremorgan was a Dwarvendim and he had the build of one native to the Stone Kingdoms but his height was truly remarkable. It had been Mallen's experience that Dwarvendim stood less than shoulder

height to most Kalboreans. What they lacked in stature they made up for in physical strength and they were well-known for the power they could bring to battle. This Dwarvendim however, stood at least a head taller than himself and had maintained the strong physique of one of his kind. His hair was long and unkempt, a braided beard hanging from the same square face that could be seen in the lineage of most Dwarvendim. What he was doing here, so far from the Krodestaag Mountains and the safety of the Stone Kingdoms, was a question Mallen decided he would very much like to answer.

In short order Gremorgan returned carrying two large bowls of steaming stew. What the contents of the bowls actually might be Mallen could not say, but it was hot and full of the smell of spices. After days of bread and hard cheese it was a welcome change.

Together the two ate and when they were finished the Dwarvendim placed the empty bowls to one side. He crossed his arms and looked straight into Mallen's eyes.

“You have accepted the hospitality of my home and now I must ask you why you are here. It has been many years since I have seen anyone attempt to cross into the domain of the Hra'gora and, if nothing else, I am curious.”

Mallen made himself as comfortable as he could and told Gremorgan the whole tale of his return to Callenfrey, the events that led to his arrival within the caverns; the destruction of the port and his attempt at following the warband. The Dwarvendim listened attentively, eager for any information about the Hresh, especially the nature of their battle armour and insignia. When Mallen had finished the Dwarvendim sat back and smiled, his face a picture of wonder and disbelief.

“Well, as I live and breathe, a Kalborean on an honourable quest. This requires a moment's thought.” Gremorgan closed his eyes and began to hum. Mallen did not know what he was doing but he waited, somehow he had the feeling that this huge Dwarvendim would prove to be a useful ally, if not a strange one.

When Gremorgan reopened his eyes it was as if he had just returned from a journey that had provided him with some powerful insight. He did not keep these insights to himself.

“Well Mallen, you have taken upon yourself a long and difficult journey, one fraught with danger and for which you are ill-prepared. Somehow it has brought you here and I can only assume that Providence has turned you in my direction. Perhaps you should stay

here for a time before you continue on.”

Mallen shook his head, “I cannot. As I sit here the Hordim move further away and I must not let the trail run cold. If the Warband exits these caverns and then disperses into the wide grasslands beyond I will never be able to recover my brother. I appreciate your offer but I must move on as soon as possible.”

Gremorgan considered the Kalborean's words and turned to a large scroll that lay curled upon his workbench. Using the empty bowls as weights he spread its parchment across the table between them and let Mallen look at it. It was the hand-drafted plan of a maze of huge dimension and it appeared to spread over a wide area. The Dwarvendim pointed to a passage at the very edge of the maze.

“This is where we are, and this wide network of tunnels and chambers is the domain of the Hra'gora. I have watched the Hresh for many years and I know the paths they follow. You can be assured that they will take at least five days to traverse this system of caves and delvings before they can return to the surface, and even then I am quite sure I know exactly where they are headed. It is no secret where Hresh such as those you described will return, nor the paths that they shall take to return to their homes beyond the Sanhar.”

Mallen sat back from the parchment and could not help but appear sceptical, such knowledge was not known to Men, at least not as he knew.

“How can you be sure of this? By what artifice can you be privy to the plans of the Horde, and for that matter why are you here, living in such close quarters with our Enemy?”

Gremorgan smiled again and stood. “I cannot tell you why I am here, let's just say that I have been given a commission by my King to find something; something of great value to the Dwarvendim. In my search for it I have come to understand the ways of the Hordim and it has been one of the reasons that I have been able to survive here, within their midst.”

Mallen was no wiser for the answer and pressed harder, “But how can you know where they are headed? Surely the Sanhar Wastes are a mystery to all men. The lands of the Hordim are no place to wander, even for one such as you.”

“And yet,” said Gremorgan, “you would venture there yourself? The Sanhar Wastes are a great mystery to some but the Dwarvendim have made it their business to understand their enemies. Do you think we have been idle over these centuries, content to trade and take taxes,

and wait like cattle for the next attack of the Horde Armies? I think not. The insignia you described to me are those of the Denmar Kraal. It has been known for some time that the Denmar have fallen in with the Jotun Kraals of the West in a long term plan to break the power that is held over them by the Mutan. For a generation the Jotun have secretly been attempting to find the key that will break the hold the Mutan have over all Hordim. If they can achieve such an end then they will destroy the Mutan just as they did the ancients before them. It is something that they have expended great blood to achieve.”

Mallen could not see the connection. “Yes, but what does this have to do with the Warband that attacked Callenfrey and took my brother Tomas?”

“Your brother has red hair?” asked Gremorgan.

“Yes, but...”

The Dwarvendim waved his hand and cut Mallen off.

“Mallen Cael, it will do you well to listen. I am aware that we are little less than strangers, but give me ten minutes of your time and I can assure you it will be worthwhile.”

Mallen nodded and resumed his seat. The Dwarvendim had deep concern written into the nuances of his words and it compelled him to remain silent.

Seeing that the Kalborean had settled Gremorgan continued.

“I can see Mallen Cael that you are not an innocent in the ways of this world. You know, as do I, that nothing about the Horde is accidental nor are their actions random. When they attack, they attack for a reason. When they burn and slaughter it is not simply for the pleasure of doing it, but so that they might achieve some end, some part of a greater plan that is as yet unknown to Men. The Hresh that attacked your town did so under the express directions of the Mutan, of this I have no doubt. The destruction of the town was ordered for some purpose that is yet to be uncovered, but the taking of Callenfrey's red-haired townsfolk was no whim. The Denmar Hresh have been in conspiracy with the Jotun of the West for some time, in earnest search of a way to break the hold the Mutan have over all Hordim. When they were given the task of attacking Callenfrey they must have seen it as an excellent way of obtaining something that they had long required.”

Gremorgan shifted in his seat and Mallen took the opportunity to interject.

“This may be so but I do not see how red hair can be so important?”

The Dwarvendim reached over to his desk once again and hefted a large book. He opened it carefully, its decrepit pages dry and brittle as he searched for a particular section. When he had found what he was looking for he turned it to face Mallen. It was written in a language unknown to the young Kalborean but he did recognise a number of small diagrams as charts, maps of sections of Kalborea and a star chart that meant nothing to him. To Gremorgan it seemed very important.

“This book is one of three written by a scholar of the Old World named Shalengael. He lived during the first years of settlement of the Four Nations in Arborell and was a witness to the command the Hordim had over EarthMagic. At that time Men were nothing more than immigrants, wind-borne flotsam of another world, and we were weak. At any time in those early years the Hordim could have destroyed us, but instead they helped to keep us fed and sheltered, and we repaid them by taking their lands and driving them into exile. Shalengael saw the harnessing of EarthMagic as a way to keep what had been taken and set about recording everything he saw.”

“What Shalengael did not realise at that time was that EarthMagic does not allow itself to be abused. It cannot be harnessed unless it wishes to be, and the consequences for those who try without permission can be devastating. In his ignorance he recorded all that he saw and then tried to duplicate the incantations and supplications himself. It will suffice to say that he was never seen again and all that remained was his notes, of which this book is one collection.”

“The Dwarvendim have studied what he recorded for many years, and we have come to realise that EarthMagic is more than just power, something that can be used. It is a reality that physically holds Arborell together and binds every living thing to it. At some time in the past the Mutan found the key that allowed them to take hold of EarthMagic and harness it to their own ends. And I believe that inadvertently Shalengael recorded that key as a part of this ancient book.”

“You see Mallen Cael, EarthMagic is the power the Mutan have over all other Hordim, and to break that hold the Jotun, and the Denmar Hresh, must wrest EarthMagic from them. It is clear from Shalengael's writings that the only way to lessen the powers of EarthMagic is to corrupt them, to physically introduce something foreign into its essence that will change its nature. If this can be done then the key needed to wield it will change as well and the Mutan will

not be able to find it quickly enough. Their grasp will weaken and then collapse.”

Gremorgan carefully closed the book and placed his hand upon its binding.

“The Jotun of the West are not fools. In ancient times they destroyed their masters only to find themselves held still in subjugation by the Mutan. It is a Word of Command that the Mutan use to keep all the other Hordim in thrall and the Jotun seek a way of breaking that Word. They must believe that we are the best chance they have to change the essence of EarthMagic, and they have determined that of all of us, those that are red-haired are the most unique and therefore the most foreign. Whatever they plan to do with your brother has got nothing to do with the attack on Callenfrey, and everything to do with their search for the one thing that will break the hold of the Mutan. I fear that your brother is in grave danger of becoming an experiment in the wider designs of the Jotun.”

Mallen sat with his mouth open and his eyes wide. Gremorgan's words were spoken with an authority of someone who was absolutely sure of what he was saying. Yet, he could see no way that anyone might know such things. The Hordim were a mystery to all and a fear that most preferred not to meet face to face. How the Dwarvendim could know the machinations of the Jotun was beyond him, and yet he could see within Gremorgan's eyes a well of wisdom that would only be divulged when something important required it. He decided in that instant that this man was indeed a mystery worth uncovering, but first he had a few questions of his own.

“If this is truly the design of the Hordim then what can I do? As we speak my brother is being transported further from my grasp. How do I get him back?”

Gremorgan stood and grabbed a small rucksack that lay thrown between two piles of rock. Purposefully he began packing it with items from his chamber and stopped only to give Mallen his answer.

“For some reason Providence has placed you across my path and I cannot ignore that. Mallen Cael, our fates have been intertwined and although it is still uncertain I can see that the object of my search may very well be connected with the recovery of your brother. If you want to know how to get your brother back then I will tell you. To find the Hresh and make good his rescue I must go with you.”

Mallen stood in the corner of the Dwarvendim's chambers and watched as Gremorgan readied himself for the journey ahead. He

had accepted that his quest to find his brother would be a solo effort, and felt uneasy at the thought of another being involved. He had neither considered help nor requested it, but it had been thrust upon him and he could say naught against it. The Dwarvendim was far too powerful for him to overwhelm and leave behind, and the huge man would take no argument as good enough reason to remain here in his dark domain. As he watched he was only sure of one thing, and that was that he did not yet trust this man, or for that matter, the reasons why he seemed so eager to go with him.

Yet the Dwarvendim had both power and knowledge, attributes that the young Kalborean lacked, and for which Gremorgan had demonstrated he had in abundance. Regardless of his suspicions it was obvious that taking him could mean the difference between a successful recovery of his brother, or an anonymous death at the hands of the Hordim. He decided he would make the best use he could of the giant Dwarvendim's talents. On the long road ahead he would need them.

Gremorgan would not leave until he had everything he needed. As Mallen stood quiet in the shadows of his chambers the Dwarvendim collected clothing from drawers, books and papers from workbenches and shelving, and a number of strange metal items from a locked chest. All of which he stuffed into a set of strong leather bags. The Dwarvendim had food in abundance and he gave Mallen enough to fill his own pack with cheeses, fruits and a curious bread that smelt heavily of spice and nuts. All of this he packed carefully, and then took the chance to taste a piece of the aromatic bread. He was not prepared for the effect it would have upon him.

One bite was enough. As he chewed at the soft, doughy loaf he could feel a strange warmth spreading from his neck, across his shoulders and down his arms. For a moment he felt a slight disorientation but that passed, and as it did so he felt new energy infusing itself into his being. Fatigue and the aches of his travels passed from him and his head cleared. Suddenly the way ahead was clear, the road before him a sure path to his brother. It was enervating and yet slightly disturbing.

Gremorgan saw what Mallen was doing and cautioned him.

“Mallen Cael, be careful not to eat too much at first. A man not used to Nahla bread can be quickly overwhelmed by it.”

Mallen placed the remainder of the bread in his pack and tried to remain still. The effects of the Nahla had been immediate and

powerful, and it took some effort to restrain a rising urge to expend the energy that the bread had afforded him. It took all the willpower he had to do so.

When Gremorgan finished he held a pack and three sling bags, all draped upon his broad shoulders, and sported a huge axe fitted into a sheathe at his waist. The axe immediately caught Mallen's attention. The Dwarvendim had struck him as a man of knowledge and a weaver of magic, but the weapon he held at his belt indicated there was a side to Gremorgan that was still to be revealed. The axe was a massive blade of tempered steel, ornately forged and engraved, and secured to a haft of black wood that was as long as Mallen's outstretched arms. At first he could not see how Gremorgan might move with such a weapon at his side. It was both ungainly and far too long for free movement within the passages and halls that Mallen had assumed they would be passing through. His unspoken question was answered as his companion grabbed at the leather handle and watched as the entire haft shortened to only a third of its extended length. Mallen was about to ask how such a thing could be but Gremorgan raised his hand again and stopped any further interrogation. He had the look of someone who had been indoors too long, and was anxious to get out into the fresh air and warm sun. It was time to go.

"Come now Master Cael, you have been patient enough, but now it is time for us to get on our way. The Hresh will not tarry any longer than is necessary within the caverns."

As he spoke the Dwarvendim made for the stone arch and placed his hand against the solid wall. For a moment he concentrated on the rock, feeling at its surface as he delved for something beyond. Mallen could feel Gremorgan's thoughts extending beyond the chamber into the passages outside, and his own consciousness was swept up in the power that the Dwarvendim was using to achieve it. He stood close by Gremorgan and his mere proximity was enough for his own mind to venture out into the darkness, surveying the cold tunnels and finding them safe to travel. When he was finished Gremorgan stood back and waved his hand slowly over the rock that filled the arch. Once again the stone dissolved away, leaving a perfectly cut doorway into the passages beyond. Gremorgan paused for only a second and then put his head out into the darkness. It was absolutely black beyond the threshold and Mallen remembered the strange spectacles that he had been given. Carefully he placed them on his head and the darkness

withdrew into a world of deep red and long tunnel-like delvings. With a hint of trepidation he stepped out into the passage and followed Gremorgan into the gloom.



Gremorgan moved with an expert knowledge of the passages ahead. Through his nightglasses Mallen could see the corridors were rough-cut and littered with debris, in much the same way as he had found the tunnels at the entrance to the caverns. As they moved deeper into the network of passages and chambers he could see that this was changing. He had at first assumed that the caverns were the product of an ancient delving, a mine that had long since given up its riches and been abandoned. However, it was apparent that this underground world was much more than that. In the hours that followed Mallen came to appreciate the vast size of the labyrinth that Gremorgan had come to call home. Ancient tunnels and corridors worked their way deep into the earth, exposing huge chambers and natural caves that then exited into well-carved and precise passages. All came together in a huge maze that defied Mallen's ability to determine what direction they might be travelling; all he could be sure of was that they were descending, working ever deeper into the bedrock of the world.

Although Mallen had no knowledge of where they were, Gremorgan navigated a sure path that took them carefully into a series of natural caverns, and then along the course of an underground stream that wound its way further into the cold earth. Only when both began to feel the heavy hand of fatigue did the Dwarvendim call a halt. For the first time since they had begun he turned to face Mallen. They had stopped at the edge of a wide natural cave, beside a series of rock formations that rose as buttresses from the floor and arched upwards into the cave's walls high above.

"We should rest here for a time Mallen Cael. There will be little opportunity to do so once we have passed beyond these buttresses."

Mallen took in the grandeur of the rock and then busied himself with some food from his pack. The journey underground had proved

a tiresome endeavour and he was glad for the respite. He had more questions of his own too, ones that had festered since leaving the security of Gremorgan's home and he took the opportunity to air them.

“Where is it that we make for? I see us delving deeper into these caverns but see no hope of finding the sun for many days. I would feel better if I were privy to your intentions.”

Gremorgan chewed on a mouthful of dried meat and nodded his head. “I am sorry Master Cael, I have been alone for such a long time that I forget that others do not know my mind. Your question is a fair one, and I shall attempt to answer it as best I can.”

“It is my belief that the Hresh will take at least five days to traverse the domain of the Hra'gora. Such a large band cannot take the most direct route as it is bottlenecked at many places and this would delay them for too long a time. For the Hresh to make their way out of the caverns as a group they will need to follow a path that takes them some distance further to the north before again turning westwards. We are not constrained in this regard. By following the path that lay before us we will make the outside world a good day ahead of them. It is my hope that we will be able to lay in wait for them and then find an opportunity to recover your brother.”

Such an outcome was more than Mallen could have hoped for. He had his doubts though, and he did not mind expressing them.

“There must be many exits from a cavern system such as this. How will we know which is the correct one?”

Gremorgan smiled and tapped his nose. “Leave that to me, it is something I am very good at.”

With that the two companions ate. In the silence the cold meal was welcome but somewhat joyless. The Kalborean chewed at his food and pondered the unknown road ahead. There was something the Dwarvendim had said previously that interested him.

“A number of times you have mentioned that we journey through the domain of the Hra'gora. What is it, some kind of monster?”

Gremorgan looked up from his food and shook his head. “Not what, but who. We shall meet the Hra'gora upon our journey but do not be overly concerned, they are neither dangerous, nor interested for that matter, in what we do. It will suffice to say that they have been here a long time, existing within these dark halls, going about their business. I have no doubt they will remain here long after Men have faded from the world.”

It was all Gremorgan would say. Mallen remained none the wiser, although he was reassured that the Hra'gora, whatever they might be, were harmless. Together they ate until they were satisfied and then packed away what remained. As Mallen stood and brushed dirt from his pants Gremorgan came close and whispered in his ear.

“Beyond these buttresses extends a wide cavern, one we must cross without cover or camouflage. It is important that we make little sound, on this we must be diligent.”

Mallen peered out into the darkness but could see nothing, “What lies there that requires such stealth?”

Gremorgan grabbed Mallen by the shoulder, “Trust me, unlike the Hra'gora there are things that lurk in the dark places of the world that do not like to be disturbed. It will be best for us that we do not disturb this one.”

Mallen nodded and let him take the lead. Carefully the Dwarvendim crossed the short distance to a gap that lay between two wide upthrusts of stone. Against their bulk he was insignificant, and he disappeared quickly into the shadows. Mallen followed, a feeling of anxiety growing within him. He could not know what might lay beyond the stone arches but it was obviously something better left at peace.

Gremorgan waited in the gloom as his companion caught up, and then pointed in the direction they were to travel. Even with the nightglasses Mallen could see little, but what he saw did nothing to allay his disquiet. Before them spread a vast cavern, roughly circular in shape that rose to more than one hundred metres above their heads. The sides of the immense space were covered in a sinuous flowing series of stalagmites that spread up the rock walls and cascaded as frozen stone in great leaps from its dome. The floor of the cavern was remarkably smooth, and although it was littered with debris he wondered whether it was natural in its making. It looked more like something made that had been left for many centuries to the mercy of water and time.

Gremorgan pointed again across the cavern's floor and there Mallen could see a great rift that split the far wall. That would be their objective. Together they descended a small slope of loose dirt that ran to the floor of the cavern and then gained a footing upon the solid stone. The Dwarvendim said nothing. Instead he began a careful navigation of the cavern, keeping to the less-littered sections of its floor, avoiding what debris he could that had fallen from the

high dome above. Mallen followed and in time began to relax as the anticipated dangers did not materialise. He watched all that Gremorgan did, mimicking each step and turn he took as he found a silent path through the wide spaces of the immense chamber.

In a way it was easier for Mallen than he had expected. After the closeness of the passages they had passed through, the open space of this great dome was a welcome relief, one that allowed him to consider more closely the mystery of his new companion, his obvious power and the knowledge he possessed. His thoughts diverted his attention and in time made him careless.

Gremorgan had passed beyond an outcrop of fallen stone and Mallen was making his way around it when he noticed a strangely shaped stone on the ground. It would have been unremarkable except for its uncanny resemblance to an animal bone protruding from the dirt. It caught his attention, and for a moment he pondered its unusual shape as he felt his way around the outcrop. What he did not see was the shelf of jutting rock that lay in his path and he walked straight into it, hitting his head hard against its unforgiving surface. In pain and surprise he fell backwards and hit the ground, his pack spilling its contents upon the dusty floor. Too late he saw the shelf of rock for what it really was, a long slab of stone that balanced precariously upon an uneven perch. In an instant it began to slide sideways and as it did so Gremorgan turned, a look of dismay etched upon his bearded face. There was nothing either could do as the slab slid off the outcrop and slammed on to the debris littered floor of the cavern. It was an impact that could not go unnoticed. Beneath Mallen's hands he felt a vibration spreading from the impact like a stroke upon a drum skin, a rolling boom that echoed out into the cavern and returned to remind him of his carelessness. As the rumble grew, its intensity increasing as the sound ricocheted from wall to wall, a new danger unfolded. Loose pieces of limestone from the roof above began to fall, dislodged from their seating, hitting the ground ahead like lethal rain. Within the thunder and crash of the falling debris Mallen lay dumbfounded. He turned towards the Dwarvendim and found that Gremorgan was definitely not happy.

“Which part of 'do not disturb' didn't you understand my young friend? Hurry and raise yourself lest we be caught floundering here in the open!”

With one hand he grabbed Mallen and hauled him to his feet. Embarrassed, and covered in a fine white dust, the Kalborean

shrugged his pack from his shoulders and hurriedly collected the scattered food. As he worked a new sound filled the cold air of the cavern, a rasping scrape that could be heard above the reverberations of echoing thunder and dropping stone. Mallen stood and looked about but could not identify its source, it sounded like it came from high above.

Gremorgan grabbed Mallen and shouted at him, no pretence remained with the Dwarvendim for silence or care. "Now we must go, you have awoken the Molgoth and we must move with haste if we are to make the other side of the cavern."

Dragging Mallen by the arm he grabbed up his own bags and set off at the run, his eyes scanning the heights of the cavern's ancient dome, in search of some great danger lurking high above. Mallen saw it first. Against the reddish tinge of the rock at the apex of the dome, he saw the indistinct movement of something detaching itself slowly from a great crack that ran a third of the way down one side of the vast ceiling. He could not see it clearly but he had no doubt this was the object of Gremorgan's concern.

"I see it, moving against the rocks above!" he called to the Dwarvendim. Gremorgan came to a halt and scanned the cragged ceiling overhead.

"Yes, it is indeed awake. The Molgoth arises and it will not sleep now until it has satisfied its hunger. Let us make sure that we are not its bedtime meal."

Together they ran, scurrying between huge pieces of fallen stone and drifts of clinging dust blown up by their collapse. Within the dust and debris Mallen could see little, however he could hear clearly the cry of a great beast as it voiced its anger at having been woken from its deep slumber. The young Kalborean did not tarry beneath the monster's rousing cries, the hairs at the back of his neck tingling with the surety that they had been discovered. He did not have long to wait before the monster Gremorgan had called Molgoth found them both.

With a cry that echoed out into the dark spaces the fury of its anger and distress, the Molgoth swooped from its nest down upon the two travellers. Caught in the open Gremorgan came to a sudden stop and pulled his axe from its sheath. Mallen could not understand what the Dwarvendim was doing but then he saw the beast resting on its haunches only a short distance ahead, wrapped in dust and scattering debris. Gremorgan did not wait for the Molgoth to attack.

"Take your nightglasses off Mallen Cael. Do it now!" he shouted.

Immediately Mallen complied and found himself standing in the pitch-dark. Only then did he remember he had a weapon of his own and drew it in readiness for the attack to come. He stood his ground and waited for the Dwarvendim to do something.

Slowly from out of the dark came the voice of Gremorgan, chanting a low resonant dirge that rose and fell as waves might lap against the shore. It was a hypnotising hymn that brought everything to a pause, and as he stood in the vast space Mallen could feel the air moving around him. It was but a breeze at first, a wisp of air charged with static that rolled and bent, searching out the man who had called it. Quickly it became a gale, building as the first squall of a storm might out in the wider world. And then from the darkness a flock of glowing, multi-coloured orbs coalesced, spiralling in a tight ballet that sputtered and flashed before coming together in one incandescent sphere. The Dwarvendim stood firm as the brilliant light shone forth, coming to rest around his hands before ascending high above their upturned heads. Within the light the cavern was revealed in all its glory, and the beast he had called Molgoth was exposed.

Mallen was not ready for either. Rather than the shades of dull-red that he had travelled with whilst wearing the nightglasses, the cavern was instead awash with colour. The buttresses of stone transforming into pillars of flowing pink and ochre, of frozen blue-green cascades and massive crystal-like filaments that hung from the dome as petrified stalactites. All reflected the light of Gremorgan's orb into a myriad of rainbows that shone out across the length and breadth of the cavern and dazzled all who might see it. It was a fairy world far outside Mallen's experience and he was mesmerised by it, but the Molgoth quickly brought him back to the dangerous reality of their situation.

The Molgoth squatted not ten metres from where Gremorgan stood. Its fat bulbous body covered by leathery wings that entwined it as it tried to protect itself from the brilliant light of the orb. Mallen ran up beside Gremorgan just as the Molgoth spread its wings and hissed a squeal of defiance at the intruders. The Kalborean then saw its true form. It was a monster unlike anything he had seen, a great hair-covered bat, which even in a squat stood twice the height of Gremorgan. Mallen stepped back a pace and the sound of his movement caught the attention of the monstrosity, it hissed again and lumbered forward, intent on killing everything that had disturbed its sleep.

“Gremorgan! By the Fates run man! Save yourself whilst it is blinded by the Orb!” Mallen shouted, but the Dwarvendim did not run. Instead he planted his feet squarely in the dirt and swung his great axe in front of him, shouting at the beast to attack and doing everything he could to keep its attention focused on him.

With one great sweep of its leathery wing the Molgoth hit Gremorgan in the side and flung him out of the circle of light illuminated by the now diminishing Orb. Mallen despaired at the ease with which the monster had thrown down the Dwarvendim and turned on his heel to attack the beast. He could not leave the cavern, he did not even know where he was. In his desperation he realised he needed Gremorgan and was not about to let the creature have away with him.

With sword glittering in the light of the Orb Mallen charged the Molgoth and hacked deeply into its outstretched limb. Deep went the cut, and the monstrous bat screamed in pain as it turned to face its new assailant. In its anguish it rushed forward on its short legs and raked the ground violently in front of it, looking for the flesh of the man that had hurt it so. Mallen was not about to let its blows find their mark. With a stabbing thrust he sank the sword's tip again into the Molgoth's wing and pulled down on the blade with all his might. The Molgoth staggered backwards, thrashing its wings and gnashing its teeth as it tried to evade any further wound. The damage had been done, however. Mallen's blade had rent the monster's wing from bone to edge, neatly cutting its flight surface in half and rendering it impossible for the beast to return to the safety of its loft. It was not defeated though. In a rage it advanced once again, throwing its limbs at Mallen, thrashing the ground before it and fanning great gouts of dust into the air. In the choking haze Mallen fell back, unable to see what was before him. Out of the dust came a taloned claw, crashing into his shoulder and spinning him through the air. In the violence of the attack his sword flew from his hand, and he hit the ground awkwardly, sliding to a halt against a wide slab of fallen limestone.

The Molgoth ran from the haze, its eyes alight with pain and hatred, focused on Mallen as he lay disoriented against the stone. The Kalborean searched with his hands for his sword but it was nowhere to be found. In the gathering dark of the faltering Orb Mallen pressed himself against the stone and waited for the stroke that would end his life. This time it did not come.

Out of the darkness Gremorgan charged, axe held in both hands as

he rushed the creature, barrelling directly into its side, sending it skittering on clawed feet across the smooth stone. Before it could recover the Dwarvendim jumped upon its heaving torso and swung his axe with all the force he could muster. Down it came, a cleaving blow that sunk deep into the Molgoth, embedding its steel to the hilt in the giant bat's chest. Mallen watched as he pulled the weapon from its new home and swung once again, this time severing the creature's arm, throwing down its wing as it flailed in its despair. With one final lunge it swept Gremorgan from its body and sent him crashing to the ground, but it was the end for the Molgoth. Mortally wounded it sank to the floor and lay still, its lifeblood seeping from open wounds that ran freely across the dusty floor. Then for a time all was silent.



Mallen did not arise until the dust had settled and the Orb had finally flickered out. He had received a crushing blow to his side, and although he could feel no broken bones, the muscles felt both bruised and sore. Carefully he pulled his nightglasses from where he had secured them to his belt. In the familiar ruddy shades he surveyed the ground and found Gremorgan searching the area surrounding the body of the Molgoth. He looked distraught.

“Gremorgan! I am over here.” he shouted, his throat choked with dust and hair. At the sound of Mallen's voice the Dwarvendim cocked his head and ran to where he lay. The worry on his cragged face now transformed by a broad smile.

“Well, young Master Cael, I thought the beast had fallen upon you. It is good to see you still in one piece.”

“But somewhat the worse for wear, Gremorgan. Here, give me support as I try and stand.”

He reached up his hand and the Dwarvendim took it, pulling him to his feet. The young Kalborean could not believe the size of the beast they had slain, and as he took a closer look he realised the chance Gremorgan had been prepared to take in traversing the domed cavern. It had been a close thing, the Molgoth had almost taken both their lives and his new ally had known all about it. As he stood in the

dark massaging his bruised ribs he began to doubt that Gremorgan was indeed a friend. It was a doubt that grew quickly. Perhaps the Dwarvendim's own reasons for wishing to journey with him might not preclude putting Mallen's own life at risk, and the thought arose that to this man he might be expendable. With gathering distrust building within him he approached the Dwarvendim and could not help himself. He hit him.

Taken by surprise Gremorgan took the blow fairly across his face. It was a punch delivered with all the force Mallen could muster, and it bent Gremorgan backwards. Before the Dwarvendim could answer the affront Mallen pushed him down and stood over him, both fists ready for a fight.

"What were you thinking you stupid stone-eater? By all the powers of Providence, you led me into a trap for which you had full knowing and deemed it necessary to mention naught of it to me. And then, when we are confronted by this...this beast here you do not make haste to escape when it is obviously blinded, you stand your ground and wait for its attack. Are you mad? Speak in your own defence quickly Gremorgan, or I will vent my rage upon you!"

The Dwarvendim had been stunned by the unforeseen assault but he did not wait for Mallen to strike again. The Kalborean stood straddled across the huge Dwarvendim's waist and he was unprepared for Gremorgan's response. Using his greater physical strength he threw his right leg out and swept Mallen's legs from beneath him, toppling him backwards on to the floor. In an instant the big man was on the younger Kalborean, a huge hand about his throat, holding him to the ground as Mallen flailed his arms and legs trying to break the hold.

"Young Master," he whispered into Mallen's ear, "it would do well that you keep such impulses in check. If it was not for the fact that I am very glad to see you still amongst the living, I should take the opportunity now to throttle you." He released the grip he had upon Mallen and dragged him upright. Mallen massaged his throat but before he could speak Gremorgan continued.

"There is something here that you should have no illusions about. There are no second prizes, no consolations for not reaching the outside world before the Hresh. We are in a race where such risks are necessary, and there will be times when it should not be necessary for me to explain myself. I told you not to make a sound and you succeeded single-handedly in bringing down half the ceiling, which I

might add not only awoke the Molgoth but also has probably alerted most of the denizens of these caverns to our presence. I fought the beast because that is the nature of my people, and therefore it is my nature. We do not run from a challenge and we do not take a backward step when we are attacked. It is something you should consider in the days to come.”

“Now you have a choice young Master, you can either accept that I might know what I am doing and follow where I lead, or you can take your leave. You have until the time I collect my gear to make your decision.”

With that he rose to his feet and began to walk back to where he had dropped his baggage. When he had got a few steps from Mallen he turned, something had been left unsaid, “And one last thing Mallen Cael of Kalborea. Call me a stone-eater one more time and you will truly see the wrath of one angered beyond reason. It will be an affront you will not survive intact.”

Mallen slowly raised himself from the dust of the cavern floor and brushed himself down. His side ached from the blow he had received in the melee, but it was not the greatest injury he would have to endure. He had been greatly chastised and felt the foolishness of his anger and the unfairness of the blow he had laid upon Gremorgan. He had assaulted him and then insulted him in a manner that the Dwarvendim had not deserved. As he stood in the dark he felt only embarrassment that he had reacted in such a way to the first true test of his character since he had begun his quest to find his brother. He could not leave such an ally in such a state of affront but he did not know how to make amends for it. It was Gremorgan however, that took the matter out of Mallen's hands. He arose from the darkness with his bags arrayed upon his shoulders and looked quizzically in the direction of his companion.

“Well? Shall we trust each other and find our way out of this labyrinth?”

Mallen smiled and nodded. No word was said as the Dwarvendim turned his back on the Molgoth and they made their way towards the rift in the far wall. Mallen knew he had little choice. He was a stranger in an unfamiliar land and Gremorgan, for good or ill, was his guide. Only Fate could decide where that might ultimately lead him.

## Chapter 6 - Song of the Hra'gora



Within the expanse of the Molgoth's lair the two men set off, the way before them a ruin of broken rock and lingering dust. Ahead the rift in the cavern wall gaped wide and they made for it at the run. Neither spoke. Since their altercation over the Molgoth there was now a distance between them, one that could only be healed with time. Anger and distrust had replaced what had been a growing friendship and Mallen felt the split keenly. Gremorgan took the lead, finding a path through the fallen stone that lay shattered upon the floor of the cave and then, without a word, plunged into the rift and the claustrophobic confines of its crumbling walls.

Mallen followed. In the dull-red illumination of his nightglasses he could see little except the vague outline of the passages before them, and the barely visible form of Gremorgan, always a few steps ahead, his huge frame bent forward, focused on the path and its many pitfalls. The Kalborean needed the Dwarvendim, he knew that now, and their altercation in the cavern had placed more than physical distance between them. He could not believe that he had hit the man, and had done so just a few minutes after Gremorgan had saved him from the Molgoth. He would need to rebuild a few bridges, and as he carefully followed the Dwarvendim's lead he confessed to himself that he had no idea at that moment how to do it.

Doggedly Gremorgan picked his way through the remains of tunnels and chambers, delving into a part of the labyrinth that was far older than anything they had travelled before. Here the passages were truly ancient. Cut deep into the rock by hands that had long since past from the memory of the world, these works shifted and crumbled with their passing. Most were in a state of partial collapse and Mallen found himself on more than one occasion flat upon his stomach, pressing his way through fissures in the stone barely large enough to squeeze through.

As they crawled deeper into the rock Mallen could see that Gremorgan was searching for something. He trusted that the Dwarvendim knew exactly where he was going but he could see in his companion's expression that something had eluded him, something important. It was not until they had come up against a seeming dead-end that Gremorgan found what he was looking for. In the

right hand side of a collapsed passage he pulled away at a pile of fallen stone and uncovered a narrow crack just wide enough to get through. Without a word he forced his way into the opening and disappeared from sight. Mallen followed and found himself sliding down a narrow slope of loose dirt and scree. At the bottom of this incline lay a small chamber, half filled with broken rock and debris that offered no visible exit except for a single crack in its northern face. Here Gremorgan stopped and pulled a small device from a pocket in his trousers. Mallen kept his distance, and from the shadows watched as the Dwarvendim held it before him, studying it carefully. It was metallic and fitted easily into the palm of his hand, a flat face of glass and a few small buttons on its side all he could see of it. What it was he could not say but Gremorgan seemed more than happy with what it appeared to be telling him. Once the device was back in his pocket he climbed into the crack, gesturing for Mallen to follow.

The fissure opened into a long broken rift in the bedrock, one that could only have been created by a great shifting in the stone itself, splitting and separating the rock in the same way that one might tear a loaf of bread. The floor of the rift was strewn with rubble, in places it was no more than a long pile of boulders and debris, over which they were forced to scramble until they reached its end.

At the edge of the rift the Dwarvendim came to a halt. Beyond the last rise of boulders lay another large cavern, not as huge as the Molgoth's den, but just as open. It took only a moment for the two men to clamber down a short slope of loose rock to reach the more solid floor of the cavern itself. This time Gremorgan did not make for the opposite side, instead he kept to the edges of the cave, picking his way slowly around its crumbling border until he found a large crack in the floor, one that split the stone at its edge before falling away into darkness below. It was only as he looked down into the gaping maw that he finally spoke to Mallen.

"Of all the passages and chambers we must traverse, this crack is the only part of the labyrinth that requires the use of rope. At the base of this chasm lay a straight path that will take us as far as Trebett's Gorge. It is there that we will find a way out of the domain of the Hra'gora. To reach it however, will require that we climb down into this darkness. I trust you do not have any trouble with heights."

Before Mallen could protest fully that he had no head for heights at all Gremorgan had already set to preparing his gear. From one of the

three bags slung from his shoulders he produced rope and two flimsy leather harnesses that Mallen assumed were designed for climbing. One of these harnesses was thrown to him and he followed Gremorgan's lead as the Dwarvendim strapped himself into the other. By the time he was secure within its embrace it had become obvious how the harness was to be used. Such knowledge did not dispel a rising sense of trepidation however, that Mallen found difficult to control. Prior experience had shown him that he was never at his best where heights were concerned, and the flimsy nature of the harness provided him with little solace. As he watched, Gremorgan carefully fed one end of the rope through a series of looped metal rings that were attached securely to the front of each harness, and then tied the other to an outcrop of hard stone. Once he had tested that the tether would indeed hold, he hoisted the remainder over the lip of the chasm and let it fall into the darkness below.

Whilst Gremorgan busied himself with his bags Mallen tested the rope for himself. It was thin but strong. He could not help but wonder though, if it would be strong enough to hold two bodies on their descent. Gremorgan did not seem concerned, Mallen would find out soon enough that both men descending the rope together was not his plan at all.

“You will go over first Mallen Cael. The metal rings through which the rope is woven will slow your descent, but you will have no ability to stop until you reach the bottom. It is a sheer drop, one that affords no opportunity to pause until you hit the floor below. Keep upright and bend your legs as you reach the end. Do this and you will survive the fall without harm.”

Mallen stared at his Dwarvendim companion, but was given no opportunity to voice any concern for what seemed an overtly reckless method of reaching the base of the chasm. Before he could speak he was grabbed by the harness and dragged to the edge. In one powerful movement Gremorgan lifted him by the armpits, and then threw him out over the precipice and down into the all-embracing dark.



Mallen found he could not scream. In a turmoil of rushing air and hissing rope he tried to steady himself as he tumbled into the darkness. To his relief Gremorgan proved as good as his word. In a whiplash he was jerked upright by the harness as the rope engaged within its metal rings. Only then did he begin to slow. From the rush of free-fall his descent eased until he could sense that he was dropping at a rapid but steady rate. He could not touch the rope as it slid through its metal holdings so instead he looked down, searching for the bottom of the chasm and readying himself to absorb the shock of landing. Too quickly the ground loomed up from the darkness beneath him and he had only moments to prepare. With a thud he hit a sloping incline of loose dirt and scree which exploded with the impact of his fall. In a cloud of dirt and tangled rope Mallen rolled down the slope until he came to rest upon a flat piece of ground at its base. Even before the dust had time to settle he had disconnected himself from the harness and stood in the gloom cursing the Dwarvendim for every insult he knew. Gremorgan followed quickly.

As the Molgoth had descended from its lair, so too Gremorgan fell to earth, his harness straining to keep his huge bulk from plummeting into the ground below. In a cloud of grit he hit the unstable slope but he did not stop. With one practised turn of his hand he unfastened the rope from his harness and turned towards Mallen. He did not need his nightglasses to see the anger in the Kalborean's young face.

"You threw me off the edge of a cliff? And I was worried how I might make amends for my outburst before. By the Fates Gremorgan, I swear if I had a crossbow I'd shoot you where you stand."

Gremorgan shook his head but did not reply. Instead he looked up towards the lip of the chasm far above. In the gloom Mallen could not tell if he was trying to stop himself from laughing or if he was frowning instead. His eyes however were searching upwards, and there was no mirth in his gesture as he waved Mallen to his side. Suddenly from far above a number of ropes fell, slapping into the incline ahead of them and raising small gouts of dust with each impact. Someone had found them and in the dark was coming for them.

"I think young Master, that there may have been a small amount of revenge in my actions, and I am prepared to apologise for that at some future time. It seems however, that we now have a far greater concern to expend our energy upon, one that will not wait until we have aired our grievances."

Mallen followed the Dwarvendim's gaze to the lip of the chasm far above. In the gloom he could just make out movement upon its edge.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It appears that our encounter with the Molgoth has brought unwanted attention down upon our heads, literally. The movement you see above are Hresh, about fifty in number I would imagine, and they have our scent."

Gremorgan waited no longer. Hurriedly he removed his harness and motioned for Mallen to do the same. When both were unfastened he stuffed them back into his bag and pointed out into the gloom.

"There can be found ahead the path we must take. If we are to keep out of reach of the Hresh then we will need to put great distance between ourselves and the Hordim. It will not take long for them to reach our position here."

With that they set off, hurriedly re-shouldering their packs as they ran. Mallen could hear the sounds of movement clearly in the air behind them, the slapping of ropes as more hit the ground, and the clatter of weapons swinging loosely from bodies being lowered from the lip above. It was the sound of shouting, of commands being given that rang out most loudly in the darkness.

For the next hour the two men kept up a hectic pace, charging forward as they tried to outrun the Hordim. Gremorgan had taken them into a dark, open corridor, one that extended as far as his nightglasses could penetrate. Within this open space the two men ran, and as they did so Mallen felt the air change. The corridor was wide, he could see neither side nor anything but open space ahead, and as they pressed on he could not help but notice the passing of many thick pillars, strangely marked, that extended high overhead. In the chill Mallen ran onwards, desperately trying to keep up with the Dwarvendim, but he was finding it a difficult task. His legs were starting to weaken, the weight of equipment and supplies taking their toll upon him.

"How long must we keep up this pace? I can hear nothing of the Hresh behind us. Can we not stop for rest?"

Gremorgan came to a halt and bent over, his hands resting on his thighs as he struggled for breath. The run had not gone lightly for him either.

"I fear that the Hresh have taken up our trail in the worst possible place. Even though we cannot hear them they are there, somewhere in the Hall behind us, and they know that this corridor goes only in

one direction. They need only keep up a steady pace and they will overtake us eventually. We will need to move on very soon.”

Mallen looked back into the gloom behind them and could see no sign of the Hresh. He did not doubt that they were there though.

“Where is it that you take us?” Mallen asked.

“This corridor is unknown to Men, but to the Horde is known as the *Caer'nar'dorum*; the Hall of Whispers. It is neither the making of Man nor Hordim but of something far older. In a straight line it travels due west for more than thirty-two kilometres and has only one exit in its entire length. If we can make that exit we will be safe, on this you can be sure. Once the Hresh have given up the chase we can return to the Hall and make our way out of this place. At its end we will find fresh air and blue sky. I don't know about you but I could do with some. But quickly, I feel movement in the Earth, the Hresh are coming.”

With no further chance for conversation Gremorgan heaved himself to his feet and turned to the west once again. As he picked up his pace he shouted back at Mallen and took off his nightglasses.

“You won't be needing these any more! Make sure you secure them in your pack.”

As he ran Mallen did as the *Dwarvendim* had directed. In the ruddy glare of his glasses he could see little of the Hall of Whispers; for some reason they did not seem to be as effective here as they had been in the chambers above. When he took off his glasses however, a new world opened up to him and in that moment of revelation he came to a grinding halt once again.

Instead of the dull visage provided by his nightglasses the *Caer'nar'dorum* was revealed as a treasure far beyond his imagining. The uniform pillars that they had been running between revealed themselves in their true majesty, and in their unveiling took his breath away. Here he found before him the perfectly carved forms of ancient forest trees, massive pillars of stone that shone yellow in the light of the Hall, their trunks lifting up to the roof high above as trees might intertwine in the deep woods. Huge boughs sprung from these trunks, radiating out to encompass the limbs of their near brethren in great arches of stone, and all were unique. No two of the carved trees that made up the parade were the same. To bark and leaf and bough, each was unique and all shone out, sparkling yellow in a world that Mallen had come to believe was lightless.

In his wonder he turned to look back at where they had come. Sure enough the trees fell back in that direction as well but the yellowish

glow faded quickly to their rear. They had crossed a boundary of some kind, and in that crossing had stumbled into a different world, one of light and beauty.

“Gremorgan! Stop!” Mallen cried out. The Dwarvendim had kept up his pace and was a good hundred metres ahead before he could utter the words. Quickly Mallen ran to him and grabbed his arm. “What is this place? It is incredible!”

Gremorgan smiled and nodded his head. “Aye, the Hall has been seen by few men and I for one could not tell you why it is here. But its beauty is not its only attribute. Stand for a moment and look down its length, and in doing so focus your eyes to the end of the way.”

Mallen did what the Dwarvendim said. The Hall spread nine trees wide, a distance of almost one hundred and fifty metres, evenly spanned in eight huge arches formed by the limbs of each row of trees as they came together above. Ahead of them however, the arcade of stone extended out as far as their eyes could see. Gremorgan had said the Hall of Whispers continued for more than thirty kilometres and Mallen saw no reason to doubt it. The Hall disappeared into the distance, a huge boulevard of shining stone glittering in the brilliance of its own light.

With his eyes fixed as far ahead as he could into the distance he waited, and it was then that he saw the true secret of this place. The trees were moving. Solid in their trunks the trees were swaying imperceptibly as if a breeze was running through their leaves, turning their boughs gently as it went. In waves the movement rippled through the trees, each bending slightly as it was brushed by the next, and as they did so he began to hear the almost imperceptible whispers of wind and leaf, rustling quietly in the cold air. If Mallen had not known he was deep underground he could have sworn he was within a great forest, witness to the first hints of a coming storm. It was mesmerising in its vastness and its subtlety. It was Gremorgan who broke him from his contemplation.

“Is it not strange the secrets that can lay unseen beneath our feet? Imagine Mallen Cael, we have travelled the lands above for nigh on four centuries and yet had no idea that such a marvel existed. You can be glad in the knowledge that less than five men have ever seen this and you are one of them.”

“Who could possibly have built a wonder of this magnitude? It is beyond anything I could have conceived possible.”

Gremorgan frowned and turned back towards the way they had

come. “As I said before this is not the artifice of Men or Hordim, indeed even the ancient Trell'sara in their unending hubris could not have put together something of this size. Other powers were at work here, powers that have long since left our world. All that is left for us is to marvel at what they have wrought.”

A noise far off in the gloom at their backs turned both their attentions away from the Hall. Gremorgan grabbed Mallen by the shoulder and started off again at the run.

“I will tell you all that is known of this place at another time, for the moment we have other concerns.”

Mallen ran with all the remaining determination he could muster, keeping pace with the Dwarvendim as they charged through the endless arches of stone. Behind he could see nothing of the Hordim, but there was a feeling creeping into the air, a hint of malice and danger that he could sense building around him as the Hresh got closer. Then, amongst the echoes of the vast chamber he heard them.

Above the muffled footfalls of their passing another sound echoed in the Hall. The Hresh did not run as individuals, their discipline would not allow it. Instead they moved as a unit, each step measured against the warrior next to them as they ran. From somewhere in the distance Mallen could hear their feet pounding into the dusty stone of the Caer'nar'dorum, like a drumbeat in its regularity, fifty iron-shod pairs of boots crashing into the ground in unison. They would not be travelling as fast as Gremorgan or Mallen might, but he knew they would be able to keep it up for days at a time. Within such a long Hall they would slowly, but surely, be overtaken. He looked at the Dwarvendim and could see the concern etched upon Gremorgan's face.

“What will we do? Is there no way we can get out of the Hall before they reach us?”

Gremorgan shook his head and instead pointed to the right-hand side of the archways ahead. “There is only one other exit here and that is still six kilometres ahead. It will be the only place we can escape our pursuers. It is there we must make for.”

Mallen nodded his understanding and both men increased their pace. The sound of the Hresh was clear now, a resonating beat that vibrated through the pristine arches as they raced for the only exit that might give them sanctuary from their pursuers. Ahead lay six kilometres of open hallway, a space large enough to accommodate an army within its breadth. Within this subterranean world the

Dwarvendim and the Kalborean ran with all the strength they could muster, keeping to the right-most set of arches as they charged forward.

The pursuit proved quickly to be a trial Mallen was ill-prepared for, a grinding rush that sapped the strength from his legs, and left him heaving for breath as he attempted to keep up with Gremorgan. Both men could not keep the pace fast enough to evade the Hordim. With each few hundred metres they both had to rest, and at each stop the sound of the Hordim grew closer, a rhythmic pounding that was becoming clearer and more defined with each pause. It was a situation that could have only one outcome if they did not reach the exit quickly.

Gremorgan's huge bulk remained a few steps ahead of his own, and Mallen found it easier to focus on his back, measuring his own pace against that of the Dwarvendim, rather than worry about how far they might have travelled. The Dwarvendim knew what he was doing and Mallen could no longer doubt that both their fates were bound together. Regardless of the argument they had had previously he was all too aware that the success of his quest, and his own personal safety for that matter, depended completely on Gremorgan. The Dwarvendim's knowledge and talents had been all that had stood between himself and failure, and it was hard to see how he could have possibly continued on his quest without him. It was a point upon which he took the time to ponder, and in doing so an idea began to form in his thoughts about who his unlikely companion might actually be. It was an idea he decided would be worth testing if ever they emerged from this labyrinth alive.

The Caer'nar'dorum spread before them as a seemingly endless parade, one that ebbed and flowed as if it held a life-force of its own. Mallen could not conceive of the work that must have been needed to create such a marvel and even as he ran he began to realise that there was far more to this boulevard of stone than Gremorgan had given voice to. Its huge arched canopies were only a small part of its wonder, and as he struggled to remain in step with the Dwarvendim he discovered that the arches held other secrets. At first he had noticed that the walls of the Caer'nar'dorum were carved in the same intricate manner as the tree-pillars and the canopy above. These carvings wrought a perfect representation of the forest floor, its undergrowth and its wild-life, and all were set in sculptured relief, a permanent record of the forests of old. In the ongoing passage of

these sculptured walls he began to notice something else.

Just as the trees above swayed in the breeze of an imaginary wind, so too the denizens of the forest floor moved beside him. From the corner of his eye, small animals and birds scurried about, climbing the trees or disappearing into the shadows of the forest's thick undergrowth. Every time he attempted to gain a clear view of one of these creatures he found nothing to see, just the exquisite sculpturing of the walls as solid as the ground beneath his feet. If he had not been running for his life it could have been considered both wondrous and thoroughly disconcerting.

With the warriors in pursuit the men ran on. As the wonders of the stone forest spread out before them they kept up their pace, the sounds of the Hordim clear and imminent at their backs. Neither turned to see how close the Hresh might be. There was no need. The footfalls of their passing were drowned by the encroaching rhythm of their pursuers, and now they could hear them calling. Out into the wide spaces of the Caer'nar'dorum Mallen could hear them shouting curses at those they pursued, oaths and commands cut through the air, exhorting the Hresh ever faster in their pursuit. The chink of weaponry and the stomp of boots filled the openness of the arches, and Mallen could not help himself, he looked back.

The Hresh were close and they were far more numerous than Gremorgan had estimated. A black line of warriors fanned out across the breadth of the Hall, no more than three hundred metres behind. He could not tell how many were after them but it could be no less than two hundred, and they could see him. With cries of anger and ruthless determination the Hresh surged forward, leaving the ordered ranks that had brought them so close they broke into a sprint, swords and fists waving in the air as they charged forward, quickly covering the distance that remained between them.

In this moment of danger Mallen felt his body failing him. The colour drained from this face as he looked forward and saw Gremorgan a good twenty metres ahead of him. The Dwarvendim had not looked back, instead he had kept up his pace and had pulled ahead of the Kalborean. He was sure his companion was not aware of the danger and his energy was now spent. Mallen needed his help.

"Gremorgan, Wait!", he yelled, and as he did so the Dwarvendim turned and came to a halt. In that moment he also saw the number of the Hresh and dropped one of his bags from his shoulder.

"Come on young Cael. It is no time to be dawdling!"

Mallen reached him in a matter of seconds, out of breath and sick to his stomach with the exertion of the chase. His chest heaved as he tried to recover some measure of his strength.

“What will we do, they will be upon us within minutes. How far is it to the exit?”

Gremorgan searched the walls ahead and frowned, “We are still at least a kilometre from sanctuary. We will need to slow down the Hresh or they will have us.”

Carefully he pulled a small globe of black metal from the bag at his feet and threw it out into the centre of the Hall. Gremorgan hoisted the bag back upon his shoulder and turned again to run.

“That should keep them busy for a short while. Now hurry, if we can make the exit we will find safety.”

Together they ran on. The break had done nothing to ease the leaden feeling Mallen carried in his legs, but he staggered on. Gremorgan had said nothing about what the metal globe was supposed to do, but with the Hresh getting closer his entire being was focused on the last stretch that would see them to safety. He had no choice but to trust that Gremorgan knew what he was doing.

Suddenly from behind the two men came a series of shattering explosions that sent waves of sound resounding through the Hall of Whispers. In an instant they were hit by a shockwave that swept both Dwarvendim and Kalborean off their feet, throwing them forward in a pounding wave of dust and debris. Both hit the ground hard, unable to stop until they barrelled into one of the stone pillars. In a flurry of gravel and debris they came to a halt, their bodies enmeshed in a tangle of bags and spilled equipment. Gremorgan roused himself first, and shook gouts of powder-dust out of his hair and clothing as he tried to put himself into some semblance of order. Mallen struggled to get to his feet but old wounds made it difficult. His ribs were still sore from the fight with the Molgoth and the fall had done nothing to help. With Gremorgan's assistance he was able to stand and both men quickly began to recover their equipment. Of the arches behind nothing could be seen, a solid wall of dust, roiling and twisting in the concussion of the blast, moving quickly in their direction, swallowing everything in its path.

Gremorgan rubbed his face and shook a drift of dust from his beard. “Well, that's a surprise and no mistake. Wasn't supposed to go off like that.”

Mallen looked at the Dwarvendim, “What was it? A blasting

powder?"

"No Mallen Cael, nothing but a simple concussion device, designed to create a large bang and enough noise to stun anything within range. Should have done nothing more than raise a bit of dust. Just enough anyway, to get us away from here and out of the sight of the Hresh. A miscalculation on my part, although I do not know why it should have been so powerful. Still, I think we should move on, the Hresh will wake up soon enough."

Mallen watched the wall of dust moving down the Hall towards them and tried to shake some of the dirt from his clothing as he did so. He hoped fervently that the explosion had not damaged the exquisite carving behind them but he had no time to worry on it. With legs aching he turned to the exit ahead and again the two picked up their pace. Behind them the cloud of dust had obscured everything, and amongst the echoes of the blast Mallen could hear screams and curses rising beyond the roiling cloud. Desperately they ran on, weighed down by their equipment but determined to find the only way out that might provide safety. It was only after a further twenty minutes hard effort that Gremorgan found what he was looking for.

The exit was cunningly enclosed within a field of intricate carvings and sculpture that hid its wide opening effectively from view. It could not be recognised at all unless a person was standing directly before it. When he came to Gremorgan's side Mallen found himself before the threshold of a wide archway, carved as a twisting tangle of ivy and intertwined branches. The archway was just as intricate in nature as any of the other surfaces in the Hall of Whispers, but it struck him immediately that there was something different about it. There was a power here, Mallen sensed it as soon as he came to a halt before it. Beyond this beautifully carved arch something was waiting, watching everything they did. It was not malevolent, Mallen was sure of that. It was more a brooding dormancy, something waiting for its opportunity to come to life. It prickled at his skin and he could feel a soft wind caressing his face as he waited at the threshold.

Gremorgan had found what he had strove for and did not hesitate. Through the arch he ran, and Mallen followed him into a large chamber that opened up beyond. The chamber was no different to the arches through which they had been travelling, every inch of its surface a carved masterpiece of stone trees and animal life. At its far end however, was set a doorway of clear crystal some fifteen metres high that glistened in the light as if it was on fire. Its entire surface

was crowded with symbols and incantations long lost to those who built it. On either side of its open maw stood two immense hooded statues in black stone, robed in long cloaks and set in postures of greeting and quiet prayer. Whatever lay beyond was shrouded in darkness. Gremorgan paused for only a second then spoke quickly.

“Beyond this stone entrance lies the Kora'gef, the Crystal Cascade, that will take us out of the reach of the Hresh. Do exactly as I do Mallen Cael, for here can be found wonders the like of which you will never see again.”

Mallen went to ask what he meant, but the sounds of the Hresh somewhere out in the Hall brought any possible conversation to an abrupt end. Although weary the two men hoisted their packs and ran again for the far end of the chamber and the beckoning doorway. As they stepped over the threshold Mallen could see only that it opened into a wide natural cavern that wound downwards in a series of tight curves before disappearing into the darkness below. The Kalborean looked to Gremorgan and wondered what they would need to do next to escape the Hordim. In such a place they would need more light if they were to successfully make their way.

At the threshold of this great cavern Gremorgan stood with his arms raised and began to chant. Mallen recognised it as the same dirge he had used in the battle against the Molgoth, but the result he obtained proved completely different. As Mallen stood next to the Dwarvendim he could feel the same power building in the air about them, a charged energy that spun itself tightly about the Dwarvendim before disappearing into the air above. This time no orb of light materialised. Instead the walls themselves began to glisten, then shine forth as if a great flame had been brought to life, illuminating them from within. Piece by piece the walls, floor and ceiling of the Kora'gef burst into life, a great fountain of colour and brilliance that advanced down the wide spiralling cavern as it fell away into the distance below.

Against this backdrop Mallen could see the true nature of the Kora'gef. It was a staircase, a huge stairway of carved crystal more than thirty metres wide, wrought as a waterfall frozen in time as it flowed down into the root of the world. Gremorgan stopped his chant and looked at Mallen. He could see the impression the cascade had made upon the young Kalborean.

“Impressive isn't it? I can only assume that it was artificed by the same power that made the Caer'nar'dorum. Under other

circumstances I could tell you quite a bit about it but we do not have the time. Come, we must get to its base to be assured of safety from the Hresh.”

The Dwarvendim pulled at his companion's arm and then started down. It was a descent the like of which Mallen could never have imagined. About him the crystal rock flowed and ebbed as he might have seen a stream cascade down a rock-strewn slope. In its frozen, captured form it wound its way downwards, a solid spiral stairway that twisted tightly, following the natural curves of the vast cavern as it went.

For some hours the two descended into the Kora'gef, each series of stairways and landings a new revelation to the Kalborean. The staircase itself lay as a perfect piece of carved crystal, but the walls and vaulted ceilings were as the builders had left them, in their natural state and just as magnificent as the stairway itself. Huge stalagmites and stalactites crowded the edges of the crystal stairs, and in the brightness of the cavern they shone in a glittering display of colour and reflected light. In this place of wonder it was easy to find time slipping away and it came as a surprise to him when he realised that he had heard nothing more of the Hresh. It seemed to the Kalborean that they had indeed evaded their pursuers. When Gremorgan finally stopped to rest, they both fell upon the smooth surface of the steps and lay still, exhaustion gripping them forcibly.

“Surely we have come far enough,” said Mallen eventually. “Such labours must be rested from. I hear nothing of the Hresh behind. Is it not time now to eat and take rest?”

Gremorgan did not need to be convinced. “Indeed it is time to rest. My plans for our quick passage out of the domain of the Hra'gora have well and truly been altered now. Nothing can be lost by taking time to eat.”

Without another word he threw open one of his bags and fished out two of the small loaves of Nahla bread. Mallen took one of them and broke it between his fingers. Immediately he was surrounded by the heavy scent of spices, and in his state of fatigue it made his head swim. It was a smell he could not resist and slowly he began to eat. As he chewed at his food he took the time to appreciate the artistry of the Kora'gef and in doing so did not notice the subtle regenerative power of the Nahla working upon him. In a matter of moments his head had cleared and his breathing stabilised. Legs that had cried out for rest became strong once more and his shoulders lost the terrible

ache that had left his neck stiff and sore. Half the loaf had been consumed before he also felt the heavy hand of fatigue pressing down upon his body, telling him that he had done enough. With a large piece of the bread still in his mouth, he fell into sleep.



In a swirl of images and sound Mallen slept. Oblivious to the dangers that may have laid upon the steps of the Kora'gef he fell into a deep slumber that completely enfolded him in its embrace. Upon the crystal cascade his dreams came quickly, and with the power of the Nahla still working upon him, took on a clarity that left him twitching in his sleep. Deep he ventured into his memories and it was there that his dreams began. His journey moved before him as a series of emerging and dissolving images; the attack on Callenfrey, his pursuit of the Hresh, his meeting with the Dwarvendim, all a montage of sight and emotion. Then, from somewhere within it all came new images, strange places and creatures that he had never seen. Citadels that reached for the clouds and wide lands of deep forest and pristine lake. He travelled across vast plains as quickly as the wind might presage a storm, and crossed snow-capped mountain ranges in the space of a single breath. Then, before he could make sense of what he had seen, he found himself back upon the steps of the Kora'gef. But he was not alone. Beside him lay Gremorgan, also in sleep. In a sharp instance of consciousness Mallen recognised where he was, but he was sure that he was still asleep, and in a moment of panic he tried to wake himself from his dreaming. He found he could not. Something else was holding him there, and as he watched the form of Gremorgan faded away. He was now alone upon the Kora'gef.

Held in the grip of an insurmountable power Mallen felt himself being pulled to the side, away from the main stairway and in behind a wide spray of crystal that hid him from view. He had no control over his movements but the force had not harmed him. Instead, he had simply been moved aside, as if to make the room available for something else. Mallen could not help but wonder what that something might be.

There he waited, huddled behind a wave of crystal, wondering what terrors lay ahead, desperately fighting to raise himself from sleep. Then a movement caught his eye. From the threshold of the Kora'gef high above he could see vague figures moving down the stairs, hundreds and then thousands of forms that filled the breadth of the crystal stairway and then advanced down towards him.

Hidden within his alcove Mallen waited as the procession drew closer. He could see clearly that all were hooded, all dressed in black robes lined with silver and Azuril. As they descended the line grew longer, more of the beings emerging from the threshold of the Kora'gef as they went. By the time they had reached Mallen's hiding place they numbered in their tens of thousands and still they came. Not until the vast number had reached the base of the stairway below did they stop, and then all was silent.

Mallen peered out over the vast assemblage and wondered at their multitudes. Hooded and silent the figures stood quietly waiting for some unseen command. Then from the silence a murmur began to run through them as the wind might unsettle a field of long grasses. Far out of sight, in the depths of the Kora'gef something was happening and it was quickly being carried up the winding stairway, an unspoken call that had all upon the steps alive with expectation. Then as one the figures removed their hoods. Mallen gasped as he saw that these were no human pilgrims. Their features struck him immediately. With long flowing silver hair and dry, olive complexions they had the air of beings as old as the march of time itself, and as they stood in quiet expectation he could see a strange resemblance forming, of faces not quite human but not quite alien either, a haunting mixture of all things sentient that had lived in the world. Then they began to sing.

As one the unearthly choir let forth their voices and Mallen found himself overwhelmed by it. From somewhere deep in the Kora'gef arose a thousand deep voices, an outpouring of sound that resonated in the stairway, capturing everything within its grasp. Mallen could feel it vibrating within the stone at his finger-tips and sending tremors deep within his bones. A throng of voices then joined the first, a series of higher notes that swept up the stairway until all were enmeshed in the song and then, once the crystal cavern was resonating like a living thing to the outpouring, the song changed.

From within the choir a new rhythm arose. Here Mallen could hear human voices intoning a chant as old as the earth itself, and in the

rise and fall of its melody came a single voice as clear as crystal. It came to Mallen in words he could not recognise, but its meaning was unambiguous. The song rang true, both subtle and evocative, a celebration of all things living in the world, and a reaffirmation of the power of life itself. In its complex cycle it grew in energy, until above the voices there could be heard the sounds of the natural world gathering in the vast cavern.

At first Mallen could hear the hint of a wind blowing through the canopy of a forest, moving as a wave up the long staircase. Then came the uncanny echoes of rain slapping against the unyielding stone of a mountainside, tempered then by the soft lapping of water at a lake's edge. From within this tranquil mosaic a new theme insinuated itself. Far away the first hints of a summer storm reverberated, a rumbling growl in the distance that provided a backdrop to a chorus of human voices that rose and fell before being overtaken by a wild chant that grew ominously in the air above. Mallen recognised it as the sounds of Hordim, but these in turn were supplanted by an even more alien dirge that wormed its way out of the depths. Horns blared in time to great drums that clamoured forth in an attempt to drown out the rest until all was thrust aside by the sounds of the earth, of shifting rock and exploding magma. From above it all rose again the same deep voices from the depths of the cascade, resonating within the stone and full of power.

Together the song cycled over and over, each time being weaved and metered in a different pattern until Mallen began to feel the air charge with energy. Even in his sleep he smelled the heady odours of wet grass and soil, of the static tingle of a lightning strike and shuddered at the pure chill of ice-water. Only when the Kora'gef was saturated with these sensations of the wild world did the figures begin to move once again. In a steady procession they replaced their hoods and moved down the crystal stairway. Then in a wave of energy they were gone, dissolving into dust as a hot wind blew from the depths below. It was only then that Mallen was released from the grip of the strange power that had held him so effectively. He shook himself awake to find Gremorgan standing over him. The Dwarvendim had a wide smile upon his face, and Mallen could see he was flushed with excitement.

“Did you see them?”, he cried excitedly, “Did you see the Hra'gora?”

Mallen shook his head and tried to clear senses still dulled by the hand of sleep. But he had seen them, it had not been a dream, or had

it?

“They were the Hra'gora? I thought you were talking about creatures of flesh and bone. I had no idea you were talking about dreams.”

Gremorgan laughed and dragged Mallen to his feet. “My friend, the Hra'gora do not allow themselves to be looked upon openly. They pick where they are seen, and do so at a moment of their choosing. But we have beheld them and heard the wonder of their song. It is a great day!”

Mallen could not help but marvel at Gremorgan's change. All the tension that had festered between them had disappeared, his demeanour now that of a child excited by what they had both experienced.

“Who are the Hra'gora?” asked Mallen.

“They are Earthkind Mallen Cael, spirits of the bedrock of the world, and subjects to the Shan'duil itself. Along with the other Earthkind they keep the balance that gives life to everything in Arborell, and it is their song that binds us all in the eternal cycle of life and death. I cannot believe I have seen it for myself. Truly it is a great day for us both.”

Mallen looked back up the now empty crystal staircase, remembering the multitude that had covered its every step, and then wondered at the Hresh and where they might have gone. In truth they had fallen asleep at a time when the Hresh should have easily been able to overrun them, yet they were nowhere to be seen. Gremorgan saw where the Kalborean's eyes led and reassured him.

“The Hresh cannot follow us here Mallen Cael, we are too close to the source of EarthMagic. It is not in their nature to follow where we must now go. But we must move on. I do not know how long the Song of the Hra'gora lasted, and we must get back to the surface if we are to catch up with the Warband that has your brother. First though we must make a short detour.”

In the majesty of the Kora'gef Gremorgan shouldered his bags and then started down the steps. It was not what Mallen had expected. “Hold on Gremorgan. Why are we still going down? The surface lies far above and this stairway will not take us there.”

The Dwarvendim halted on the steps and turned to face his companion. “Do you forget that the Hresh still wait above? They may not follow us down but they know there is no other way out of this place. They will be waiting for us at the threshold of the

Caer'nar'dorum, knowing full well that we must return that way. If we are to get back on our proper trail we must first find the bottom of these stairs. Only then will we have what we need to get past the Hordim.”

“What can we find so far below that can help us?”, asked Mallen.

“At the base of these stairs lies the solution to our immediate problem. It will require some quick talking though.”

“Talking? To whom?” replied Mallen.

Gremorgan turned back to the stairs and continued on. Mallen barely heard his reply. “We are going to seek an audience with the Shan'duil, Mallen Cael. Soon we must talk with the source of EarthMagic itself. It would do well if you would clean yourself up a bit.”

Mallen shrugged his shoulders and followed the Dwarvendim. He had started his quest with only one intention at heart, to find his brother and return him safely home. Whatever lay ahead was unknown, all he could be sure of was that he now trusted Gremorgan, and with his help would not stop until Tomas was safe.

## Chapter 7 - Mentor



Something important had happened to Gremorgan on the steps of the Kora'gef, the consequences of an unforeseen discovery filling his thoughts as he descended the crystal stairway. He had said nothing of it to Mallen, his companion still shaken by the reality of the Hra'gora and their song, but he knew that he would need to share it with him soon. It was something profound in its implication and he needed time to consider the ramifications of his discovery. Perhaps later, there would be time for him to explain the importance of what he had uncovered to the young Kalborean.

For him the song of the Hra'gora had been a revelation, not just an experience that he had shared with his new companion. It had come to him unasked for, and in its simplicity he had almost missed it, but it had been there hidden within the words of the Earthkind's song. The culmination of years of hard work, of research and solitary labour had been repaid to him with the answer to a puzzle that had eluded him for more than two decades.

As the two men descended further into the bedrock of the world he took the time to ponder the song's meaning and consider what he should do about it. His young companion was not aware of it, but he had just been given the key to a power far greater than anything the Dwarvendim had yet encountered. He would do well to think upon it before telling any of his brethren.

Twenty years he had spent in the darkness and solitude of this domain, and quite by accident he had found the answer he had been looking for meshed within the strains of the Hra'goras' supplications. Why they should give it to him was puzzling, but the servants of the Shan'duil had their reasons. Of that he was sure. Perhaps it had been the presence of his companion that had stirred the Earthkind. He knew they were very receptive to the thoughts and emotions of those engaged upon an honourable quest, and he had to admit that for all the Kalborean's apparent hardness he was an honest man on a noble venture. Gremorgan had to smile though. He could well remember when he had first arrived in the domain of the Hra'gora to begin his search. The excitement of those first months had quickly been tempered by the rigours of his research and the hard labour of his efforts. Maybe in the process of his interment here he had lost the

spark that might have opened the Earthkind's song to him. He could not dismiss the idea that he might ultimately need the young Kalborean far more than he might be needed himself.

The crystal stairway extended before them in one long shining river of stone. He had been this way before and knew that there was at least another good hour before they reached the base of the stairs. He decided that in the quiet of the Kora'gef he should take the time to consider the power he had been given, and perhaps get to know a little better the Kalborean that travelled steadfastly at his side. First however, he needed to ponder the significance of what he had been given and look back at how he had arrived at such a crucial juncture.

Gremorgan could not complain about the life he had endured. The Dwarvendim as a people did not make life easy for themselves, and certainly spent nothing of what they had on the comforts or luxuries of soft living. As a child he had been separated from his family and sent to the School of Lore in Menion'Tanch. There he learned quickly that for one such as he there was no such thing as childhood, only the rigours of scholarship and the pain of martial discipline. He had been identified early in his youth as a Shadarim and with that title came both power and duty. It had stayed with him his whole life and had defined everything that he was, or ever would be.

When his King had commissioned him to the task that had sent him into the depths of the earth he had done so without question. Those who had power and responsibility obeyed the dictates of their duty above all. For he and his brethren there was only one arbiter of their actions in the world, and that was their fealty to their King. Twenty years was a long time, but he had been blessed with a long life and could not begrudge the time he had spent so far from the human world. Now he could say that it had been worth it.

His King had given him a mission, one that had been based on nothing more than prophecy. Within the dark passages of the labyrinths of the Hra'gora lay the key to a great secret, one that could finally force peace between the Dwarvendim and their mortal enemies. It was important to the security of the Stone Kingdoms, and Gremorgan Hedj had been the chosen of his brethren to search it out. He had found out very early however, that it was neither simple nor without risk, and in consequence of his task he had lived in the domain of the Hra'gora longer than any other. Now, by the subtle hand of Providence, the Kalborean had entered his world and placed him exactly where he needed to be to find the object of his searching.

He could not help but smile as he considered how difficult his life must now become. Finding the key within the words of the Hra'goras' song was only the first part of his task complete, now he must find where it must be used, and to do that he would need to go with Mallen Cael deep into the lands of the Hordim. It had been an unexpected twist in a long story, and he had to admit that after such a long time alone he could well do with the company.



“Mallen Cael,” he called, turning to his companion. “We must talk.”

Mallen twitched as if he had been stung. Gremorgan's voice was loud in the quiet of the Kora'gef and he had been diverted by his own thoughts as they followed the seemingly endless stairway downwards. Talking was something he needed to do though, and he would take advantage of it while there was the opportunity. The Dwarvendim spoke first.

“Something has been bothering me Mallen Cael. In your description of the attack upon Callenfrey you said there was around four hundred Hresh in the Warband. Upon reflection do you still consider that to be correct?”

Mallen thought for a moment and then nodded. “Yes, the guards who survived the onslaught put the Hordim at least at that number. Why do you ask?”

Gremorgan scratched at his beard. “It is curious that's all. I do not doubt that you are correct. It has been my experience though, that the Hresh do not expend half their number as rear-guards under any circumstance. They know the strength that can be found in numbers, and in unfriendly lands would never leave any more than one in ten behind to cover their retreat. There was more than two hundred Hresh in the Hall of Whispers and I know for a fact that such a large number has not been within the labyrinths long. I fear that your Warband was only part of a much larger raiding party, most of whom did not take part in the initial attack upon your home.”

The Kalborean considered the idea but Mallen was not willing to believe that any further Hresh could have evaded his notice. His own

recent experience with the Hordim had left him hoping that he would need to deal with no more than the *crue* he had been following.

"I'm not so sure of that Gremorgan," he replied. "I saw no evidence of a group larger than that which I was tracking. If a much larger Warband was on the move I would have seen some sign of it."

Gremorgan nodded and shifted the weight of his bags across his shoulders. "I was thinking about that too. When we first met you might remember the Hresh that almost discovered you at the stone bridge. I wondered as to why they didn't come after you, and for that matter why they were there at all. I have seen Hordim in the caves but not for some time, and it struck me then as curious."

Mallen stopped on the stairs and grabbed Gremorgan by the arm. "And what are your thoughts now on their presence?"

"It seems obvious, the Warband you were chasing entered the caves without stopping. They knew where they were going and had little need to leave a force behind to cover them. No Kalborean Army unit would dare venture into such places, they would instead try and pick up the Hordim's trail further to the west, at any one of the openings that would allow the Hordim an exit. Such openings are well known to the Scouts and Rangers of Kalborea. No, those Hresh had been left behind to meet a larger group that must have been encamped elsewhere. It would not surprise me if a much larger *crue* made it into the caves whilst we were eating stew in my quarters."

Mallen took in the words and then a sharp realisation struck him.

"If that is so then my quest to rescue Tomas has just become much harder, hasn't it."

Gremorgan nodded once again. "That is true Master Cael, but do not despair too greatly at this point. Remember that the larger the Warband the slower it will travel, and the wider will be the trail that we will be able to follow. Providence will give us our opportunity, we can trust in that."

Mallen thought on Gremorgan's words and realised that it was indeed possible that the Warband had been divided before the attack. It was not unknown for the Hordim to use a smaller force to attack a target and then regroup afterwards. Any pursuing Army units would lay their plans based on reports taken and then be overwhelmed when confronted by a much larger force than expected. It had happened before and it was a possibility that kept the young Kalborean deep in thought as they continued on.

For a while the two men descended the stairway. As they ventured

deeper Mallen could feel a steady warming in the air, an increase in temperature that grew imperceptibly as they spiralled lower into the Kora'gef. After the chill of the upper levels it came as a welcome change, however it was not long before he could feel himself sweating under the weight of his travel clothes and backpack.

“How long will it be before we reach the end of this stairway? The heat is beginning to sap my strength as surely as our pursuit in the Hall of Whispers did before.”

Gremorgan looked about the vast stairway and answered. “No less than five minutes will see us at the stairway's end. There we can rest for a short while before we make our way to the Shan'duil.”

Mallen was glad for an end to the endless steps of the Kora'gef, he was not so sure he felt relieved by the idea that there might be further travel involved before reaching Gremorgan's goal. He reasoned quickly that any further need to find the Shan'duil in this place must involve long distances and an unreasonable length of time to reach. Perhaps there were other options.

“Is there really a need to find this Shan'duil you speak of. By now the Hresh must have got well and truly tired of waiting for us to return to the Hall of Whispers. Can we not return to our path and get out of this place?”

Gremorgan smiled and turned to his companion. “Do you really want to go back up these stairs? I would have thought any option that would speed us on our way would have been preferred.”

Mallen stopped on the stairs. He was not convinced. “Gremorgan, I have no doubt you know exactly what you are doing. You are just not confiding much of it with me. Tell me where it is we go, and why, or I shall indeed begin to climb back up these stairs and leave you here to enjoy the solace of your own company once again.”

The Dwarvendim sighed and slipped his bags from his shoulders. It was not in his nature to explain anything to anyone. In a long life of solitude it had been a skill he had had little recent opportunity to exercise. He could see the Kalborean's point though. It would be best to be open about what was about to happen.

“We cannot return to the Hall of Whispers as we are, Mallen Cael. The Hresh will wait as long as it takes for us to either return to them, or die of starvation down here. With the weapons at our disposal we are no match for them, and I can tell you frankly that I do not wish to damage the edge of my axe upon any of their thick heads at this time. We need something else, a boon that will see us past them and back

on the trail of your brother as quickly as possible. To this end we must seek an audience with the Shan'duil, and if all goes well, gain an opportunity to make up the time that we have lost. It is as simple as that."

In the quiet of the Kora'gef Mallen considered Gremorgan's reply and found it raised more questions than it answered.

"What can we possibly get down here that would do that, and more importantly what is the Shan'duil anyway? You keep on saying it, but it is something that you have not yet fully explained."

Gremorgan paused for a moment and scratched at his face. This was a harder set of questions to answer than Mallen knew.

"What we will find down here is something that I cannot tell you, for it is not my place to say what help will be given to us. The Shan'duil is just another name for the River of Life, of which it has been given many. I choose such a name because it is most comfortable for me to do so. The River of Life however, is no common thing and if one is to make reference to it, one should do so with respect. Have you not heard of the River in your travels?"

Mallen nodded. Talk of such things had been the stuff of many roadside campfires and he had to admit that he had treated such talk flippantly. In the hard world in which he had lived, such things seemed of little importance.

"I have heard of the River of Life, but to me it has always been just myth and the talk of drunks or fools. Are you telling me that we are actually going to see it? And in doing so talk with it?"

Gremorgan laughed out loud. In his world the River was as real as the boots he wore upon his feet. He could see his Kalborean friend was in for a shock.

"Mallen Cael, the River of Life, or the Shan'duil as it is known, is as much a part of your existence as any other part of the natural world. Although you may not know it, the River flows beneath the world of Arborell binding every living thing to it. It is the source of life here and a storehouse for the power of EarthMagic. Everything that grows, and lives, and dies is bound to its eternal ebb and flow. It is the one power in our world that has no equal. We are about to look upon its face and ask it for what we want. Whether it gives it to us will be completely up to it."

Mallen shook his head in disbelief but he could see that Gremorgan was serious. The Dwarvendim turned to continue his descent but found himself with one more question to answer.

“Who are you Gremorgan? You are no common prospector, that became apparent from the first time I sat in your quarters. I would like to know who I am travelling with before I take a further step.”

“Is it not sufficient that you know my name, and in that knowledge be assured that I wish you no harm?”

“It would be enough, but you have shown me things that are beyond the experience of the years I have lived in the world. The solid, real world I have come to believe in has faded before the uncertainties of your magic and the power of the Hra'gora. Tell me now who you are and from this point I will forever call you friend.”

Gremorgan extended his hand and as he did so Mallen could feel his huge frame grow before him, the edges of his travel cloak lightening with a radiance that had its source deep within him. “To my family, Mallen Cael, I am known as Gremorgan Hedj, third son of Paderian Hedj of Menion'Barac. To my friends I am simply Gremorgan. But to my people I am the Maturi Hedj, Seventh LoreMaster of the Grand Circle and servant to the Doctrine of Araheal. That is who I am and who I shall always be. Take heart young master in the knowledge that I mean you no harm.”

Mallen took Gremorgan's hand and shook it in friendship. Everything the Dwarvendim had done and said now made sense. He was a LoreMaster, one of the most powerful men in Arborell and regularly the centre of great suspicion and distrust in the world outside the Stone Kingdoms of the Dwarvendim. The eleven LoreMasters of the Grand Circle were the only men in the known world who had mastered the ways of EarthMagic. And such power was the subject of both envy and distrust by those who did not possess it. Now he could truly say his companion was known to him. It made Mallen feel much more comfortable in the huge man's presence.

“I believe you hold no malice towards me. Shall I continue to call you Gremorgan or do you prefer a title of some kind?”

The Dwarvendim smiled and shifted the weight of his bags upon his shoulders. “I think Master Cael, that you can call me anything you want.”

“In that case Gremorgan will do me fine.”

With that the two men continued their descent of the Kora'gef and in its silence began to hear the low sound of a drumbeat carried on the hot air as they took the last twist in the stairway's carved stonework.

When they arrived at the base of the stairs Mallen found himself

within a wide chamber, roughly square in shape that rose into a high, vaulted ceiling above. Here the walls were plain, without carving or device, hewn of a marbled yellow stone, except for one large metal plaque that covered the entire wall at their right hand. Engraved into the thick golden metal was four lines of sharply etched writing. Somehow it seemed familiar and Gremorgan stood before it with his hands at his waist, murmuring to himself as he read the lines in turn.

“What does it say?” Mallen asked.

The Dwarvendim stood and faced his companion, a glint of sorrow in his visage. “That is the question that has haunted my brethren since the day we gained mastery of EarthMagic. These four lines are the Ather’Lorell and they are the basis of all the power wielded by the LoreMasters. We say the words and make supplication to the forces of EarthMagic, but their actual meaning remains a mystery locked within the ancient language that wrought them. It is a puzzle that has been put before us by the Shan’duil itself. The River of Life has provided no clues, it is something we apparently must solve on our own.”

“What will you gain by uncovering it?” Mallen asked.

Gremorgan turned again to the lines of text and answered, “That is a question that can only be answered when we do.”

Without further discussion the two men sat upon the last step of the Kora’gef and rested. The descent of the crystal stairway had been taxing on both mind and body, and for a short while the companions sat quietly, contemplating the chamber they had found. Mallen was glad that they had reached the foot of the great stairway, but it left him anxious to move on and the chamber seemed to provide no way forward. There was no exit from this place and it appeared to him that they had travelled a great distance for nothing. For his part Gremorgan reclined as best he could upon the last few steps of the Kora’gef and considered carefully the huge metal plate. He did not appear at all worried.

“What are we to do now?” Mallen asked after he felt sufficiently rested. Gremorgan said nothing but got to his feet and collected his bags.

“Do not be concerned young Master, nothing is ever as it seems.”

Carefully he pulled a small leather pouch from a pocket within his travel cloak and from it placed two circular pieces of rubber in his ears. Then he turned to the metal engraving. As he did so he looked at Mallen and winked, “Watch Master Cael, even solid rock cannot

stand before the power of EarthMagic.”

With his back to Mallen, Gremorgan raised his hands before him, palms facing the metal engraving, and uttered a single word. “Tolluth.”

Instantly the lines of text began to glow, a deep fire bursting from the depths of the engraving, sending sheets of brilliant light out from the words and across the chamber into the wall opposite. Gremorgan jumped aside and pulled Mallen with him as the light danced across the facing wall and dug deep into its stone. Within seconds the opposing wall began to fade, a long crystalline passageway uncovered behind it as the solid stone disappeared into nothingness.

With the wall gone, the chamber was suddenly flooded with sound, a deep reverberating beat that pounded in the closeness of the space, assailing Mallen's ears and driving spears of pain into his temples. It was a sound he could not escape. With hands on his ears he looked at Gremorgan but the Dwarvendim seemed unaffected, instead he fumbled about in one of his pockets and presented the Kalborean with two of the small rubber discs, indicating with a quick gesture that he should place them in his ears. Mallen did so and immediately the sound lessened. It could still be heard but had been muffled to a level that was tolerable. He could hear nothing else.

Enfolded in a thick cloud of heat and surging noise they began to walk down the crystal passage. It was rough-hewn and shaped as a long stone arch that led to an opening some one hundred metres further into the rock. Gremorgan picked up his pace. Mallen could hear nothing except the background noise that sent tremors along his teeth and temples, but he could see an air of expectation in the LoreMaster that gave no doubt that something important was ahead. And indeed there was.

When they reached the end of the passage it opened out on to a flat outcrop of stone, uncarved or engineered in any manner that Mallen could discern. It was wide though, about ten metres in width and fifteen in extension as it jutted precipitously from a sheer cliff that ran for many hundreds of metres above where they were standing, and for almost the same distance below. Mallen could see that they were in a huge open cavern, one untouched by any sentient hand, formed by the forces of the earth itself. About them a hot wind rushed up the cliff face before swirling into the heights of the cavern above, disappearing between huge buttresses of stone that sprang from all sides of the chamber. It was within this surging turmoil of heat and sound that

Mallen Cael looked upon the face of the Shan'duil.

Carefully he peered over the edge of the outcrop. Its surface had been worn smooth by the footprints of many visitors and apart from a single stone plinth that sat squat upon its farthest edge was unremarkable. Gremorgan stood close by his side, and as he looked into the depths of the cavern he could see clearly against glowing walls of rock the blinding rush of a river, shining in its own brilliance. It was not water though, and it was hard for him to place a description upon exactly what he was seeing, but he could not discount the idea that the Shan'duil looked to him as stars might if they could be captured and brought together in a river of flowing energy. From multitudes of openings in the cavern's lower walls goutts of liquid light were spraying out into a wide lake at the base of the cliff, ebbing and gushing in time to the reverberating beat that was sending tremors through his body. Within the overwhelming pounding of the river he could see forms flowing with the light, as fish might struggle against a river current. And everywhere was the brilliant glow, turning the cavern white and then blue in colour as the rushing noise echoed around the monstrous chamber.

Gremorgan could say nothing. The noise was too loud, but he got Mallen's attention and then pointed to his chest, tapping upon his ribs as he pointed down into the depths below. Mallen understood immediately. It was a heartbeat, the pounding rush of the life-force of the Earth, flowing through endless tunnels and tributaries like blood flowed beneath his skin. He watched it for a short time then looked to Gremorgan, wondering what they must now do for the Shan'duil was far below them. Mallen could not see how they might contact it and he looked to the Dwarvendim for the answer. Without a word the LoreMaster was already preparing.

First he set about securing all his bags tightly to his body. After a few gesticulations Mallen did the same, bemused but anxious to see what was about to happen. When all their gear was stowed and tightly secured about their bodies the Dwarvendim moved to the small pillar of stone at the edge of the outcrop. There was nothing particularly remarkable about it, and except for a small globe of crystal that sat upon its flat upper surface it seemed quite out of place, almost temporary. Gremorgan came close against Mallen and cupped his hands against the Kalborean's ear. He was shouting but Mallen could barely hear him.

“Mallen Cael, we cannot speak directly with the Shan'duil, it takes

preparation we don't have time for. There is however, a quicker way. You need only place your hand against the crystal sphere when I do. Do you understand?"

Mallen nodded his head. There was now nothing the LoreMaster could say that seemed to surprise him. Together they reached for the sphere and as one touched its shimmering surface.

The effect was instantaneous. In a flash of light, and a pause in time that lasted less than a heartbeat, both Gremorgan and Mallen found themselves within a small chamber no larger than an office. There was no door and every wall but one was stacked from floor to ceiling in bookcases and scroll shelves, all heavily laden with documents and other bound texts. The one free wall before them stood as a single piece of clear crystal, a window that looked out upon the cavern of the Shan'duil in all its shining brilliance. Mallen could not see the outcrop upon which they had been standing. Here however, there was no noise and little heat. The crystal wall was a backdrop to a simple oak desk that sat solidly in front of them. Sitting at the desk was an old man. He was immersed in the reading of a unrolled parchment and did not seem to have noticed their sudden arrival. Gremorgan spoke to gain his attention.

"Mentor, we stand before you as humble servants to the Doctrine of Araheal. It is our wish to ask for a favour."

The old man lifted his head and folded the parchment so that neither of the newcomers could see what might be written upon it. Mallen winced, he was sure he could hear the man's joints crunching as he moved.

"A favour you say? Servants to the Doctrine you declare? Well, we'll see about that. Who are you?" He pointed his finger at Gremorgan and with it came a chill that filled the small room, cutting through their clothing and numbing their skin. The Dwarvendim answered without haste or trepidation.

"I am Gremorgan Hedj, Seventh Maturi to the Grand Circle and servant to the Doctrine of Araheal. I stand before you in need of assistance and declare that my intentions are both honourable and without malice."

The old man listened carefully and then turned to Mallen. "And who might you be. You have no connection to this place, no affinity with the power of the Shan'duil. How is it that you come to stand before the Mentor?"

Mallen felt the Mentor's gaze cut through his own thoughts and

before he could speak he felt something grasping deep into his memories. The old man had not waited for a reply, he had found his own way to answer his questions and Mallen could do nothing to hold back the power the Mentor was wielding. Any resistance was pushed aside as the tendrils of a great energy insinuated its way into his thoughts, selecting everything that related to how he happened to be standing beside the huge Dwarvendim. It was over in a matter of seconds.

“I see you are a man with an uncertain future ahead of you. A great task ahead that seems beyond your skills to complete.” He turned and looked out over the surging brilliance of the Shan'duil and then spoke softly, “It is good that you have found one such as the Maturi Hedj. Without him you will not succeed.”

Gremorgan stepped forward. “Mentor, we ask that you grant us one favour, a small boon that will see us on our way and a step closer to finding the object of our search. It is for you to decide how this might be done.”

The Mentor turned from the window and strode over to Mallen. His clothes were so old that they flaked from his form as he moved, but there was a light in his eyes that sparkled with the vigour of a predatory bird. There was an energy within him that Mallen could feel and as he stood before the frail form he wondered how long he must have been here. The Mentor looked at the Kalborean and then turned his head to Gremorgan.

“Does he understand the Doctrine?”

Gremorgan shook his head. “He is a novice in the ways of EarthMagic Mentor, he does not understand what the Doctrine is, nor its dictates.”

The Mentor snorted and moved back to his desk. When he was seated he pulled open the parchment that had been hastily folded and laid it out for all to see. With a simple wave of his hand the room was filled with a flowing series of images and voices, both human and Hordim. It was telling a story, one that Mallen did not understand. It seemed important to the Mentor that he did.

“Before you Mallen Cael is the history of the Doctrine of Araheal and the reason that the Dwarvendim of Arborell have found favour with the powers of EarthMagic. It is a story you must understand before the boon that you ask can be granted. Listen carefully.”

“Before the coming of Men to this world only the Mutan had access to the power that could be given by the Shan'duil. They had taken it

when the ancient Trell'sara had been thrown down, and to serve the needs of their own lust for power had used it to dominate the rest of the Trell's servants. For centuries they harnessed EarthMagic to wreak havoc upon their world, and in their decrepitude have caused great harm to the lands of Arborell. It was only with the arrival of Men in the world that the Shan'duil found a way to calm its unease.”

“The first thing you must understand about EarthMagic Mallen Cael of Kalborea, is that it is only interested in one thing, balance. The health and vitality of the lands of Arborell are built upon a foundation of balance, of equal forces in constant flux, one always limiting and countering the other. Just as death follows life, and night follows day, so too EarthMagic requires this levelling of the scales, and until the arrival of Men in the world it had been without balance for a very long time.”

As the Mentor spoke the images between them changed and flowed. As his words rang out within the chamber so too the images and sounds of history long past were brought to life, a vivid illustration of the world as it once was. Mallen could see in the old man's eyes that there was a point to his lesson, one that he would need to learn if they were to obtain help.

“The ancients knew of the need for balance but disregarded it, and fell into an oblivion of their own making. With their demise the Mutan took up the powers of the Shan'duil and in time found themselves, and their kindred, thrown into the wastes of the Sanhar. What they all refused to acknowledge was that power such as that granted by EarthMagic must be shared and cannot be commanded. It was the Dwarvendim who first realised this, and it was one Dwarvendim in particular who found a way to gain access to it.”

Mallen watched as the visions before him changed, displaying a single Man, wrapped in robes and holding a long stave of white wood as he stood upon the lip of a high cliff, talking with what looked like one of the Hra'gora. The apparition was a turmoil of diaphanous cloth and shadowed form framed within the ice and snow of a mountain storm, but the Man stood his ground, and in that maelstrom said four words that broke the silence of the Mentor's chamber. In that instant Mallen could feel the world turn upon itself and shudder into a new alignment where not only the Mutan held power.

“An agreement was reached upon that very mountainside, at a place known to men as Araheal. The Shan'duil would grant the powers of EarthMagic to eleven members of the Dwarvendim nation,

in the same proportion as there were wielders of power amongst the Mutan. But there were conditions, and the breaking of any of them would mean the withdrawal of such power to all who had been granted access.”

The Mentor folded the parchment and looked at Mallen, his frame now flooded with an untapped power that enfolded him in light.

“One of these conditions is that any favour granted by the Shan'duil, any power developed or harnessed by one must be given openly to all others. If I grant this boon for you, and deliver you quickly to the outside world, you must understand that the same grant must be given to the Clavern'Sigh of the Mutan, for them to use at a time befitting to them. Do you understand?”

Mallen nodded his head but was not sure what the Mentor wanted of him. The Mentor stood and pointed his outstretched finger directly at the Kalborean's chest. “Is the granting of this boon worth the delivery of its power in equal measure to your mortal enemies? Say yes and it will be granted. Be in any doubt and I will return you to the stone outcrop from whence you came.”

For his part Mallen knew he needed the help but the weighing of such matters was outside his experience. In a moment of indecision he looked at Gremorgan. The Dwarvendim stood stone-faced but nodded his head just enough to show that he was in agreement. That was all Mallen needed.

“Yes,” was all he said.

“Then so it shall be. Behind you is a door. Open it and take the help that has been offered.”

Both men turned to find a doorway in the wall behind them, where previously there had only been shelving. The door was closed, made of sturdy oak and fitted upon thick brass hinges. Its surface was covered with a carved scene of dragons in flight and at its centre was set a large spherical knob.

Gremorgan thanked the Mentor and then spoke to Mallen. “We had better be going Master Cael, the outside world awaits us.”

Together they walked to the door and placed their hands upon the doorknob.

Mallen could not remember what happened next, but when he rose from the ground upon which he lay the first thing he noticed was that it was late afternoon. In the west the twin suns were setting, spreading deep-red and orange layers of colour upon the horizon. Above, the sky was darkening and the first stars of night were

beginning to appear. After the heat of the Shan'duil it was cold, a wind blowing from the north bringing with it a blustering chill that gave a hint of bad weather to come. Quickly he looked around and found Gremorgan heaving himself upright. His bags had somehow wrapped themselves around his neck and he was having no small amount of difficulty untangling them to his satisfaction. Only when his throat was free did he speak.

“Well, we certainly got what we asked for, eh?”

Mallen smiled and nodded. He was glad to be breathing fresh air once more. “Where are we? Are we really out of the labyrinths or is this some trick?”

Gremorgan raised himself to his feet and stretched his back. “We are indeed out Mallen Cael. The Mentor has placed us where we would have been if we had not been pursued by the Hresh in the Caer'nar'dorum. In his wisdom he has deposited us at the southern edge of Trebett's Gorge. It will be for us to find our way from here however.”

Mallen carefully surveyed the lay of the land and tried to determine exactly where they were. To the west and south the ground fell away in a series of descending slopes before meeting a wide plain that disappeared into the encroaching darkness. To the north stood a defile cut deep into a solid wall of rock, weathered and bracken filled. Beyond it sank a winding gorge within which the dry bed of a long dead river meandered out of sight. Behind them rose a sheer cliff, a wall of splintered granite from which the table of ground upon which they stood extended out, before falling away to the plains below. At its base was a small opening, choked at its edges with dead Oer'daaki vines and low bushes.

Gremorgan was looking westwards, into the last embers of the setting suns. His thoughts had already turned to practical issues.

“Our first concern must be to find a safe place to sleep for the night and then find the trail of the Hordim upon first light tomorrow. Nothing can be gained by trying to pick up their trail now. If they have maintained a large force as we suspect then we will find their tracks upon the slopes to the west. The Gorge to our north is a dead end. If the Crue has come this way we will find their tracks upon the softer earth of the ground below.”

Mallen agreed. The lay of the land indicated only one possible direction the Hordim could have taken. “I have never travelled these parts before. I know the Isirien River should be somewhere to our

west, but surely there could be no good purpose in making for it. There can be found the Mireglades, and I could not wish such a danger upon anyone, even my enemies.”

Gremorgan unshouldered his bags and let them fall. The wide table of ground upon which they stood was stony and hard, only the toughest of grasses covering the few pockets of soil that filled hollows in the weathered stone.

“I have no doubt the Hresh are making for the Mireglades. If they expected pursuit after leaving the domain of the Hra'gora there would be the perfect place to avoid it. Beyond the marshes of the Isirien lay the open plains and hills of northern Kalborea. I would imagine they would make use of any chance to put distance between themselves and anyone who might be after them.”

Mallen was dubious. He had only heard of the dangers that lay within the Mireglades, but that was enough for him to know that it was a dangerous place, best avoided if possible. He hoped the Hresh had some sense and had decided on another route. He had no doubt however, that they would go wherever the Warband led them.

In the gloom of twilight Gremorgan took hold of his bags and made for a shallow depression in the ground at the edge of the clearing to the west. It was surrounded on three sides by low brush and at one side by a copse of gnarled Acacia, stunted and sickened by the rocky ground within which they had been forced to grow. Here they made camp and took the time to eat a hot meal. Gremorgan fell into sleep as soon as he had finished eating. In the glow of a low fire Mallen lay upon his blanket and stared at the clear sky above, searching out familiar stars and wondering at what his future might hold. Before he could finish his thoughts the hand of sleep took him as well.

## Chapter 8 - Mireglades of the Isirien



The night passed slowly. Overhead the sky revolved on its axis, Elanna and Shabel slowly moving in concert to the rise and fall of the stars as they arched overhead. Within the depression Mallen and Gremorgan slept restlessly, their travel blankets thin protection from a gathering wind that blew in ever increasing blusters from the north. In the quiet of their slumber the weather changed. A hint of chill came into the air, and upon the coaxing of the breeze cloud began to move from the far mountains. By dawn the sky had become an overcast of grey, tinged with the dull red of a stifled sunrise. Morning came with rain and a numbing cold.

Mallen awoke first. He had been aware of the wind but when he opened his eyes he was met by the first fine mist of a swirling drizzle and he moved carefully in his blanket, testing aching feet and stretching his limbs as he untangled himself from his coverings. Within the bowl of the depression, and its border of thick bushes, he could see nothing of the outside world except the grey sky above. He did not hurry as he pulled his cloak about him. Long experience of living rough in the world had taught him that a cold day should be started with a warm meal and Gremorgan was not yet awake. He would wait for the Dwarvendim before starting breakfast.

With his cloak about him, and his hood raised against the misting rain he reached for his pack and checked its contents. He had picked the rucksack from a number that Greel had collected back in Callenfrey and he was pleased with his choice. It was well made and waterproof though he could only wonder as to who it might have previously belonged. As he looked at it he could not help but feel as if his life before the attack on his home had belonged to someone else as well. What he had experienced, and discovered, whilst journeying within the labyrinths of the Hra'gora had shaken the foundations of what he had believed about the world he lived in. The very existence of EarthMagic had been of no consequence to him, merely the stuff of campfire stories, but now he had witnessed it for himself and its reality was irrefutable. It would take him a while to get use to this new world he had stumbled into.

Carefully he stowed his blanket and stood. The night had been cold and in the morning light he stretched his back and tried to get some

feeling into fingers that had become stiff from the chill. His movement roused Gremorgan, and as the Dwarvendim coaxed their fire back into life Mallen put together the ingredients of a hot meal. The LoreMaster had brought with him a range of packaged foods that could be quickly turned into a warm breakfast, and in short order both men were sitting down to a stew comprised of dried meats and vegetables. As they ate Gremorgan turned over his thoughts about the day ahead.

“I think as long as the rain does not become too heavy that we should make good time on the plains below, Master Cael. The Hresh will have started early but they will be travelling as a large group and we should be able to make up some ground against them. It will be interesting to see what sign they leave in their wake.”

Mallen looked at the LoreMaster, he was not sure exactly what his companion meant. “What do you mean? I would have thought the Hordim would leave nothing but bootprints.”

Gremorgan nodded. “Aye, that they will. But in your experience you have probably only had the opportunity to track creatures of the forest or, in the case of the warband you followed, a group of lightly equipped warriors. If we are right and more than one group of the Hresh have joined together, then we are talking about a large mass of warriors moving through the plains below. You would be surprised what can fall from a soldier's equipment when they are intent upon moving quickly along their path. Anything dropped cannot be recovered and if the group is as large as I believe it to be, there should be some interesting pickings along the way for a set of keen eyes.”

“What would you be looking for?” Mallen enquired carefully. He had no doubt the Dwarvendim was not interested in pilfering the loose detritus of the Hordim, there would be something else he would be searching for.

Gremorgan put down his plate and cleaned it with a wet cloth. His answer came as he carefully checked and packed his equipment. “Identification above all else. The Hordim mark their gear and anything dropped should give us a clearer indication of who we are following. From the details you gave in my quarters I am quite sure that it was Hresh of the Denmar Kraal that committed the assault upon Callenfrey, but they are not a large Kraal in the scheme of things. At best they can muster no more than six hundred warriors and for the crue we follow there are far more than that. More than one Kraal is involved and I need to know which.”

“Can it be that important though? Is not one Hresh just as bad as the next?”

Gremorgan shook his head, “The Denmar Hresh are in league with the Jotun of the West in their attempt to overthrow the power of the Mutan. Remember what I said in my quarters about the politics of the Hordim. The Mutan hold sway over all Hresh but are unaware that the Denmar Kraal have thrown their lot in with the Jotun. The other Hresh are not aware of this and would see the capture of the red-haired townspeople as purely the acquisition of slaves. At some time in the future the Denmar will try and get their captives away from the main group and send them on their way westwards to the Jotun. They will have to do this however, without the other Hresh noticing. The only question is how they will do that. For us it might prove the one time that we will have the opportunity to take your brother from them.”

Mallen ate his food slowly, savouring its warm, rich taste and considered the Dwarvendim's words. He would need to think long and hard about how they might eventually recover Tomas from the clutches of the Hordim, but for the moment finding him alive was his only concern. Breakfast finished without further conversation.

In the cool of the morning the two men finished packing their gear and shouldered their belongings. In the overcast the world outside the depression was closed in by mist and scudding cloud. All that could be seen was the wet face of the cliffs at their back and the indeterminate slopes that lay before them to the west. All disappeared into the drizzle before them, and as they stood upon the lip of the depression Mallen could see little of their way ahead. Gremorgan set off immediately, his pace a shambling run that had his bags shifting on his back as he made his way towards the slope ahead. Before he could dissolve completely into the mists, Mallen went after him.

In the half-light of an overcast sky the two men made their way quickly down the sloping terrain. As they had seen on the previous night the table of rock upon which they had camped fell away in a series of shallow slopes to a wide plain below. By mid-morning they reached the base of the incline and found themselves upon a grassland interspersed with stands of trees and patches of thick bush. In the first days of Autumn the grasses were still brown and gave little resistance to the men as they searched the ground systematically for any sign of their quarry. It was not long before Gremorgan found a

clear trail trampled into the soft earth. He knelt into the grasses and examined the edges of a footprint stamped into the wet ground.

“We are in luck Mallen Cael, the Hresh have indeed passed this way, and recently too. They are no more than a half-day ahead of us if I judge the sign right.”

Mallen bent into the grass and studied the print. The Dwarvendim was correct. Carefully he followed the direction of the imprint and found another a short distance ahead. It took only a few moments to find the grasslands to the north and west covered in similar marks.

With the direction of travel clear Mallen turned to Gremorgan and pointed into the west. “There can be no doubt that the group travels west at the run. These bootprints are too deep in the ground for creatures out for a casual stroll in the countryside, even those as heavy as the Hresh. It might be a good idea to find the northern extent of the tracks before we move on though.”

“You're looking for breakaways aren't you?” asked Gremorgan.

Mallen smiled and nodded as he surveyed the way westwards. “I have had previous experience with this group. It would be wise to keep to the northern edge of their tracks. Any part of the Warband that separates from the main group will more than likely do so towards the north. If they are going to make for the Isirien River and the surrounding marshlands, they can only deviate in that direction.”

Gremorgan was impressed. He waved his hand outward towards the west and let Mallen lead. “You know what you are doing Mallen Cael. In this I will let you take the front. The west awaits us.”

The Kalborean accepted the invitation without hesitation. This was something Mallen knew well. The hunt was a speciality of his, and it was a skill he had spent many hungry years honing. Ahead the ground was open but interspersed with sparse stands of acacia. In the distance Mallen could see the ground changing however, the further they reached westwards the closer the grasslands became, trees falling away to be replaced by thickets of tangled thorny bushes. Within this patchwork of thorn and grass the Kalborean kept to the trail made by the Hresh. It was easy to follow, there were so many creatures in the group that the ground in parts was churned to mud. He knew though, that at any time the group could start separating in the same way that he had been deceived in the forests outside Callenfrey. Keeping to the northern edge of the tracks proved the best way to follow. The Hresh were moving quickly but the two men were moving faster. Something was holding the Hordim back and it was more than just the size of

their number.

“Do you see it Gremorgan?” Mallen brought himself to a halt and pointed at the ground before him. “The tracks stop here, as if this part of the group had to wait for something. I have noticed this same pattern at frequent points along the way. For some reason they are continually halting and then moving on again.”

Gremorgan had a look at the tracks. In the soft ground he could see clearly where creatures had come to a halt and then waited before moving on. “I could not tell you why they are stopping here for sure. The only possibility I can think of is that they have wounded.”

“Wounded? I was always taught the Hordim killed their wounded.”

The Dwarvendim shrugged his shoulders, “It is true that the Hordim have been known to kill injured warriors, but only when they are in a dire position where there is a chance of capture. Like ourselves they do not leave anyone behind unless it is absolutely necessary.” He looked back to the east and smelled the air. For a moment Mallen watched as the LoreMaster became absolutely still and then he took a deep breath before turning back to the Kalborean.

“There is a chance that the Hresh may have been engaged in a skirmish of some sort. I can smell blood on the air and these pauses could well be the Warband waiting for those helping the wounded. It will be a question that we cannot answer until we sight the crue for ourselves. Let us however, take advantage of any difficulties our quarry may have had put before them, eh?”

Mallen agreed. With the suns of Arborell reaching overhead the men ran, covering the ground quickly as they followed the tracks. In a straight line westwards the Hresh ran, then stopped and then ran again, a regular pattern that assured them both that they were indeed making ground on the Warband. By the hour after midday however, they needed to rest and a small stand of acacia looked most promising as a camp site. Gremorgan chose it and he had good reason.

“It is best that we rest out of sight. There can be found more than just the Hordim upon these wild plains, and it will do us well to ensure that we see any possible danger first before it spies us.”

The acacia grove proved an excellent campsite with a small cleared area at its centre. The sky overhead had lifted as the morning had progressed and with clear patches of blue visible the light of the suns had placed the entire stand in shadows. From within its verge the two men could see unhindered what was taking place in the world outside and would remain disguised within its borders. After the efforts of

the morning they took the time to rest and then eat a small amount of their provisions. Gremorgan seemed well pleased with their labours.

“We have done well Mallen Cael, and it is possible that we are no more than a few hours behind the Warband. It is time that we consider how we will recover your brother from their grasp.”

Mallen leaned forward and dragged the point of a long stick through the loose dirt at his feet. “I have been thinking about that. I'm not sure there is any way that we can take him without the Hresh feeling very put out about it. When we do catch up with the crue we may have no choice but to follow them and then make a decision as to how best he can be rescued.”

The Dwarvendim nodded and pulled a small piece of orange cloth from under his belt. “This gives me some hope that we may have the opportunity we need.”

Mallen looked at it closely, it appeared to be a strip of torn clothing, possibly from a sleeve or collar.

“What is it?”

Gremorgan took it back and pushed it under his wide belt. “Remember I said to be careful for anything that might be dropped? I found this snagged on one of those thorny bushes about a kilometre back along the trail. This is important to us for it shows much about the distrust that festers within the Hordim. It may work to our advantage, and in fact I am sure that it will.”

In the shadows of the acacia Mallen could not see the connection and Gremorgan saw in his companion's eyes no realisation of the cloth's importance.

“It is orange, young Master. All the Hresh colour code their gear, it makes disputes over equipment easier to adjudicate. The orange belongs to the Hresh of the Tomsk Kraal, one of the more numerous Kraals amongst the Hresh and the most loyal to the Mutan. If they are here with the Denmar Hresh then it can only be for one reason, to keep an eye on the Denmar and ensure they follow the orders they have been given.”

Mallen could see the connection now. “So, if the Hresh who attacked Callenfrey are holding Tomas for their own purposes, they can't do anything about spiriting him off to the Jotun until the eyes of the other Hresh are firmly fixed elsewhere.”

“That's the idea. If we are right then we need only follow the Warband until the Denmar Hresh make their move. It will be then that we may have the opening we need to get him back.”

Mallen smiled at the irony of such a circumstance. Still, it was just supposition until such time as they could gain a clearer view of the Warband itself. The reality could turn out to be far more brutal than either he or Gremorgan could imagine.

When they had taken the time to rest and eat a small meal, both men began the task of preparing to move on. Mallen stood, stretching out his arms as he reached for his pack. He looked to Gremorgan and immediately froze, the Dwarvendim had not moved from his place in the clearing, the look on his face leaving no question in Mallen's mind that something was wrong.

“What is it?” Mallen whispered. Gremorgan slowly raised his hand and made motion for the Kalborean to get as low as possible. Carefully he complied, turning in the direction that the LoreMaster had been staring. From within the border of the grove Mallen looked out over the grassland to the south and saw the unmistakable forms of Hresh moving towards them. As he watched more of the creatures appeared out of the grasses, a long line of warriors that stopped no more than a stone's throw from where Gremorgan and himself now lay hidden.

Gremorgan moved close to where Mallen lay and tapped him on the shoulder, pointing out towards a single Hresh who held a banner unfurled upon a long spear. “These are Hresh of the Denmar Kraal. Notice the sky blue markings on the banner, I have seen such colours before. These are the warriors who pursued us in the Hall of Whispers.”

“The rearguard?” whispered Mallen.

“Yes. And if I'm not mistaken they are about to make camp.”

Both men watched as the Hresh began to fan out upon the grasses south of their hiding place. The Hresh had chosen a stand of acacia only fifty metres from where they lay as the centre of their camp and begun quickly to establish a defensive perimeter around it. Mallen could see at least a couple of hundred warriors as they set up their encampment in a predetermined, organised manner. Within minutes tents had been pitched and a wide circle of sentries established around the central acacia grove. One of those sentries stood only a short distance from where Gremorgan and Mallen lay quietly in the shadows, the creature's presence making any movement or conversation impossible.

The afternoon wore on as the two men watched the Hresh warriors going about their business. Neither could speak but Mallen found the

sight of so many of the enemy so close compelling. He watched everything they did, and what struck him most about their encampment was how mundane it all was. He had expected fighting, cruelty and violence but instead he watched as warriors repaired equipment, cleaned weapons and cooked meals on small portable fires. At the centre of the camp stood one large tent, and it became quickly apparent that the commander of the *crue* resided there, a constant stream of warriors entering and leaving as the warband went about its daily routine. Only once did he see the Commander himself, and in the bright light of the afternoon Mallen felt his blood run cold. The Hresh was as dark as the night and stood before his tent encased in an ornate set of battle armour. The creature looked exactly as Mallen could remember the Hresh who had stood over him in his dream, and the realisation of that shook him.

They could do nothing except watch the warband and wait for them to leave. Sentries changed, patrols went out into the grasslands and returned, and the suns of Arborell swung their way westwards. By dusk both Mallen and Gremorgan knew that they had lost a chance to catch up with the Warband they had been tracking. By nightfall, the low fires of the encampment lay as the only illumination in the gloom, but the sentries had been pulled in closer to the acacia and this gave Gremorgan the chance to speak.

“Who would have thought we could be stymied in such a fashion eh?” he whispered into Mallen’s ear. The Kalborean nodded and cocked his head westwards.

“We have lost half a day at least, and who knows how long the Hresh will make their camp here. Is there any way we can get away in the dark?”

Gremorgan raised his head slightly and peered out into the nest of fires and movement before him. “We could but it would be to no good outcome. We cannot track the other *crue* in the night and these Hresh still have patrols out upon the plains. There is too much chance that we will be stumbled across in the dark.”

“What can we do then? We will lose too much time if we wait here all night for them to leave.”

“I am afraid Mallen Cael that we have no choice. We cannot move on until they do, but this may work to our advantage anyway. As a rearguard we can assume that they have achieved their objective and are now on their way to return to the main group. They will not be as hampered by numbers as the other and will make their way to some

predetermined meeting point as quickly as possible. Perhaps our best bet is to follow these Hresh. If Providence graces us they should lead us straight to the main warband.”

Mallen slumped on to the dry ground and looked through the thin branches of the acacia to the stars above. He could not see any way around it, they would have to spend the night here as well.

Gremorgan sat up against the nearest trunk and made himself comfortable. “We will need to sleep now but we will have to take turns keeping watch. I will take the first watch, I will wake you at midnight. And Mallen Cael, try not to be too disheartened, it could after all be much worse.”

Mallen looked at the LoreMaster. “How so?”

The Dwarvendim smiled and bent his head towards the camp. “They could have chosen this stand of acacia as their latrine. I am thankful that they did not.”



The night passed without incident. As he had promised Gremorgan woke Mallen at midnight and then settled himself for sleep. In the quiet of the night there was no sound other than the light rustle of a breeze blowing its way through the sparse branches of the trees. Mallen took up Gremorgan's position and began his watch. Of the Hresh he could hear nothing. Their camp was utterly dark, the only sign of movement the regular changing of sentries and the occasional flapping of a tent cover in the light wind. By the first hour before sunrise the ground was flooded with pale moonlight as Elanna and Shabel dropped towards the western horizon. It was then that the Hresh encampment returned to life.

Without order or command the warriors rose from their resting places and began a well-ordered breaking of camp. Tents were pulled down and in the half-light meals were prepared and equipment stowed. Within twenty minutes the warband stood ready to travel and it was only then that Mallen moved to wake Gremorgan. Carefully he crawled over to where the Dwarvendim slept and lightly shook his shoulder. Gremorgan's eyes sprung open, and it was as the

big man raised himself that Mallen heard the Hresh singing.

Out of the night's gloomy shroud the sound of hundreds of voices rose as a low growling hymn, a dirge of lament that filled the air with its strange harmonies. In the quiet of the early morning the warriors were standing in ranks, facing the setting moons, and in the light were silhouetted against their disappearing glow. The song was only short, a few verses that rose and fell before being cut off by the sharp cry of their commander to return to their journey. What struck Mallen was not the words, he could not understand any of it. What struck him was the emotion of those singing it, the absolute sadness of the warriors as they sung to the setting moons. It unsettled Mallen greatly.

Gremorgan found a place beside the Kalborean and watched as the crue ordered themselves into unit formations and then made their way westwards. Both men heaved a collective sigh of relief before sinking to the ground and reflecting on how close they had come to discovery. Mallen could not keep the Hresh's song from his thoughts.

"What was that song they sung Gremorgan?"

"It is the *enkara*, a song of mourning. It is common practice for the Hresh to pay tribute to the setting moons when practicable. It is sacred to them."

Mallen looked again to the west and pulled his pack to him. He felt very hungry.

"What does it mean?" he asked as he fished about within its contents.

"The *enkara* reminds them of all they have lost, and provides them with the resolve to fight harder to get it back. The moons that fall in the west and resurrect themselves in the east are a potent symbol to the Hordim, a reminder that everything lost can be recovered."

Together the two men ate and then prepared to break camp. Mallen took the opportunity to eat a small piece of Nahla bread, not much, just enough to restore strength to his legs and back. His watch had left him stiff and sore and the regenerative power of the bread flowed through him like a hot tonic. Gremorgan saw what he was doing and cautioned him.

"Be careful with the bread Mallen Cael. There may come a time when it will be all we have to eat. It will be best left until we need it most."

Mallen nodded but did not regret its consumption. He felt fit to travel and had needed the help the Nahla had given him. One day, he

thought absent-mindedly, he should ask how it was made. While Gremorgan finished his preparation for the day's travel, Mallen stepped out on to the early morning grasslands. The air was cool but not chill, and the sky was clear of any cloud or sign of weather. With luck it was going to be a fine day. While he stood in the deep grasses at the verge of the acacia grove he breathed in the morning air and felt the power of the Nahla surge through him. Today he knew they would take up the chase in earnest and he was ready for it.

Gremorgan arose from the shadows of the trees with bags strung across his wide shoulders and a look of grim determination on his face. The heavy travel cloak was missing, replaced by a lighter, open-necked leather jerkin.

“We have given the warband enough of a start. Are you ready?”

Mallen nodded his head and took the lead. Gremorgan had determined that the Kalborean was better skilled to track the Hresh and fell in behind as they move off into the grasslands. The tracks were clearly visible in the soft earth. Long lines of broken grasses gave unmistakable track lines that led off into the west. These Mallen followed, checking the ground for sign of any separation of the group as he went.

The twin suns of morning broke the horizon just as Mallen and Gremorgan reached the borders of the Marshlands. Here the nature of the terrain changed, the ground a growing patchwork of dry and wet areas, which quickly turned into shallow meres and wide areas of swampland. Mallen had been surprised that they had reached the edges of the marshes so quickly but he had no time to concern himself with it. On the open plains the trampled grasses had been an easy trail to follow. Upon the edges of the marshlands the tracks became far more disordered. There was now no doubt that the Hresh were not going to skirt the glades, they had passed into the wetlands and disappeared.

It was here that Mallen had to stop. Ahead spread the bogs and mires of the Isirien River. It was a place Mallen had never ventured into, and for good reason. Here could be found fell creatures that lurked in the swamps, waiting patiently for an unwary traveller to make the mistake of trying to pass through. The reputation of the Mireglades was not to be taken lightly.

“Are you sure that we must pass through this mire?” he asked.

Gremorgan nodded and waved his hand in a wide arc. “I am afraid so. Unlike the labyrinths of the Hra'gora there are too many

ways here that the Hresh can leave. We will have to follow them whichever way they may travel.”

The Kalborean knew the history of this place and he hesitated, but only for a moment. The Mireglades had once been a fertile plain, covered in farmlands and vineyards. Early in the history of Kalborea settlers reached into the interior of Arborell and found rich soil on the banks of the Isirien. Farms and townships soon sprang up and with a need for water to irrigate the outlying regions, the river itself was dammed and most of its water diverted into a network of channels and ditches that fed a wide area of farmlands surrounding it. The Isirien could not be held captive though. What the farmers and engineers did not know was that the river changed its course regularly, and when it did, the waters of the Isirien flooded the farmlands and swept away the settlements that had grown along its banks.

For a century the settlers fought against its advances, building dikes and levees to hold back the waters, but it had been to no avail. Each season brought new floods and slowly the river itself silted up, clogging its channels with soil and spreading out over the plain, forming the Mireglades and awakening creatures beneath it that used the dark waters as lairs for their malevolence. Few people tried to cross it. Fewer succeeded in doing so. Mallen took a deep breath and followed the tracks in.

The Hresh knew where they were going, but the warbands that had passed this way before had separated and rejoined at many points, breaking up their numbers as they used different trails to forge ahead quickly within the increasingly dank terrain of the Marshes. Mallen could not follow all the trails so he kept to those that led directly westwards and in doing so was able to maintain contact with the largest group.

The morning wore on, the trail a network of dry ground that skirted small lakes, and areas of putrid mud that grew larger as they travelled west. At the edges of the meres grew thick dome-like hedges, that concealed movement along the pathways and choked the narrow spaces that provided the only dry land in the marshes. Dead trees thrust great gnarled fingers into the air and everywhere was the sounds of bird and insect life, a cacophony of cries and calls that rose in a chorus to completely overwhelm any sounds the two men might have left as they pursued their quarry.

By mid-morning the multitudes of pathways had come together in

one main animal trail that weaved its way between the bogs crowding the ground around them. Mallen was determined to keep up the chase but the LoreMaster pulled him back with a word of caution.

“It is best that we do not travel too quickly here. The Hresh have been forced to concentrate their numbers on this one path and that can only mean that they will be moving very slowly. We should take our time so that we do not stumble upon them within the confines of the marshes. It would be better for us that any accidental confrontation should occur on the other side of these wetlands.”

Mallen nodded, “Should we take the opportunity to rest then?”

“No, we'll just walk this part of the trail, perhaps take the time to enjoy our surroundings eh?”

The Kalborean could not see anything enjoyable in the bogs and meres of this wetland but he knew Gremorgan was right. In places the path was barely shoulder wide, falling away on both sides into either lake or putrefying mud. The Hresh would be hemmed in by the terrain, unable to move in anything other than single file. It would slow them down considerably and he had no wish to stumble upon them in broad daylight in such a place.

By midday the two men were deep in the watery domain of the marshlands. Areas of dry ground had become scarce and when Mallen walked into a wide, clear area of dry grass he knew they had found the perfect place to rest and take food. Almost the entire area had been trampled flat, it looked as if the warband had spent some time here as well, and in the sudden openness of the clearing he immediately felt vulnerable. Retreating to the closeness of the path he put up his hand for Gremorgan to stop and listened hard for any fragment of proof that they might not be alone. The Dwarvendim could see what Mallen was doing and searched the edges of the clearing for any hint of an ambush. There was none. The Hresh had moved on.

Carefully both men moved out into the bright light and found a position in the shade of an old dead elm. Here they took the time to relax and eat a hurried meal. As they ate Mallen looked over the clearing and considered the strangeness of their hunt. They were following a warband of Hresh, who, in their turn were following a larger band of Hresh. So far he had found no sign that the Hordim had split at all. In fact, the terrain did not allow it. That meant that there was every chance both groups passed through this clearing...

“Gremorgan.”

The Dwarvendim was eating and looked up at his companion. Mallen was more than excited as he jumped to his feet.

“We need to search this clearing.”

With a shrug of his shoulders the LoreMaster struggled to his feet. “And what might we be searching for?”

“Anything that might prove my brother has been here. There is a chance that both warbands passed this way. If that is the case then there may be something of his left behind.”

Gremorgan arose from his food and began to trace a systematic path across the clearing, but he was unsure what Mallen would be expecting. “What is it you think he might have left here?”

The Kalborean was looking through the bushes at the edge of the dry ground and stopped only to answer, “My brother is the most disorganised person you will find in any village of the Union. His pockets are always full of bits and pieces, nuts and screws, used lengths of solder, anything he doesn't have time to find a place to set down. Whether he was conscious or not, such things will fall from him. If he was here there may be something left behind.”

Gremorgan nodded and continued the search. The clearing was probably only forty-five metres in length and half as wide, but most of its surface was broken by hundreds of bootprints. Mallen studied the ground, looking for that tell-tale glimmer of something metallic pressed into the soil. Together they searched, combing the ground for sign, but found nothing. Within the debris of crushed foliage and flattened grass they uncovered ample evidence of the occupation of the clearing by the Hordim, but nothing that could indicate his brother had been there. It had been a hope that had proved fruitless, and Mallen walked back to the old elm and slumped against its rough trunk. Gremorgan joined him and returned to his meal.

“Do not worry Master Cael, we are on the right track, we will just have to trust in Providence and the soundness of our collective judgement.”

Mallen opened his pack and pulled out a square block of cheese wrapped in waterproof papers. “Your judgement I trust in, it would have been good to find some sign though.”

The two ate and then organised themselves for their return to the trail. Gremorgan re-packed his bags and in the light of the afternoon suns took a drink from his canteen. With the first gulp he gagged and spat the water on to the ground.

“By the Fates, what is this?”

Mallen ran to him, "What is it Gremorgan?" The Dwarvendim had his fingers in his mouth and was trying to pull something from inside his throat. Carefully it came out, it was a long thread of hair.

Mallen recognised it immediately. "Where did you hang your canteen?" Gremorgan pointed to a broken limb of the elm and the Kalborean ran to it, carefully studying its broken surface. Sure enough, he found more of the threads, almost a handful, stuffed into a crack in the trunk. It was red hair.

The Dwarvendim saw what he had in his hand and smiled. "Well, we are indeed on the right track, are we not? I am surprised though that your brother's hair should be this long."

Mallen shook his head and played the threads of hair out to their fullest extent. Some were a good metre in length. "This is not Tomas' hair. His would extend only a third of this length. This is the hair of a woman, and if I am right it is Shemwe's"

"Your brother's fiancée?"

"Yes. Wherever she is, he will be found. Of this I am sure."

With a new hope growing Mallen collected his pack and both men then took up the pursuit once more. In the warmth of the afternoon they moved quickly, following the winding trail as it navigated its way through the maze of meres and swamps that made up the marshlands. Somewhere ahead was the Isirien River, a tributary of the Laneslem to the south, and one of the widest rivers to be found in Arborell. Mallen had heard many stories of the creatures that lived within its wet confines but he was afraid of only one, and it was his fervent hope that their travels would steer them far from any chance of meeting it.

The twin suns arched towards the western horizon as the companions continued their hunt. For Mallen it was an easy task, the tracks clear in the spongy ground, a stiff breeze now masking any sound of their movement. The wind was expected, a regular part of the change of seasons in this part of Kalborea. Mallen looked north of west and found a bank of cloud building upon the horizon. If they were lucky it would blow southwards, but he had always entertained the idea that the hand of Providence never made life easy for a traveller of the wilds, and he made a mental note to pull out his travel cloak at their next place of rest.

In the growing bluster of the wind, the two men moved carefully along the paths, their movements hidden by the thick vegetation that grew haphazardly along the edges of the swamps. At intervals the

walls of green were broken and Mallen was able to see wide areas of water, broken only by the dead hands of hundreds of drowned trees reaching skyward, slowly rotting in their watery graves. In this world they were not alone. Vast flocks of water-birds fed within the marshes, more circled in the air above, and frequently Mallen could see darker shapes sliding beneath the surface of the meres, huge creatures that moved slowly out of sight, never showing themselves to the full light of day.

The Kalborean turned to warn Gremorgan that there was something in the waters to their right, but he did not get the chance. In an explosion of water a multitude of long rope-like tentacles snaked out of the mere, flailing the soft earth, searching the ground for a purchase and finding it around the legs of the Dwarvendim. In an instant Gremorgan was on the ground, being dragged quickly into the bushes that bordered the path.

“Trippets!” shouted Mallen. Before the Dwarvendim could be pulled out of sight the Kalborean sprang to action. In one quick movement he drew his sword and leapt into the path of the writhing tentacles, cutting through them with a swinging slice of his blade. At that point the world around Mallen dissolved into a chaos of broken ground and smashed vegetation. In a flurry of severed limbs one creature withdrew only to have more burst from both sides of the trail. It was an ambush.

Gremorgan disentangled himself from the cut tentacles only to find himself the target of another that threw a host of sinuous rope-like arms in his direction. With a practised hand he pulled his axe from its sheath at his back and hacked at the tentacles, forcing it to retreat. When he was clear both men moved to the centre of the path. There was precious little space to defend themselves, the bushes on all sides seething with tentacles, reaching out along the path, trying to grasp them. Beyond the bushes Mallen could see the huge bulks of at least six enormous creatures. All avenues of escape had been cut off.

“What did you call these things?” shouted Gremorgan as he swung at another set of flailing tentacles.

“Trippets. At least that’s what I think they are. I count six at the most.”

Before either could speak again the creatures drove forward, crushing the bushes under their huge weight as they struggled to get at the two men. Limbs snaked towards Mallen and he sliced the air, cutting three of the tentacles down. Enraged the Trippet lunged again

at the Kalborean and it was only then that he realised most of the bulk of the animal was still in the water. It was a huge leech-like monster, a flurry of tentacles snaking from its mouth as it grasped the air for a hold on the men. Mallen could see no eyes, it was feeling for them, aware of them only by the vibrations of their foot-falls. Gremorgan saw this as well.

“The creatures cannot see. If we are to force them to withdraw we must not make it worthwhile for them to stay. Cut at everything you see, the more pain we cause the more likely they will move on.”

Mallen could not see how they could fight against such huge creatures but he took a deep breath and ran at the nearest Trippet. Tentacles came from all directions and Mallen hacked at them like a madman, pieces of the monster flying in all directions as he edged closer to its body. In the chaos of the assault one tentacle hit him fairly across the shoulder and threw him to the ground. Sensing a kill at hand the Trippet pulled itself closer and in the pause Mallen regained his feet and stabbed straight at the creature's mouth. In a spasm of pain the monster fell back and slid out of sight into the dark waters at its back. It was a small victory but the fight was far from over.

The Kalborean turned to see Gremorgan caught between two of the monsters, his huge form wrapped in tentacles that were pulling him one way, and then the other as both Trippets tried to have him for themselves. Mallen ran to him and hacked at the limbs forcing both to give up their prize. Together the men cut into the beasts, slicing great welts into their sides and leaving huge pieces of gelatinous flesh hanging from their slug-like bodies. It was then that the bush around them exploded once more.

Tentacles flew in all directions as the monsters attempted to escape the source of their pain. Pushing backwards the Trippets let out howls of rage and thrashed about as they attempted to regain the safety of the waters and the darkness below. In great tremors of rage two of the beasts withdrew, flailing their remaining limbs in vain attempts to crush their adversaries. With the two Trippets in retreat the path ahead was left open and Mallen and Gremorgan needed no invitation to use the opportunity to escape. Together they ran, the remaining monsters smashing the ground behind them before withdrawing to their watery lairs.

Mallen did not look back. He had heard of the creatures but had never thought in his wildest dreams they would be so huge. With the

heat of the battle propelling him forwards he ran as hard as he could, keeping to the pathways but taking no care to follow the bootprints of his quarry. When he came to rest he stood exposed upon an open piece of ground, the brush falling away behind as he found himself in a wide clearing. He realised with a cold shiver that Gremorgan was not behind him.

Cursing his carelessness he began to retrace his steps. The Dwarvendim had been at his back, he could not see how they might have become separated, but somehow they had and he needed to find him. By the time he reached a small fork in the path he had recovered most of his composure and with a cooler head began to watch for any sign of his friend. Quickly he found it. A clear set of prints led along the path that he had not taken. They were unmistakable as those of the LoreMaster, but there was something else, another set of boot marks that followed behind him. Gremorgan was being pursued.

Mallen drew his sword and charged down the new path. His mind was full of possibilities, the tracks were not Hresh but human, smaller than Gremorgan's and lighter upon the soft earth. Whoever was following the LoreMaster was small, and very good at what they did. He had seen no sign of anybody behind them and for whatever reason the unknown traveller was hot on the Dwarvendim's trail. The Kalborean gripped his sword all the harder as he raced down the path.

Suddenly a huge shape disgorged itself from the brush at the side of the trail and fell upon Mallen, knocking the wind from him and throwing him to the ground. In an instant Mallen recognised his attacker as Gremorgan, but the Dwarvendim clamped his hand upon the Kalborean's mouth and made a sign to be silent. Mallen relaxed and waited, he could see Gremorgan was listening for something.

"Did you see it?" he whispered into Mallen's ear. Mallen could not respond, he just shook his head. He had to assume Gremorgan was talking about whoever had been following him, but he could do nothing until the huge man took his arm from across his chest.

Gremorgan waited for a short time and then released his grip. He had a look of grave concern on his face. Carefully he pulled himself into a crouch and gave Mallen back his freedom. The Kalborean rubbed at his chest and brushed dirt and leaf litter from his clothing.

"What was it Gremorgan? Did you see who was following you?"

Gremorgan shook his head and kept his eyes peeled on the track behind them. He was not convinced his pursuer was gone. "I tell you

Mallen Cael, I was hard on your heels when I heard something coming up behind us. When we reached the fork in the path I went the other way, thinking that if we were being followed, our pursuer would be forced to make a choice and that I might be able to turn that choice to our advantage. Got to this point here and waited, hoping I could jump them from the bushes but caught you instead.”

Mallen looked back along the track. “I saw nothing, just the prints of someone after you.”

“It was a surprise to me as well. Whoever may be after us is a master of their craft. We will need to be careful.”

Both men sat in the obscurity of the bushes and waited for some sign of the mysterious stranger but none came. It was Gremorgan who moved first, standing and helping Mallen to his feet.

“We cannot wait for whoever it might be to show themselves. The Hresh must now be a fair distance ahead of us and the suns will set soon enough. It would be good for us to be out of the Mireglades before they do.”

Mallen agreed. He did not wish to spend a single night within these wetlands.

Again they returned to the trail and Mallen found the signs of Hresh embedded in the soft earth of a path that led directly to the west. With all the speed they could muster they ran, the wetlands passing before them as a blur of greenery and still waters as they followed the Warband. It was not until dusk that they found themselves upon the banks of the Isirien River.

Mallen looked across the wide waters of the Isirien and knew then that they would not be crossing until morning. They had followed the Hresh to the shallow banks of the river and now stood at the threshold of a series of rock strewn fords that ran haphazardly across its breadth. The Hordim had chosen one of the few places that it was possible to cross the river on foot, but Gremorgan and Mallen had arrived to late to take advantage of it. Already the suns of Arborell were edging the western horizon and the two men looked directly into their glare as they surveyed the scattered ford. Its crossing would have to wait for the new day.

“We have arrived too late I am afraid.” Gremorgan remarked as he threw a small stone into the languid waters. “Our only concern for now must be to find a safe place to pass the night. I do not fancy another encounter with those Trippets as you call them.”

Mallen nodded his agreement and surveyed the surrounding lands

for some safe shelter. He found it to their north. Set a short distance from the banks of the Isirien stood a huge shattered Oak, long dead, but still standing tall, a victim of relentless floods and the changing course of the river. It was dead but it still held its upper limbs, and although gnarled and twisted from centuries of struggle for life it looked sound. Its high branches would provide the sanctuary they needed.

“There we should find safety for the night.” Mallen proclaimed, pointing to the old Oak and Gremorgan agreed. Anywhere would be better better than being caught in the open in the dark of night. “But we will have to be off the ground before nightfall. Who knows what dangers may lurk here.”

Together they followed the stony bank of the river and found the base of the tree submerged in a shallow pool, surrounded on all sides by bush and thick mats of reeds. Gremorgan cut a wide swathe of the reeds and bundled them together with a short piece of rope. “Bedding.” was all he said as he hoisted the bundle upon his shoulder.

The Tree proved easy to climb, its twisted trunk giving easy purchase as they made their way carefully to its bare canopy of broken branches. It was there that they found a wide crook at the spreading of three huge limbs and made what provision they could for food and rest. By the fall of night they had made their camp and sat nestled within the intersection of the limbs, eating Nahla bread and small portions of dried meat. Before them spread the wide meander of the Isirien and the dark patchwork of the Mireglades. Mallen fell into sleep easily but Gremorgan waited in the dark, watching the lands about their perch for any sign of danger.

In the total darkness of a moonless night the Dwarvendim sat upon his bed of reeds and surveyed the lands about him. The Isirien flowed from the north, meeting with the Laneslem River some distance southwards. Across the breadth of his gaze he could see no sign of life, only the slow passage of clouds carried upon a light breeze, and the gentle swaying of the rushes at the edge of the river. It was a while before he noticed the solitary light that shone out from the darkness, a small beacon alone in the gloom of night. It was a campfire.

With eyes focused upon the light he concentrated on its glow, trying to ascertain anything he could about its origin. In the dark it was impossible to gauge how far away it might be but he knew it wasn't the Hresh. The fire burned to the east, the Hresh had already passed

beyond the Isirien and had no doubt found their own haven for the night somewhere upon the plains westwards. Whoever enjoyed the warmth of this fire was keeping some distance from their position. He could not help but think that beside the warmth of that fire might lay the man who had been tracking them, and who had so easily avoided their notice until now.

Gremorgan entertained the idea of keeping watch for a while but he could feel in his bones the fatigue of the day's travel. The pool of water and its beds of rushes would provide ample warning of anyone's approach, their height above the ground would give them the time to react to any dangers. Instead he lay back upon his bed of reeds and watched the sky roll across his gaze. He had much to consider and no energy to do it, and quickly fell into sleep himself.



Morning greeted both Men with fog and the cool embrace of a northerly wind. There was little to be seen upon the ground below, all was obscured by a thick mist that swirled around the tree before moving slowly southwards with the flow of the nearby Isirien. In the cold of the morning there was little sound and no sign of life around them.

“We might as well make some breakfast and take our time about it,” suggested Gremorgan as he pulled together his reed bedding and threw it out into the mist below. “We won't be going anywhere until this fog lifts.”

Mallen swung his legs off the edge of one of the old limbs and pulled his pack to him. He had ceased wondering if there could be any more ways that Providence could delay them.

“How far ahead do you think the Hresh must now be?”

Gremorgan looked out into the mists and scratched at his chest. “The only thing I can be sure of is that they have crossed the river. Judging by the state of their tracks we are still close but they must have at least a half day on us.”

Mallen agreed and watched as the sky above lightened, turning from dull red to blue as the suns of morning rose slowly in the east. It

would not take long for the light of day to disperse the fog and then they could get on their way. He waited quietly, chewing at the sparse fare of a cold breakfast and watched as the fog slowly rolled on its way. Then he saw a shadowy figure appear out of the mist directly below their position upon the old tree. Carefully he tapped at Gremorgan's shoulder and put his finger to his lips before pointing down at the edges of the reeds below them. Gremorgan understood and said nothing. Together they watched as the figure came into clearer view.

Whoever it was was certainly human, small of stature, his clothing tattered and worn from long travels. Neither men could see anything of the person's features, the morning still shrouded the ground in semi-darkness but the figure moved with a purpose, carefully checking the ground to the south of the reed-pool and inspecting the patch of cut reeds at its edge before moving off towards the river. Before the stranger had moved ten metres he was swallowed up in the mists and disappeared back into the anonymity of the gloom below.

When Mallen was sure the man had departed he looked at Gremorgan and grabbed at his pack. "We need to get moving, this journey is becoming altogether too crowded. Do you have any idea who that man was?"

Gremorgan shook his head. "None, but I don't think it was any man."

Mallen stopped what he was doing and looked at the Dwarvendim. "It looked human to me, just not that big."

The LoreMaster smiled and grabbed at his own bags. "Aye, not that big. But did you not notice the mannerisms of the man as he checked the edge of the pool? By the way the person was moving and the nature of their stature I would say that we are being tracked by a girl, probably no older than her late teens. And for the life of me I could not say why she would be out here. This is no place even for the hardest of Men."

The Kalborean took in the idea of their shadowy nemesis being a girl and had to concede that he was impressed. "Well, girl or no, I will have to say that when I meet whoever it is I'll find out how they pulled that vanishing trick. Never seen anything like it."

Within the first half hour after sunrise the fog lifted, revealing the wide breadth of the Isirien once again. From their vantage point in the tree Mallen could see a series of disjointed banks of sand and stone blocks that made up the ford they would use to cross the Isirien.

This particular crossing had once been a long levee, used by early settlers to divert the waters of the river in the summer months when it had been most needed for irrigation. Now it was a ruin, but a convenient point to traverse the slow moving waters.

Mallen was first down on to the soft earth by the reed-pool. While Gremorgan made his way out of the tree, he went to work on the tracks left by their mysterious visitor and found that Gremorgan's surmise about her probably correct. The boot size of her tracks was small and shallow even in the soft mud at the pool's edge. If she came to any more than half his own weight he would be surprised. Still, even a small girl can wield a razor-sharp dagger if that was her intent. He would need to be mindful now, not only of their quarry, the Hresh, but also of this girl, whose motivations were unknown to him.

With the fog lifting the two men made it back to the ford and ensured their packs and bags were secure. Ahead of them lay the long line of broken stone and shallow banks of sand that would provide their crossing and they did not hesitate to take it. The Isirien was wide but not deep, the ford more an opportunity to avoid getting wet than the only possible way across. By a process of jumping and careful navigation they made it to the opposite bank without difficulty, wet boots their only discomfort. Then they picked up the trail again.

The Hresh had used the same ford but had not been concerned about discomfort. Hundreds of the creatures had forged into the current and used the shallow banks of sand along the ford to keep a purchase as they ploughed into the waters and waded to the other side. Mallen found a swath of ground at the river's edge that had been trampled and churned by the Hordim as they made the opposite bank, and then clambered up into the surrounding bushland. The tracks left behind were clear and they all pointed westwards.

With Gremorgan at his back the young Kalborean set to the trail and found the Hordim concentrating their number in a long line that snaked down a series of wide, well-used paths. Keeping to the trail he followed them as they led across a narrow band of marshland at the river's edge, then onto a terrain of undulating ground that slowly opened onto a wide plain of rolling grasslands. There the ground hardened, the grasses becoming sparser and the trail less defined. But nothing could stop Mallen now. He was on a scent, one that led to his brother and he focused all the skills and experience he had to the task. The Dwarvendim kept close at his heels, watching the surrounding terrain for any signs of danger as his companion

followed the trail. It was an exhausting process, but one that Mallen had been honed to over the course of a hard life, and which he found himself enjoying as he worked his way westwards.

By noon the day had warmed considerably, the cold breezes of the morning dying away as the suns rose to their zenith. All vestiges of the marshlands had disappeared and by the time the two men had stopped to take lunch, they were firmly settled along a thin trail of indistinct bootprints that continued to lead westwards. About them spread the vast openness of a featureless grassland that met the horizon in all directions and gave Mallen the impression that they were completely alone in a world of grass and sky.

Lunch was taken quickly, and in the first hour after noon they applied themselves to the trail once more. Without a word the men moved quickly, falling into a half-run that conserved their energy but allowed them to cover great distances between rests. Mallen had his head to the ground, searching the grasses for prints and anything else that might define the trail. Gremorgan kept a look out, sure that his companion knew exactly what he was doing. Together they crossed the plains of grass until out of the centre of the vast expanses they came upon the ruin of an old homestead. It was here the trail changed direction.

“What do you see?” asked Gremorgan.

Mallen pointed at a number of blackened areas on the ground and then moved behind the ruined building, surveying the ground before looking northwards.

“This is where the Hresh spent the night. There are the ashes of campfires in a wide perimeter here, and the bootprints of a large number of Hordim. They have covered their encampment well but you can’t disguise the damage of that many iron-shod feet. Judging by the sign left behind they decamped in that direction.” He pointed just slightly west of north and looked at Gremorgan. “Do you know where they go?”

The Dwarvendim cupped his hands over his brow and peered into the warmth of the afternoon. On the horizon he could see only the endless grassland and the indistinct silhouettes of mountain tops to the north-east.

“They are heading west of Nargel’s Hold, which surprises me, keeping to the open grasses, making for the plains of Surgis’Ka. Their Warband must now be so large that they have decided the best way to move quickly is upon the plains northwards. We will be hard pressed

to keep up.”

Mallen nodded and then smiled at the Dwarvendim, “Let's not keep them waiting then.”

Together they disappeared in the grasslands, their determination matched only by the vastness of the plains ahead.

## Chapter 9 - March of Shadows



Tomas stared at the sky above and tried to make some sense of where he was. Pain drilled at his temples and spread across his face with an intensity that threatened to topple him back into unconsciousness, but he fought desperately against it, grasping in the darkness for any thread of recognition that he might use to pull himself from his confusion. He could remember nothing of what had happened to him, just fleeting impressions of violence and movement, and then of pain, a never ending agony that infected his thoughts and reduced everything about him to nothing more than mist and shadow.

From somewhere within his confusion however, a single point of light took a hold of his consciousness and the Kalborean fought to bring its soft glow into sharper clarity. As he did so he began to notice movement around him, of forms shifting in the darkness, quiet and careful in their progress, and of a smell, something rich and spicy, but alien to him.

Gradually the world around him solidified and he came to realise that he was laying on his back, facing the sky. Above him the radiance of the moons of Arborell shone out, illuminating the ground with a pale yellow glow that lightened the gloom of night and exposed his surroundings. He stiffened as he realised he was surrounded on all sides by rows of neatly ordered tents, piles of stacked equipment and ranks of sleeping Hresh Warriors. Somehow he had awoken in the midst of a Hordim encampment.

As the shock of his whereabouts settled within him he closed his eyes and feigned sleep. For a moment fear gripped him, questions running through his mind as he tried to fathom how he might have awoken within the ranks of a sleeping foe. Confusion replaced fear as cluttered images of violence and death filled his thoughts, but he could make no sense of it, his mind still a mire of broken memories unable to find coherence. Something was wrong though.

As he lay upon the cold grass he could feel something working at his consciousness. It was more than just a blow to the head that had kept him unable to awaken, a bitter taste in his mouth a clue telling him that he had been drugged, and even as he tried to clear his thoughts he could feel its potency withdrawing from his limbs, allowing him to move his fingers and toes.

Carefully Tomas checked his body, stiffening the muscles in his arms and legs and breathing deeply to search out any source of pain in his torso. He was shackled by his right ankle but seemed uninjured. However, as he moved his head hammer-blows of agony raced across his forehead and down into his jaw. He was clearer of mind now and whereas before the pain had aggravated his confusion, making him retreat into a safer place and disentangling him from the dangers of the world outside, it now brought clarity, hammering his thoughts with a myriad of images and emotions.

Like a veil lifting, a torrent of memories crowded back into his consciousness. The fires of Callenfrey rose fresh in his mind, the desperate battle against the Hresh Warband, a fleeting vision of a Guardsman holding a spear, the smoke and flames, all jostled for prominence in his mind, but it was the voice of Madame Sandofel that cut through it all.

“Find my Shemwe,” she had said as he had been leaving his fiance's home, and all he could feel was an overwhelming sense of failure each time the words were uttered in his thoughts. What had happened in Callenfrey once he had been rendered unconscious was unknown to him. Whether Shemwe was still alive was a question he could not answer, but he did know one thing, he had failed to find her, failed to bring her back to her mother, and that was a failure that cut deep at his own sense of honour.

For most of his life he had owned nothing of value except his reputation, and even in the comfortable life he had made with his brother he was known as a man who kept his word, no matter the consequences of the promise given. It had stood both of the Cael Brothers in good stead as they had built their business in the merchant community of Callenfrey, and he had never failed to live up to a pledge. At the very root of his own self-worth the knowledge that he had failed to personally bring Shemwe home gnawed at him, twisting his stomach in knots even as he lay prone within the Hresh encampment. He had been captured by the Hordim, of this he was now sure. In such a state of captivity he would not be able to find her, he could not even save himself.

For a time he lay motionless, listening to the noises of quiet activity about him. It was night and a cool wind was blowing from the north. He could hear the breeze rustling a hedgerow of high bushes nearby, cicadas calling from within the undergrowth, and he was sure he could hear running water, a cascade of falling liquid that fell from

some nearby point into a pool at its base. Most importantly though he listened for the sounds of his captors. They made little in the way of noise but in the light of Elanna and Shabel he had seen dozens of them, camped about him as they slept away the night.

Carefully he opened one eye and looked about. Those Hresh that were close seemed asleep, only a few sentries stood at the outer edge of the tent-rows, silent sentinels unmoving as they focused their attention on the terrain surrounding the encampment. With no response to his movement from those around him he raised his head slightly and took a better look at the nature of his circumstances. What he found left him dismayed.

He was in the middle of a very large group of Hordim that numbered in the hundreds. The ground in all directions covered in the forms of sleeping Hresh, a nearby ruined temple crowded with creatures, each of its crumbling levels packed with quiet warriors. To his right he could hear the rush of a waterfall, pouring its shimmering waters down into a wide lake, and in the breeze he felt the closeness of a forest to his left. The temple was unknown to him. He had no idea where he was.

At all sides he was surrounded, and in the dark he lay still, his thoughts a melee of competing ideas as to how he might escape. There was one problem though, the shackle at his ankle held him tightly, and a leash of plaited leather led from his leg into the closest group of warriors. He could not doubt that at the other end of the leather strap lay someone who was responsible for his captivity. The hopelessness of the situation did not escape him but he was not a man who let Providence guide his destiny. Tomas would not spend one day as a slave, and if that was to be his fate then he would take matters into his own hands and take as many of his enemies as he could with him to the grave. He did not know however, if he had the courage to do so. It was then, in a moment of bravado, that he determined to find out.

Tomas carefully arose from the ground and sat hunched in the dark. For a moment he could do nothing, his head afire with red-hot needles that skewered their way along his nerves, but the pain lessened quickly in its intensity. Whatever drug had been administered to him was wearing off, and rather than keeping him asleep was providing a measure of relief to the ache at his temples. For that at least he was thankful. When he had regained some clarity in his thoughts he grabbed at the leash and slowly began to pull its

length towards him. He wasn't completely sure what he should expect. The tether was long, and as he pulled in its length he found no resistance until it suddenly became taut. None of the sentries had raised an alarm at his movements, all had their attention focused into the surrounding forest and hedgerows. The Kalborean knew he was about to do something foolhardy, but he could not conceive of any possible future as a captive of the Horde except slavery. There was simply no other reason he could think of for his capture. For Tomas that was unthinkable. He would rather die.

With both hands he grabbed the leash and wrenched it with all his might. From out of the huddled forms came a cry of surprise and then a shout of outrage, followed by the rising of a huge form from the darker mounds of the Hresh. Like a ripple the Hordim came to life as each was awakened by the next. Tomas took the moment of confusion to rise to his feet and start shouting like a madman, but he did not wait for the Hordim to quell his cries. With the loose tether in his hands he ran to the nearest Hresh and grabbed at a scimitar that lay at the creature's side. In one swift rise and fall of the huge sword he threw its sheath out into the awakening encampment and then cut cleanly through the leather at his ankle. He had determined that he was not going to be anyone's slave.

In those first few moments Tomas realised that there were no avenues of escape open to him. The sentries were the first to react and they came for him at a rush. He wielded the scimitar with both hands, swinging it recklessly from side to side in an attempt to hold these few Hordim at bay. Then he turned and ran. Rather than try and fight a pitched battle he forced his way deeper into the encampment and started hacking at anything that moved. The effect was instantaneous. In the dark of the night Tomas stabbed and cut at any target that presented itself, and in the sudden confusion brought down three of the warriors as he weaved between tents and piled equipment. The retribution of the Hordim would be swift but that was expected, Tomas knew his resistance could only end in a violent death, but blood was pounding at his temples, his desperation fuelling his muscles as he ran into the midst of the still awakening warriors and hacked at them with all the strength he could muster. In his wake he left a mounting toll of injured Hresh, some of whom lay badly wounded, their cries of pain adding to the confusion that allowed him to cause so much damage before he was finally contained.

In a chorus of cries and alarms the encampment erupted into life

and the Kalborean immediately found himself on the defensive. Warriors came at him from all directions and his sword sliced from left to right as he cut them down, but still they crowded in about him. It was only as he stood fast, cornered against the crumbling stone of the Temple that he realised that none of the Hordim had drawn weapons against him. In their eyes however, he could see only death and his hope was that it would be quick.

Then, from the Hordim came a single command that rose clearly above the taunts and insults of the crowding warriors.

“P'arj! P'arj Hresh'na, ha'es mar vehmin!”

The Hresh immediately stopped their advance and looked to the back of their number. The tone of the command compelled obedience, and they fell back, opening the way for a huge Hresh Chieftain who strode through the parting throng and stood before the young Kalborean. For a moment Tomas froze, his scimitar held above his head as he watched the advance of the Hordim. The Hresh was tall and well-muscled, his face scarred by more than one blade, his skin darkened by years of harsh exposure to the suns of Arborell. He was dressed in blackened battle-armour and wore a blue coloured tunic beneath his breast-plate. All who stood before him fell away as he stopped an arms-length in front of Tomas and crossed his arms.

“I do not know your name *vehmin*, and I do not care who you are. You stand before Ansolon'Denmar, Chieftain of the Denmark Kraal and master of your destiny. It is only one word from me that holds back my warriors. It would be in your best interest to put the sword down.”

Tomas raised the scimitar higher and made no move to relinquish it. Instead he struck out at the Hresh Chieftain with his sword, a heavy blow that would surely have left a lethal injury on the Hordim if it had been allowed to hit its target. Ansolon'Denmar was not about to take the blow willingly. With a swift movement of his huge arm he hit the blade of the scimitar away with a mailed fist, then pulled the weapon straight from Tomas' hands with the other. In that instant the Hresh warriors closed in about their commander but he waved them back.

In the ensuing silence the Chieftain threw the sword into the ground at his side and turned back to the Kalborean. Tomas shrunk back against the cold stone of the Temple and awaited his death. At least, he thought, he had achieved his objective, some of the Hresh would be following him to the afterlife. Ansolon'Denmar however, had other plans for the Kalborean and he was not about to give his

enemy what he wanted. In his eyes was a smouldering fury, his mailed fists were gripped tightly by his side, but he did not retaliate.

“You will find my friend that a warrior spirit holds great value here, but it will not save you from your own stupidity. Do that again and I will cut you to pieces, then feed you to my Voercats.”

Ansolon'Denmar turned again to the assemblage of his warriors and called into their number.

“Trem'Alindae, Commen!”

Again a tremor ran through the warriors and the chieftain waited as a huge, but aged Hresh was brought before him. Two warriors forced the creature to its knees and then retreated. Tomas got the impression that discipline was about to be enforced against the old Hordim, and it had a lot to do with the trouble he had just caused.

“Trem'Alindae, es viis vehmin ad'u ma'gyar?” The Chieftain pointed at Tomas and the Hresh nodded. The Kalborean could see that the Hordim was not cowed. There was pride in the old warrior, and as he watched the scene play itself out in the gloom he could sense the Hresh was simply waiting for whatever punishment fate might deal him.

Ansolon'Denmar did not hesitate. With a punch that would have killed any man he hit the kneeling Hordim with his mailed fist, striking him squarely across the side of the head. The force of the blow toppled the Hresh to the ground but the creature picked himself up and stood, although groggily, before his commander. Then the Chieftain addressed his warriors.

“Hresh'na u nar Kraal Denmar, thella hald Trem'Alindae, ha'es vidut honorum. Parle phenath u medu muath qarum me'du redem'na. Hresh'na, viis es ma'a scria!”

With these last words the Hresh stood to attention and then returned to the re-ordering of their encampment. Tomas was left alone, only Ansolon'Denmar and the old Hresh standing by him. The old Hresh had his head bowed but the look in his eyes told Tomas that he had been humiliated, and that it was to the young Kalborean that he looked for revenge. The Chieftain spoke quietly to the Hresh who then disappeared into the darkness, before again turning to the Kalborean.

“You have caused Trem'Alindae to lose respect within his Kraal, and this will not be forgotten by him *vehmin*. It is fortunate for you that the orders I must follow require you alive, or else I would have had you killed out of hand. You are a captive and you will comply

with orders given. Do you understand my words?

Tomas looked the Hresh directly in the eyes and felt the unrestrained violence that such a creature could perpetrate, but he did not retreat. "A swift death would have been far more preferable to another day of breathing the same stinking air as your warriors."

Ansolon'Denmar bristled but stayed his hand. Instead he grabbed Tomas roughly by the neck and dragged him through the camp until he had him at the entrance to a large tent that had been erected beyond the Temple. Behind him the waterfall cascaded down from the cliffs above and over the crash of its waters the Hresh Chieftain spoke into Tomas' ear. There was a vehemence in his words that left no reason for doubt.

"There is more at stake here than you could possibly know boy. You will comply with my wishes or I will kill everybody in this tent, of this you can be absolutely certain."

With that he threw back the covers at its entrance and pushed Tomas into the tent's dark interior. Only a small lamp flared in the gloom but it was enough for him to make out the huddled shapes of three people sitting upon its cold grassy floor. The young Kalborean drew in his breath as he struggled against the iron grip of the Hresh. One of the shapes was Shemwe.



"Tomas?" A voice whispered from the darkness, its rasping call nothing more than a breathless expulsion of hope. Tomas recognised her, but he was held tight by Ansolon. Before he could reply the Hresh forced him back outside and then threw him to the ground. He had seen that the Kalborean had recognised one of the captives and he was going to use that to his advantage.

"These *vehmin* are nothing but civilians, cattle fit only for slaughter. I will kill them the moment I believe they are of no further value to me. Give me any reason to do so and I will have them killed. Do you understand that their safety depends completely upon your compliance? Raise a hand against any of my warriors again and they will all die. Do you understand?"

Tomas nodded, the shock of seeing his beloved huddled in fear in the dark leaving him speechless. In that moment he found a new focus to his existence, one where he must do everything to stay alive. His Shemwe had been caught in the same net as himself and it would be up to him, and only him, to see her back to safety. Without thinking he tried to re-enter the tent but was stopped by the emergence of Trem'Alindae out of the shadows to his left. The old Hresh had a new tether in hand and he quickly fastened it to Tomas' leg. Ansolon'Denmar grabbed Tomas by the shoulder and squeezed his collar-bone until the pain forced the Kalborean down on to one knee.

"Trem'Alindae is your keeper. You are his responsibility until such time as you meet your fate. Do everything he says and do not attempt to escape. Any trouble on your part will lead to the death of you all!"

The commander left Tomas outside the tent, tethered to his keeper. He wanted to get inside and talk to Shemwe but Trem'Alindae had other ideas. He had been given the task of controlling the captive and had been humiliated by his commander for not doing so. This time he was going to take no chances. Without warning the Hresh punched the Kalborean across the jaw, knocking him senseless and toppling him to the ground. As Tomas fell he could hear the Hresh laughing quietly and then everything was again black.

Days passed and Tomas remained unaware of their passage. In a progression of day and night the Kalborean felt nothing, his mind struggling to counter the effects of a foul liquid that the old Hresh forced into his mouth at every rest the Warband took. It kept his mind addled and his vision confused, incapable of thought or feeling, unable to recognise where he was being taken. To the Kalborean the world was a disorderly march of shadows from which he could not escape, and in this state Trem'Alindae kept his captive quiet, unaware of his surroundings and compliant.

For Tomas however, captured within the vague walls of his potion-induced prison only one thought found its way to coherence. Out of the veils and mists of his dreaming he took hold of the one thought that he could use to fight against the power of the drug that coursed through his system. And like the light of the moons before he found himself rising from an ocean of confusion, gripped tightly by a promise that he had made, and one for which he had no intention of breaking.

"Find my Shemwe," came the words once again, pounding into his mind, overwhelming all other considerations. The look of despair on

Madam Sandofel's face burned its way back into his consciousness and there he once again found something to hold on to. In his prison he began to harden his resolve and fight the effects of the Hordim's soporific liquid. As the days passed he came to realise that it was slowly losing its effect upon him.

As the potion's power receded he once again found himself able to discern the nature of the world around him. Although he was almost paralysed his mind had again become active and his vision returned. The shadowed forms that had been his company for days on end coalesced into the images of Hresh warriors, running at his side as he was carried upon a makeshift stretcher by Trem'Alindae and another Hordim named Fhans'Garoth. Beyond the circle of these warriors he could manage only the fleeting glimpses of a huge Warband, somehow much larger than he had seen before, passing through country that he had never travelled and could not recognise.

He spent his days thus, staring at the passing cycle of night and day, watching cloud and star move across his vision as he was carried to an unknown destination, and to a fate that he could only imagine in his wildest nightmares. This time he did not spend idle however, there was much to think about and much to plan for.

Whatever the purposes of his capture Tomas was not about to make anything easy for his captors. With time to think he came to realise that he did not believe the Hresh Chieftain's threats. He had no reason to doubt that Ansolon'Denmar was capable of killing all his captives without a second thought, but his assault upon the Hresh camp should have left him dead. The warriors had made no move to do anything except subdue him, even though he must have seriously wounded at least a dozen of their number. Such restraint could only mean that they needed their captives alive. His simple logic saw no purpose in them being alive unless they were meant to be, and he used this thought to begin formulating a plan for his escape and the eventual freeing of Shemwe. First though he would need to regain the use of his body and that was going to take time.

The effects of the liquid regularly poured down his throat would spread quickly through his body, numbing his arms and legs but then dissipate just as rapidly. Whatever the intent of his keeper, the potion's only lasting effect was to leave a feeling of overwhelming fatigue in his limbs. Once his mind became clear he began to work against these lingering effects, flexing his arms and legs as he lay in the stretcher and testing the resolve of the potion to keep him

immobile.

He was not sure but by the eighth day of his capture, as best as he could reckon it, he had overcome the effects of the potion and lay ready to take advantage of any opportunity that might allow his escape. The Warband had left an area of marshes and spent most of the day travelling west across a wide grassland when they encountered an old ruin, a farmstead, long abandoned and crumbling from exposure to the elements. It was there that they camped for the night and it was there that he heard an argument erupt between the Hresh, a lethal confrontation that almost had the entire Warband in an uproar.

Tomas had become aware that two groups of Hresh travelled the grasslands together and both held great distrust between them. At first he had seen the iron control that Ansolon'Denmar held over his warriors. He could have nothing but contempt for the barbarous creature that had led the attack on Callenfrey but he had seen also the absolute proficiency of his crue. From the vantage of his stretcher he had the time to observe the daily routine and the incredible stamina of the Hordim, and could not escape the conclusion that they were indeed a formidable force, one that was held together by their commander's unquestioned authority and the ruthless dedication of the warriors themselves.

That changed quickly as a new commander took control of the warband. Tomas could not say why but he felt the tone of the march change. The Denmar Hresh had been allowed to maintain custody of their captives but had been pushed into the background, a much more numerous group of yellow-marked warriors taking control of their leadership. The Kalborean could see it in the eyes of Trem'Alindae and his companion-bearer that distrust and anger festered between the two groups. It was only a matter of time before it became personal.

In the dark of night Ansolon'Denmar and his sub-commanders forced their way towards the warband's command tent. Tension had been rising within the camp through the preceding hours and it was evident that some major disagreement on strategy had developed between the two opposing factions. Tomas could see nothing of what happened but within minutes fighting broke out between the Hresh. As the commanders argued their disparate views inside the tent, their subordinates who remained outside were not as restrained. In the melee a number of the Hordim were cut down but the superior

numbers of yellow-banded warriors ensured the fight was short. The fighting ended with both commanders forcing the warring groups apart, but the dispute had not settled, new reasons for animosity forged instead in the heat of the brawl, and in its aftermath the Denmar Hresh withdrew taking four wounded brethren with them.

In the dark Tomas had entertained the idea of using the uproar to escape, however Trem'Alindae did not leave his side and instead he was left to determine the play of events by what he could hear, and be content with the thought that such rivalries may well give him the opportunity he would need to escape.



Dawn broke with the Warband on the move again, this time forging its way northwards, across an undulating landscape of open plains and isolated copses of acacia. To the north-east a line of mountain summits cut the horizon, to the west the dark shadow of a great forest bordered the grasslands. Through the slits of his eyelids Tomas watched the world pass by and wondered where Shemwe might be amongst the mass of running Hresh. The Warband was moving quickly, its warriors spread out across a wide area, taking advantage of the open spaces that gave them the room to move freely. Across this grassland the Hresh ran without rest, conscious of their exposure to attack. By midday the Warband had travelled deep into the plains, and it was at the juncture of two dry creek beds that the warriors then split into two separate groups, one falling back as the other picked up its pace.

Ahead a series of steep hills rose to the right and this forced the warriors to veer towards a narrow pass, concentrating their numbers as they turned to avoid the steeper slopes. Tomas took little notice of the change of direction, in the warmth of the day he tried to sleep, but as he was about to fall into slumber a strangled gurgle of surprise roused him back to wakefulness. He opened one eye only to find himself falling, the stretcher collapsing to the ground, an arrow protruding from the neck of the Hresh at his feet as he slumped down into the grasses. Quickly Tomas rolled from the stretcher and dug his

way into the grass. Trem'Alindae was nowhere to be seen, all the Kalborean could hear was the unmistakable sounds of mounted troops thundering down a slope to his right.

In the bright light of day he pulled the stretcher over his body and waited for what was to come. Somehow mounted units of the Kalborean Army had found the warband and there was no chance that the Hresh would surrender, no matter what the cost in their own lives. There was going to be a battle, and it would be a fight to the death. From ahead of his position he heard commands being shouted and the sounds of warriors quickly arranging themselves in formation. Against the thunder of the approaching cavalry the Hresh were remarkably quiet as they formed a series of defensive positions, then as the Kalboreans closed in, began a chant that was followed by the pounding of war-drums and the blaring of horns.

Before he had any chance to retreat from the field a large group of Hresh formed an extended line only a few metres ahead of where he lay. Beneath him he could feel the vibration of charging cavalry, and the shouts of the Hresh as they prepared for battle. It took only seconds for the two forces to meet headlong on the plain and Tomas did not dare move. From beneath his flimsy covering he watched as the world about him erupted once again in lethal combat, the dark shapes of the Hordim overshadowed by the larger forms of lance-wielding cavalry charging down upon their positions. In a crash of steel and bone the combatants met and the battle of the Surgis'Ka began.

## Chapter 10 - Ghosts



An early dusk settled over the plains of the Surgis'Ka as Mallen and Gremorgan hastened their way northwards. The remainder of the afternoon had been warm but a chill had touched the wind, and as they continued their pursuit of the Warband both men looked anxiously to the horizon. Storm clouds were brewing in the north, the winds forcing huge thunderheads in their direction. Before them the endless grasslands were a sea of undulating green, a wide panorama of waving grass that spread to all the horizons and gave no hint that it had either border or boundary. Since leaving the ruin of the old farmstead the two men had ran, the afternoon falling away as they attempted to make ground on the Hordim. Somewhere upon the vast plain ahead moved their quarry, and in the slanting light of the afternoon suns Mallen could not be sure how far ahead of them the Hresh actually were. The signs left in the harder ground of the Surgis'Ka were faint and the Kalborean found himself regularly having to pause in the knee-deep grasses to test the remnants of the Hordim's advance.

“What do you see Master Cael” asked the Dwarvendim as he bent into the grasses. Mallen rose from his consideration of the trail and made an arc with his arms, encompassing a wide area of the ground ahead. In his hand he held a small scrap of yellow cloth.

“The Hordim move at a rapid pace, their number spread wide across the plain. I fear it will be impossible to tell if any of the Warband break away. There are simply too many tracks.”

Mallen brought the piece of cloth to where the Dwarvendim stood and showed it to him.

“I have found a number of these over the course of the day. There must be many more of the yellow-marked Hresh than the Denmar. It makes me wonder if there is any possibility of them separating, and whether we would know anyway, considering the wide swath they cut across the plain.”

Gremorgan nodded and pulled a water bottle from one of his bags.

“It is in the hands of Providence as to what they might do. All we can do is follow, but we must trust that at this stage of the game they will see the benefit of their strength in numbers. I am sure it will take a major event to separate them now. And if that is so, we will know

about it when we stumble across its aftermath. Hopefully the sign they leave behind will show us the way.”

The Dwarvendim took a drink and wiped his mouth. In the evening light the ground had started to darken, and he looked anxiously towards the sky.

“I think that it will be prudent for us to find shelter. I do not like the look of those clouds. There's a storm coming and I have the feeling that we will need to be properly protected when it does.”

Mallen agreed, but as he looked about the plains he could see little sign of any suitable refuge. “I think we have few choices here Gremorgan, shall we not move on and trust in Providence to provide cover when we need it?”

Gremorgan smiled and pulled a small device from one of his many pockets. Mallen immediately recognised it as the metallic object the Dwarvendim had used once before to find his way within the labyrinths of the Hra'gora.

“Master Cael, in these lands you do not trust to anything if you wish to stay alive. We have been relying on your skills for some time. Now I believe it is only appropriate that I add something to this enterprise.”

With that he placed the instrument in his hands and muttered something quietly as he looked into its glass face. When he had finished he nodded his head in satisfaction and held out his hand for Mallen to look as well.

“This is a Dirge-compass Master Cael. Unlike a sailor's instrument that might show you true north, this device seeks out and identifies the remnants of past life-energies. I have asked it to show me the nearest human habitation and it has done so. For good measure it has also given me the distance as well.”

Mallen looked into the top of the disc shaped device and found a slender stone needle suspended over a field of glowing metal. The needle was pointing slightly west of north. In the descending night the metal plate glittered, displaying a field of shining points of light that Mallen could have sworn were moving slowly over its surface, as if the device was tracking something.

The Kalborean turned to Gremorgan. “How does it work, and what does it tell you?”

The LoreMaster took one further measure from it and replied, “It tells me that an old farmstead lies no more than three kilometres from where we stand, roughly in that direction.” He pointed to the north-west and then continued. “If we are lucky we can reach it within the

hour.” For a moment he paused, looked out to the setting suns and then closed up the compass before returning it to his pocket.

“How the Dirge-compass works is a simple affair. It is a product of EarthMagic, the needle you saw floating within it is stonewood, a shard of petrified wood taken from an ancient tree that resides at the very source of the Shan'duil. You may remember when I described the nature of the River of Life that it binds the cycle of life and death in this world. Stonewood is drawn to any life, and when placed in a Dirge-compass it can tell me where any person, or other living thing may be, or has been in the past. What the compass is measuring here is the echo, or the residual life-energies, of those people who lived in the farmstead. It may well be that they abandoned their farm to the elements generations ago, but their life-struggle, their emotions and their determination have all left a mark which the compass can sense. It can be a very useful device when the circumstances warrant its use.”

Mallen thought that this was probably an understatement, and in the gathering gloom he followed as Gremorgan began a rapid march towards the farmstead. To the north a solid bank of black cloud had obscured a third of the sky, and even as the first stars of night struggled into view both men could see huge blasts of lightning hitting the ground far ahead. As of yet there was no rumble in the air, the storm still a good distance away, but it was advancing rapidly and Mallen could feel the air changing, an energy creeping into his surroundings, charging everything with the anticipation of the tempest to come.

Before they could cover less than a kilometre they were hit by the first of a series of winds that flattened the grasses around them and sent debris flying southwards. In the bluster of the winds Mallen pulled his cloak tighter about him and sensed in the air that this was not going to be just a storm. Within its blows and eddies he could feel an icy chill, and as the storm closed in upon them he could see the tops of the thunderheads being torn apart by crosswinds and shears. The lightning grew closer as they marched, a deep rumble shaking the ground as blast after blast of light assaulted the plains ahead. It felt like the ground itself was being shattered by the force of the pounding. With every stride they took the velocity of the wind increased, attempting to push them back as they struggled forward.

In the gathering bluster Gremorgan came closer and shouted into Mallen's ear.

“We are in trouble Master Cael. This is no ordinary storm, we are

confronted by the *treachersa*, and if we do not find shelter before it hits we may well not survive it.”

Mallen agreed and immediately followed Gremorgan at the run. He had used one of the old languages when he described the storm as a Treachersa, a murderer of the innocent, and as good as their name such storms were killers. He had heard tales of travellers disappearing within the violence of such tempests, and of entire villages that had been flattened by their power. To be out in the open when one hit was not a proposition he relished.

With their attention focused on the approaching storm the two men ran onwards, finding what they were looking for huddled between two shallow hills. The farmstead was a large affair, a two-story stone dwelling that had been overcome by the spreading branches of a stand of Elm trees. It must have been abandoned for at least three generations and as Mallen and Gremorgan approached its solid stone walls they could still identify the outlines of fencing, outbuildings and barnyards surrounding the main structure. In its day it would have been an impressive establishment, but with the black wall of cloud thundering down upon them they had little time to appreciate the effort that would have been required to build it out here in the wilds. Mallen's only concern was where they might find refuge.

Above the howl of the wind he shouted to Gremorgan, “Where to now?”

The Dwarvendim surveyed the building quickly. Most of it lay shattered by action of wind, root and branch but at the rear of the main structure there stood a small outbuilding, a tool-shed. It looked both solid and was still in possession of its slate roofing.

“There we should find shelter. It looks solid enough for our purposes. Let us hurry. The storm is almost upon us!”

Mallen did not need to be convinced. The door to the shed was weathered and broken but still serviceable to a fashion. Together they made it inside and then forced the door closed. Inside the shed was a morass of broken shelving and rotting cupboards. Against its far wall a heavy workbench stood squat and immovable. Gremorgan took one look at the contents of their refuge and set to work. With Mallen's help they reinforced the door with shelving and bolstered the walls with planking they found stacked in a corner. When they had finished the Dwarvendim crawled in under the workbench and motioned Mallen to join him.

“Come quickly Master Cael. This shed may survive the storm but

then it may not. If it doesn't you do not want to be standing out in the open do you?"

The Kalborean took the point and crawled under the bench himself. And it was there they stayed, crouched beneath its heavy wood, awaiting the inevitable impact of the Treachersa.



They did not have to wait long. About them the air became suddenly chilled, and as the storm approached the building was hit by powerful winds, then hail that hammered at the shingled roof and tore at the stone walls. In seconds the whole farmstead was engulfed in a cacophony of crashing ice and blasts of lightning, a rising tide of elemental power that shook the foundations of their refuge, smashing in what remained of the shed's windows and tearing at its walls.

Beneath the workbench both men remained huddled, wrapped in their travel cloaks, waiting for whatever might follow. Quickly the power of the storm increased, hail and sleet slicing through the shattered windows, hammering against the makeshift boarding Gremorgan had put up to cover them. In the deluge Mallen could hear ice building on the roof. Under its weight the timbers were beginning to buckle and over the rush of the wind he could hear the low groan of wood under pressure. About them the lightning crashed into the ground, sending out shock-waves of sound and charged energy as thunder rolled away along the plain. In the maelstrom the Kalborean found he could not endure the noise. In an attempt to escape its overwhelming volume he placed his hands over his ears and pressed himself closer to the stone wall at his back. It was to no avail.

For his part Gremorgan watched the storm build before him more with awe than fear. He had always marvelled at the power of nature and over the years had come to accept that life in the outdoors had its dangers. As the lightning crashed about them he placed his hand against the cold stone at their backs and felt the power of the storm send shudders through its structure. He believed the main building was strong enough to stand the onslaught, but its ruin offered no protection from the pounding hail. The shed had a roof but he had

his doubts it could withstand the enormous forces that were being vented on its slate shingles. The workbench itself was their real protection. As long as they were beneath its thick timbers they should be safe enough.

For an hour the storm raged unabated, venting its power on the unprotected plains, before lessening as a change in wind direction sent the centre of the storm eastwards. In the ensuing rain the two men sat in the dark and chewed at some Nahla bread, waiting for what was to come next.

Both men tried to sleep but it was impossible in the confines of their refuge to do so, the noise and the cold making the cramped conditions under the workbench too uncomfortable to find rest. Instead Gremorgan decided to tell a tale to pass the time.

“Master Cael, have you ever heard of the Verk'haalen?”

Mallen shook his head and waited for whatever the Dwarvendim had to say. There was a look of devilment in the LoreMaster's eyes, as if he was about to perpetrate some type of mischief.

“The Verk'haalen are an ancient Hordim myth, a legend from a time long before the coming of Men to Arborell. As far as I can tell it originates at the time when the Mutan first gained their hold on EarthMagic and their grasp upon its power was shaky at best.”

Outside of their refuge the storm rumbled ominously and both men looked again to the windows as rain lashed the sides of the outbuilding. For Gremorgan it was a suitable backdrop for the tale he was about to tell.

“After the destruction of the Trell'sara, the Mutan took control of EarthMagic and began to experiment with its powers. For whatever reason their dabblings tipped the balance of the Shan'duil and unleashed the creatures the Hordim called the Verk'haalen into the world.”

“Who were they?” asked Mallen.

“As best as I can say the word Verk'haalen means 'storm shepherd' but they were nothing like their name suggests. In the worst storms they would appear, gruesome spectral beings using the power and the malevolence of the maelstroms as doorways into our reality, and for as long as the storm lasted the Verk'haalen would create havoc, destroying what they could, and killing everything that was unfortunate enough to cross their path.”

Gremorgan paused for effect before continuing.

“For the Hordim, especially the Hresh who lived upon the plains of

Arborell in those times, the Verk'haalen were demons that could not be killed and who spread trails of murder and fear wherever a storm might travel. Many died. It is said entire Kraals disappeared in those days, taken by the storm shepherds to a tortured end. Even now, the Hordim will not travel in times of storm or inclement weather. They fear what lurks in the dark power of the Treachersa, and I myself do not blame them."

Outside an arc of lightning hit the ground nearby, illuminating the windows and sending thunder crashing through the shed's stone walls. The storm was returning, the wind changing once again and pushing the power of the storm back in their direction. For Mallen the story of the storm shepherds gave him one more reason to wish the refuge they had found was more substantial. Outside the noise of the storm increased, the wind sending cold blasts of debris and icy hail hammering into the farmstead, rocking its weathered stone and drowning all other sounds in its howl and bluster. As he tried to huddle further under the bench he shouted to Gremorgan. "How did the Mutan get rid of the Verk'haalen?"

The Dwarvendim looked out at the storm and then turned to his companion. His words were almost drowned in the increasing violence of the storm. "Who said they did?"

Before Mallen could ask anything further the storm broke against the ruined buildings with added fury; a grinding, tearing force that pounded at the foundations as if the Verk'haalen were indeed outside, trying to break down the stone walls to get at them. The Kalborean had never witnessed such a maelstrom. A lifetime of travel upon the roads of Kalborea had not prepared him for the absolute power of this storm. Tightly he held his pack and dug himself deeper under the workbench.

Then the roof collapsed.

In a deluge of ice and slate the outbuilding's roof caved in, throwing timber and stone in all directions as it came down directly on top of the workbench. Protected only by the heavy wood the roof smashed down upon them, covering the bench entirely in debris. Gremorgan cried out as a piece of shattered timber drove itself down across his shoulder. Within the thrash and tear of the storm Mallen did not notice his companion's injury until a bright blast of lightning illuminated their small refuge enough to show Gremorgan pinned by the beam, his back forced against the cold stone behind them.

"Gremorgan!" he shouted, but the storm muffled his cry. In the

confines beneath the bench he pushed away some of the debris and attended to his companion, grabbing the timber with both hands and wrenching it away. The Dwarvendim looked winded, his face a mask of pain as he grasped at his shoulder. Blood poured from between his fingers.

Mallen was unsure what he should do, but he knew he had to do something, and quickly. Carefully he exposed the wound and found that it was not deep. It was however a long gash that ran from Gremorgan's collarbone to his sternum. And it was bleeding profusely. The Kalborean looked worriedly at the LoreMaster.

“What must I do? This bleeding must be stopped.”

Gremorgan nodded and pointed to one of his bags with his free hand.

“I do not feel any damage other than the tear in my skin. In the bag you will find some powder and a long roll of bandage. The powder I can apply, the bandaging will be up to you.”

Mallen grabbed at the bag and found what the Dwarvendim had asked for. As the storm raged about them Gremorgan went to work. With hands slick from his own blood he unscrewed a small jar of white powder and carefully sprinkled some of its contents over the open wound. In the crash of lightning Mallen saw his face contort with pain and a veil of mist rise from the surface of the wound, but as the Dwarvendim lay more of the powder upon the tear he could see its tattered edges begin to fuse, the blood disappearing as the powder reacted with his body.

When Gremorgan had finished the wound lay red and sore across his chest but all sign of bleeding had dried up. The LoreMaster had paid a price however. His face was drawn and his breathing laboured.

“The powder has only closed the injury. It will need to be bound if it is to heal sufficiently. Take the bandage and bind it tightly about my chest and shoulder.”

Mallen watched as his companion stripped off his cloak and vests. In the freezing cold the Kalborean carefully bound the Dwarvendim's torso as he took directions as to how it must be done. When he was finished Gremorgan dressed and lay back against the cold stone. Once the task was complete Mallen could see he was breathing much easier, however there was no doubt in his mind that the pain was still intense, regardless of the unusual power of the white powder.

Under the debris they waited as the Treachersa pounded the

ground around them. In waves of wind and hail, the storm clawed at the farmstead and its stand of trees. Blinding flashes of lightning hit the earth all about them, sending mounds of dirt erupting into the air, spilling soil in all directions and filling the space beneath the workbench with foul vapours. It was not long before everything became soaked by a mist of smashed hail that found its way between the cracks in the debris about them, chilling their bones and fogging their breath as they exhaled. Mallen could see that the cold was aggravating the Dwarvendim's injury and he decided he must do something about it.

Carefully he organised a small pile of wood splinters and enclosed it in a ring of broken stone. With flint he struck a spark to some tinder and carefully built a small fire that twisted in the drafts that found their way through the debris surrounding them. After some effort it caught and he was able to build it up until its licking flames provided a small amount of warmth. For both men it was a welcome comfort in the midst of the tempest. In this manner they passed the hours that followed, waiting patiently as the storm did its worst and then moved on, lessening in intensity as it slowly edged southwards. It was past midnight before the last of its strength dissipated. Only when it had gone could either man try and find rest.

Morning broke upon a world scattered and torn by the Treachersa. The violence of the night had left destruction and chilling cold in its wake, but with the rising of the suns the new day gave some promise of milder skies. When he awoke Mallen immediately began working to force a way through the rubble pile that had been their sanctuary, and found it easier than he had expected. The slate roof of the shed had collapsed directly on top of the bench they had been sheltering under, spraying slate tiles and beams of weathered timber upon the dirt floor. Most of the roof had remained intact however, and even though it had appeared in the dark of night that they had been completely engulfed in debris, the morning showed instead that the roof had collapsed at one end, forming a pocket of shelter within which they had remained safe from the worst of the storm. It was only a matter of pushing aside the loose slate at one end of the roofing and he was free. Able to stand for the first time in twelve hours Mallen stretched aching limbs and looked about him at the devastation the storm had left in its wake.

Behind him the farmstead remained resolute in the face of the Treachersa. Apart from their shed the remainder of the house had

survived, only a small portion of the front of the building succumbing to the winds. The stand of Elms had not fared so well. They stood as solitary stems, stripped of all foliage and a good portion of their upper branches. Such was to be expected, the trees were no match for the violence of the winds that assailed them. The lands surrounding the farmstead shocked Mallen however, the level of destruction a testament to the unrestrained power of the tempest. The ground itself had taken a terrible pummelling. All about him he could see the shallow craters of what he assumed where lightning strikes, pockmarks of broken earth and burned ground that extended as far as he could see. Trees lay smashed and broken, and all of what remained of the farm's outbuildings had been utterly flattened. If Mallen had not known better he could easily have mistaken what he was looking at as the aftermath of a vicious battle, one where the earth itself had been a combatant.

As he surveyed his surroundings he concentrated on the sounds on the morning and tried to clear his head. Birds called to the west, and as he listened to their raucous carousing he tried to remember what lay in that direction. He knew that the central plains of Arborell had been opened up and claimed for Kalborea. Two great fortress cities were already under construction, named after the Frontiere and the Nephrim, legendary ships of man's early history. He could also recall somewhere in that direction that there lay a great forest, and beyond its breadth a wide area of wetlands that had only newly been discovered. The Chemblain it had been called and it was a magnet for hunters and hopeful settlers. He pondered the idea for a moment that they should have better luck than whoever owned the ruin behind him.

In the quiet of the dawn he listened to the breeze, taking in the chill of the morning air to fully awaken, and in his contemplation began to hear something different. It was the pounding of horses hooves coming from the north. For a moment he did not move. Some two hundred metres from where he stood lay a shallow rise, and beyond it he could see the points of at least two dozen lances appearing upon its grassy crest. Before he could turn to inform Gremorgan the first of the riders appeared out of the plain ahead and was then followed quickly by his compatriots. They saw him immediately and veered in his direction, lowering their lances as they rode.

Mallen had nothing to fear from them. He recognised the riders as Kalborean Army Scouts and could see no reason to do anything but

wait and greet them. As he watched them approach however, an ill-defined anxiety began to grow within him. The cavalymen were not at ease, they rode with a sense of purpose that struck Mallen as aggressive. Carefully he surveyed each of the riders and saw that a good number of them were injured, their mounts stained and muddied. These Scouts had been in a fight and they did not look as if they had won it.

Mallen took one step backwards and then stood fast. He knew he had nothing to fear but he could not say the same for Gremorgan. The Dwarvendim were not enemies of Kalborea but they were treated with suspicion. The last thing he needed was for them both to be arrested. One look at the LoreMaster and no amount of quick talking could save them from interrogation and delay.

Before he could move again the scouts were upon him, drawing their mounts to a halt as they encircled his position. Only one dismounted, an officer who himself appeared injured, a deep gash in his arm only partly covered by a makeshift bandage. He did not look like he was in any mood for either small talk or salutation.

“State your name and registered place of abode.” The officer barked at Mallen, but there was a hoarse edge to his voice that indicated his arm was not his only injury. It was a request he would have to answer truthfully.

“Mallen Cael, resident of Callenfrey.”

“And what is your purpose here?”

To this Mallen decided he could not answer truthfully. There was only one enemy of Kalborea and that was the Horde. To say he was following a warband to rescue his brother would have been met with derision and suspicion. He instead gave the soldier a more palatable purpose for his sojourn on the plains.

“I am a hunter, travelling west to the lands of the Chemblain. I have been told that a man can make his fortune there if he does not mind hard work.”

The officer strode closer and put out his hand. “If this is so, then I will need to see your Hunter's Permit.”

Mallen placed his hand slowly into his tunic and pulled out his wallet. It was the only thing that he had not lost in the raid on Callenfrey and amongst other things held a current Hunter's Permit. The young Kalborean had always kept it up to date, more out of habit than need, and now it would prove very useful.

Carefully he removed the frail papers and gave them over. As soon

as the officer saw that his permit was up to date he relaxed visibly, and motioned for his soldiers to stand easy. He could see no danger here and his men needed rest.

“My name is Sanclare, Unit Commander of the 17th Mounted Scout Detachment. We have ridden long and need rest. If you have no objections we will share the shelter of this ruin with you for a short time.”

He handed back the permit and then called his unit to take rest. Now Mallen could see that these soldiers saw no danger in his presence, and as long as Gremorgan stayed out of sight they would no doubt move on. He had a few questions of his own though.

“It looks as if you have been in a fight. Is there any danger here I should be aware of?”

The officer shook his head and looked back to the north. “There has been a major battle this day past upon the plains of the Surgis’Ka, not more than fifteen kilometres from here. A major force of Hordim have been ambushed and destroyed, but at the loss of all those who made the attack. We may have defeated the Hordim but the cost has been great. By our measure more than twelve hundred cavalry and foot soldiers have died, for a similar loss amongst our enemy.”

Mallen looked aghast, for a moment his head swam, his thoughts racing as he tried to find some composure. Sanclare could see his distress. “Is there something wrong? Did you know someone who might now lay dead?”

The question was more inciteful than the officer knew. If the Hresh had indeed been ambushed then there was every chance Tomas was now dead, killed by his captors as they lay besieged upon the plain. He would have to get to the site of the battle as quickly as possible. None of this could be imparted to Sanclare however.

“No, I have no relatives or friends who could have been involved. I am just shocked by what you have said. Have you come from the battlefield?”

“Yes. We were on patrol to the north and found the slaughter spread out about us. We checked as many of the bodies as we could but they are scattered over a wide area. I have decided to return to our base at Hallenbrook to the south and report our findings. It will take at least a month for the Administrators’ Guild to work out the casualty lists. It is a job I do not envy them.”

In Mallen’s mind the sight of the Administrator at Callenfrey’s Civic Hall came back to haunt his thoughts. It was their job to ensure that

all who died were properly certified, no matter what the reason, and the thought of it filled him with fear for his brother's safety.

"Is it safe to travel? Are there any of the Hordim remaining?"

"As you are heading west you should find no danger, the Hordim have been destroyed. We came across a few stragglers making for the north-west but cut them down as they ran. The injuries you see amongst us come mostly from the storm last night. You found shelter I see. We were not so lucky and had endure the soft caress of the tempest within a stand of sparse acacia. It was not a night I wish to repeat for a long time."

For an hour the scouts rested before moving off. Sanclare gestured goodbye as they mounted and then rode off quickly southwards. Mallen watched as they disappeared into the undulations of the plain and then, once they were out of sight, crawled back into their refuge. Gremorgan was waiting for him.

"Did you hear what was said?"

Gremorgan nodded and gathered his bags. In the gloom of his hiding place the Dwarvendim looked pale, but his injury was not going to stop him.

"Aye, it is the worst possible news and I fear that something terrible has been perpetrated. Grab your pack Master Cael, we cannot wait for breakfast. We must get to the battlefield before anyone else. There is something very wrong about what has happened and we need to find answers."

Both men ran, their footfalls muffled in the sodden earth of the plain as they laboured northwards. Gremorgan did not let the pain of his wound slow him, and as they ran he took the time to eat a small piece of his Nahla bread. Mallen did the same and felt it immediately quell the stiffness in his limbs, clearing his head of fatigue and infusing his body with new energy. He did not eat too much though. Ahead lay a long journey and although he held great fears for his brother, the Kalborean found himself not quite able to believe that anything had happened to him. It was a feeling that only grew stronger as they moved closer to the battleground, and by mid-morning they had made it more than half way to their objective.

"I think we should rest for a short time Master Cael. I need these bandages re-wrapped."

Gremorgan could go no further until his wound had been attended to, and after the morning's exertions Mallen had to agree. The plains were wide and almost featureless, only the boundaries of the horizon

showing anything other than a sea of waving grass and rolling hills. It was only in the north-east that the summits of a mountain range broken the line between grass and sky, and it was in that direction that they now travelled, trying to intersect the tracks of their quarry.

Upon a crest in the terrain the two men settled to rest. The day had turned fine, the remains of a high overcast blowing steadily southwards, following the storm of the night. Birds had returned to the air as well and as they rested Mallen amused himself by feeding scraps to a small ground-fowl that seemed to have no fear of the interlopers in its small territory.

“We can only tarry for a short time Mallen,” said Gremorgan as he ate the last of his dried fruits. “It will be important that we reach the field of battle before anyone else. News of such calamities spread as a fire might in dry grass, and it will not only be the Administrators who will be visiting the site. We must get there before anything disturbs the remnants of the battle.”

Mallen could see the need for haste, he did not relish the idea though, of having to pick through a battleground to find his brother.

“Who else could possibly want to visit such a disaster?” he asked.

The Dwarvendim paused before answering. There were things about human nature he did not enjoy nor wished to contemplate. “Many are the reasons that men visit a place of the dead, and most have nothing to do with treating the fallen with respect. There are those who would wish to rob the bodies or take souvenirs for sale. It is a distasteful practice but not my main concern.” He looked earnestly at Mallen and continued. “It is very important that we get there before any other, regardless of their motivation. For us to find out if anything happened to your brother the scene must be undisturbed. This is very important.”

Mallen was intrigued by the LoreMaster's concerns. “Why is it so important? If he has been harmed won't we find evidence of that within the borders of the battlefield?”

Gremorgan shook his head. “When was the last time you heard of a battle where everybody on both sides was killed? Where are the wounded, the prisoners? The Kalborean Scout you spoke with was quite specific about his description of what had happened. All the combatants had died, their bodies strewn across a wide area. He did not mention anything about survivors except for a few stragglers that they killed without difficulty, and certainly nothing about a large group of Hresh still on the move. The aftermath of large battles

always leaves survivors on the field, to tend the wounded or despatch those enemies that will not be taken prisoner. It all makes me think that the Denmar Hresh found their opportunity to get away and took it.”

Mallen could see some of the logic of the Dwarvendim's argument but could not see how the Denmar Hresh could have engineered such circumstances. Gremorgan however, felt he had the answers.

“If we can get to the battlefield quickly I will show you what happened.”

Before Mallen could open his mouth to ask how, the Dwarvendim raised his finger and smiled.

“We will be there by midday. There are some things that are better seen than explained.”

After a short time for rest the two men returned to the trail, and the seemingly limitless ocean of grass that lay before them. The day was fine but still cool, an energetic breeze waving the grasses in long furls as they ran swiftly over the plain. Gremorgan was pale but he showed little sign of his injury. Only every once in a while would he flex his arm as if testing his shoulder, and each time he did it Mallen noticed him wince slightly. No matter what the recuperative power of the white powder, he was still injured.

By the hour before midday Mallen found sign of the Warband. The previous night's rain had washed away most of the prints left by the Hordim, but there was enough to show that the Hresh were still moving northwards, and were still spread over a wide area. With Gremorgan following behind, the Kalborean set to his task and carefully tracked the Hordim as they ran. It did not take him long to find the tracks far more complicated than he would have expected. In the bright light of midday he stopped and stood pondering what he was seeing. It did not make a lot of sense.

“What is the matter?” enquired Gremorgan as they came to a halt. Anxiously he looked at the surrounding countryside but could see nothing. Mallen was on one knee, intent upon a bootprint stamped into the ground.

“I do not understand the sign left here Gremorgan. It tells me two different things and I cannot reconcile it.” After he had finished with the print he moved to another, and then a third before standing and scanning the horizon.

Gremorgan moved next to him, his face flushed from the exertions of their chase. “It seems straightforward to me, all the sign moves

northwards, the battleground lies only an hour ahead. What do you find disconcerting?"

Mallen pointed to the footprint at his feet. "See how the heel of this boot has dug deep into the ground? The Hresh wearing it was running, moving quickly northwards as you say. But look at this print here, it is far less deep in the ground and far more consistent with someone walking. I have found prints like this ever since we found the trail."

Gremorgan considered his friend's words but couldn't see the problem. "Some of the Hresh were walking. Is this not a good thing for us?"

The Kalborean nodded but then began scanning the ground to the east, searching the grasses for further sign and finding more evidence of the walking Hresh there. When he had finished he scratched at his neck and shook his head. Gremorgan could see that he was disturbed by what he had found and Mallen kicked at the ground in frustration.

"There are now two groups of Hresh moving on the plain. One group maintains its speed northwards, another has separated from the main group and has slowed to a walk, falling back as the other group runs ahead. The walking group is moving slightly more eastwards of north. They have split and for some reason the slower group has changed direction. There is a chance that the second group took no part in the battle."

The Dwarvendim looked at where Mallen was pointing and then nodded. "There is a chance that the second group missed the battle and has moved on to the north-east. The mountains in that direction would provide sanctuary, but I am not convinced. Let us take a chance at this time and keep going north. The answers to our questions will be found there. And if it transpires that we should have followed the other group then we can always pick up their trail again."

Mallen agreed and they set off once again. With the wind gusting before them they ran into the north, their need for haste driving them forward as they followed the trail. Ahead lay a barrier of hills and for the next hour they moved closer, the hills growing on the plains as they headed north. It was upon their lower slopes that the two men found the aftermath of the battle of the Surgis'Ka.

It was Mallen who saw it first and he put out his arm to bring Gremorgan to a halt. Before them spread a wide battlefield, the long grasses of the plains trampled and broken by the death throws of

thousands of Men, horses and Hordim. Upon the slopes to the north and east the Kalborean could see clusters of bodies, banners and equipment thrown recklessly in all directions and above it all the smell of blood mingling with the wet earth. Gremorgan moved forward, the edge of the main fighting was a good two hundred metres from where they stood and he ran quickly to a large tangle of dead Hresh. When he got to it he began searching the ground. Mallen was not far behind.

“What are you looking for?” he shouted over the blusters of a rising wind. Gremorgan pointed at the ground and then began pulling a small leather pouch from one of his bags.

“I need to find a set of bootprints that clearly show where a man stood. See if you can find this for me. I must prepare for a difficult task.”

Mallen began to search the ground without questioning the unusual nature of the request. He wanted nothing more than to begin searching the field for his brother but he would do what the LoreMaster asked first. It seemed important.

Beyond the first collection of bodies he found a clear set of bootprints. They were from a man, much smaller than the more oval-shaped footfalls of the Hresh, and arranged in such a manner that their maker would have been standing with a lance or spear at the ready. Mallen called to Gremorgan and the Dwarvendim came at the run. What happened next would not be forgotten by the young Kalborean for the remainder of his days.

Carefully Gremorgan stood in the bootprints of the hapless soldier and untied a small strap that held the leather pouch pursed at its opening. From its soft folds he took a small globe of crystal and held it in his open palm at his chest. Mallen looked at the crystal sphere and was instantly intrigued. It was the most brilliantly clear piece of stone that he had ever seen, and as he stared into its surface he could feel some part of himself being drawn towards it. He had to consciously stop himself from stepping closer.

Gremorgan began to chant as he stood upon the bootprints, a whispering string of words and sounds that wove themselves into the air as he uttered them. The Dwarvendim motioned for Mallen to stand by his side, and as he did so he could feel a dome of misting light beginning to form around them both. The sphere was glowing, within its crystal form a swirling miasma of light and shadow began to spin, and as it did so the dome of light surrounding the men grew

more translucent, blocking a clear view of the grasslands as a fine mist might in the early morning.

It was then that Mallen began to discern movement, and the mist began to expand. When it was so fine that it appeared as nothing more than a vapour surrounding them, ghostly images began to coalesce, taking on form as the crystal sphere began to shine brightly in Gremorgan's hands.

“What are we seeing?” whispered Mallen.

Gremorgan put his free hand to his mouth and motioned the Kalborean to silence. He was preoccupied with his task and instead pointed generally in the direction they were facing. Mallen watched, and as he did so he began to see the faintest of images beginning to materialise before him. Upon the plain he could see men on horseback charging down from the slopes to the north and long lines of Hresh warriors running to form defensive lines, but these faded as he was overwhelmed by emotion. Suddenly he felt fear, hatred and pain running through his thoughts like hot knives, and before he could shut it out, memories flooded into his consciousness.

He was not seeing with his eyes but through the memories of others. In a wave of uncontrolled image and sound he felt the overwhelming power of hundreds of minds as they fought desperately upon the grassland. In one instant he was charging down the slopes to the north, lance in hand, thundering down upon rank after rank of Hresh as they waited for the crash of arms; the next he was a foot soldier, armed with halberd, standing his ground as a huge armoured Hresh rushed him with scimitar flashing in the sunlight. Image after image swept through his mind, and above it all he could feel the raw emotion of the battle; of fear and of courage, of pain and frustration. All combined to tell a story that laid out exactly what had happened, and how each soldier had died.

In the turmoil of his thoughts Mallen struggled to find his own identity amongst the clamour of the images. His mind felt free of body and time, wandering the battlefield, searching the multitude of raised voices, looking for one that he recognised. He could not find it. Instead he found the vague spectres of men and Hresh engaged in combat, locked in a grim dance that always ended in pain and death. Amongst it all however, he began to make sense of what had happened on this grassy plain and began to realise the treachery that had been perpetrated. When the images stopped, Mallen found himself standing next to Gremorgan, he had not realised it but he had

closed his eyes. Everything he had seen had been placed directly into his thoughts for him to experience and it had exhausted him. He opened his eyes and was overcome with fatigue. Before Gremorgan could steady him he fell into the grasses and lost consciousness.



Mallen came too as the suns of Arborell settled against the western horizon. Overhead he could see the orange-glow of dusk and a few faint wisps of cloud moving to the south through the branches of an old tree. Birds called out to the coming night and in the air he could smell the spices of one of Gremorgan's hot stews. Tentatively he raised himself on to one elbow and looked around. The Dwarvendim was hunched over his camp-stove and from a small pot came the heady aromas of meat and vegetables. The battlefield could be seen to the east, but they were some distance from where he had collapsed. When he remembered what had happened his temples began to hurt, memories and emotion threatening to rise up again and overwhelm him. Unlike before he was able to quell the voices and took the time to clear his head. Gremorgan heard him rouse and turned from his cooking.

"Well, I was wondering when you'd wake up. Took a nasty turn you know. Had a devil of a job carrying you into this stand of trees."

Mallen rubbed his forehead and looked at the Dwarvendim, "What happened? Last thing I know was I was standing next to you at the edge of the battleground."

"Aye, that's where you collapsed. It was a hard thing to watch, but at least we have the answers we needed."

Mallen did not feel like he had found anything except a bad headache. "What answers have we found, Gremorgan? And what happened to me?"

The LoreMaster sat back against the trunk of a tree and crossed his arms. His shoulder appeared to be feeling much better.

"What happened to you happened to both of us, but in different ways. That crystal sphere you saw in my hand is a Gatheringstone. It focuses the remnants of great emotion and attempts to make sense of

the memories and echoes of traumatic events. In essence we witnessed the ghosts of the dead, re-living their last moments, feeling the fears and exaltations of their thoughts as they fought for their lives. Through them we were able to see exactly what happened. But what we have seen was not the same for each of us.”

Mallen turned his head and tried to read the meaning of Gremorgan's words. The LoreMaster smiled and paused only to stir the stew that was bubbling on his stove.

“You saw the battle from the viewpoints of the men who ambushed the Hresh. I have no doubt it was a harrowing experience. War is a brutal and merciless affair, and those who witness it through the vapours of the Gatheringstone see it at its most personal. It was necessary though, that you be the one to see it. If your brother had died in this battle then his thoughts and experiences would have been the most noticeable to you. They would have shouted loud and clear the last moments of his demise, and you would have had no doubt that he was indeed gone from this existence. Did you find him?”

Mallen shook his head and tried to keep the memories from flooding his thoughts. “I found nothing of him.”

The LoreMaster pulled two bowls from his bags and began ladling out the stew.

“Good. I can assure you that he would have been there if he had indeed died. The fact that he was not can only mean that he had no part in this blood-bath. I believe I know why.”

The Kalborean sat up and pulled his travel-cloak about him. He was about to ask what the Dwarvendim meant when Gremorgan continued.

“Just as you experienced the last moments of the Men I instructed the Gatheringstone to find for me all the echoes and remnants of the Hordim, and I have to say it was more than illuminating. You see Master Cael, the Hordim are not that different from ourselves, they look upon the world from a different perspective but their motivations and emotions are very similar to our own. What you experienced with Men I experienced through the Hresh, and what I found, well it surprised even myself.”

“This entire battle has been part of a plan within which most of the participants were unwittingly swallowed up. The Denmar Hresh have known of this ambush from the time they laid the clues of their escape before the Kalborean Army, and in doing so told them exactly where they were going. The leader of these Hresh is a creature of formidable

mind and authority. He manipulated the distrust that had been festering between the two groups of Hresh to ensure that the majority of the Tomsk Hresh ran straight into the ambush. It was an ambush the Tomsk were never going to escape alive.”

“When the cavalry rode over the hills to the north they found most of the Warband exposed upon the plain. The Hresh quickly formed a defensive position and tried to repel the initial charge but were pushed forward from their eastern flank towards the small pass that they had initially been making for. On the other side of the hills lay a large force of foot soldiers, waiting for the Hresh to pour through and be slaughtered. What the Kalboreans did not count on was the second force of Hordim that came up quickly from the south-east.”

Mallen's eyes went wide. “The walking Hresh.”

Gremorgan nodded. “Yes, the walking Hresh, but mostly Hresh of the Denmar Kraal. They caught the cavalry from the rear, crashing into their number and scattering their formation so that the Tomsk could move more freely. With the advantage lost the foot soldiers advanced and met the Hresh head-on. It was a mistake. On open ground the Hordim are better warriors, and soon the battle deteriorated into a grinding melee where neither side could get the upper hand.”

“And what of the Denmar? What did they do?” asked Mallen.

“Nothing. They did nothing except hunt down the cavalry units that had slipped through their initial attack, keeping all who fled their way within the killing field. Whilst the Tomsk fought almost to the last warrior they waited patiently in the south and only advanced when the battle was almost done. At the end little more than fifty of the Tomsk survived. All the Kalboreans were dead.”

“It was only then that the Denmar showed the true intentions of their inaction. With the Tomsk diminished and the Kalboreans gone they turned on their own, cutting down the remaining Tomsk and killing all who lay wounded. When they had finished there was nothing left but themselves and their captives. And they had been very careful to ensure that all the captives remained alive.”

Mallen took in the words and knew them to be true, he had felt the progress of the battle in just the same way and had found no trace of his brother at all. “What must we do now? Where have the Denmar gone?”

Gremorgan pointed to the west. “After they had finished their deadly work they moved westwards. I can only assume they took

their captives with them. They are going into the depths of the Old Forest so that they might evade whoever is first to investigate this blood-letting. From there they will travel north through the Black hills until they meet the Keln'Kraag Mountains. This I know from what I felt. It is now where we must go also."

Mallen accepted his bowl of the stew and thought about what his companion had said. There was only one thing that he needed to add.

"If we are to continue on, then we must start now. After what I have seen this day I do not wish to remain here for the night. The closeness of the dead is sending chills up my spine. I know I will not be able to keep the memories of the fallen from my mind until I have left this place. Let us eat and then we should go."

Gremorgan agreed. Hurriedly they ate their meal and then packed away their equipment. Under a starlit sky the two men strode out on to the grasslands and then disappeared into the gloom of the west. Ahead lay the Old Forests, and in the darkness of the night neither man could know how close Mallen Cael's brother was, nor how far their quest would ultimately take them.

## Chapter 11 - Grass and Leaf



Two days had passed since Mallen and Gremorgan had left the killing fields of the Surgis'Ka and the pace set by the Hresh had proven relentless. Without falter or respite the warband had maintained its path westwards, enduring storms and driving rain as it pressed on across the open grasslands.

Since leaving the battleground Mallen had kept focused to the trail left by the running creatures, and he had seen no sign of any lessening of their pace. He was a Metalsmith but he had surprised even himself with the keen edge his old tracking skills had returned to him. In this endeavour tracking the Hordim had been left to the young Kalborean. Gremorgan had ceded that responsibility to his younger companion, and had instead kept a close watch on the surrounding terrain as they had moved into the west. Following the Hresh had not proven an easy task however. Although the running Hresh had taken no opportunity to cover their tracks the weather had conspired to do everything in its power to obliterate them for the Hordim. Rain had beset the plains and under its constant barrage the sign left by their quarry had become indistinct. On more than one occasion the trail had been lost and it was only skill, and a small amount of luck, that had brought them back to it.

Through veils of drizzle and mist the two had continued their pursuit, keeping to the sodden remains of the trails left by the Hordim. Without knowing how far ahead the Hresh warband might have travelled Mallen could not stop, or rest until he had some further, clear sign that his brother was alive. It was a mission that consumed his thoughts and energy.

Their determined pursuit had left no mystery as to the objective of the Hordim. Since leaving the carnage of the battleground the Hresh had made directly towards the dark line of forest that grew inexorably before them. Within the rain-soaked world that had been theirs for the past days it had been the one constant, and always it had spread before them, until now it could be recognised as the first vestiges of a thick tree line.

The Hordim had not stopped for rest, and as the suns set dimly on the second day of their chase Mallen and Gremorgan had no choice but to break their pursuit and take sleep. It was the LoreMaster who

brought them to a halt.

“That is enough Master Cael. I fear the injury I sustained during the Treachersa requires further tending. We must rest and then rejoin the chase at first light.”

Mallen agreed, his legs felt as if they were made of stone, his clothes and equipment sodden and heavy. He knew that he also could go no further.

“What is it that spurs them on so?” he gasped as he bent to the ground, his breath laboured by the exertion.

Gremorgan looked into the west and pulled his packs from his shoulders. “They are making for a remnant of the Old Forest known as the Meshaal. I believe it is in their minds that if they can reach the sanctuary of its deep timbers that they shall find an easy path northwards to the Black Hills. Their haste is understandable. There has been a great battle and they do not wish their part in it to be uncovered. In truth there is little chance that anyone will discover that these Hresh are fleeing the battle, but with news of it spreading through Kalborea there will be many scouts on patrol. The forest ahead provides them with an opportunity to rest and then pass unnoticed to the north.”

Mallen saw a glimmer of opportunity in the Dwarvendim's words. “Do you think they shall take the time to rest and remain hidden in the forests?”

Gremorgan nodded and reached into his tunic pocket. “The Hresh are potent warriors but they are not indefatigable. Remember Master Cael, the exertions of their journey began long before the attack on Callenfrey. It must have taken weeks of hard travel to make it to the forest that bordered your home, and they have been on the run ever since. They have been on the move far longer than any man could sustain, and it did surprise me that they did not take the time to recover their strength within the domain of the Hra'gora. The Forest of Meshaal is their next best opportunity. If they do then we should be able to catch them up.”

For Mallen it was a slight hope at the end of a long day, and he relaxed in the knowledge that they might not be running a losing race after all. With that hope in mind he turned his attention to the practical necessities of life in the wilds. Food and shelter from the incessant misting drizzle were his first priorities, a need for sleep his next concern, but it was a concern that required a suitable shelter if they were to get any rest at all. Looking about in the gathering dusk

he could see nothing, however it was Gremorgan who provided the answer. From his pockets the Dwarvendim pulled the small Dirge-compass that had found them cover from the Treachersa, and with the night growing about them looked into its strange incandescent face. It did not take long for the device to spy out a ruin to the south-west. Gremorgan seemed quite amused by what he had found.

“It would seem my young friend, that we will be the guests of the Hordim this night. And I believe we will be thankful for their thoughtfulness.”

Mallen did not understand what Gremorgan meant but he shouldered his pack and followed the huge man into the gloom. It took less than a half hour to find the object of Gremorgan's search, and at first it appeared that they had discovered nothing more than a nondescript bulge in the earth.

“What is this we have found?” Mallen asked.

Gremorgan answered as he searched its perimeter. He was looking for something.

“In the languages of the Hordim this is known as a *tpesh*. It is nothing more than a stone hut, shaped as a high dome, but so old that the high grasses of the plain have grown over its surface and returned it to obscurity. In times long before the advent of Men in this world these shelters were common property, sanctuaries that any Oera'dim could use when confronted by the ravages of weather or beast. Without the Dirge-compass we might have passed dozens of these and not even known they were here.”

While Gremorgan talked Mallen had to stand back for a moment and think on what the LoreMaster was saying. He had played on these innocuous mounds as a child, and had seen them upon all his travels along the eastern coasts of Kalborea. Never once had he considered them anything other than a peculiarity of the terrain, and as he watched his friend stooping upon the southern side of the mound he found himself undertaking a strangely unnerving shift in his understanding of his world.

“Bothers you, doesn't it?” Gremorgan opined as he tugged at a long section of grass.

Mallen could not help but agree. “I spent some of the happiest times of my youth playing upon mounds such as these. I had no idea that they were Hordim-made. In truth it leaves me somewhat perplexed. I cannot count the number of times such a shelter could have saved myself, and my brother, from the long cold nights of our

travels.”

Gremorgan nodded and returned to his task of removing earth from the base of the tpesh.

“It is a truth Master Cael that our brethren have chosen to forget the history of these lands, and disregard the ruination we have brought to the works of our great enemy. For tonight however, we shall return this crumbling shelter to its original purpose and with its resurrection seek a respite from the rain.”

With that the Dwarvendim pulled aside a wide mat of vegetation and earth and found what he was looking for. It was an entrance, a dark hole in the side of the dome that beckoned as an escape from the relentless rain.

Gremorgan disappeared inside first, and then called for Mallen to follow. What he found was unexpected. The inside of the tpesh was completely dark, its walls matted with the tendrils of grass roots and crumbling from centuries of neglect, but beyond the narrow entranceway the tpesh opened into a space some six metres in diameter and a full metre below ground level. At its highest point the domed roof extended some two and a half metres above the stone floor, its entire circumference bordered by narrow platforms that he could only assume were provided for sleeping or the stowage of equipment. At the centre of the structure was a shallow fire pit, and it was there that Gremorgan busied himself with the task of coaxing a small fire to life. After the blanketing rains that they had been forced to endure the shelter had come as a welcome relief, one that Mallen had only wished he had known about in his younger days. It was dark and smelled of decay and wet earth, but its stone floor was dry, and that was good enough for him.

Quickly the Dwarvendim brought his fire into existence and within minutes it was warm enough within the stone hut to begin the slow process of drying clothes and putting together a meal. Gremorgan seemed well pleased with himself.

“You know Mallen, it has been many years since I have spent time within one of these shelters. It may not look like much but there are few places in Arborell that provide safer respite from the tempests of our world. Can you imagine the number of Hordim that must have spent long nights within these walls, watching through the entrance as a storm tore up the ground about them. I can only wonder at what they might have said, or thought as they did so.”

Mallen did not answer. He found it difficult to concede that the

Hordim could be anything other than the ruthless creatures that had taken his brother and destroyed his home. But he had seen things on his journey to recover Tomas that had left him wondering about all the things he had thought certain about his world. He knew in his heart that he was not the same man who had left Callenfrey, and no matter what his prejudices he knew also that the Hordim he had been tracking were not mindless monsters. To a certain point he found himself wishing that they were. A ruthless enemy was so much more dangerous when possessed with cunning and determination.

Deep in thought Mallen became lost in memories of what had happened to him since leaving Callenfrey, and it was with no small surprise that he found himself being handed a bowl of steaming stew. Gremorgan had been busy, the rich smell of the meal bringing him back to the immediate concerns of their journey. In the light of the flickering fire Mallen searched his pack for a piece of his remaining Nahla bread. There was little enough of it left and although the Dwarvendim had said nothing Mallen knew that the additional food brought by Gremorgan would be running low as well. If they were to remain in pursuit the Hresh they would need to hunt, and Mallen did not relish the delays that would entail.

In the flickering light of their fire the two men ate in silence and then set to the task of re-bandaging Gremorgan's shoulder wound. The powders he had used to seal the torn flesh had done their work well, but new bandages were needed to keep the straps of his heavy shoulder packs from reopening the wounds. In the comfort of the tresh it was a job quickly completed. Outside the weather grew more ominous. Beyond the heavy blanket of overcast another storm had grown in the north-west, and even as Mallen rolled out his bedding and organised his equipment for the morning he could hear the rising wind, and the first rumbles of an advancing stormfront. Within the tresh however, he was warm and dry, and with the blustering gales as a backdrop fell into sleep.



It was in the hour before dawn that Mallen felt the large hand of Gremorgan shaking him awake. The tpeish was completely dark, their small fire no more than smouldering ash within the fire pit, but through the entrance he could see the first signs of light brightening the horizon. Gremorgan did not let him speak. Instead he placed his finger to his lips and then whispered into the young Kalborean's ear.

"It is time to awaken Master Cael, but before we can begin breakfast I must show you something, and it will require absolute quiet to do so."

Mallen rubbed the sleep from his eyes and pulled his legs from his bedding. Gremorgan was already on his way to the entrance to the tpeish and motioned for Mallen to follow. Intrigued he pulled on his boots and made also for the narrow opening.

"What is it?" he whispered.

Gremorgan placed his finger to his lips with a greater urgency and pointed out onto the grasslands beyond. In the blue-tinged twilight of the early morning it took a moment for Mallen to see what the Dwarvendim was pointing at. Against the dim horizon there was something different about the landscape. It was an indistinct undulation in the otherwise flat ground of the plain that seemed as out of place as the tpeish itself. He was sure that it had not been there upon their arrival at the shelter the evening before. As Mallen focused more carefully upon the strange form he became more accustomed to the gloom, and it was only then that he could see the vague shadow was moving slightly. It was not an unnoticed moulding in the terrain, it was a beast of some type, and it was massive.

Again Mallen turned to Gremorgan and whispered the same question. "What is it?"

The Dwarvendim moved to Mallen's side and answered him.

"Such a beast has many names Master Cael. In the language of the Elder Tongue the creature you see is an orn'qirion. In all the dialects of the Hordim the creature is known as a gael'qirion, or Windhammer. To us it is a Dragon, and I can tell you for a fact Master Cael that there are few men who will ever be this close to one and live to tell about it."

Mallen pulled away from the entrance and took up a position out of sight of the beast.

"A Dragon? Such creatures have only been encountered in the great mountains of the far west and north. By what circumstances could there be one this far to the east?"

Gremorgan scratched at his face and motioned for Mallen to return to the narrow entrance. He would not answer until the Kalborean was close.

“This Dragon is fully matured and a beast of its size requires a huge amount of food to survive. I can only think that with the onset of the cooler season that the serpent's normal food, the Sempaca and Yunta herds of the west, have moved out of its hunting range. To be here it must have been drawn by the carnage of the battle, and has decided that the journey is worth the easy feast that it might find there.”

As Gremorgan spoke Mallen saw the first identifiable movement of the creature. Silhouetted against the horizon the Dragon raised its head and sniffed at the air. In the gathering light Mallen could clearly see the extension of its long neck, and the definition of a line of sharp scaled ridges that ran down its back. He could not yet see its wings, but there was little doubt that the creature was huge. From within the low rush of a growing wind he could hear the beast breathing, each of its breaths a powerful expulsion of air that sounded to Mallen almost identical to a blacksmith's bellows.

It was the head of the Dragon however, that left the young Kalborean cold. Two long horns extended back from its head, a counter-balance to a skull heavy with razor-sharp teeth, and a set of protruding incisors that looked as if each was a metre long. He tried to gauge the length of the beast but most of it still resided out of his view. From the entrance of the tpush there was little of the beast that could be seen and he was not game enough to try and get a better look. Somewhere out in the darkness he could hear it sniffing the air once again.

“What is it doing Gremorgan?” Mallen asked, the first hint of real fear edging his voice.

The LoreMaster pulled his companion back from the entrance and found a position against the far wall of the shelter.

“Our friend out there knows we are somewhere in the vicinity. He can smell us, but he cannot find us. It is believed that serpents such as these sense their prey by body heat, and it is not for nothing that the Hordim built their shelters in stone. For the beast the plains appear as an unbroken sea of grass, and this shelter nothing but a bump in its wide expanse. We can be thankful that the enemy knew what they were doing in building these tpush. Otherwise I fear that we might have been the beast's morning meal and had little say on the manner

of our demise.”

Gremorgan did not speak for a short time and then turned again to Mallen. “To encounter a Dragon on the ground is an uncommon thing, and I can only believe that it has been forced to ground because of the weather; probably in the storm last night. If we are lucky the weather will improve and the Dragon will return to flight. It will be best that we do nothing until it has moved on.”

Mallen could not agree more. Together the two men sat in the cold confines of the tpush and waited for the Dragon to continue its journey into the east. There was little that they could do but sit in the dark and listen to the creature as it moved upon the grasslands outside. Within the tpush Gremorgan remained quiet, his countenance immobile and patient. Mallen however, felt every passing minute keenly for he knew that every minute lost was one that allowed their quarry to move further from their reach. It was a delay that weighed heavily upon him.

In the hour after sunrise Mallen heard the first welcome signs of the Dragon's departure. Against the rush of the wind Mallen could hear a great movement only a short distance from their shelter. Both men looked at each other as the creature rose to its feet and Mallen did not need to see the Dragon to feel the tremors of its footfalls as it made ready to depart. Within their shelter the Kalborean waited, in his mind the hope that the beast would not accidentally step on the tpush and crush them all. What came however, was a piercing screech and three deep, snorting bellows that swept across the plain outside and echoed painfully within the stone confines of the shelter. It was only then that the Dragon rose into the air and winged its way eastwards. Quickly Mallen moved back to the entrance and for a moment saw the blurred shadow of wings pass over the tpush. Before he could get into a better position the Dragon was gone.

It was then that Gremorgan pulled Mallen from the entrance and back into the darkness of the tpush.

“Have you not heard the old proverbs on the dangers of too much curiosity? The Dragon may be gone but we will not be able to move on until we can be sure that it is well on its way. From altitude the beast can see for many leagues and it knows it has missed something here. It may be best that we take this opportunity to eat and make sure our gear is fit for travel. I have the feeling that it is going to be a long day.”

For a short time the men ate and then worked upon their weapons

and clothing. All the work that should have been completed in the early hours of the morning remained to be done. The spare clothes from their packs had to be aired, their weapons properly oiled and inspected. It was tedious, time-consuming work, but it was essential to their ability to continue their pursuit. They could only spend so much time on such activities however, and with the sky clearing Gremorgan indicated it was time to make for the trail once again. The Kalborean did not require any urging to leave the confines of their shelter.

Carefully Mallen crawled out of the tpeash and straightened his back. The sky had indeed changed for the better, the persistent clouds of the past days having passed southwards. In the bright light of day he was ready to return to the chase. To his consternation he found Gremorgan was not.

Instead the LoreMaster made for where the Dragon had spent the night and Mallen followed, curious as to his intent. What they found was a wide area of grasses flattened by the weight of the beast and a series of deep scours in the ground where it had dragged its claws in the darkness.

“See here,” Gremorgan declared as he pointed at the gouges in the earth. “This Dragon was indeed a monster. It must have been eighty metres in length at least, with a wingspan just as great. One can only wonder at how old it must be.”

Mallen was impressed with the beast's size but he was impatient to return to the trail.

“This is all very well Gremorgan, but we should return to our journey. Is it not proper that we leave here?”

Gremorgan smiled and took the Gatheringstone from his pocket. It was not idle curiosity that had brought him to where he now stood.

“We will return shortly Master Cael, but first I believe we should see what this beast has seen in the past days. From its lofty vantage we may find clues that will help us greatly.”

The Dwarvendim motioned for Mallen to stand beside him and once again the air about the two men became charged with energy. As had happened as they stood before the carnage of the battle of the Surgis'Ka the chants of the LoreMaster brought a thickening mist, and out of those vapours came memories and images that flooded into the mind of the young Kalborean. These memories were very different from the frustration and violence of the battle however, and they held a terrifying power that gripped Mallen's thoughts as if they were held

in a vice.

Out of the mists came images and emotions, primal instincts that raged within Mallen's thoughts. Within a heartbeat he was the Dragon, gliding high over the vast mountain ranges of the western world, searching out prey, delivering a quick lethal end to any creature unlucky enough to fall within its gaze. Mallen found himself descending swiftly into the brooding malevolence of a predator on the hunt, feeling keenly the freedom of a creature with no concerns but the acquisition of its next kill. And it was within that base motivation that he felt the hunger growing within him. From somewhere unseen there came the hint of death on the air, and a relentless pull to feed that sent the beast winging eastwards from its mountain home. Quickly the great plains of the west were speeding away beneath its great wings and always the beast searched the ground, looking for that next morsel that might satiate a growing hunger.

It was as Mallen fell deeper into the thoughts of the beast that he began to sense a strange compulsion within the animal. It was driven by hunger and the need to survive, but there was something else there as well, an overwhelming need that fought constantly with the Dragon's animal instincts. As first he could not determine what it was, but then a new roil of images made sense of the internal battle the serpent was fighting. This beast was no simple creature. It had a hunger that needed to be satisfied, and an overwhelming compulsion to find and acquire gold. For Mallen it seemed that he must be reading the beast's memories incorrectly as he could not see how such a monstrous creature might be drawn to such a strange obsession. But as quickly as he found these memories he was once again swept up in the power of the beast's emotions as a torrent of new memories arose through the mists.

It was within these images that Mallen saw the encroaching weather and a thick blanket of cloud that smothered the ground, turning the land beneath the Dragon's flight into a moving panorama of grey mists and towering white-capped stormclouds. Between these clouds the Dragon kept up its advance, the smell of death growing all the more powerful as it dodged the storms, but soon enough it could go no further. Its first landfall came upon the far side of the forests of Meshaal, however it could not linger there. Hunger grew in its consciousness like a physical stab in its side and soon enough it rose again to head eastwards. With a break in the clouds the information looked for by Gremorgan came into their knowledge. Between lines of

advancing cloud the Dragon spied a line of creatures running for the edges of the forest. Immediately it turned towards them but lost their indistinct forms as the weather once again closed in, forcing the beast more to the south, and eventually to ground only a short distance from their small shelter.

In the Dragon's mind Mallen could sense the presence of something close, but there was confusion and frustration. It could find nothing yet it could smell the odours of ash and sweat, sure signs of a meal close at hand. The last memories of the beast came as an overpowering smell of death on the wind and the nagging ache of its hunger. Then the memories faded and were gone.

"We have been fortunate Master Cael." The LoreMaster said as he pocketed his device and pointed into the west.

"The Dragon spied our quarry entering the forest no less than a day ago. It would seem that they were not as far ahead of us as we had thought. The trail should still be fresh."

Mallen took in what the Dwarvendim said but he was still trying to clear the Dragon's memories from his mind. He was not sure he could ever get used to the insight Gremorgan's Gatheringstone could provide. The experience had left him with questions though, and one thing in particular he needed to ask.

"Gremorgan, within the memories of the beast I found a strange compulsion for gold. It was like a drug to the creature and I cannot fathom its need for it."

"Aye, it is a strange thing and no doubt the answer will seem stranger." The Dwarvendim paused for a moment as he considered his reply and then turned back towards the tpush.

"It may seem surprising but nobody really knows if Dragons are products of the natural world, or created beings like the Hordim, manufactured by the Ancients to be used as weapons of war against their enemies. What is known is that regardless of their origin the Trell'sara did try to bend them to their will, their intention to change the course of a war that was going very badly for them indeed. The mythologies of the Hordim tell clearly of the disasters that ensued from rampaging Dragons destroying friend and foe alike, but the Trell'sara were nothing if not persistent, and in their madness found a way to control the creatures and turn them to their own purposes."

"They could not remove the natural aggression of the beasts as that would make them useless as weapons of war. Instead they planted in the minds of their Dragons an addiction to gold in all its forms. The

Dragons could not find the metal for themselves and therefore became reliant on their masters to feed their new addiction. With this compulsion in place they found the beasts under their command compliant, but in their haste they had made a fatal error. Like all addictions the need for gold had to be met, and there came a time when there was not enough of the metal in all the realms of the Ancients to support the Dragons' desire for it. Before they could use their new weapons to any advantage the Trell found themselves under siege, and were forced to destroy them all."

"As would prove to be the case the ancient Trell'sara were not as thorough as they were persistent. A number of the Dragons escaped and even to this day that compulsion for gold lingers. But the dabblings of what the Hordim call the Fallen Masters have also led to some very unusual side-effects, some of which have had consequences even for the nations of Men today."

Mallen looked at his companion and waited for him to explain. Gremorgan seemed to be enjoying the interest of his captive audience.

"What the Trell'sara did not realise was that by instilling the compulsion for gold into their Dragons they had inadvertently tied the life-cycle and attributes of the metal to the creature as well. Dragons do not die naturally. Accident and misfortune may bring them down, but they do not age beyond maturity and in theory can live as long as the world itself. You will find that the Fallen Masters never gave much thought to the longevity of their creations, and it has been a lack of foresight that has meant that these winged creatures are still a part of our world even now."

Gremorgan picked up his packs and began placing them carefully about his shoulders. As he did so he looked out into the west, his eyes searching the plains ahead for any sign of trouble.

"Do you know Mallen that a Dragon can sustain itself indefinitely if the need requires it with nothing more than the gold within its nest and small amounts of burnt wood? How this is so I cannot say, but I do know that a Dragon forced to do so can be driven mad by the hunger pangs it must endure. It seems reasonable to assume that a beast in such a state would need to be avoided at all costs."

"And what of the consequences to the Four Nations? How has this experimentation affected us?" asked Mallen.

Gremorgan smiled and took a single silver coin out of his tunic pocket. "Have you ever wondered why it is that our coinage is all silver; that we do not adorn ourselves, or make ornamentation from

the precious gold that can be found in abundance throughout Arborell? I will tell you that it is because to do so would make one a target of every Dragon within range. It is said that a Dragon can sense an ounce of gold above ground at more than one hundred leagues. Not a happy prospect for anyone carrying coin on the road, eh?"

Mallen could see the logic of it. The Dragon he had shared memories with had been nothing less than a force of nature, unstoppable and absolutely determined to have what it most desired. He could not say why but an image flooded his mind of a family in their home, running for their lives as a Dragon tore the roof and walls apart in its attempt to make its own a small piece of gold jewellery. As quickly as it came the image dissolved into nothing and he found himself having to catch up with Gremorgan. The Dwarvendim had already covered more than fifty metres from the tpush and Mallen hurried after him.

"It is to the Forest of Meshaal that we must now go Mallen." Gremorgan declared as the Kalborean made his side. "The Dragon's memories are clear and if we are lucky the Hresh will spend time within the forest before moving on. I can think of no better place to recover your brother than in the confines of the forest. The advantages the Hresh wish to find within the gloom of the trees will help us just as well. But we must hurry. We have spent enough time in the company of Dragons."



The remainder of the morning passed quickly. From the tpush the two companions tracked to the north-west until they intersected with the trail of the Hordim once again, and then followed the tracks westwards. As they expected the trail did not veer from its westerly advance. The Hresh were making directly for the forest ahead, and judging by the depth of the footfalls they were doing it at the run.

With Gremorgan at his shoulder Mallen kept to the trail, following the sign left by the Hordim as they ran towards the dark line of trees. After the heavy rain of the night most of the tracks were indistinct, but

Mallen had enough to follow to keep a brisk pace. He could feel his brother somewhere in the forests ahead and it pushed him forward all the faster. At midday he came to a sudden stop. The tracks had changed. Amongst the more indistinct footprints of the Hresh he could now see the clear impressions of two much larger creatures.

“Gremorgan!” he called to the Dwarvendim, but he found him standing about twenty metres to the right of the trail. He was also looking at the wet earth. When he heard Mallen's call he waved for him to come over.

“What have you found?” Mallen asked as he reached the Dwarvendim's position. Gremorgan pointed to the ground and there lay clear impressions of the same bootprints. As well however, Mallen could see a clear track leading from the north and then its intersection with the Hresh. Gremorgan did not look happy.

“These are Jotun, Master Cael. It looks like they travelled from the north until they found the trail of the Hresh and then have begun to follow them as well. It would seem that the Hresh have more pursuing them now than just two men of the Four Nations.”

Mallen bent and checked the depth of the prints and the state of the ground. Judging by the lengths of the strides he guessed the Jotun must be at least three to four metres tall.

“These Jotun have found the trail only in the last few hours, and they have set off after the warband without delay. Do you think they were sent by the Jotun of the West to retrieve the Warband's prisoners?”

Gremorgan looked out towards the forests and shook his head. “These cannot be Jotun of the West. Within the tribal hierarchy of their peoples they are outcasts, unable to travel except within their own far western domains. It has always been my thought that the Hresh would have to deliver their prisoners directly to their co-conspirators and it remains so. I believe these Jotun are a much more dangerous adversary; assassins sent by the Mutan themselves to find the Hresh and test their loyalty to the Clavern Sigh.”

“What will they do when they catch them?” asked Mallen.

“I am afraid,” replied Gremorgan, “that the actions of the Hresh have shown clearly to these agents of the Sigh that they hold no fealty to the commands of the Mutan. When they find them they will kill them all, and then for good measure kill all their prisoners as well. They will leave nothing alive to give witness to any disloyalty to their masters.”

Mallen stood aghast. “Then we must stop them. Find some way to bring them down.”

The LoreMaster shook his head. “I will tell you truthfully Master Cael that it is very difficult to overestimate the power of the Jotun, even if they number but two. Believe me when I say that it is well within their capability to kill all of the Hresh, and make quick work of the task as well. This new twist requires unfortunately, that we trust in the cunning and intelligence of the crue leader that commands the Denmar Hresh. He has shown remarkable ability, and we can only hope that he has a plan for such a contingency as this.”

“What must we do then?” asked Mallen. “Do we just follow the tracks and hope that everything just works itself out?”

Gremorgan could see his companion's anxiety but he had nothing better to offer. “It grieves me to say it but we have no other course of action. Providence has given us all that we have needed on this journey so far. I can see no reason to think that we shall be forsaken now.”

With that Gremorgan turned back to the trail and called for Mallen to follow. The Kalborean knew he had no choice. The pursuit had just become all the more dangerous and they could do nothing more than keep to the chase. With Gremorgan keeping a keen eye on the land ahead Mallen took once again to the trail, his only consolation that the Jotun made no effort to conceal their tracks. It was indeed going to be a long day.

Mid-afternoon found the two men no more than a league from the edges of the Forest of Meshaal. Against the western horizon it was a thick line of dark woodland that extended as far as the eye could see to the north and south. The tracks had not deviated, and Mallen had found no sign of any of the Warband or Jotun breaking away from that heading. The Jotun were fast however, their strides immensely long as they chased down the running Hresh. In his mind Mallen could not see how they might counter this new threat. Gremorgan had told him a lot about the nature of the Hordim, and especially of the Hresh and Jotun. These were creatures created with intelligence and power, every bit as dangerous as the campfire stories he had heard as a boy. He did not relish the idea of being caught up in the tangled web that was proving to be the politics of the Horde. In the end however, it was a concern that quickly found its own solution.

The Men ran on, following the trail as they raced towards the forests. It was Gremorgan who pulled them to a halt.

“Master Cael,” he whispered. “Do you see the disturbance in the ground ahead?”

Mallen had been focused on the trail and when he looked up he could see clearly what looked like spear shafts protruding from the plain some forty metres ahead. The Kalborean nodded to his companion and knelt down in the grasses. Gremorgan did not look happy.

“I think my friend that we had better keep our weapons handy. This smells too much like an ambush.”

Mallen nodded again and peered through the grass at the oddly placed spears. “How should we approach this? There could be Hresh all through the grasses.”

Gremorgan scratched at his shoulder wound and considered the lay of the land. A wind had grown quickly from the north and there was the smell of blood on the air. “It seems to me that we may have arrived too late for the party. If the Hresh are lurking in the grass they would have been all over us by now, and we would be in no doubt of their existence. The fact that they haven't gives me pause to consider another possibility.”

“And what might that be?” asked Mallen.

“That the ambush was not meant for us. Keep close to my left shoulder Mallen, and keep your eyes on everything at our back.”

With that the Dwarvendim took a firm grip on his axe and slowly stood. Mallen followed, drawing his sword as Gremorgan moved carefully towards the standing spears. With a gusting breeze swirling the grass about them they crept forward, all senses alert to any sign that danger may lay in wait for them. No attack came, but what they found gave both men cause to take a backward step.

In a wide area of flattened grasses lay the mutilated bodies of two Jotun and four Hresh. The Jotun lay as ragged giants on the ground, their bodies pierced and bloodied by six cavalry lances. Mallen had never seen a Jotun before and he could not help but hesitate at the size of the creatures. Each of the Jotun were at least half as tall again as Gremorgan, and twice the size of himself. Clad in dark battle-armor they lay in pools of blood, their ochre skin emblazoned with tattoos, their heads shaved except for a single tail of plaited white hair that reached for a metre at their backs. Close by each body lay a huge warhammer, with hafts longer than Mallen's entire body and fitted with ornately carved metal heads. Even in death they seemed indomitable but dead they were, and somehow the Hresh had killed

them.

About the Jotun were strewn the crushed forms of four of the warband, and all exhibited the signs of a brutal struggle. Amongst the carnage lay weapons and equipment, but there was a story to be told here and Mallen could see it clearly laid out in the patterns of tracks and torn grasses.

“What do you see here Master Cael?” asked Gremorgan. He could see that Mallen had quickly overcome his horror of the scene and had begun to draw together a picture of what had happened.

Mallen walked about the small battleground and talked as he went. “The two Jotun were running from our direction. Two of the Hresh were hiding in the grass on either side of the tracks left by the Warband. They must have had the spears in hand waiting for these giants to bear down upon them. At the run the Jotun could not have been keeping a close eye on the surrounding terrain and the Hresh took advantage of that, pulling their spears up from the grasses and allowing the first Jotun to run onto them. Impaled, that creature fell dead, but the second was slightly behind and brought his weapon down onto the nearest Hresh here.” He pointed to the crushed body of the Hresh at the edge of the battleground.

“The other Hresh tried to defend itself with its scimitar as it retreated to the centre of the grasses where it was killed as well. It was only then that the other Hresh sprang from the surrounding grasses with their spears and drove the Jotun to the ground. Judging by the state of the body it looks like they had to strike it more than a dozen times before it fell. Two more Hresh were killed in that fight and the remainder then fell back towards the west, leaving these remains here.”

Gremorgan nodded his head and began searching the bags of the Jotun. From one of the giants he took a collection of paper-wrapped parcels and placed them in his own backpack. Then he pulled the nearest Jotun onto its back revealing a blood-soaked tunic and breastplate.

“These Jotun are no ordinary assassins. See these markings on their battle-armor, the three silver tear-drops that emblazon their left breastplates? These are Jotun of the Mutan's personal guard. To be out here in the wilds of an enemy's territory makes me wonder on the importance of their mission.”

For a moment the Dwarvendim regarded the scene then turned again to Mallen.

“Do you notice anything that strikes you as particularly out of place here?”

Mallen scanned the area of flattened, torn grasses and shrugged his shoulders. “It is what it is Gremorgan. I can see nothing that should not be here.”

The LoreMaster walked to the nearest Jotun and pulled one of the spears from its body.

“There is more to this story Master Cael than that which we see displayed within this grisly scene. The Jotun are dead and we can argue that this has lessened the difficulty of our quest. But there are questions here that make me think carefully on the nature of the Hresh we pursue.”

Gremorgan pointed at the Jotun and continued. “We know how the Jotun died, but we do not know for certain why they were here. At first I thought they were assassins intent on doing the bidding of their masters, but these creatures were not assassins. If anything they were more likely messengers, sent to ascertain the success or otherwise of the warband's mission. We can conjecture that they were killed purely because the Denmar Hresh cannot afford any witnesses to what they are actually doing. What we see here tells us much about what has happened. It is this however, that tells me most about what we are to face in the future.”

The Dwarvendim balanced the spear in his hand and looked at Mallen questioningly. “Do you recognise it?”

Mallen looked at the bloodied weapon and shook his head. It was familiar to him but he could not place it. Gremorgan did not wait for his companion to answer.

“It is a cavalry lance Mallen, razor-sharp, and fitted with an extended haft that allows a long reach when on horseback. We saw hundreds of them scattered over the battlefield at the Surgis’Ka, and in his cunning the commander of the Warband we are pursuing deemed it important to take a number with him. You see, the only weapon that has proven effective against the power and reach of a Jotun's warhammer is the lance. A Hresh needing to defend itself against a Jotun with a hammer is completely outmatched if it must rely on its scimitar alone. The ambush we have stumbled upon had been planned and executed with a ruthless efficiency. The Jotun did not stand a chance and we must learn from what we see here.”

For a moment Gremorgan was silent, his thoughts lost to the winds as he considered the dead Hordim. When he spoke again it was with

a softer edge to his voice.

“This Hresh plans for every contingency, his warriors absolutely obedient to his orders. If we are to recover your brother we will have to match his wit with a surprise or two of our own. Something perhaps that he could not make provision for. For now however, we must return to our task. Keep to the trail Mallen. I will maintain a closer eye on our surrounds. We do not wish to suffer the same fate as these Jotun.”

With that he tapped Mallen on the shoulder and pointed into the west. The Kalborean immediately returned to the tracks and their pursuit of the warband began again in earnest.

In the dimming light of the afternoon Mallen and Gremorgan ran along the narrow trail left by the fleeing Hresh. No longer were the tracks of the Hordim spread upon the plain, instead the warband had tightened its formation, running in a single file that left a clearly defined line of trampled ground. For Mallen it was a simple task to follow, one that did not require skill or knowledge to maintain. And with the tracks so evident he began to find his mind wandering as he ran, his thoughts concentrating on what they might do if they found Tomas alive. Gremorgan's words had stayed with him, and left him wondering what they could actually do to rescue his brother. The twists and turns taken by the Denmar Hresh in their efforts to achieve their goal had so far left himself and Gremorgan as little more than bystanders. For all their efforts they had been unable to do anything but pursue them, and in that pursuit discover the violent aftermath of their determination to succeed. Not for the first time on his journey did Mallen fear that he might not meet the challenge of his quest. He was thankful though, for the companionship of the LoreMaster. Mallen knew that it was only with the Dwarvendim had he had any chance at all of finding his brother.

The rest of the afternoon slipped away, the chase a test of endurance as the great forest loomed before them. As they drew closer Mallen began to see the first indications of the scale of the woodland that would soon confront them. There was no easy transition from grassland to forest, no scattered copses of trees that would herald the forest to come. Ahead there was only a sharp division between the light of the plain and the trees themselves. The forest of Meshaal was a deep, brooding wall of branch and leaf that dissolved within its own shadows into an encompassing gloom of dark timber and thick undergrowth. It appeared neither beckoning nor

safe. Everything about it shouted danger.

Such was Mallen's thoughts as he raced towards the forest, his mind a turmoil of competing questions and doubts. It was Gremorgan who pulled him to a halt and pointed at the tracks ahead.

"Look Mallen. What do you make of this?"

For a moment the Kalborean could not see what Gremorgan was pointing at. Ahead lay the tracks of the Hordim, their impressions stamped into the wet grassland. It was only as he looked at the nearest footprint with more focus that he saw a second print, vague but discernible, within the larger. It was human.

Mallen's heart jumped in his chest. Quickly he knelt beside the track and tested it more closely. It had been pressed into the other track no more than a few hours after the larger Hordim print and judging by its condition, certainly after the rains of the previous night. Gremorgan asked the question that now consumed his companion's thoughts.

"Is it Tomas' print?"

Mallen shook his head. "I cannot tell. The size is right but I need to find the left boot to be sure."

Mallen knew what he must look for, a mark distinct upon all the boots and shoes worn by the Cael brothers. It was an unusual mark left by the bellows they used to heat the fires of their metal shop, and all their footwear had suffered the same damage. If he could find an impression of a left boot he would be sure.

"Look along the trail for a left-hand print. If one can be found I will know that this is indeed Tomas."

Gremorgan nodded and set to the task. Some forty metres back along the trail he found what they were looking for. Mallen ran to his side and fell onto his knees. Sure enough it was an impression of a left boot and across its heel was a clearly defined wear mark. In the shock of its recognition he remained speechless until he regained his feet. There were more questions here than he had answers for.

"How can this be? How is it that my brother should be free upon the plains and following the Hordim? Has he not the brains to get away and save himself?"

Anger grew within the Kalborean, but it was not an anger born of malice. His brother was free of his captivity but had not availed himself of that freedom. For some reason he was doing the exact opposite of what sense would dictate. It was so much like him.

"Do not be too harsh on your brother Mallen. I fear that he is as

stubborn, and determined, as yourself. By some act of Providence he has been able to free himself of captivity, and for his own reasons has chosen to follow the Warband instead of saving himself. I am sure that you know the reason why.”

Mallen looked at Gremorgan and nodded. “Shemwe. It can be the only reason. Madame Sandofel told me that he had gone in search of her daughter and I am aware of the depths of his feelings for her.” Mallen laughed and pointed back down the trail towards the east.

“I thought our day had become more complicated when we found the Jotun tracks. Now we must deal with a brother who is bent on testing the limits of his luck. Well, it would seem that we must rejoice in his good fortune, and hope that it does not end before we can find him.”

Gremorgan balanced the weight of his packs on his shoulders and looked towards the forest. In the light of the late afternoon the sky overhead was a deep blue, but clouds were starting to move in from the north once again. The Dwarvendim breathed deeply, his lungs feeling the chill that the northerly wind was bringing with it. There was the smell of another storm in the air and it was time they moved on.

“I believe we should start again.” he said as he pulled his belt tight. “It will be good if we can make the trees by nightfall. Within their shadows we will find shelter from the worst of the coming storm.”

Mallen looked to the north and then moved off, following the trail as it made for the trees ahead. Now he had far more to think about, and he had the clear sign that his brother was alive, somewhere within the embrace of the forest before them. In the failing light it made him run all the quicker.



It is said in the lands of the NomDruse that a hunter must always be sure of one thing; that he is in fact the hunter and not the prey. It was an old truism that had stuck in Mallen's mind as a young boy and was now one that seemed more than relevant. The two men had made the edges of the forest by nightfall, and in the gloom of a

clouding night had been forced to resort to their nightglasses to find their way within the deepening forest. The trees themselves were enormous and in their shadows Mallen could swear that he felt angered eyes falling upon them as they ran. Too frequently he found himself drawn from his concentration by a swift movement in the vegetation about him only to find nothing there. Although he could give no proof to the idea that something might be following them, he sensed the attention of a brooding entity settling upon them both. It was a feeling that grew more insistent as they made their way deeper into the forest.

With the Dwarvendim's nightglasses it soon came to pass that Mallen found he could no longer follow the trail. The glasses did not have the acuity needed to search and identify the rapidly diminishing sign of their quarry. Bootprints and other evidence of the Hordim's passing grew quickly indistinct within the thick undergrowth. The wet ground of the plains had disappeared, replaced beneath the canopy by thin animal trails bordered by tangled undergrowth, and a hard-packed earth that gave few clues as to the passing of the Hresh. Upon the firmer ground the trail of the Hordim faltered and then dissipated. With all sign of the warband gone Mallen came to a halt but Gremorgan did not stop.

"Come Mallen. We have relied on your skills for some time, but now it is necessary that we make use of the knowledge I have of our quarry."

Gremorgan said nothing more, but took the lead instead and somehow made his way quickly between the ever-increasing girths of the giant trees that crowded in around them. With Gremorgan intent on the trail, Mallen took up the role of look-out, scanning the trees for any sign of danger, trying to make sense of the curious ruddy tinge that the glasses gave to everything about him. There could be no doubt however, that it was a forest Mallen had seen before.

All about him trees reached upwards, vast trunks that spread high overhead into a thick canopy that blocked any sign of the sky above. In all his travels along the seaboard of Kalborea he had never seen such huge trees, but they were familiar to him nonetheless. Here were the trees upon which the *Caer'nar'dorum* had been fashioned. About him grew a vast living cathedral of trunk and bough that sat as solidly here as it had in the extraordinary magic of its subterranean reflection. As within the Hall of Whispers the wind blew here, slowly flowing through the canopy, rustling the upper reaches of the trees,

and sending a constant rain of broken leaf and twig into the thick undergrowth below. It was a place as quiet, and yet as energetic as the Hall, and like the Hall it had its own imminent dangers. Around him Mallen could sense whispers and movement, and in the darkness felt the gaze of something watching them intently.

For some hours Gremorgan led them both deeper into the Forest of Meshaal. The path he took became a series of interconnecting trails forced through the dense undergrowth, that led them roughly north of west into what the LoreMaster called the Old Forest. By the time they came to rest Mallen could not contain a growing feeling of malice that hung upon the air. It was so oppressive he could almost smell it.

“Gremorgan,” he whispered, “I tell you truthfully that I feel eyes upon us here. Can you not sense the affront that our presence causes?”

The LoreMaster took off his nightglasses and smelled the air. It was heavy with a miasma of humus and damp earth.

“It has been some time since Men have come this way. It is a fact that the trees do not suffer trespassers happily Master Cael, but do not fear malice here. If we tread lightly, and move with care, they will leave us alone.”

Gremorgan stood for a few more moments. In the darkness Mallen could see that he had not put his nightglasses back on. As he waited the LoreMaster scanned the forest about him. He was looking for something.

“What are you looking for.” Mallen whispered into the gloom.

The Dwarvendim pointed towards the west and answered in the same low voice. “See the glow beyond the trees ahead? If we are to find the Hresh that is where we must go.”

Gremorgan moved off quickly with Mallen at his back. The Kalborean could barely see a light, almost as dim as moonlight filtered by a heavy mist. It looked like it was only a short distance ahead, but distances within a forest can be deceiving, and it took almost an hour before Gremorgan stopped and took refuge behind the moss-covered trunk of one of the huge trees.

“It is here Master Cael,” he said as a whisper, “that we must be most careful.”

In the absolute darkness of the forest there was only the barest of lights ahead, but Mallen could see now that its source was close, maybe fifty metres ahead at most. At such a distance he could also here voices.

“What have you brought us to Gremorgan? Tell me quickly so that I might prepare.”

The Dwarvendim looked at Mallen and nodded his head. “Not one for surprises are we, eh? Still, this will surprise you nonetheless. The light ahead comes from what the Elder Tongue would call a *taal*; a shrine that the Hresh must visit if they are to have safe passage through the forest. It was my hope that we might find the Hresh here and it would seem that my hopes were valid.”

Mallen felt his heart begin to race at the mention of the Hresh only a short distance ahead.

“If this is so then we should try and get closer.” As he spoke he began to move forward but Gremorgan pulled him back.

“It is very important Master Cael that we do not disturb the Hresh whilst they are at the Taal. Trust me that it would not be a wise action.”

Mallen threw off the LoreMaster's heavy grip and faced him. “Why is it so important? Surely this would be the best time to get closer, whilst they are involved in their ritual.”

In the darkness Gremorgan's voice became more insistent. “It is not the Hresh I am concerned about. The Hordim can be tracked to the warband without any need for us to move closer just yet. They are our best hope of finding the main body of warriors. It is who they speak with that provides a reason for caution.”

The Kalborean slipped back into the gloom of the trees and took cover once again. “What is it that gives you cause for such trepidation?”

Gremorgan found a comfortable crook in one of the many roots that arched out of the ground and sat himself down in front of Mallen.

“At this moment the Hresh who survived the ambush of the Jotun are asking for a safe passage through the forest. The light you see ahead of us comes from a Being known as a *Caer'dahl*. It is a guardian Mallen, a servant of one of the Three Powers that hold dominion over Arborell. It is not malevolent, but if it senses our presence it will tell the Hordim, for it has much more in common with them than with us.”

Mallen looked around the tree and into the dull glow that had grown brighter as they had talked.

“What is their mutual connection? I can only assume that the *Caer'dahl* is a magical creature and the Hordim are not.”

The LoreMaster took a piece of Nahla bread from his pack and

settled himself. He did not seem to want to go anywhere in a hurry.

“What you assume Master Cael is incorrect. It is true that the Caer'dahl are entities born of EarthMagic, but do not be too quick to discount the Hordim as anything less. You have seen many things on your quest so far, not the least of which being the Shan'duil itself. In the history of our occupation of these lands only a handful of Men have ever seen the River of Life, and you should be mindful of that privilege. But Mallen, when you surveyed the vastness of the River did you not wonder as to its purpose?”

Mallen shrugged his shoulders. These were questions beyond his understanding of the world and he could not see what it might have to do with his question.

Gremorgan took the Kalborean's silence as his cue to continue.

“You ask about the Caer'dahl and their connection with the Hordim. It is a very long story Master Cael, but it is one you should hear at least a part of before we return to our quest. There is a chance that it will prove useful to you.”

“There was once a time when the Shan'duil alone maintained dominion over Arborell. It is, and will always be, the First Power of the world, the arbiter of all things, and the life-force from which everything grows and prospers. In the early Ages of the world however, it was a force primal in its motivations and without consciousness, a vast binding flow of EarthMagic that maintained the balance of the world. It did not think nor contemplate its existence. It just was.”

“It came to pass however, that in the endless millennia before Men arrived in the world another Power came into being in the form of a vast tree of white wood known as the Silvan Tree. Unlike the Shan'duil it was born of high intelligence, and as its sole purpose took dominion of all the Forests of Arborell. In the world that it created it was Master of the Trees. In all things that related to the forests it was absolute.”

“It was the Silvan Tree that created the ancient beings known as the Trell'sara, and it was the Trell'sara who destroyed their creator. In an act of treachery the Silvan Tree was torn down and taken into the far western mountains where it was thrown, piece by piece, into a great abyss. It was their intent to remove their creator from all memory, to cover the vile act of their treachery and take dominion of the world for themselves. Unknown to the Trell'sara, it was in the depths of this abyss that the remains of the Silvan Tree came into contact with the

Shan'duil.”

“Within the dark confines of the abyss the Silvan Tree began to recover itself, and as it grew it became one with the Shan'duil, taking on a new form and spreading its consciousness throughout the River of Life. Although separate the Silvan Tree and the River became a single force. It was at this time that the two Powers created the Hra'gora and the Caer'dahl. The Hra'gora to maintain dominion over Earth and Stone, the Caer'dahl to shepherd the needs of Air and Water. They are the Servants and Guardians of the world, and do the bidding of their creators without equivocation.”

Mallen moved upon his makeshift seat and whispered, “But what has this to do with the Caer'dahl and the Hordim?”

Gremorgan put up a finger and continued. “Patience Master Cael, I'm getting to it.”

“It further came to pass that the Trell'sara had need to create a warrior army. It was not in their nature to fight, and when confronted with the onset of a war that they had no wish to wage themselves, took the knowledge they had been given of EarthMagic and created the Hresh. It is a fact that to give their creatures life they used pieces of the Silvan Tree itself. It is a fact that every Hordim that walks the world today has a spark of life within them that is directly connected to the Shan'duil. It is that connection that binds the Hordim and the servants of the Powers in a common bond. It is why we must wait here. While the Caer'dahl resides upon the Taal there is every chance that we will be discovered. For the moment we must exercise patience.”

“And what of the Third Power you spoke of. What is its purpose?” asked Mallen.

Gremorgan smiled and shook his head. “The Third Power is quite another story. One that can be explored at another time. Suffice to say that we have talked of the servants of the Shan'duil and Silvan Tree. We can only hope that we do not cross the path of the servants of the Third.”

Mallen moved to ask another question but was stopped by the LoreMaster. In the west the light had dissipated and Gremorgan moved off quickly, gesturing for Mallen to follow.

“If we are to keep up with the Hresh we will need to move quickly. The Hordim are expert at moving through woodlands undetected and it will be best for us if we have a fresh trail to follow.”

Mallen could sense that something had been left unsaid, something

important, but he followed Gremorgan as he made for the direction of the Taal. Whatever the nature of the Third Power he knew he would have it from the LoreMaster soon enough.



The Taal stood in a small clearing only a short distance from where the two men had taken cover. In the dark of an overcast sky, and under the close canopy of the forest, Mallen had followed behind the Dwarvendim as the huge man found his way between the enormous trees. It was only a short distance but it took time, and when both men emerged into the clearing there was little sign of the Hordim or the Caer'dahl. The Taal however, remained as it must have for millennia. Situated in the centre of a wide clearing it rose before the two men, an edifice wrapped in darkness that brought Mallen to an abrupt halt.

In structure it was a tall stepped pyramid of finely cut stone, no more than twelve metres on each side, made up of three levels capped by a wide platform. At each corner of the pyramid stood the silent form of a hooded figure, facing out from the shrine in a stance of contemplation. Mallen recognised each as representations of the Hra'gora, but it was what stood upon the uppermost level that took the Kalborean's attention completely.

On the summit of the pyramid rose a carved representation of a tree, probably ten metres in height, whose limbs spread in a tangled weave of leaf-less boughs as an oak might in the cold season. Against the overcast sky it reached upwards, long fingers spreading out from its trunk as it grasped towards the overcast sky.

The pyramid, statues and tree were all cut from the same black, glass-like obsidian, and in the impenetrable gloom of the forest it ebbed with a strange blue glimmer that seemed to emanate from deep within. For a time Mallen stared at the carved image of the tree and slowly came to see that it was not simply a statue. Against its dull background of moving cloud and swaying trees he could see the smallest of movements in its limbs. Somehow the obsidian tree was moving. Like the trees of the Caer'nar'dorum it also had a life of its

own, and no doubt a purpose that only the Dwarvendim could uncover. He turned to ask Gremorgan on what it meant, but the LoreMaster was already at work searching the ground surrounding the shrine.

“What are you looking for?” he asked.

“It is part of the ritual that the Hresh must supplicate themselves on the side of the shrine facing the direction they wish to travel. It is part of their pact with the Caer'dahl that they cannot deviate from that path once permission is given. We need only find where they have knelt and we will know exactly where they are going.”

Gremorgan made for the northern edge of the Taal and found what he was looking for. Against the wet ground were two sets of marks, made by two creatures on their knees.

“See Mallen, two Hresh made away from the ambush of the Jotun and now seek to move into the north. It is clear now that six warriors were left in rearguard to kill the Jotun and that is important to know. It means the Warband must be at least sixty strong, and if we can keep up the pace our two survivors will no doubt lead us straight to the main crue. I fear Master Cael that there will be little sleep for us tonight.”

Mallen nodded and Gremorgan made no further utterance. From the Taal a clear trail extended northwards, running deep into the forest and then out of sight. Upon the trail Mallen could see the imprints of heavy boots and he immediately renewed the chase. With Gremorgan again at his shoulder the Kalborean returned to the hunt.

In the early hours of the night the two men moved through the forest and as they did so the weather began to worsen. From the trees above the first hint of a strengthening wind quickly grew into a thrashing gale that whipped the upper levels of the forest with each bluster. Showers of leaf, twig and insect life rained down upon them as they ran, but there was nothing that would keep Mallen from his brother. Without thought of rest or food he followed the tracks left by the Hresh, cutting along animal trails and forcing his way through thick undergrowth as he traced the thin line of evidence that led northwards.

It was in this manner that the two men maintained their pursuit of the Hresh. In the remaining hours of the night they were dark forms silently negotiating the forest, their passing nothing more than the flicker of shadows quietly moving through the trees. As stormclouds grew above them they ran, and as the first sign of rain fell through the

canopy above they did not falter. In the half-light of an overcast dawn it was the sight of the Hresh ahead that brought them to a halt.

Gremorgan grabbed at Mallen's shoulder and pointed forward into a small clearing that opened through the trees ahead. Upon the open ground lay the bodies of the Hresh. They were dead.

"This is not what I expected," whispered Gremorgan between deep breaths. "When given passage no Hordim will attack another whilst they are within the forest. This must have been done by human hand."

Mallen moved closer to the boundaries of the clearing and in the feeble light could make out that both Hordim had had their throats cut.

"I cannot make sense of it either Gremorgan. This was done with a small blade, and with great skill. What should we do?"

Gremorgan moved closer and then strode out into the clearing. "Whoever has done this has moved on, and we have lost our best lead as to where the Warband is heading. Let us make what we can of this disaster."

Carefully he searched the bodies and then surveyed the ground surrounding them. Sure enough there were bootprints in the wet ground and they were not Hordim.

"Look," Gremorgan exclaimed as he pointed at two clear sets of prints that lead off to the northern edge of the clearing. "It would seem that your brother has had a part in this attack, and that he has found a friend. One I think we may have seen before."

Mallen made for the prints and stood next to the Dwarvendim. In the growing light he could see clearly the identifiable bootprints of Tomas pressed into the damp soil. Beside them were a much smaller set of prints, and for their size they were most likely those of a young woman. Memories of the young girl that had tracked them to the edges of the Isirien River came back to him, but it did not seem possible.

"Surely such a young girl could not have dispatched these warriors with such efficiency?"

Gremorgan shrugged his shoulders and searched the edges of the clearing for any signs of danger. "I tell you truthfully Mallen, I do not know what to make of it. The girl we saw at the Isirien demonstrated remarkable skill at remaining undetected, but it would surprise me greatly that she could have done this alone. I can tell you that we would have been hard-pressed to achieve such a quick kill. And now

it would seem that we are left with these bodies, and only the footprints of their killers to wonder on.”

The Kalborean knelt beside the bodies of the Hordim and thought on what it meant to their quest. If these were indeed the Hresh they had been pursuing Mallen knew that Tomas must be no more than a few minutes ahead of them, somewhere in the trees to the north. He had no doubt on what he needed to do.

“Gremorgan,” he said urgently. “Tomas must only be a short distance ahead. We must find him quickly.”

The Dwarvendim nodded and settled his packs on his shoulders. “There is only one path that we can now take. It would seem that to recover your brother we need only follow his trail. Let us not delay another moment.”

Mallen rose from the side of the dead Hordim and began to run. In the space of a few heartbeats both men raced into the gloom of the forest, their forms merging quickly with the deep shadows. Somewhere ahead was Tomas, and Mallen would not stop until he had him safe.

## Chapter 12 - Sil



Tomas lay still. In the quiet of the afternoon he found himself wondering at the silence that now confronted him, and in that moment of solitude tried to make sense of what he had just witnessed. For most of the afternoon he had lain within the long grasses of the Surgis'Ka, waiting for the last of the surviving Hresh to leave. He had been witness to a great battle, and an even greater treachery, and as the winds of the afternoon sent long rustling waves through the grassland about him he could only thank Providence that somehow he had survived.

It was a survival that had come at a price however. Through the violent events of the day Trem'Alindae's soporific potion had maintained a tight hold upon him, but with the passing of the Hresh into the west he could feel its paralysing grasp beginning to weaken. He had not come through the battle uninjured though, and as the effects of the numbing brew withdrew from his limbs he could feel the burning insistence of a wound he had taken to his leg. The hand of Providence had worked quietly to keep him safe during the carnage of battle, but his luck had not held in its aftermath. Caught in the paralysing grip of the potion Tomas had remained a silent observer to the great events that had unfolded about him, and as he fought to regain a measure of control over his body he knew that he had just lived through a day that he would remember to the end of his days.

Much of the early phase of the battle had passed him by as a melee of sound. He had fallen at the first assault of the Kalborean cavalry, pitching into the soft earth as one of his litter bearers had fallen. The stretcher had followed, covering his body as Trem'Alindae had joined his crue to make ready for the battle to come. In the confusion of that moment the old Hresh gave little thought to the fate of his captive, and as the long bloody battle grew around him Tomas waited quietly, paralysed by the Hordim potion, unable to do anything but watch the battle of the Surgis'Ka unfold.

The Kalborean cavalry had caught the Hordim unprepared upon the open plain. From the north they had swept down upon the Hresh, forcing them to retreat towards a low saddle between two hills. From his hiding place he could see little, but the progress of the battle drew out as a grinding test of strength and courage from which neither side

was willing to retreat. In the bare hour that the battle raged he could sense the determination of the Kalboreans to crush the Warband, but just as he could hear the first signs of victory in the air the tide turned, and it proved to be the cavalry itself that was trapped and destroyed. From the south he felt the tremors of a new crue of Hresh moving quickly towards the final stand of their brethren. Caught between two forces the cavalry faltered, their supporting troops lost to the discipline and tactics of the Hordim. In a tide of murder and butchery the Kalboreans were killed, executed to the last man and horse.

Without any capacity to help Tomas had been left instead to remain quiet, but as he did so a new sound arose upon the afternoon breezes. The Tomsk Hresh had barely survived the battle, and as they regrouped the Denmar turned upon them. Above the bluster of the winds came the sounds of treachery and outrage, and it did not stop until every one of the Tomsk lay dead as well. When all had once again become quiet it was only the Denmar who remained standing.

As the suns of Arborell turned towards the western horizon the Denmar Hresh moved purposefully upon the plain, collecting what they needed from the dead and shepherding their captives into the west. For a fleeting instant he caught a glimpse of Shemwe, her hair blown by the gathering winds as she and two others were pushed roughly out of his field of view. If he could have called to her he would have, but he had no voice and instead struggled against his paralysis, forcing movement into his fingers and toes.

It was only then that Tomas came under the scrutiny of the Hordim. A number of the Denmar Warriors had passed him by, scavenging food and equipment from both Hordim and Kalborean alike. Tomas could not realise it but one of his boots had been protruding from the underside of the stretcher. With a cavalry lance the nearest of the warriors thrust it into his lower leg, cutting through flesh and driving the spear tip deep into the soft earth. Tomas could not feel the wound, only sense the tug and pull of the lance as the warrior tested if he was dead. Without cry or movement the Hresh probed no further, leaving the young Kalborean pinned to the earth. In that state he had remained still, listening for any sign of further danger, and dreading the inevitable weakening of his paralysis.

Time passed as Tomas did what he could to recover feeling and strength to his limbs. Whilst in the less than tender care of Trem'Alindae he had worked at reducing the effectiveness of the potion, and in that endeavour had gained a measure of control over

its numbing effects. Given enough time he might have found some way to escape his captors, but dumped upon the plains he remained in no state to find his feet, or for that matter think clearly on what he should now do.

In the twilight he could feel the pain in his leg growing, and with its nagging intensity he knew he must attempt to rise. Carefully he pulled aside the tangled stretcher and turned his head to see what damage he had sustained to his leg. In the red glow of the dusk it proved far worse than he had imagined. The lance had gone straight through his leg, the edge of the razor-sharp blade cutting through the front half of his shin, cleanly passing between the bone and his calf muscles, pinning him to the earth. He had been lucky in that the wound had bled, but had then constricted around the cold blade, a pool of congealed blood stark evidence of the severity of the injury he had been dealt. For a short time he remained still, shocked by the sight of the cold iron piercing his leg, but then the reality of his position forced its way to the forefront of his mind. He had lost a lot of blood, and the use of his leg. It did not require wisdom to appreciate that out in the open he would be lucky to last the night.

With the pain building in his leg he raised himself on his arms and looked about the battlefield. In the spreading shadows he could see the plain covered in bodies, piles of equipment and weaponry scattered about, battle-standards jammed into the wet earth. Against the quiet breezing of the wind, and the unblemished arch of the deep blue sky, the dead spread out before him, tangled and ragged in their mortality. He could not think on how many had died, but as he gazed out upon the trampled grassland Tomas knew that his Shemwe was not amongst them.

The pain now grew stronger, the Horde potion's effects lessening with each passing minute. If he was to do something about his leg he needed to do it before the numbness dissipated completely. Within arm's reach of his position lay the body of a cavalryman. The Hresh who had stabbed him had also rifled through the Trooper's few possessions, and one of those that had been discarded was a thick cotton shirt. Quickly he pulled it out of the grass and tied it tightly about his leg. He could still feel only a nagging ache in the limb, and with his tourniquet in place attempted to pull the lance. Slowly it came away, but as he pulled he realised that the lance tip was covered in clinging earth. To try and take it from his leg would draw dirt through the wound. For a moment he paused but there was nothing

he could do. No matter how he tried to extricate the lance the risk of infection would be almost certain. He had no choice and with one last effort wrenched the lance from his leg. Immediately the wound began to bleed. Carefully the Kalborean tightened the tourniquet, and then bound the wound securely with strips of cloth torn from the fabric of the shirt. When he was sure the makeshift bandages were secure he slowly released the tourniquet, and to his amazement the bleeding lessened and then stopped. For the moment at least he would not bleed to death.

Feeling better able Tomas rose from the ground, using the lance as a support as he tried to gain a footing. Weak, and still disoriented by the potion he stood, taking in the scale of the disaster that somehow he had survived. At all horizons there was nothing but the dead, and the tattered remains of the violence that had killed them. Nothing moved, and as he surveyed all the grassland about him he realised that he had no chance of survival himself. Injured and alone his fate would be the same as those who had fallen about him. His was just going to take slightly longer.

It was as he considered the hopelessness of his position that he saw a movement amongst the bodies to his north. From a pile of dead Hresh an arm flailed out, taking a purchase upon the edge of the mound, pushing one, then another of the creatures away as something struggled to extricate itself from the tangled bodies. At first Tomas could only hope that it was one of the Troopers, somehow a survivor in the midst of such devastation, but the truth would soon prove to be far more threatening.

Before Tomas could move a single Hresh arose from the pile of dead. Horribly mutilated by a crushing blow to its shoulder, the creature struggled and then found its freedom. Staggering to its feet the warrior shook off its pain and picked up the nearest weapon it could find. Even in the lengthening shadows Tomas recognised who it was. In the gloom he stood before Trem'Alindae, and the old Hresh was not happy.

"It would seem," the warrior sneered, "that we have been given an opportunity to settle a debt, one that remains unpaid between us. Call to your gods vehmin, for you are going to need them."

There lay only a short distance between the two combatants and Tomas had nowhere to run. Supported by the lance he could not move, but he was not about to let the Hresh kill him without a fight. Balanced on one leg he swung his lance down and awaited the

Hordim. Trem'Alindae could see no threat before him but he also had been badly injured. As he moved towards the young Kalborean his shoulder gave way and he collapsed to one knee as a great agony swept over him. It could not keep him down though. Wracked with pain he staggered back to his feet and rushed Tomas.

Across the grass he ran, swinging a long scimitar as he bore down upon the Kalborean. Tomas raised his lance and stood his ground but the Hresh was too big and far too strong. With one blow the Hordim threw aside Tomas' blade and barrelled into him, knocking him back into the grasses. Trem'Alindae stood on Tomas' right arm and pinned him to the damp earth, a look of malevolent satisfaction on his face as he raised the scimitar above his head. In the ruddy light of the dusk the metal of the Hordim's weapon glared red and Tomas had no energy to resist. It would take only one blow to end his life and he waited for the scimitar's fall, but it did not come.

Through a fog of pain Tomas looked up to find the Hresh motionless, the flaming scimitar dropping slowly from his upraised hands. Without word or cry the warrior fell sideways, his body limp. In the gathering mists of a delirium Tomas thought he saw the slight form of a girl standing at the Hordim's back, two long-bladed daggers in her hands. And then he fell into darkness.



When he awoke there was nothing before him but stars. Flickering points of light spread in a wide arc about him, and it took some time for Tomas to realise that he was lying on his back, the world darkened by night. In those first few moments he blinked and tried to remember where he was, and recover some memory of what had happened to him, and why he was alive. Then he remembered the girl. Carefully he raised himself from the ground, and propped himself on one elbow. In the darkness he could see only the stars, and the dark outline of a figure sitting hunched in the grass only a short distance from where he lay.

“So you are awake then?” came a voice out of the darkness.

Tomas pulled himself to his feet and brushed himself down. “I do

not know how you did it, but thanks.” He said quietly.

About him the wind was gathering strength and he could see a line of cloud moving quickly from the north. Lightning arched out in the distance, an accompanying rumble a warning that a storm was on its way.

“You have no need to thank me. I have done nothing more than find you here, asleep within the midst of this great carnage.”

Tomas shook his head and approached the girl. He could see now that she was indeed young, maybe no older than her late teens, and in the dark she appeared very vulnerable. “I saw you save me from the Hresh, and for that I am in your debt.”

The girl stood quickly and replied. “I am afraid Kalborean that you are mistaken. I found you at dusk delirious with a strange fever, and have simply waited here to pass the night. As you will see with the coming dawn there is nothing here to be saved from.”

For a moment Tomas stood quietly, taken aback by the girl's remonstrance. In his mind he clearly remembered the girl and her daggers, but he was not about to press the issue. He was alive, and for some reason the girl did not wish the thanks that were hers to accept. Her presence upon the plains however, was something she could not deny as easily.

“If this is so may I have your name instead?” He asked weakly.

The girl shrank back from him and reached for one of the daggers that remained sheathed at her side. She did not draw it, only rested her hand upon its handle.

“I am Sil, daughter of Padma, a merchant of the Faeyen.”

The declaration of her name gave Tomas reason to pause and consider her response. He had been a traveller most of his life and he knew the Faeyen well. Of all things they treasured most it was their family name, and Padma was not a surname. Sil had not given her family name, and there was only one circumstance upon which it could not be given. It was something that he needed to confirm with her if he was to understand why the girl should be out in the wilds alone.

“How was your father murdered?” he asked carefully.

Sil stiffened and took a step towards Tomas, her disposition no longer that of a vulnerable girl.

“You ask too many questions. What business is it of yours?”

Tomas stooped to pick up a broken lance shaft. He did not wish her harm but he needed to keep the Faeyen at a safe distance, at least

until he could understand her appearance so far from civilisation.

“Stay at arms-length girl. We have no business being in conflict. There is much here that makes little sense, and it is best that we start with an answer as to why you are here.”

Sil halted her advance and smiled. “The same could be asked of you Kalborean. Perhaps you might explain why it is I should find you upon the edge of a great battle, smelling like you have been living with the Horde half your life. Perhaps if you give me a straight answer I might forego slitting your throat and leaving you for the crows.”

Tomas gave her what she wanted. He had no need to be anything other than truthful.

“I am Tomas Cael, a metal-smith of Callenfrey. Fate brings me here as a captive of the Horde, and an act of Providence appears to have set me free. Whatever your reasons for being here I can tell you truthfully that I have only one. Somewhere to the west runs a crue of Hresh, and in their possession they have my fiancée. I mean to get her back.”

The girl straightened at the mention of the Hresh. In her eyes there burned a hatred that Tomas could almost feel tingling against his skin. In a moment of decision she sheathed her dagger and turned instead to the west.

“More than three weeks ago I was with my father on the road between Gainsrow and Millerain. We had just completed a successful tour of the coastal towns of Kalborea when the Hresh found us. It had been the end of a warm day, and we had decided to camp in a small roadside clearing. At midnight the first scouts of a warband stumbled upon our campsite. My father did not stand a chance, but I ran and in the darkness barely eluded them.”

For a moment she paused, then turned back towards Tomas.

“You ask me how my father was murdered. Well I can tell you that it was at the hands of the Hresh, and it was a cruel end. You may wish the return of your fiancée, but I am here for a more deadly outcome. I am going to kill the Hresh that took the life of my father, and ensure the death of every other that travels with him. Once this is done I will be free to use my name again.”

They were strong words, but Tomas understood the reasons for her determination. The Faeyen were looked upon by most in the Kalborean Union simply as merchants and craftsmen, as indolent people of wealth that lived their lives far from the concerns of

ordinary men. It was a truth that the Faeyen had built massive citadels in the far west of Kalborea, and there had shut themselves away, venturing out only to ply their wares and conduct the business of their many Trading Guilds. In his business dealings Tomas had known many however, and he knew the strength of their societies rested on the importance of reputation and family honour. It was a custom of the Faeyen that a murdered man had more than just his life taken from him. Until a blood relative could avenge that man's death the murderer had also stolen his good name. In the eyes of the Faeyen it made the crime all the more potent, and one that had to be measured with swift retribution. It was Sil's responsibility to prosecute that justice. For Tomas however, her quest seemed even more implausible than his own.

"Forgive me Sil, but how do you propose to complete your goal." Tomas looked around the darkened plains and shrugged his shoulders. "Neither of us appear well-prepared, and I doubt we will even be able to find the warband again."

As he stood in the long grasses Tomas found his resolve faltering. Without food or equipment he had no way of continuing on, and no idea where the Hresh were going. He only knew that they had left the battlefield and moved into the west. They could be anywhere, and Shemwe was with them.

In the darkness a roll of thunder shuddered out of the north. Both Faeyen and Kalborean turned instinctively towards the sound and then looked at each other. The approaching storm was to be more than a simple downpour. For Sil it was her call to action.

"Look Tomas Cael, you may doubt your capacity but I do not. I have been tracking the Hordim for three long weeks and I am not about to let them get away. You have only one decision to make and its simple. You either turn around and go home, or you join with me and we find the warband. Believe me Kalborean, I will not stop until I have retrieved my father's good name. It is your choice to come along, if you are brave enough."

For a long moment Tomas weighed up the consequences of travelling with the girl. She exhibited a confidence that was completely at odds with her size and preparedness, but if she was to be believed, had survived weeks pursuing the Hordim. It was experience the young Kalborean did not possess, and it swayed him quickly to a decision. Tomas nodded his head and smiled. "You are right. We will go together and see what the hand of Providence might

bring us.”

Out of the north a huge arc of lightning lit up the grasslands. About them the detritus of battle began to move as the blusters of a rising wind heralded the tempest to come. Sil made the first move.

“Come then Kalborean. The Treachersa approaches and we need to find food and equipment amongst the remnants of this great battle before it arrives. Take what you need and we will depart.”

Together the two figures scavenged the battlefield. Amongst the dead Tomas could find little, but he did recover a pack, a leather jacket and a small measure of food. As he searched the scattered bodies he came across a cavalryman half hidden beneath the weight of his horse. Both had met a gruesome end, but it was the man's boots that gave Tomas pause to stop and look at his own. He had worn his old pair since the attack on Callenfrey and they had not weathered captivity well. In the gathering dark he wondered if he should take this man's footwear in replacement. It was then that he stopped in his tracks. A memory of agony crept into his consciousness and he shook his head, struggling with a strange inability to focus his thoughts. For a moment he felt himself becoming disoriented, then he gasped as a vision of a lance tip protruding through his lower leg returned to his memory. Something was desperately wrong.

“Sil!” he called into the darkness. From out of the east the figure of the young girl emerged from the gloom, a long cavalry lance in her hands. As soon as she was within arm's length he grabbed her and knocked her to the ground. Before she could get up he placed his booted foot on her chest and held her against the soft earth.

“Do you notice something wrong here?” It was an accusation, one for which he demanded a swift answer.

“What are you talking about Kalborean? You better have a good reason for this assault or you are a dead man.”

Tomas pressed harder. “The last thing I remember before falling into unconsciousness was you standing over the Hresh, and feeling the agonies in my wounded leg overwhelming me. How is it that I now stand over you with no injury or infirmity. What did you do to me whilst I was asleep?”

Sil squirmed under his weight, then grabbed at his boot and twisted it violently to the side. Her strength took Tomas by surprise and he fell sideways. Before he could react the girl brought her boot down upon his stomach, forcing the air out of his lungs. In a fit of pain and breathlessness he tried to get up but the Faeyen rolled over onto his

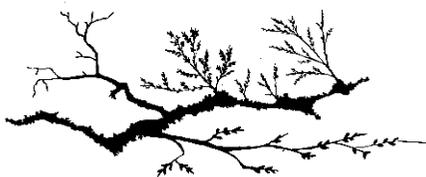
chest, and slowly pulled a razor-sharp dagger across the skin of his throat.

“You are a fool Kalborean. What manner of creature do you think I am? I found you as I said, unconscious and delirious. I cannot account for what you remember, nor take responsibility for your obvious shortcomings. I know only that if you attack me again I will kill you where you stand.”

Tomas could not believe her. Too keenly he had felt the pain of his wound, and he could not believe it was simply a dream. In that moment he relived all that had happened to him and there was no way it was a product of delirium. There was something about this girl that required caution, but for the moment he could only see their fates intertwined in a common purpose. He had made a mistake by letting his anger get the better of him. In the darkness he shrugged his shoulders and relented.

“If what you say is true then you have my apology. I can only think that I must have been suffering a side-effect of the potion forced on me by my captors.”

Sil stood and let Tomas raise himself from the ground. She seemed satisfied with his retraction, and Tomas quickly went about the remaining business of preparing for their pursuit of the warband. He had food and a sturdy jacket and that was enough for the moment. With the storm brewing menacingly in the north he called to Sil and they left the battlefield.



In the dark hours the two forms ran swiftly across the grassland. With only the fleeting illumination of cloud-obscured moonlight to aid them they followed the westerly heading of the warband, and watched anxiously as a monstrous tempest grew at their right shoulders. Across the northern horizon a wall of lightning and impenetrable cloud scudded towards them, and overhead the crowns of huge towers of cloud roiled and flashed as the companions tried to put distance between themselves and the carnage of the Surgis'Ka. In the late hours of the night the first outriders of the storm overtook their

position, a wild wind that blew icy-cold sheets of rain upon them.

“We cannot remain in the open Sil. This storm will kill us if we do not find shelter.” yelled Tomas through the blusters of a growing gale. “We need to find cover quickly.”

Sil nodded and pointed to a jumbled pile of boulders capped by the gnarled remains of an ancient tree. It was less than a few hundred metres from their path and together they ran for it. As they made for the stone pile a huge blast of lightning hit the ground, spewing large mounds of smoking earth into the air. The first was followed by another, and then a staccato of bolts that tore up the earth, leaving wide depressions of scorched soil as they ran. The Treachersa had arrived.

In a flurry of driving rain and chill winds the storm rose before the two fleeing figures. Tomas made the stone pile first, but it was Sil who dove into the narrow space between two large boulders at its base. Tomas followed and to his surprise found a small space within the pile that would serve well as a shelter from the maelstrom.

“How do you know of this place?” he yelled over the roar of the rising gale. Sil shrugged her shoulders and pointed to the thick roots of the tree above them.

“In the forests of the Faeyen I have found many such secret places. The roots force the stones apart and animals use them as shelters. It just seemed possible that one could be found here as well.”

Tomas moved to speak again, but a huge thunder clap shook their refuge, dropping a layer of dried vegetation and loose stone over them. Sil immediately cleared a small space between the two of them and collected pieces of the detritus as tinder for a small fire. From her clothing she produced a set of flints and soon had a few fingers of flame brightening the tight confines of the shelter.

In the light the Kalborean could see clearly the nature of the hole they had sought sanctuary within. The walls were nothing more than slabs of fallen stone held tightly by a sinuous network of old roots that extended from the roof above deep into the ground below. At some point it had also been the home of at least one animal, most likely a predator as a collection of split and gnawed bones littered the floor. These proved the best fuel for the fire, and Sil spent her time slowly placing the yellowed pieces into the flames.

It was the girl herself that provided the greatest mysteries for Tomas. Outside the storm raged, a constant attack of light and sound that tore at their meagre shelter. In such circumstances they had no

ability to talk, but he had his first opportunity to properly consider the nature of the strange companion he had found on the plains.

In the flickering illumination of the bone-fed fire he could see that she was indeed a Faeyen. Like her brethren she was thin-limbed and slight of build, but he had felt an enormous strength within her and he could not fathom it. She was dressed in tight fitting travel clothes, and had her ink-black hair braided into a single pony-tail that extended a good half of the way down her back. Her complexion was tanned and healthy but it was her face that struck Tomas the most. He could not deny that she was the most exquisitely beautiful girl that he had ever seen. Her features seemed almost crafted, a perfectly formed visage without blemish or fault. In the firelight she sat crouched against the stone, her legs pulled up so that her chin rested on her knees. For Tomas it was the greatest incongruity of the girl. Within the tight confines of the animal den she was a vision of frail beauty. He could not understand how she could possibly have survived the weeks of hard travel needed to keep pace with the Hresh warband. There were many questions that needed to be answered, but in the midst of the storm they would have to wait. Without a word said the two sat within the cramped confines of their makeshift shelter and listened to the tempest rage across the plains. Such was the manner in which the night passed and soon Tomas fell into sleep.

In the first light of a grey morning Tomas awoke to find himself alone. For a moment he collected his thoughts then tried to move, wondering where the girl had gone, but more concerned with a body stiff and sore from the cramped conditions of their sanctuary. Outside he could hear the rustling of a light breeze upon the grassland but there was little else to be heard. Carefully he crawled out of the hole and straightened. The dawn had only just grown into daylight and a high overcast covered the sky. Looking around he could not tell where the girl had gone, though he thought it unlikely that she had simply left him and gone on alone. Whatever she might be doing he decided the best thing to do would be to eat. Sil would turn up in her own good time.

With his back still stiff he found his pack and organised a small amount of food for his breakfast. He had not been able to find much in the short time he had been given to scavenge from the dead, but he had found a few things, and in the cool morning air ate some bread and dried meat. It was not much, however it had been days since he had eaten anything and it did not take him long to finish it. As he

placed the last piece of meat in his mouth Sil appeared from behind the stone-pile.

“It is good to see you awake Kalborean.” she said as she slumped onto a flat stone at his side. “The warband is no more than a few hours ahead of us in the west. They will have a rearguard so it will be best that for the moment we let them move on. It will serve our purposes best if we allow them some distance.”

Tomas looked at the girl and wondered at her confidence. “You talk as if you have a plan, yet I have heard nothing of it. Is it best that we wait? Surely the Hresh could go in any direction?”

Sil shook her head and pointed into the west. “The Hresh are making for the Forest of Meshaal. It is in their nature that they will keep to the woodlands as much as possible, and I can tell you Kalborean that there is only one path they can take once they have left the Meshaal.”

“And that is?” Tomas asked.

“North of course.” answered Sil, “To attack a settlement is one thing. To take prisoners and keep them alive, even though they have been under attack, is something else entirely. There is a purpose to their actions, and it must require that they get the prisoners back into the wastelands of the Sanhar. To that end there is no other way. They must go north, and then find their way back across the mountains of the Great Rift.”

Tomas raised an eyebrow at the mention of the warband's prisoners.

“What do you know of the prisoners? Have you seen them?” Memories of seeing Shemwe roughly treated gave a raw edge to his voice.

The Faeyen stood. In the wakening daylight she seemed as fragile as a river reed, but there was a look in her eye that only barely veiled a murderous hatred.

“Yes, I have seen the prisoners. In the dark of night I have crept into the heart of their encampments and stolen food and water. I have seen them, alive and cared for, and it perplexes me as to their survival. Never in my life have I heard an account of the Horde taking any prisoners. Certainly it is their way to kill any encumbrance to them if attacked, and I do not understand why they should covet those Kalboreans above all others. Do you know why?”

Tomas shrugged his shoulders. “You are asking the wrong man. I can give no enlightenment of this except the coincidence that we all

possess red hair. And before you ask I can also tell you that such a coincidence makes no sense to me either.”

Sil remained quiet for a moment. Tomas could see her thoughts momentarily overwhelmed by a revelation that had stared her in the face without realisation. Whatever she had found in Tomas' words she kept to herself. Instead the Faeyen gathered her few belongings and prepared to leave.

“It is now that we must make a decision on our way forward,” she said as Tomas shouldered his pack. “The Hresh will be making for the Meshaal but we should not follow them there. Within the confines of the forest the Hresh will have too great an advantage over us. They will be posting rearguards and always be looking to the possibility of pursuit. It is my thought that we do not follow them in. Instead we should head to the north-west, across the open plains to the northern edge of the Meshaal. Between the edges of the forest and the Black Hills we can lay in wait for them and hopefully achieve both our goals. All that is required is the speed to make it there first. What say you Kalborean. Are you up for a bit of a run?”

Tomas could see the sense in waiting for the warband to come to them, rather than conduct what might be a dangerous chase into unknown terrain. How the girl could be so confident of their path he did not know, but he was smart enough to accept that he was way out of his depth and needed a clear plan. It was an easy decision to make.

“Until such time as I recover my Shemwe I am with you Sil, daughter of Padma. May we both survive our obvious recklessness.”

Sil laughed and crossed from the stony ground surrounding the stone-pile onto the long grasses of the plain. With Tomas at her shoulder they ran, and in the full light of morning disappeared into the north-west.



Two days passed quickly upon the grasslands as Tomas and Sil ran. Before them they saw no sign of the Hresh, and within the embrace of worsening weather they kept to their course, making for the northern edge of the Meshaal forests. On the first day of their pursuit the sky

had remained fine, but by the evening of that day a dull overcast grew again in the north, descending upon the plains as a harbinger of mists and heavy rain. Within the cover of the downpour they ran, and in the misting gloom of the day passed unnoticed beyond the boundaries of the Surgis'Ka.

On few occasions did they stop for food or rest, and then only for the shortest time. It was not until they ran onto stony ground that Sil drew them both to a halt.

“We must take care here Kalborean. Before us lies the outer borders of the Warrens, and although they are uninhabited they provide some danger to the careless. Keep to my back and tread only upon my footfalls.”

Tomas peered into the mists and could see little. Before him the long grasses of the Surgis'Ka had disappeared, replaced with a barren landscape of broken stone and bare earth. Amongst the wind-blown fogs he could also see the barest of flattened mounds, many of them collapsed at their centres. Above all he could feel a brooding malevolence that reached out for him hungrily.

“What have you brought us to? What manner of place is this?” he asked, his breath laboured from the exertion of their run.

“As I have said it is the Warrens. Here can be found the oldest delvings of the Ancients. It is recorded in the library of the Faeyen at Teth, that these mines and workings were laid down in a quest by the Trell'sara to find the source of the Shan'duil. It is said they failed, leaving only these great holes and mounds as evidence of their passing.”

Tomas looked at the girl and wondered at what she was talking about. “I have no idea what you mean. I ask only if they are dangerous.”

Sil nodded and began to move further onto the hard ground. “Dangerous enough Kalborean. For a while at least we must walk, and tread carefully enough. Stay close and you shall not discover how deep some of these delvings really are.”

Carefully Sil began a slow navigation of the stony ground. The entrances to the Warrens opened up before Tomas as huge gaping holes in the earth that disappeared quickly into unfathomable depths. He had seen delvings of similar type before, mostly around the iron mines of Kal Mannion, but he had never seen anything on the scale of what he found here. Laid out in a haphazard patchwork were openings on a massive scale, deep workings that were so wide that he

doubted he could have thrown a small stone across them. With each was partnered a tailings mound, a huge pile of broken rock and earth dug out of each hole. These mounds he found to be wide and flat topped, covered in coarse grasses and large enough to be considered as small hills in their own right. The young Kalborean could not conceive of the labours that must have been endured in the creation of the delvings, but as Sil moved closer he was surprised to see that smaller holes had also been dug into the tailings mounds themselves.

“Wait up a moment.” he whispered to the Faeyen. As she turned to him he pointed to the smaller holes. “You say these Warrens are the product of some ancient search. What then are these smaller holes dug into the mounds? They appear to be only recent additions.”

Sil smiled and leant close to his ear. “You ask a lot of questions Kalborean, but I do know the answer to that one. Before the coming of Men into the world this part of Arborell was heavily forested, similar in fact to the Meshaal in the west. In those days the forests of eastern Arborell were the dominion of the Morg, and these delvings were their Kraal. It was only with the retreat of the great forests that they abandoned the Warrens and moved northwards into the Great Rift. Consider yourself lucky. If they were still here they would have tortured us to the edge of death, and then eaten the remains alive. With such happy thoughts in mind it is probably a good idea that we move on.”

Tomas agreed, and followed as Sil trod a careful path through the Warrens. It was in the last hours of daylight that Sil once again called them to a halt. The weather had not improved and in the faltering gloom of the day she paused, listening carefully into the mists ahead.

“What is it?” Tomas whispered.

“Someone is coming, moving from the north at the run.” She looked around quickly and pointed to the nearest mound. “It will be best that we hide. There is no benefit in meeting those who now come towards us.”

Together they ran for the mound and forced their way into the first hole they could find, retreating within until complete darkness embraced them. From their vantage they waited, and it was only a matter of moments before two creatures came into view. Tomas drew in his breath as he realised that they were Jotun.

In the dark he watched as the huge creatures came to a halt barely fifteen metres from their hiding place. Both wore armoured breastplates, heavy leather tunics, and sported long white pigtailed of

braided hair. He could not judge exactly, but they looked as if they might stand at least twice his height, and even in the gathering dusk he could see their ochre skin glistening with the sweat of their exertions. They looked like they had come a long way.

Neither of the Hordim spoke, and it was only a pause that lasted long enough for one of the Jotun to adjust the strapping for a huge warhammer that he held fastened at his back. Before Tomas could see anything more the creatures returned to their journey and disappeared quickly into the mists to the south.

In the confines of the crudely cut entranceway the young Kalborean found himself sweating, even though the air ran a keen chill across his skin. The Jotun had been huge, and he had expected that, stories of the giants told of their immense strength and their considerable height. To see one so close however, left him wondering how Men could ever have stood against them. From his vantage they seemed indomitable.

“Should we move on?” he whispered to Sil in the darkness. The Faeyen shook her head and sat back against the wall of the tunnel.

“I do not know that we should just yet. It is getting dark, and although the edge of the Warrens lies only an hour to the north it is not a wise course to try traversing it at night. Perhaps we should stay here and take advantage of the shelter. I don't know about you but I would appreciate a night out of the rain.”

Tomas looked about the dismal confines of the Morg tunnel and decided that it would be better than spending another night in the continuing drizzle outside. There was something about the rough earthworks that gave him the creeps though. Perhaps it was the idea that Morg once lived within its crude walls, but the girl had said that they were long gone, and without further consideration began to organise himself for the coming night. It was as they put together the tinder for a fire that Sil began to talk openly about herself, and her life before the death of her father.

Before a small blaze the two ate what food remained to them and talked on the circumstances that found them in their present condition. At first Sil had described the journey that had led herself, and her father to the northern towns of Kalborea. It had been a long, arduous endeavour that had seen her father Padma concluding a series of contracts for the provision of fine cloth all along the coast. The success had saved their trading house from bankruptcy, and her expectation had been that they would return to their home in

Caravanserai with the first touch of the warmer seasons. Then the Horde had attacked their small convoy and her world had changed forever.

Tomas listened, realising that there was much in common between the girl and himself. She now found herself alone in a dangerous world. It was the same position that Mallen and himself had endured for many years, and he began talking long into the night on the many journeys of their youth, and the circumstances that had led to the opening of their store in Callenfrey. It was an easy conversation that flowed equally between the stories of both, and in that dark hole they struck up a solid friendship. Only as the first rays of dawn spread across the Warrens outside did they finally sleep.



Neither stirred until the early hours of the afternoon. Outside the rains of the past days had retreated to the south, and with their passing the sky remained as a patchwork of scattered cloud propelled by a brisk northern breeze. Tomas was the first to awaken. Carefully he pulled himself up from the hard floor of the tunnel and tried to coax some life out of the embers of their fire. As he did so Sil awoke and ran her fingers through her hair. It was full of dirt and detritus from the tunnel floor, and as Tomas found some tinder she went about combing what she could from her tresses. A quick search of their bags provided no food and little water.

“I fear,” Tomas said as he packed his jacket away, “that we are in need of food and without a quick means to acquire it. If we are to maintain our pace we will have to find some soon.”

Sil nodded and shouldered her own small pack. “Food we will have Kalborean. The Warrens will provide nothing of value but the edges of the Meshaal will give us what we need.”

Tomas was surprised at her change in plan. “I thought we were staying clear of the forest. Is our objective not to lay in wait for the warband in the north?”

The Faeyen shrugged her shoulders. “Unfortunately our need for food will force a small diversion. We are near enough to the northern

edge of the Meshaal to take the time to penetrate its border, but our objective should remain the same. It will take just a bit longer that's all."

Tomas was happy with that. Once again Sil led the way and in the bright light of the afternoon began the arduous process of negotiating the dangers of the Warrens. In the daylight the young Kalborean watched closely as the girl trod a careful path around the many delvings that lay scattered across the landscape. Quickly he realised that it was not the wide maws of the delvings that she was concerned for. A wide berth of their crumbling edges was easy to maintain, but it was the many cracks and depressions between them that kept her focus on the ground at their feet.

"What is it you are looking for?" he asked.

Sil pointed to a shallow depression in the ground ahead and began to skirt its boundary.

"The delvings are wide and unmistakable, but the ground between hides areas of subsidence and unstable earth. To walk too carelessly will leave an unwary traveller standing upon a sinkhole or a partially collapsed tunnel. To go safely we must avoid them all."

Tomas nodded and looked all the more carefully at the ground ahead. Between mounds and dark delvings the Faeyen led the Kalborean roughly to the north-east. It was a path strewn with hazards, the Warrens a maze of old workings that the weather had not made any easier to negotiate. The rain of the past days had left the ground a curious pattern of shallow pools and soft bogs, that fell away into deep pits at the slightest disturbance. Between huge dark holes and sinking meres Sil made her path, and found the safe passage that eventually brought them back to solid ground.

By the mid-afternoon they had passed beyond the Warrens and once again stood upon the open grasses of a wide plain. Tomas could now see the distant undulations of what Sil had called the Black Hills to the north, and the dark line of a forest extending to the west. He could not help but notice also the first tendrils of another stormfront advancing from the north. In need of a rest Tomas pulled Sil to a halt and looked to the billowing clouds.

"Another storm rises in the north, and by my reckoning it should hit us some time during the night. Can shelter be found within the forest from such a tempest?"

Sil considered the storm and pointed to a part of the forest just slightly north of west. "There we can find both shelter and food, but I

warn you we should not venture too far in. The warband will probably spend time within the sanctuary of the forest and there will be scouts everywhere. If we can we should get the food we need and then move immediately northwards. Shelter can be found within the forest if and when it is needed.”

The Faeyen did not wait for Tomas' agreement. Instead she began to run, making a straight line for the distant forest. Tomas took a deep breath and followed.

The remains of the afternoon became lost in the rigours of the run into the west. Ahead of them lay the thick line of the forest's edge and Sil did not stop, her determination a seemingly endless source of energy that kept her running. For Tomas it was almost too much to maintain. The ground had become easier, but the Faeyen's inexhaustible need to avenge her father left him straggling behind, trying to keep up a pace that seemed beyond the capacity of any man to endure. The long hours dragged on, and in that time the terrain changed. No longer did the long grasses of the Surgis'Ka lay beneath them; instead the ground had hardened, patches of bare ground spread within a sparse plain of coarse bushes and acacia trees. Within this bushland the girl weaved a path towards the forest, and it was only in the last light of day that they met the edge of the Meshaal. Only then did she stop.

Upon the hard edge of the forest Sil came to a standstill, glistening with sweat, her hands on her hips as she struggled for breath. Tomas came to her side a few minutes later and then collapsed onto the ground, exhausted. At the boundary of the Meshaal he had taken his last step, and for a short time could speak no word to his companion. Sil however, was not yet done. Carefully she surveyed the edges of the forest and then bent to her prostrate companion.

“Wait here Kalborean. I shall return in a few minutes.”

Tomas lifted one arm and waved weakly for her to go. In his own mind he could not care for what she might be doing, but watched anyway as she made for the undergrowth at the forest's edge, and then disappeared within its embrace. The young Kalborean lifted himself onto one elbow and shook his head. Never had he seen such endurance, and he was not sure that the run had been in either of their best interests. As he lay exhausted upon the hard ground he felt the need for at least a day to recover, and worse still, he could feel the wet irritation of blisters along his ankles and toes. For a while, he believed, he would be going nowhere.

Good to her word the Faeyen appeared out of the forest only a few minutes after fading into its gloom. In her hands she held a small pile of brightly coloured fruits and seemed very pleased with her find.

“What have you found Sil?” Tomas asked as he grabbed for one of the fruits.

The girl pulled away from the Kalborean and instead took one of her daggers to the soft pulp of the largest fruits. “This is a Nahla fruit Kalborean. If you were to eat it raw it would kill you as surely as taking poison. To take advantage of its special properties it needs to be prepared properly, and cooked into a form where it can be eaten without harm. We do not have the time to do so, so we must make the best of it as we can.”

As Tomas watched Sil took one of the red and yellow coloured fruits and sliced off a piece of its flesh. Between her fingers she squeezed out all the juice she could from the pulp, and then stuffed the flesh into the remaining water she had in a small waterbag at her waist. Quickly she shook the waterbag and sniffed at its contents before handing it to Tomas.

“Take but a small swallow Kalborean, any more and it will go badly for you.”

Tomas took the waterbag and sniffed for himself. It smelled not unlike cinnamon but had a sour edge. He was not convinced it was a good idea to swallow it. Sil smiled and took back the water.

“Come Kalborean, do you need convincing that this draught will do nothing but good? Take off your boot and I will show you something that will amaze you.”

Before Tomas could consider her strange request the Faeyen turned to his feet and quickly removed his left boot and sock. Exposed to the cool air his foot arched with the pain of his uncovered blisters. He knew he would not be walking anywhere for a while. Sil did not baulk at what she did next.

From her side she picked up the remains of the Nahla fruit and squeezed its juice over the blistered underside of his foot. For just a second a numbing ache spread across his lower limb, then before his eyes the blisters shrunk and then hardened into callused areas of thick skin. Sil appeared well pleased as Tomas grabbed at his foot and searched for some sign of trickery or illusion.

“How did you do that?” he exclaimed, unable to believe his eyes. Sil pulled at his other boot and administered the same rough care to his other foot.

“I swear Kalborean, that you think everything is my personal doing. I did nothing. The Nahla fruit is the most potent regenerative medicine to be found anywhere in the known world. It is so potent that it requires care in its consumption, but it has its uses and we will be well advised to keep the remaining fruit in case they are needed later. Now drink the damn water and let's have no more argument. I have Hresh to kill.”

Tomas felt well chastised and took one swallow of the liquid. It tasted much as he had expected, and as he gagged on the sour after-taste he felt a sudden rush of warmth through his body. Before he could react the potion took a hold upon his being, forcing out any fatigue in his limbs and clearing his mind like chilled mountain water. In a matter of moments he was able to stand, and within a minute he had pulled on his boots and was ready to continue.

“What is our path now?” he asked. Although he felt much better, there was a strange unsettling effect that the potion had upon him. He felt both enervated and edgy, as if he needed to work off the potion's effect before it began to harm him.

Sil turned her head to the forest. “Whilst I was searching for a Nahla tree I found a set of tracks heading into the north. They are two Hresh rearguards making for a rendezvous point with the main warband. I intend to find them.”

Tomas shook his head and took hold of her arm. “Find them? Wasn't the plan to avoid the forest altogether and lay in wait for the warband further north? Tell me Sil, what has changed your mind?”

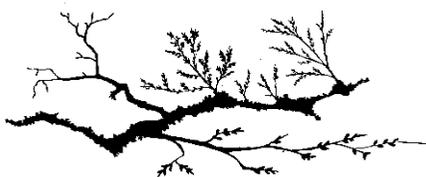
The Faeyen hardened her visage and advanced on her companion. Tomas realised then that he had no say in what Sil might be planning. “We will find them because it is the best way to kill them. In a large group they have the advantage. Two alone in the forest can be disposed of, and they are two we will not have to worry about later.”

The Kalborean shook his head and tried to calm her down. There was something in her demeanour that had changed, no longer did she seem to care for the plans they had made.

“Sil, I understand your pain but you are only one against many. Surely it would be better not to tempt Fate by trying to meter revenge just yet?”

Sil smirked and turned towards the forest. “Come if you wish, otherwise go home and leave me to my work.” With that she began to run again, diving into the undergrowth without regard for her own safety.

“Oh damn.” sighed Tomas. The girl was going to get herself killed and he could not in good conscience leave her to her fate. Before he lost sight of her completely he ran for the trees himself and was quickly swallowed up in their dark embrace.



Night fell quickly and in the blusters of the approaching storm Tomas ran after his troubled companion. In the darkness he negotiated the trees, keeping close to the trail left by the Faeyen as she ran for some as yet unknown point within the forest. In was a break-neck run, charging through the dense undergrowth, weaving a complex path between huge trunks of trees that seemed as old as the world itself. It was dark yet he could see clearly, all his senses heightened by the strange effects of Sil's potion. About him he could hear the scattering of creatures, and the rush of air around the wings of birds as they made flight before his headlong pursuit of the girl. Above him the canopy whipped and thrashed in a growing gale, and yet he could still hear the muffled footfalls of the Faeyen just ahead of him.

Without rest they ran until the storm loomed high overhead. Tomas could feel the air changing, a keener chill blowing with the gales from the north. He knew it would not be long before thunder would herald the arrival of the tempest, but he hoped there might still be time to catch up with Sil and talk some sense into her. In the closeness of the trees she remained elusive though, nothing more than a shadow that would not answer his whispered calls to stop.

Around midnight he found the tracks that had spurred the Faeyen to her deadly path. Along a narrow animal trail he discovered two distinct sets of prints, and they were definitely Hordim. But therein lay a mystery that he could not fathom. It had taken hours of hard running to find the trail, yet the girl had been in the forest no more than fifteen minutes before returning with the Nahla fruit. He could not see how she might have found the trail of the Hresh so quickly, and in the growing energy of the storm he realised that she could not have. There was something uncanny about his new-found friend, but

he could not say what it might be. It was beyond the understanding of a simple metal-smith.

Carefully he checked the bootprints in the soft earth and found that they were heading exactly north. Beside them he found also the smaller prints of Sil, and with this as his guide he turned along their path and began to run after them.

Overhead the storm grew, the first rumblings reverberating through the forest as he followed the trail. Within the energy of the coming storm he felt a growing disquiet building within him. He had travelled the roads of Kalborea for most of his youth and he had met many characters in that time. His brother Mallen had quickly developed a talent for avoiding those that might be dangerous, and taking the help of those who honestly wished to give it. It was a talent that had kept the brothers safe, but never had Tomas met anyone like Sil. He wondered what Mallen might have made of her, and it was the thought of his brother that brought him to a halt.

For a moment he stood quietly in the darkness and listened to the wind thrashing through the branches above. What must Mallen be thinking he pondered. Did he think his brother was dead, lost to the cruelty of the Horde? What was he doing now? In that moment he realised how isolated he was from all the familiar things of his life, and yearned to find his Shemwe quickly. It was a curious thing but he wondered if Mallen blamed him for the destruction of the workshop, and if he had started to rebuild it. Perhaps he would one day find out.

When he started to run again the storm quickened its pace. Lightning lashed out in the east, and dull rolls of thunder spread like waves through the forest. In the distance he could hear the approach of a wall of rain as it moved through the treetops, advancing from the north. It was only a matter of time before they would be caught within its power, and he ran all the faster to find the girl. When he located her she had already found her quarry.

The Faeyen lay hunched within a growth of thick bushes, looking out through the trees into a wide clearing. Within the open space stood two Hresh warriors, their arms extended in some kind of supplication to the roiling sky above. Sil took no notice of Tomas as he moved to her side, then pointed abruptly towards the Hordim.

"See," she whispered, "these two are rearguards for the main warband. They are two Hordim who will not see the sunrise."

Tomas grabbed the girl by the arm and forced her to look at him. "You do not need to kill these warriors. They will lead us directly to

the warband if we simply let them be.”

Sil snorted and pushed him back. “What do you know of such things. I fear Kalborean, that you have been a captive of the Hresh for too long. When they are dead I will worry about where the remainder of the warband might be.”

Tomas moved to speak again but a crash of thunder prevented him. He could only watch as the girl drew her daggers and then advanced out beyond the treeline and into the open. With no weapon of his own he did not know what to do, but he could not let Sil face the Hordim alone. Searching the ground he picked up a long piece of fallen branch and ran for the clearing. In all the days that would remain of his life he would not forget what happened next.

In the advance of the storm Tomas could not hear what Sil was shouting at the Hresh, but it made them turn to face her. Upon the open ground she was a diminutive figure, dwarfed by the huge, muscled creatures that quickly drew weapons and ran at her. Tomas struggled through the undergrowth and then realised he would not be in time. The first Hresh reached the girl and swung its scimitar in a wide arc, hoping to cut the Faeyen cleanly in two. Sil retreated and then slipped behind the curve of the blow, finding the Hresh's back exposed. In two quick movements she buried one of the daggers in the creature's back and then drew the second along the side of its neck, neatly cutting its throat. The warrior hit the ground, its life gone even as it fell.

The second warrior came to a halt, and then began to circle what it now recognised as a worthy opponent. Sil held back, her blades dripping with blood as she taunted the Hresh. Tomas could not make out what she was saying for it was in a language he had never heard uttered before. It had an immediate effect on the Hordim. Swinging its scimitar from side to side it responded in a similar tongue, and as the two combatants circled each other an argument erupted, a strange interrogation between the two where neither seemed to be finding satisfaction.

The Kalborean stopped at the edge of the clearing and watched as the dance continued, but then the Hresh saw Tomas and for a short moment its attention settled upon him. It was the opening Sil needed and she moved like a stroke of lightning to take advantage of it. Before the warrior could move to defend itself the girl slid in under its reach and kicked out with both legs, landing a booted heel against the kneecaps of the Hordim. With a crack that could be heard above the

growing storm the creature's legs buckled and the warrior fell backwards onto the wet earth. Sil was on top of her opponent before Tomas could take a step towards them, and in the gloom all he could see was the flash of her dagger as she neatly slit the Hresh's throat. When she stood she was covered in blood, her arms and face mottled with the dark liquid. Tomas ran towards her and then stopped as he looked into her eyes. In the darkness her eyes were as fathomless as midnight and for just a moment he thought he saw something else. But then she smiled and turned towards the north.

"The Hresh says that the warband is no more than a league ahead of us. We should move on quickly."

Tomas ran to her side and pulled at her arm. "How do you know this?" he said, trying to bring her to a halt.

"The Hresh told me." she replied simply.

"Why would he do that?" Tomas asked incredulously.

"Because he was an arrogant fool. I asked him and he responded. What harm is there in telling a small secret when you think you are going to kill the listener? He just wasn't that good a warrior."

Tomas let go of her arm and hesitated. Sil ran into the farthest borders of the clearing and once again disappeared into the gloom. In the face of the storm the young Kalborean was left alone, standing between the bodies of the Hordim. In death they were no less intimidating than in life, but for a moment he paused to consider the ease in which they had been killed by the Faeyen. Quietly he picked up one of the Hresh's scimitars and looked at it. It was a beautifully worked piece of shaped metal, and as a metal-smith he could appreciate the care and attention that had gone into its creation. He decided that the weapon would be his own and took its matching sword belt from the Hresh. Then he turned to the north.

It was then that Tomas heard the sounds of other creatures running through the forest from the south, making for the clearing. Thinking only that they must be Hordim, perhaps another rearguard, he began his pursuit of Sil. The girl had just killed two Hresh warriors and was on the hunt for more. He was not sure what he should do. He knew only that he had become afraid of her, and that for better or worse he needed her.

It took a good ten minutes before Tomas caught up with the Faeyen. She had found a wide animal track and was using its clear path to make for the position she had said they would find the Hordim warband. On both sides of the trail the forest crowded close, and as he

made her side the sky opened up with the full force of the storm. Caught in its power Sil slowed, a strong northerly wind carrying a driving rain that hit both of them like a physical blow. Above the crash of thunder and the pounding staccato of the rain Tomas yelled into Sil's ear.

"There are more behind us. It may be best that we lay low in the undergrowth and let these pass."

Sil seemed surprised and stopped in the centre of the path. With the rain splashing around her she peered back into the deluge, looking for some proof of Tomas' words. Then she dove into the undergrowth and found a position near the track's edge. Tomas followed, his hope that the girl would finally listen to him and remain hidden. It was a hope short lived.

Before he could utter a warning two figures appeared out of the darkness. One was about Tomas' size, the other huge against his companion. Both were running hard against the rain, and neither seemed prepared for the attack that erupted from the undergrowth at their side. The Kalborean yelled to his companion when he realised that one of them was Mallen, but it was too late. As a fleeting shadow she attacked. Two daggers flashed through the gloom and both struck their target.

## Chapter 13 - Reflections



In the turmoil of the storm Gremorgan ran behind Mallen, his eyes searching the edges of the trail. The tempest had hit at the moment they had left the clearing, and in a growing torrent of rain and wind the two had forced their way northwards through the trees, following the indistinct path left by Tomas and his unknown companion. As they ran the Dwarvendim could not quell the feeling that they should move with caution, but Mallen could feel his brother's presence ahead, and he was not going to slow his pace for anything.

Within the wild ferocity of the storm Gremorgan knew that a crossroads was approaching. For a reason that he had not yet fathomed completely the hand of Providence had put the young Kalborean into his care, but it was now only a matter of time before he would be reunited with his brother, and he wondered on what that would mean for his own future. He had followed the trail of the Warband, knowing that the Denmar Hresh were part of a greater plot to overthrow the Mutan of the Clavern'sigh; and somewhere in the secrets of that conspiracy he would find answers to his own quest. He had found an important part of that mission hidden within the song of the Hra'gora, but the remainder could only be found by taking advantage of the curious machinations of the Denmar, and of the Jotun of the West. In his heart he knew that only Providence would show him the way.

Out of the sky came a great arc of lightning, a booming clap of energy that left Gremorgan wincing in pain at its proximity. But it was not the storm that gave the LoreMaster cause to falter. The tempest was no Treachersa, and although he never liked being so exposed to the elements he could sense that there was something ahead he could not identify. Mallen's brother was going to be found, of that he had no doubt. He could feel the strong connection between the two, and Mallen's determination only made that connection stronger. But there was something else as well. For too long he had known the touch of EarthMagic, and there was an entity ahead that he could feel radiating strength, wrapping itself within the power of the storm. He did not know what it was, but he could feel its closeness in his bones.

"Mallen!" he shouted into the storm, his voice barely audible above

the thrash of the winds. The Kalborean turned and halted. Gremorgan had one hand firmly planted upon the ground and was concentrating hard on the space between his fingers.

“What is it Gremorgan?” Mallen yelled. Against the torrent of rain he could see little except the dark form of the LoreMaster.

“There is something ahead Master Cael, and it veils its presence from me. I cannot tell you what it is but it wishes to remain undiscovered. I believe we should move forward with caution.”

Mallen looked up the trail but could see nothing except the thrash and roil of the storm.

“What must we do?” he shouted, unsure as to what it might be.

Gremorgan stood and scratched at his ear. “We must find your brother, for that is our goal, but I fear that his new companion may hide secrets that will prove dangerous to us all. It is my counsel that we mention nothing of my nature or history to Tomas, or whoever travels with him. Make no mention of my vocation or abilities, or anything of our journey so far, except perhaps that it has been difficult. Trust me on this Master Cael. Let me answer any question regarding myself, and until we find Tomas let me take the lead.”

The Kalborean nodded and looked again to the path ahead. Gremorgan moved off quickly and Mallen followed. Against the driving rain they ran steadfastly forward, following the remains of the trail into the north. Quickly they met a narrow animal path and upon its sodden ground found a clear set of bootprints. One of the prints was clearly Tomas' and it could only have been a minute old. Spurred on the two men increased their speed, focused to the task of finding Mallen's brother. It was then that the attack came.

As a glimmer of movement in the darkness a form detached itself from the forest's edge. Before either Mallen or Gremorgan could react two daggers rose before the Dwarvendim and fell upon him. In that instant Mallen heard also the voice of his brother crying out for the attacker to stop, but his own eyes were focused on the imminent danger to his friend. The assault came without warning, and in the driving rain played out before the Kalborean could move to Gremorgan's aid.

The first blade arced towards the Dwarvendim's collar-bone, its razor sharp edge flashing in the dark as it drove down upon its hapless victim. Gremorgan could not react fast enough and felt metal cut across his shoulder but the blade did not go deep. Over the LoreMaster's thick travel coat lay the strapping of his shoulder bags,

and the steel blade turned against their dense weave, slicing instead down the length of his heavy coat.

The second blade came at the Dwarvendim from behind, a lethal blow aimed at driving its tip into his underarm. Without thinking Gremorgan spun on his heels, flinging his shoulder bags out in an attempt to knock the assailant off balance. One connected with the dark form's arm, deflecting the force of the blow further along his back, and driving the blade deep into his backpack. It was then that the tide of the assault turned.

With his arm straightened the LoreMaster swung out at his attacker, hitting the shadow across the chest and throat with his forearm. Stunned, the young girl, for that was what Gremorgan could now see his foe to be, fell back and then attacked again, leaping at him with an unnatural speed. Gremorgan had no time to unfasten his axe, and in desperation loosed one of his shoulder bags and swung out with all the force he could bring to it. With a sickening thud the bag, full of tools and devices, hit the girl squarely in the head, knocking her senseless to the ground. In the driving rain she lay still, a crumpled mound on the pathway.

"By the Gates of Hallen'draal what is this?" he shouted into the darkness. Anger grew like a stain across his visage and he answered its insistent call by advancing upon the hapless girl. At the very least he was going to beat some life into her and get some answers.

"Stop!" Came a cry through the driving rain. Out of the gloom Tomas ran to stand between the Dwarvendim and his attacker.

"She did not know who you were. I told her that Hresh were on the path behind us, and she took that as fact. It was not an assault intended to do harm to Men!"

Gremorgan looked at the Kalborean and then turned to Mallen, his anger dissipated. "I assume that this must be your brother then. Quite frankly I don't see what all the fuss is about."

Mallen laughed and ran to his brother's side. No matter what the circumstances of their meeting he had found his brother. Tomas did not move for a moment. The Dwarvendim was huge and he would not leave his position between the two protagonists until he was sure Sil was safe from harm.

"Do not worry about Gremorgan, Tomas. He is a man of honour, one I trust with my life."

Tomas looked hard at the huge Dwarvendim and then turned back to his brother, a wide grin across his face.

“Mallen, it is a wonder that you are here.”

With that the brothers embraced, the fatigue of long days of travel draining from them as they took account of their reunion. It was some moments before they parted and it was Mallen who spoke first.

“Before we give proper explanation of the paths that have lead us here I must introduce Gremorgan Hedj, a Dwarvendim of the Stone Kingdoms, and my companion through the hard days that have brought us to this reunion.”

The LoreMaster came to Mallen's side and bowed slightly. “I have heard much of you Tomas Cael. It is unfortunate that we should meet under such violent circumstances.”

Tomas nodded and looked to the still form of Sil. “I am sorry for the actions of my companion. She is a girl of stubborn mind and I have had no opportunity to try and change it. I fear that she has done you damage though, and I have no idea how to repay it.”

Gremorgan smiled and checked his coat. A long slit ran down its outer layer from shoulder to waist but it could have been worse. If the girl had cut flesh he would have been in serious trouble.

“It is not your damage to repay. I believe that we should find shelter and wait out the trailing edge of this downpour. It seems only fitting after the labours of this journey that we take the time to rest, and let you both tell the stories of how we have arrived here.”

Mallen agreed. The rains fell as thick veils, and within their embrace the trail had disappeared into mud and water. Until it ended there could now be little use in going on any further.

As the two Kalboreans watched Gremorgan took a short piece of rope from one of his packs and bound the prostrate form of the girl. It was Tomas who then lifted her from the mud. Even in her sodden clothing she weighed almost nothing, but there was little time to consider her apparent helplessness, or the truth of her lethal nature. It was a story that he would have to tell his brother, and it was one that would be hard to believe.

“Where should we go?” Tomas asked into the rain. Mallen looked to Gremorgan and the Dwarvendim pointed into the north along the remains of the path.

“We are at the northern edges of the Meshaal. If my memory serves me there should be the ruins of a small hunting cabin only a short distance out of the trees. If the Hordim have not taken it for themselves it should provide us with the warm enclave we seek.”

Against the wind and rain the three men moved northwards,

keeping to the path and discovering quickly the truth in Gremorgan's recollections. Only a few minutes upon the trail brought them to the northern borders of the forest, and a dark expanse of open ground beyond. Deliberately the Dwarvendim pulled his axe from its fastenings and extended its haft. In the darkness he whispered for Mallen to draw his sword and together they moved forward. Ahead there could lay either shelter or the Warband, and in the gloom they could see nothing.

With Tomas carrying Sil the two men made for a shallow depression in the ground ahead. As they got closer the plain rose into a deep saddle between two hills, and upon the western slope of the nearest they found the remains of a wooden hunter's cabin. Torn by wind and tempest the building was a collection of fallen walls and collapsed stonework, but there was shelter to be found within its crumbling ruin and the three men took it gladly. Carefully they pushed their way beneath a portion of broken roofing and found within its darkness a small sanctuary from the incessant rain.

"Nothing grand I'll warrant, but better than being out there eh?" Gremorgan opined as he pulled flint from one of his packs. "I think a small fire will do us a world of good right about now."

Mallen looked about their small cover and found a collection of sticks and other wind-blown tinder. As he passed it to Gremorgan the Dwarvendim whispered into his ear. "I'll put together a meal for all four of us. You should find out what you can about this girl before she returns to consciousness, and determine how they have come to be here. Remember Master Cael, say nothing of myself."

Mallen nodded and turned to his brother. Tomas sat hunched against a length of fallen timber, the head of the girl cradled in his lap. About them the wind buffeted their shelter, the rain a pounding beat against the thin wooden shingles that protected them from the full embrace of the storm. Carefully he edged towards his brother and placed a hand upon his shoulder.

"It is good to see you again Tomas. It was my only hope that we might find each other. It still amazes me that we did."

Tomas smiled and nodded his agreement. "I tell you Mallen, no one is more surprised at our reunion than me. How is it that you come to be here, in such lonely lands?"

Mallen made himself comfortable in their cramped enclave and answered. For the next hour the two brothers talked, Tomas describing the events of the attack on Callenfrey, and his promise to

Madame Sandofel; Mallen the circumstances of his return to the town, and the destruction that followed the retreat of the Hresh. Of the long journey to their reunion Mallen kept his comments brief, mostly talking on the hardships of the chase and the cunning nature of their quarry. It was Tomas however, who spoke most. With the winds howling about them he told of his capture and the circumstances of his escape. There was much said on the brutality of the betrayal upon the grasslands of the Surgis'Ka, and most of what he could remember of his finding by Sil.

On the cunning nature of the Hordim Tomas could not help but agree. He had been a witness to their endurance, and a helpless victim of their malice, but there was much that he did not understand, especially on the need for the captives they took from Callenfrey. It was a question that would remain unanswered as Gremorgan handed out three wooden bowls of steaming stew.

“There you go Gentlemen.” Gremorgan said as he gave out the bowls, “On a night such as this a hot meal will do much to ward the cold.”

Tomas accepted his eagerly, and savoured the strange spicy smell of the food. There was something familiar wafting upon its vapours and he smiled slightly as he recognised it.

“Is there Nahla fruit in this stew?” he asked, looking to the Dwarvendim.

Gremorgan nodded. “It is not the fruit itself, but a small amount of Nahla bread that I have stirred into the broth. It is something not normally recognised by Kalboreans. How is it that you are familiar?”

Tomas pointed to Sil. “My angry companion introduced its wonders to me earlier on the journey. I had no idea such things existed in the world, but I can say that it does amazing things for blistered feet.”

Mallen looked to the girl, and then put down his bowl. “Tomas, what do you know of this girl?”

His younger brother replied without hesitation. “I tell you Mallen that I would have died on the plains of the Surgis'Ka but for her intervention. Even though she will not admit it I was badly wounded and would not have survived for long. I do not know what she did, I only know that I have her to thank for it. On her unreasoning temper and uncanny skill with a blade I cannot give any comment. She confounds me with her apparent fragility, and then chills the blood in my veins with her need to kill those that have taken so much from her. She is an unnerving creature to say the least.”

Mallen nodded and leant close to his brother. "Do you trust her?"

Tomas shook his head in answer but said nothing. He did not wish to condemn her with words but he could not lie to his brother either.

"And what of you Gremorgan." Tomas said louder. "How is it that you should arrive in this place with my brother?"

Gremorgan placed down his own bowl and considered his answer. "My journey starts long before yours, and most of it I fear would provide little entertainment. I can say though that my own travels have become much the lighter for meeting your brother. He has proven a amiable companion and an excellent tracker."

Tomas smiled at that, however the huge man was obviously not a simple hunter. "And what is your purpose here? It is a lonely wilderness that you travel."

The LoreMaster nodded. "It is true that I have a purpose. The truth is that I seek something, and it is my belief that the Hresh you now follow will show me where it is. Just as you now pursue the Warband for reasons of your own, I also have a need to find them. Is it not strange how Providence has brought us together?"

The younger Kalborean smiled again and agreed. "I have no doubt that there are forces at work here Gremorgan. I just don't understand why the Hordim have taken my Shemwe and the other villagers. It is a mystery to me..."

Just as he was about to continue the first stirrings came from Sil. As they ate she had been laid carefully to one side and now began to rouse. With a wince she opened her eyes, then waited as her sight returned to her. When she was sufficiently awake to realise that she had been bound she struggled briefly against the ropes, testing their strength and her own determination to free herself. Above all she was not happy.

"What is this Tomas? Have you turned against me now, leaving me to the whims of these strangers?"

Tomas moved to her side and took one of her daggers, his intention to cut her bonds, but Gremorgan gave him reason to pause.

"Just one moment Master Tomas. This creature has attempted harm upon me, and I do not feel obliged to give her freedom until there is some assurance that she will not try to finish the job. It is better that she remains this way until those assurances have been made."

Tomas stopped and instead sat at her side. "Sil, these men are known to me. Here is my own brother Mallen, and his companion on

the trail Gremorgan. These are no strangers worthy of violence. These are friends. They do not wish you harm, only a promise that you shall not harm them.”

Sil pulled herself up from the ground and found a position with her back against an old piece of roofing. “What assurance do I have that these *vehmin* can be trusted?”

Gremorgan's eyebrow flickered slightly but he remained silent. Tomas pressed on.

“Remember Sil it was you who attacked them. If there is any need for trust it must prove itself first through you.”

The Faeyen fell silent for a moment, and then shrugged her shoulders and relented. “Indeed it must. I am sorry Dwarvendim for any harm that has befallen you. Accept my apology and you have my word that I will cause no further harm.”

Tomas looked to the Dwarvendim and Gremorgan nodded. Both Gremorgan and Mallen sat back and watched as the younger brother carefully cut the girl's bonds. Mallen could not help but wonder at the curious paradox that could be seen in the Faeyen. For a moment she readjusted her clothing and ran her hand over the side of her face. She had taken a heavy blow and there was considerable swelling along her jaw-line. Even so he could see that she was a mesmerisingly beautiful girl, as fragile and petite as any young Faeyen. But he had also been witness to the speed of her attack on Gremorgan, and in the feeble light of the Dwarvendim's fire he could not reconcile the two.

His brother's new companion was not the only mystery to be uncovered with their meeting. In talking with Tomas he had discovered that his brother had left the Surgis'Ka and travelled into the north-west, making for the northern edge of the Meshaal Forests. Gremorgan and himself had followed the Warband directly into the west, making straight for the nearest edge of the ancient woodland. They had found Tomas' footprint in their pursuit, but that could not have been possible. At the time they had discovered evidence of his brother stamped into the wet earth of the plains, Tomas had been far to the north, by his own words sheltering within the gloom of the Warrens. He had never gone into the west, and yet a trail had led them to the Taal, and then northwards to their reunion. It did not make sense.

Gremorgan had also picked up on the inconsistency in Tomas' account. The Dwarvendim had said nothing, but Mallen had noticed

his silence as Tomas had given a truthful rendering of his travels with the Faeyen girl. There was no doubt in Mallen's mind that Tomas had told the truth, yet both men knew they had found his trail upon the western edges of the Meshaal Forest, at the same time as Tomas and Sil had taken refuge in the gloom of the Warrens far to the north. There was no way that Tomas had left the tracks they had followed into the forest. It seemed that they had been on the trail of something other than Tomas, being led by a hand other than that of Providence to their meeting with his brother.

As Mallen watched, the girl adjusted her clothing and tried to straighten out her long black hair. Although he wished to give her the benefit of the doubt, he could not help the suspicion that was forming in his thoughts that the Faeyen had something to do with their fortunate meeting. He could not however, be sure that it was for good or ill that she had now joined their number and chose to remain undecided as to her intentions. Mallen was sure though, that Gremorgan would not take his eyes off her.

Rubbing her wrists Sil sat upon the ground and motioned towards the small pot of stew that steamed upon the fire.

"Any chance of a bowl? I could eat a horse right now."

Gremorgan pulled a bowl from his pack and poured a small portion of the stew into it. In the cold of the coming dawn the hot meal was accepted eagerly by the girl and all three men watched as she ate.

"So what's the plan then?" she said between mouthfuls, "Are we to make after the Hordim, or will we spend our time sitting around this fire wondering if it is a good idea to trust the bad girl?"

Tomas shook his head in disbelief. "Sil, why must you make so light of our..."

Mallen stopped his brother with a touch to his arm. "It is of no matter Tomas. Sil is merely testing our intentions, but she does put forward a good point. Whilst we wait for the storm to abate we should consider what it is we are to do now. For my part I left Callenfrey with only one goal, the return of my brother, and I have now found him. I could return home in good conscience that I have fulfilled that objective. I believe however, that Tomas has another view."

For the younger Cael there was no question as to what he would be doing. "I will not return home until I have Shemwe. I cannot leave her in the hands of the Hordim and I will not. It is as simple as that."

Sil looked to Gremorgan and challenged him for his opinion. “And what say you? Is your mission here complete?”

The LoreMaster did not reply to the girl's question immediately. Instead he poured the last dregs of the stew into a corner of their makeshift shelter and then gave his answer.

“It is my view that I will follow whatever Mallen and Tomas Cael decide. It is a fact that I follow the Warband for reasons of my own, but it was an act of Providence that brought us all together, and I will take whatever path that may lead us upon.”

The Faeyen looked at the Dwarvendim and snorted. “That is no answer. What reasons do you have for being here anyway? We three are here because the Hordim took something of great value from us. What harm have the Hresh done to you?”

Gremorgan smiled and turned to look the young girl directly in the eyes. His voice carried all the menace of a predator.

“I have been told that you are an experienced traveller of the wilds Sil. Yet you do not seem to have learned that anyone to be found in such lonely lands as these always has a reason for being so. The Hresh have taken nothing from me, but they have something of great value that I want. What that might be is for me to know, and for others to be told of only when I wish it.”

For just a moment Sil bristled with anger, her body becoming taut as she prepared to rage at the Dwarvendim, but Gremorgan was not about to let the situation degenerate into an argument.

“Come Sil. It would seem that we are resolved to our course without a need to argue on it. Master Tomas must recover his fiancée, and I know that his brother will follow with him in that endeavour no matter what the dangers. You have the need to recover your family's good name, and if for no other reason I will stand with my friends in pursuit of Shemwe Sandofel, and follow where they may lead. As far as I can see we are all going the same way, but we will not be able to delay much longer.”

“At the most the Warband can be no further than a half-day's march ahead of us. There is little merit in continuing until the rain has moved into the south, but when it passes over we will need to move quickly. I say that we should rest as we can until the rain has gone and then take up the chase again.”

Both Mallen and Tomas agreed, but Sil looked curiously at the Dwarvendim. Mallen noted that it was as if she was trying to look inside him, attempting to divine what his motivations really were. In the end

it was Sil who laid her head down first and slept, then Mallen and Tomas. Gremorgan did not sleep, instead he lost himself in thought, thinking on the young girl and of an old legend he had heard uttered many years before.

The rain persisted as a constant steady downpour that remained through the dawn and into the early morning. It was a delay that could not be helped, but the LoreMaster knew that rest was needed. Nahla bread could only take a man so far, and after the rigours of their pursuit an opportunity to recover had to be taken. In the solitude of his thoughts the LoreMaster watched his companions sleep and considered what he should now do. In his own mind Gremorgan had become firmed to his course. He had told only a partial truth to the Faeyen girl, his reasons for going on much more definite than a need to see what Providence might put before them. It was true that the Hresh held something of value he wanted, but it was information he needed, and the leader of the Warband would be the creature to provide it.

For a short time he stretched his legs and tried to relax. He could not think on how many years he had been in pursuit of his King's commission, and in that span of years there had been few times that he had allowed himself the pleasure of simple relaxation. For decades he had searched the lands of Arborell, looking for the few pieces of evidence he needed to uncover a great mystery, one that had evaded the Grand Circle of LoreMasters since their inception upon the summits of Araheal.

Upon that sacred peak a bargain had been reached between the Dwarvendim and the Shan'duil. To return balance to the world the River of Life had granted eleven of his people the right to harness EarthMagic, and in doing so provide a check to the unrestrained power of the Clavern'sigh. In Gremorgan's mind it had been a clever bargain. Any new power exercised by the Mutan had to be measured by the fact that it would automatically be given to their enemies, the LoreMasters of the Grand Circle. The Dwarvendim had accepted the Doctrine of Araheal gladly, but it had only been over time that they had realised the true cost of their agreement. No side could ever get the better of the other. The Shan'duil above all things required balance and that had been achieved, in a confrontation based on EarthMagic no side could ever win, no side harm the other. It was a stalemate.

For the Grand Circle it was a frustrating realisation. They had

bargained for the right to EarthMagic on the basis that it could help them in their fight against the Hordim, who at that time greatly outnumbered the Men of the Four Nations. Immediately they began to search for an answer, a loop-hole in the Doctrine that might give them the edge over their Nemesis. Eventually they found it.

Upon a temple wall in the far south of Kalborea a small piece of text was unearthed, outlining the Word of Creation, the Oera, that had been used by the Trell'sara to create the first Hordim. The Word of Creation had long been known to the LoreMasters, but the text also made mention of a further spell, a Word of Dissolution. Although most of the text had been lost it had been possible to discern that the Trell'sara did not trust their new creations, and had given themselves the power to unmake their slaves if the need should arise. The ancient writings gave no clue as to the Word itself, but did mention that to be effective it must be intoned at the source of all EarthMagic. Such an utterance would remove all the Hordim from the world in one unalterable dissolution.

To solve the mystery would give the Dwarvendim, and Men in general, an advantage over the Hordim that the Mutan of the Clavern'sigh could not defend against. It was a great prize, and the song of the Hra'gora had given him the first part of its unravelling, but it was only the first step. To find the remainder would require a journey deep into the cold lands of the Horde. It was something that required time and courage to obtain, and he needed the Hresh to achieve it.

As he rested Gremorgan surveyed the sleeping forms of his companions and wondered at the strange vagaries of Providence that had brought them all together. The two brothers were good men, noble of heart, committed to each other, and restless for the return of everything they had lost. He knew that he would protect them to the end of that quest, and then he would find his way into the west and the lands of the Jotun.

For a moment he studied the sleeping form of Sil. The Faeyen girl was another matter altogether. Within her diminutive body he could sense there resided a danger far greater than the Warband that they pursued. He had not yet determined what the real nature of the girl might be, but he had his suspicions, and he knew that it would make itself known in the fullness of time. When it did he would have his hands full.

Against the old shingles the rain patted loudly, the world outside

their small haven a mire of mist and swirling rain. Under the ruin that had become their shelter Gremorgan watched his companions sleep, and as they rested he quietly pulled the small Dirge-compass from its wrappings and chanted softly across its metal face. Slowly the device came to life, its disc flickering with tiny pinpoints of light. Carefully he moved it from the north into the east, and watched as the glimmering speckles moved across its surface; but he was not looking for anything beyond the confines of their shelter. Sure enough the young girl arose as a bright blue point of light at the centre of the compass, one that did not move as he turned it from north to east, and then back again. Whoever this girl might once have been she had become something else, and now the LoreMaster knew what she was. In the gloom beneath the old roofing he put the device away and considered what should be done.

By mid-morning the last of the rains had passed into the south. To the sounds of Gremorgan preparing a small breakfast the remainder of the party awoke, the cold of the day felt keenly in stiff limbs as they made ready.

“The weather has fined,” observed Tomas as he put on a long coat offered by Mallen.

“Aye,” answered Gremorgan. “but there is a chill in the air that will not pass quickly. I fear that we have reached the change of season, and from now on it is only going to get colder.”

Mallen made himself busy, helping Gremorgan with the breakfast, and then searching through a large bag of clothes that the LoreMaster had found stuffed into a jagged hole in the old cabin's brickwork. Most of the cloth was unusable, but some could be used as padding to insulate them from the growing chill. A few pieces of this clothing he offered to Sil.

“It would be best if we take measures to remain warm,” he said as he gave over the rags. Sil smiled and declined the offer. “If I need anything I'll ask for it. Look to your own comfort if you must, I prefer to remain unhindered by any extra weight.”

Mallen shrugged and gave over the rags to Tomas, who packed them around his waist. By the time they had prepared for the day Gremorgan had finished cooking the breakfast. What he had left of the stew he doled out carefully.

“I am afraid that this is the last of our food. From now on we will need to rely on what we can find on the march, and what I was able to take from the Jotun.”

Mallen remembered the large parcels that the Dwarvendim had retrieved from the giant creatures. "What is it that you have Gremorgan?"

The Dwarvendim reached into his pack and pulled out one of the parcels. It was a package wrapped in thick yellowed paper that smelled heavily of spices.

"In a way it was fortunate that we stumbled upon the Jotun. Our food could only last a short time and the finding of these was a boon I was not prepared to ignore."

Tomas took the parcel and steadied himself under its weight. Whatever it was it was heavy.

"What is it?" he asked.

"It is Nahla cake. Just as Men use the Nahla fruit as an additive in bread, so do the Hordim use it to make these large, and I have to say heavy, cakes. They are not as refined as the breads but they will do the job just as well. I believe we have enough cake to sustain us for around a month, providing we use it sparingly."

Both Tomas and Mallen were unsure as to the safety of eating something Hordim-made, but watched as Gremorgan unwrapped a corner of the package and pulled a small piece of the cake away. Immediately their shelter was filled with the pungent smell of Nahla fruit. The Dwarvendim broke the piece into four equal parts and put one in his mouth, then offered the remainder to each of the party.

"You will find," he said as he chewed, "that the Hordims' Nahla cake has one interesting property not found in our usual breads."

Mallen took his piece and Tomas followed. Together they ate their offering and quickly discovered what Gremorgan meant. From the first swallow they felt the enervating effect of the Nahla and then something more. Across their shoulders there came a warmth, permeating their bodies, spreading like warm flowing water across their skin. Within a few breaths their entire bodies were wrapped in a vibrant energy that kept the chill of the air at bay. It was as if they were standing in sunshine on a windless day.

"This is a wonder," whispered Tomas as he found any fatigue that remained to him falling away.

Both men could not move for a moment, but as the effects of the cake drew deeper into their bodies they found themselves restless and in need of movement.

Sil laughed and picked up a makeshift slingbag she had tied together from some of the old rags.

“We better get moving. These two will be eager to burn off some of that energy, and I fear the Hresh are already on the move.”

All agreed, and with packs prepared they carefully made their way out into the open.

To the south the plain spread a patchwork of wet ground and shallow pools. At either side the hills lay sodden, their thin cover of grasses flattened by the persistence of the drenching rain.

“What is to be our course?” Mallen asked as he straightened the tension from his back muscles and shouldered his backpack.

“For now we must travel north.” answered Gremorgan. “The rains will have smothered any trail left by the Hordim, but the Warband will be on the move, and we should be able to intersect their path if we are quick enough.”

Sil nodded and pointed to the rear of the ruin, and the rising ground that lay beyond.

“Beyond these small hills lies more open ground, but a half-day's travel further north will take us into the Black Hills. There can be found huge sand hills, devoid of water or vegetation, that leave an easy trail underfoot for any creature traversing them. We will find their tracks upon those shifting dunes.”

There was no need for further discussion and as one the party moved off into the north, leaving their shelter behind as they made for a series of rises in the ground ahead. Mallen and Tomas took the lead, Sil ran a few paces behind, but Gremorgan held back, taking up a station a short distance to the rear. In the fullness of time he knew he would have to confront the creature that had become Sil, but for the moment he would be content to keep a close eye upon her. He had no doubt that all their lives depended on it.



The day wore on as the four companions ran into the north. Overhead the sky had cleared, the cloud and mist of the past days replaced with the deep blue of fine weather. Under an azure sky the fleeting figures crossed over the hills that had given them a haven from the storm, and then moved onto the wide expanse of a further

grassland. This open ground proved hard underfoot, bordered in the south by the green hills they had passed through, and the dark shadow of the Black Hills to the north. Mallen looked to these strange hills and felt the same trepidation as when he had been running towards the Meshaal forests. He could see little of them, only the sharp line of a series of undulations ahead, unreal and depthless against the horizon.

As they ran, each of the four became quiet, concentrating on the effort of the chase, and pondering the hardships that were to come. Mallen knew little of the terrain ahead, and what he understood of it gave him little cause for hope. He knew that the Great Rift lay far to the north, and as a mountain range it was practically impassable. He had heard also stories of the Shan Valleys that nestled in the shadows of those great mountains, and of the dreaded Keln'Kraag, a smaller mountain range that extended from south to north, reaching towards the larger Rift beyond.

For Mallen the chase had been long and arduous. Since leaving Callenfrey, and the familiar countryside that had been his home for so long, he had found himself in lands unknown and dangerous. As he considered what might lay ahead he realised that all their chances of success lay with the knowledge of Gremorgan and the yet to be proven trustworthiness of Sil. It was hard to acknowledge that himself, and his brother, were novices in such an endeavour, but he had faith in the LoreMaster, and to a lesser extent the guiding hand of Providence that had brought them together.

On they ran, keeping a northward track as the strangely dark hills rose up before them. It was in the hour after midday that Gremorgan called them all to stop.

“How long before we reach the hills?” Mallen asked when they came to a halt.

Gremorgan made a gesture for silence and dropped to one knee. By instinct so did everyone else, the party crouching quietly in the cool afternoon sunlight.

“To answer your question Master Cael, we should be there by dusk, but we have other concerns for the moment.”

Carefully he rose and looked hard into the north-west. Mallen could see that there was something out there, lying within the grasses ahead.

“What is it?” asked Sil, her natural impatience growing as she reached for her daggers.

Gremorgan shook his head and adjusted his bags on his shoulders. "I don't know, but we had better take a look."

Quickly they moved off towards what appeared to be a bundle of old rags some two hundred metres north-west of their position. It was only as they got much closer that they realised it was a body.

Tomas immediately broke into a run. He had not unsheathed his weapon, and Mallen shouted to him to be careful as he drew his sword and made after him. By the time Gremorgan and Sil arrived the two brothers were standing solemnly over the ragged remains of a man.

"Who is it?" asked Gremorgan.

Mallen knelt beside the body and tentatively rolled the man onto his back. The striking braided red hair was familiar, even if the emaciated and bruised face was not.

"This is Calmus Truvo, a man of good heart who lived not two streets from our metal shop. I believe his family had only just begun a journey to establish a farm in the far west of Kalborea near the Faeron flats. I remember him saying that it was his intention to remain behind and finish off the last of their business dealings before leaving himself. It would seem that he tarried too long in town."

Quietly they all considered the body before Gremorgan inspected it more closely.

"There are no mortal injuries on this man. Judging by his condition it is most likely that he died of exhaustion, run to death by the Hordim. Tell me Mallen, did this man's family have any beliefs that might hinder a quick burial?"

Both of the Cael brothers knew the Truvo family, and they looked to each other before answering.

"The Truvo's did not talk on such things." said Tomas. "It is my belief that they considered themselves men and women of reason. It would be best if we buried Calmus here, and marked his grave with a cairn of stones. There is a chance that they might wish to retrieve the body later."

Gremorgan nodded and pulled a small hand shovel from his equipment. "It is best we start then. Because you knew him it will be left to the Caels to prepare the body for burial. Sil, you can keep a lookout as we work."

The Faeyen had remained quiet during the discussion but found the attention they were about to give to the dead more than she could bear.

'You're not going to waste time on this are you? The man is dead, and burying him is not going to put us any closer to the Warband. Surely we should be moving on. I say leave him to the elements and let us get on our way!'

Mallen stood, but it was Tomas who gave answer.

"Sil, we cannot leave the body to the whims of weather or scavenger. It is a delay, but one that any one of us would expect for a member of our own families. We must do this because we cannot one day stand before his family and say that we did not. Surely you would wish such consideration for yourself?"

Sil shook her head and pointed into the north. "And what of your Shemwe? Will she appreciate such a diversion whilst she remains in mortal danger? What if we never find the Hordim because of this?"

Tomas took Sil by the shoulder and turned her from the body. "I know my Shemwe, Sil. Well enough in fact to know that she would not begrudge this man his last shred of dignity. If Shemwe has indeed survived for this long, she will find a way to survive a few hours more."

The Faeyen shrugged her shoulders. "If it is what you wish." she said dourly. Quickly she walked to a position a short distance to the north, and took watch from a rise in the ground that gave a better view of their surroundings. Tomas stood for a moment and watched as the girl made for the knoll. He had a feeling that it was not the last that he would hear from her on this matter.

The process of burying the remains of Calmus Truvo took most of the daylight left to the three men. Gremorgan started digging the grave and soon discovered that beneath a thin layer of topsoil lay a heavy clay substratum that proved as hard as any ground he had previously encountered. The rains of the past days had done nothing to loosen the earth beneath them, and the day wore on as he laboured to dig the barest of shallow graves for the man's interment.

For Mallen and Tomas the preparation of the body for burial required both strength and ingenuity. Calmus had died within the day before having been found, and the rigour of death had left him rigid upon the cold ground of the plain. For the two brothers it proved a struggle to remove his shirt and the remains of a long coat that they would use as a shroud. The customs of Kalborea demanded he be buried appropriately and with the clothing removed from the body began the task of making the man's last covering.

Although neither of the men knew the origin of the custom, it was

accepted that no body could go into the ground without first being encased in a sailcloth shroud, weighted at one end with a heavy stone. They had no sailcloth, so began instead the task of cutting and sowing the remains of his outer garments into a serviceable shroud. Gremorgan held within his bags both needle and thread, and with these items Calmus Truvo was both fitted, and then sown into the cloth.

By the time Gremorgan had finished the grave, the brothers had the body tightly bound into its covering. Without any further ritual Calmus Truvo was lowered into the hole and covered with earth. A layer of stones, and a small cairn as a grave marker finished his burial. It was a simple interment, but one the three men knew would be appreciated by Calmus' family if ever they came to retrieve his remains. For a moment they gave their respects at the graveside and then moved to organise their equipment. All that could be done had been, and now they needed to make up the time they had lost.

Quickly each of the men packed their equipment and shouldered their bags. Upon the open plain they considered for a moment the uncompromising finality of death and then turned to the north. It was Tomas who noticed that Sil had disappeared. Loudly he called name but his hail went unanswered. At all four directions she was nowhere to be seen.

“Where has that girl gone now?” asked Gremorgan.

Tomas pointed to the rise in the ground. “She was on the crest of the rise ahead only a few moments ago. She must have seen something and moved on to have a closer look.”

“Shouldn't she have let us know what she was doing first?” questioned Mallen angrily.

Tomas smiled and shrugged his shoulders. “I think that Sil has a mind of her own, and currently no motivation to talk or listen to anyone. I fear that even in less turbulent times her household must have been a nightmare.”

Mallen laughed at his brother's humour and then turned northwards towards the Black Hills. Although the plain before them spread as a wide expanse of open ground, they were now close enough to the edges of the hills to find a series of low undulations rolling towards the north. Upon a rise almost a kilometre ahead Mallen could see the diminutive form of Sil waving her arms towards them.

“Well I was right about one thing.” said Tomas. “She has found

something.”

Gremorgan squinted into the gathering gloom of the dusk and shook his head “Aye, it would seem so, but we had better get moving. The light will only last a few hours more, and it will take some time to reach her position.”

As one they started down the slope. Although the distance proved to be less than a kilometre, it took some time to make the rise upon which she waited. The ground proved deceptive in the late afternoon light, its apparent smooth undulations a series of shallow depressions filled with tangled briars and hardy clumps of waist-high razor grass. Their quick run soon slowed to a careful negotiation of the vegetation, finding a path through the thickets as they were forced to descend into, and then climb out of the clinging brush. By the time they found a place at the Faeyen's side the twin suns of Arborell were hanging low against the horizon. Sil stood in the face of the setting suns and watched as the three men ran up the hill.

“Well you took your time.” she observed as all of the men stooped to recover their breath.

Tomas was the first to answer her.

“You know you could have waited for us. Saved us the need to hurry to catch up.”

Sil shrugged her shoulders and turned her back on them. There was something upon the far side of the hill that demanded her attention.

“Perhaps, but you asked me to keep watch and I saw something glinting upon this rise. You can imagine my surprise when I found this...”

She pointed down over the crest of the hill and Tomas followed the line of her outstretched arm into the shadows. Even in the dimming light he could see clearly what she had discovered. Upon the slope, and down into a shallow gully had been discarded a huge amount of equipment; clothing, armour, tents, weapons and food supplies lay in piles, scattered randomly over a wide area. The young Kalborean recognised it immediately as belonging to the Hresh.

“Well this is unexpected.” murmured Gremorgan as he stood beside Tomas and looked down into the gully.

“Has there been a battle here?” asked Mallen. It was a question he immediately discounted. There were no bodies and no blood.

“I think,” Gremorgan opined. “that we should have a closer look before we rush to any judgement here.”

Together they all moved into the shadows of the decline and picked through the discarded belongings. It was apparent to all that no violence had been committed, only a deliberate move to throw down anything not of use to the Hresh. The essential equipment of an entire Warband lay scattered in disarray, and there seemed little reason for it.

“I for one have no idea what this is all about,” ventured Mallen. “How can the Hordim maintain their escape if they do not have their gear? It doesn't make sense.”

Sil picked up a discarded greave and threw it further down the hill. “I don't know about you, but it seems obvious to me. They now realise that they are being pursued and wish to travel faster. It's as simple as that. I can see no breast-plates or primary weapons here, just what a warrior would not need if it was their intention to make a run for safety. Somewhere ahead they will be moving all the quicker, probably with no more than the food they need for the remainder of their retreat, and the weapons they need to defend themselves. It is going to be very hard to catch them now.”

Gremorgan sat on the ground and looked northwards towards the barely visible peaks of the Rift Mountains. “That may well be Sil. It does not explain why they should do it here though. The Hresh aren't stupid, they would have known that something was up when their rearguard did not meet with them at their rendezvous points.”

The Dwarvendim pointed to the far mountains. “They are at least seven days from the foothills of the Rift, and it would take at least a further fortnight to traverse the mountains themselves before they are safe. It seems too soon to make a sprint for their own lands. It would have been more effective to wait in ambush and kill whoever might be following. But then the commander of this Crue has shown he has a plan for everything...”

Sil snorted and grabbed up one of the Hordims' discarded packs. Carefully she placed her own few belongings into it and adjusted it to her shoulders.

“Ansolon'Denmar is nothing more than a murderer, one who will still feel the sharp edge of my blades. We can consider this all we want, but as we idle our time here the Warband moves further from our reach. I am not going to wait any longer.”

With that the Faeyen turned to the north and began to run. Gremorgan called to her, but she gave no hint of hearing, instead her dark form merged quickly into the gathering darkness and then she

was gone.

Tomas shook his head. "That girl is too reckless. It is a wonder that she has survived this long."

Gremorgan nodded and rose from his resting place. "She may well be, but she is also right. If we thought we had seen hard days before, we will look upon what is to come and consider those that have passed as blessings. There is nothing for it now. We must run down the Hresh and do it before they reach the mountains. If we do not their captives will be lost to us."

In the last long shadows of the day the three men made their way down the slope, and then crested another rise. There they found before them the first vestiges of the Black Hills, and the faintest trail of a girl's footprints heading into the darkness. As one they followed.

Three days passed quickly. Under a clear blue sky the three men ran into the north, following the trail left by Sil as she pursued the Hresh. Within a few hours of burying Calmus Truvo they hit the edges of the Black Hills, and then ran the remainder of the night, navigating by the stars and the silver illumination of the twin moons. In those dark hours there was little to be seen of any sign of the Hordim, but in the chill cold of the night they wound their way through a landscape of huge sand-hills and salt-pan flats, hoping that with the rising of the suns the trail of the Warband might be found.

Morning brought with it the realisation that the Black Hills were unlike anything that could be found anywhere else in Kalborea. As Sil had described, the hills were indeed a series of huge sand dunes, marching into the north, devoid of vegetation or water. Against an azure sky the dunes sat dark as tar, comprised of a curious black sand that glistened in the sunlight. It was easy Mallen surmised, to forget that the world had any colour in it when one was deep within the Black Hills. The clear line of the sky found its match against the smooth curves of the dunes, and as the men struggled upon the sands of its marching undulations there was only the diminutive footsteps of the Faeyen before them as a sign of any other life in the world.

It was in the early hours after sunrise that the men met the trail of the Hordim. The Warband had entered the Black Hills at the same point as themselves, but had veered to the west to take advantage of less arduous ground. In the darkness the men kept to the tracks left by Sil and it was her bootprints that in the light of day turned them to the path of the Hresh.

Between two high dunes the disturbed ground left by many running warriors proved an easy mark of their passing. For only a moment they stopped, searching for any clue that captives still ran with the Warband. They found no sign and continued on, running in the wake of the Hresh, following the churned sands as the Hordim made their way northwards.

In this fashion the men pursued the Hordim over the following days. It became clear as they pursued their quarry that the Hresh knew the terrain well. Keeping to the gullies between the high dunes the Warband maintained a path that ran to the north-west, only ascending the dunes themselves when they found a dip or saddle that did not require great effort to overcome. In this manner they were able to keep a rough track into the north, and find a path that led them ultimately to the northern edges of the Black Hills.

Beyond the dunes the ground hardened, turning quickly to a woodland of thick acacia stands scattered within wide fields of hard wiry grasses. For a time they followed the trail of the Hordim before it disappeared completely upon the unforgiving ground. Three days of running had brought them beyond the sand-hills, but with the prospect of travel across open ground before them Gremorgan brought the two brothers to a halt.

"I fear that the trail has dissipated, and that the Hordim have broken up, making their way northwards in smaller groups. It can be the only reason why their sign has been lost to us."

Mallen kneeled upon the hard ground and looked carefully for any evidence of the Warband's passing.

"I can see nothing. Once again it is as if they have simply disappeared." He stood and kicked at the dirt with the heel of his boot.

"It is not surprising though. The ground here is like iron, and there is little plant-life to give witness to the movement of the creatures. Until we can pick up their trail again we will have to guess at their progress."

"What can we do then?" asked Tomas anxiously. "We dare not guess incorrectly or the chase will be lost."

Gremorgan looked at the younger Kalborean and shook his head. "Do not be overly concerned. Do you see the peaks of the mountains ahead?"

He pointed directly into the north and both Tomas and Mallen followed the line of his finger.

“Although the peaks of the Great Rift reside at a greater distance to the north, the summits you see before you are actually those of the Keln’Kraag Mountains. I can tell you for a fact that the Hordim will not enter their shadows, and we can be sure that they will make a heading to the north-west to avoid them. For the moment we should be safe in taking that path ourselves.”

Mallen looked at the LoreMaster and saw an opportunity. “Can we not cut through these mountains and try and get ahead of the Hresh?”

Gremorgan shook his head. At the aftermath of the battle upon the Surgis’Ka he had looked into the minds of the Hresh with the Gatheringstone, and had seen fragments of their intentions scattered within the turmoil. He had felt also their dread of the Keln’Kraag.

“There are good reasons why the Hordim do not enter the mountains of the Keln’Kraag, Mallen. It is said that there are nameless beasts roaming the dark places of those ranges, who consider all Beings of this world as easy meals. I have heard also that no-one who enters ever leaves. It would be best that we do not test the truth of such myths.”

Both Tomas and Mallen looked carefully at the mountains ahead and then turned to Gremorgan. They had no intention of determining the truth of such fears either.

“To the north-west then?” asked Mallen.

“Aye, to the north-west.” responded Gremorgan.



Upon the open plain the men continued their pursuit. Day drew quickly into night, and then passed into a succession of days that took them deep into lonely lands. They stopped only for a few hours of rest per night, and fuelled their pursuit with the Nahla cake of the Hordim. In the midst of their fatigue the summits of the Keln’Kraag moved slowly at their right shoulders; watching as the three men struggled against the rigours of the chase. Mallen could not help but sense the malevolence that had come to pervade the air, and which carried itself upon the growing winds. At times he was sure he could hear voices murmuring within the gusts and breezes, urging him to

turn back or take dire action against his companions. It was both disturbing and indefinable.

As they rested within the sanctuary of a thick grove of acacia he could almost taste the anger and frustration that filtered its way through the trees.

“How is it that there can be such a feeling of unease here. Are they not just mountains like any other?” he asked.

Gremorgan cut himself a small piece of the Nahla cake and sat back against a gnarled trunk.

“Perhaps it is not the mountains at all. You have been witness to many things on this journey Mallen, and you know that not everything is exactly as it seems. The Hordim fear the mountains, but perhaps their myths are founded on something far less tangible than monsters lurking in the dark.”

Mallen did not understand what the LoreMaster meant. Tomas understood even less.

“What do you mean?” he questioned. “What is it that my brother has witnessed that should lead him to believe the world is anything other than what can be seen?”

Mallen grabbed him gently by the arm and made him sit. “Do not worry on that now Tomas. Gremorgan is a man of great knowledge, and you may depend on what he says, but...” he then turned to the Dwarvendim, “what did you mean?”

Gremorgan looked out towards the dark forms of the mountains and replied.

“What I am saying is that all of the mountain ranges of this world hold dangers and the Keln’Kraag is no different. This feeling of brooding unease is something quite strange and completely unlike anything I have felt before. You can feel it working at your confidence, whispering dark warnings in your ear as you travel, telling you softly that danger lies at every turn. I am just wondering if there might be other reasons for its malevolent spirit. Stone itself holds no such properties.”

Mallen turned to his brother who smiled weakly. “Well I’m glad he cleared that up. Anyway we should get on the move again. In a few hours it will be sunrise and we should be able to make some distance before the day grows too old.”

Quickly the men organised themselves and returned to the chase. In the cool hours of the night they ran into the north-west, skirting the foothills of the Keln’Kraag until the first rays of dawn broke across the

sky. The mountains lay as a massive silhouette to the east, and as they ran a new peak grew upon the horizon ahead of them. Quickly they realised it was not a peak at all but a spire, a huge weathered tower of stone that thrust up from the plain as a needle might rise through a piece of cloth. Separate from the mountains it stood alone on the plains, a solitary landmark at least a day distant from their position, worn by weather and crumbled almost to a state of collapse. About its summit there circled huge flocks of birds, and upon the plain at its base the ground appeared scarred and broken. There was nothing about it that seemed natural.

“What have we found here Gremorgan?” asked Mallen.

Gremorgan considered the towering piece of stone and scratched at his head. “I have never been in these lands before, but I believe this is the Eagle's Reach. How it comes to stand here is unknown to me. I cannot say that I know its purpose, but it might explain a few things.”

Carefully he pulled his nightglasses from his bag and peered at the tower for a few moments, then without saying a word put them back in his bag. Without any hint as to what he might have seen he turned back towards the Keln'Kraag. In the light of morning it was possible to see that the mountains now turned to the north-east, and that they had found the far western edge of their reach.

“We must change course now.” Gremorgan said thoughtfully. “The mountains veer into the north-east and we must follow their borders still.”

“How can you be so sure?” asked Mallen.

Gremorgan pointed at the ground and smiled. “Someone is leaving us a hint, and for the moment it seems prudent to follow.”

On the ground Mallen could see an arrow drawn in the hard earth. It pointed along the edge of the mountain range. The Kalborean knelt and inspected the edges of the mark. It was fresh, no more than three hours old.

“Sil.” he said as he rose. “She appears disposed to help us even if she cannot abide our tardiness.”

“Aye,” replied Gremorgan. “I can tell you both freely that I do not trust her, but she has the scent of the Hresh and for the moment it serves our purposes to follow where she leads.”

Mallen took another look at the marking and then followed its track into the distance. Ahead stood the monolithic Eagle's Reach. At their right shoulder marched the peaks of the Keln'Kraag, cold and desolate. In the haze of the horizon ahead the insurmountable

summits of the Great Rift lifted in jagged lines. Dark grey and snow-capped they were the farthest border of the lands of Men. Anything beyond lay as the domain of the Horde, and Mallen hesitated slightly with the realisation that with each passing hour they were getting closer.

Together the men returned to the chase and for the remainder of that day kept a course into the north-east. At regular intervals further arrows appeared, dug into the iron ground, changing the direction of the party as they followed the border of the mountains. Only when night fell once more did they rest.

A further day passed beneath their pounding feet as they kept to the arrows left by Sil. Slowly the markers changed, turning the men north. By the end of that day they reached the broken ground of the Eagle's Reach and then came to a sudden halt. In the last light of dusk the plain ahead of them stood littered with bodies.

"Down!" hissed Gremorgan as he knelt and drew his axe. Both Mallen and Tomas complied, drawing their own weapons.

Without a word Gremorgan ran forward, the two brothers at his shoulder. Carefully they approached the dark lifeless forms, and discovered quickly that they were Hresh. At least ten warriors lay strewn about the ground, and all had died with their weapons unsheathed.

Mallen ran to the nearest body and pulled the warrior onto its back. The Hresh had no wounds other than the neat line of a dagger cut across its throat. All the other bodies proved to be the same.

"Who could have done this?" asked Mallen. Carefully he checked the ground for sign, but there were few clues to be found.

Tomas had no doubt as to who their foe may have been. He had seen it all before.

"This is Sil's work." he said quietly. "I have seen her dispatch warriors such as these with no concern for either their size or number. I fear that her hatred fuels a cruelty that cannot be easily contained."

"But ten Hresh Tomas, how could a girl achieve such a feat of arms?" Mallen shook his head and turned to Gremorgan.

"I have seen you pondering the nature of the girl. What have you divined of her true identity?"

The Dwarvendim shook his head and considered the lifeless form of the nearest warrior. It was a question he knew the answer to, but one he did not wish to divulge in full just yet.

"I can tell you Mallen that she is no ordinary girl, but then that is

probably obvious. I fear though that she has allied herself with us only because it suits her purposes at this time. I would not like to find myself as her enemy if she chose to change her allegiance.”

Mallen nodded and looked into the north. “I wonder if we will be finding any more of these.” he said to himself as he pondered the bodies of the Hresh.

“If Sil is true to her word there will be many more.” answered Tomas.

Together the men returned to their pursuit of the warband. As a brisk wind began to blow from the north they struggled on, first following the scratched markings of Sil, and then the faintest of tracks that began to appear upon the hard ground. By the late afternoon the terrain had also begun to change, the earth proving softer and the hard dirt plain giving way to a wiry grassland interspersed with large areas of thick brush. Within this patchwork the three men ran and in the last rays of daylight found themselves too tired to continue.

“I think that we should take rest.” said Gremorgan. “The weather grows cold and this bushland will provide both the fuel and the cover for a small fire.”

Both Mallen and Tomas could not think of a better reason to halt, and in the failing light of the day foraged for enough dry wood. For days they had survived only on Nahla cake and their night's meal would be no different, but the fire was a welcome balm to cold limbs and steaming breath. Together they made their camp and rested.

About them the world turned to sleep. Overhead the stars appeared quickly in the sky, myriad pinpoints of light that would shimmer bright until the rising of the moons later in the evening. Upon the open bushland Mallen could see the dark tower of the Eagle's Reach in the west, and the march of the Keln'Kraag mountains at his right hand. Even in the darkness he could see that they remained an unbroken barrier rising into the north, before turning again to the north-west. It seemed that they had a long way yet to go.

With their fire blazing within a circle of stones Gremorgan turned to Mallen and indicated he wished to speak privately. Tomas was lying on his bedding, and seemed too tired to notice as the two men stood and moved a short distance into the darkness.

“What is it Gremorgan?” asked Mallen.

“Remember earlier when you mentioned the strange coldness of the Keln'Kraag.” answered the LoreMaster.

Mallen nodded for he felt the same dread as a constant insistence

at his back. "Do you know where it comes from?"

Gremorgan pulled his nightglasses from one of his bags and gave them to the Kalborean.

"You might recall that I was not so sure that the mountains themselves were the cause of the ill-feeling. Look towards the Eagle's Reach and you will see the real reason for our discomfort."

Mallen put the glasses to his eyes and sucked in his breath. About the summit of the dark monolith swarmed thousands of spectral forms. In the darkness he could not tell if they were indeed solid or trails of thick vapour, but all were spiralling in a chaotic tangle about the stone edifice.

"What in Arborell are they?" he whispered. Almost as soon as he laid eyes upon them he could feel their attention moving towards him, as if he had somehow alerted them of his presence.

"Remember as we waited for the Hresh to move on from the Taal in the Meshaal Forests that we spoke of the Powers of the world?" Gremorgan took the nightglasses from Mallen and surveyed the scene for himself. "Well here can be found the servants of the Third Power. For a reason I do not know the Eagle's Reach allows them to find a path into the world of the living, and it is a curious thing indeed."

"You see Mallen these are Dreyadim, servants of the Dreya Tree, Master of the Underworld. Each of the shades that you see circling the Reach are reflections of the scourged souls of Hordim who have been deemed unworthy to return to the lands of the living. They are thralls to the Dreya and cannot be released until they have proven themselves. It is a fate that may last the life of the world itself."

"And what is the Dreya? Can its servants harm us?" It was a question looming large in Mallen's mind as he watched the frenetic chaos of the swarming vapours.

Gremorgan took the nightglasses from Mallen and placed them back in his bag. "On your last question I can tell you that the Dreyadim have no power in the world of the Living and therefore are not to be feared. They can no more harm you as you might harm an early morning mist, but they are not to be discounted lightly either. No servant of one of the Powers should ever be dismissed, for it is impossible to tell what their purposes may be. We can only leave them to their devices, and hope that they leave us in peace."

The Dwarvendim turned and looked to the eastern horizon. Against the dark masses of the Keln'Kraag the soft glow of moonlight lay as a growing aura along the silhouetted peaks. For a moment he

stood silently then continued.

“The Dreya Tree is something difficult for Men such as ourselves to fully comprehend. It is a manifestation of the power of EarthMagic that only affects the lives of the Hordim. Their fear of it orders their lives, and it is the Code of conduct it created that gives purpose to their existence. I believe it is difficult to underestimate how much the Dreya has shaped the way the world is today. But it was not always so.”

“In ancient times there was only the Silvan Tree and the Shan'duil, maintaining the balance of life in the world and forging the powers of EarthMagic that have become so intertwined with our own existence. For millennia such was the way of things until the coming of the Trell'sara. It was the meddling of the Trell'sara; and their creation of the Hordim, that forced the Silvan Tree to create a reflection of itself, a Power concerned only with death. The Trell'sara created the Hordim and under their dominion the Horde had but one purpose; to live in slavery and tend the needs of their Masters. With the rebellion that destroyed them all control over the Horde dissipated, and without purpose or leadership they turned upon each other.”

“In that time of turmoil great numbers of the Horde died, the sparks of their existence set free in a world that had no place for them. It was the Silvan Tree that saw the need first, and created the Dreya to take those souls and turn them to a more effective purpose. In doing so the Underworld was brought into being and the Code instilled into the spark of all those who passed under the Dreya's gaze.”

“Just as the Silvan Tree brings life and hope into the world so it is the Dreya Tree that takes it from the world and reforges the sparks of creation that they might be reborn. It is the Dreya that holds dominion over the Underworld, and it is that Power that tests all who stand before her. If a Being is found wanting they suffer the torment of Dissolution and become servants to the Tree itself. It is an end no Hordim can endure willingly.”

“And these Dreyadim are the reason for the oppressive malevolence of this place?” whispered Mallen. Without the glasses he could not see the swirling vapours but he could feel their presence keenly.

“Yes.” replied Gremorgan. “The Eagle's Reach is the focus of their energy, but it echoes off the mountains of the Keln'Kraag like a mirror does bright sunlight. There may well be monsters to be found in the dark places of those mountains, but I believe it is the Dreyadim that draw the shivers down our spines. It will be good to move on with the

morning, and put distance between ourselves and this place.”

Quietly they returned to the camp to find Tomas sound asleep, the fire a pile of dying embers threatening to extinguish itself from neglect. Carefully the Kalborean added extra fuel and urged the blaze back into flame. Around him the wind began to build further and under a clear sky of stars he settled to find what sleep he could.

For a moment though he lay beneath his covers and considered the nature of his world. He did not know if it was within their power to rescue Shemwe. It was his hope that they would all find their way back to Callenfrey and the life they had lived before, but he knew he could never look at the rolling hills again without wondering what secrets might lie beyond them. Not for the last time did he think it more than a simple Metalsmith should have to consider. With the fire crackling in the gusts he pulled his blanket over himself and fell into sleep.

## Chapter 14 - Adamant



Through fog and misting rain the three men trudged forward, their shadowed forms drawn in vague patches as they struggled through the heavy mists. About them the world was a pale wash of grey, only the ground at their feet visible as they moved northwards. Hard had been the days since they had left the Eagle's Reach, and there could be no disguising the scepticism with which one of their number viewed their current circumstances.

"How in the Name of Providence do we actually know where we are going? I swear I cannot see beyond my outstretched arm, yet there seems no limit to this fog, or this barren ground. Are you sure Mallen, that we are not walking in circles?"

Mallen looked at his brother with no small amount of annoyance. "Tomas, you have asked me the same question every ten minutes for the last two days and I must answer you the same as before. In this matter it is to Gremorgan that we must look for guidance. This land is known to him, and it is with him that we must place our trust."

Tomas was not convinced for he had no idea where they were. He wished only to find a trail, or some clue left by the Hresh that would confirm they were going the right way. It had been many hours since they had seen any hint of the Hordim, and Sil's markers had dried up just as completely. His only guide to their path was an assurance from Gremorgan that they should follow their current heading. He was not convinced.

Four long days had passed since they had turned their backs on the Eagle's Reach, and in the morning of the third day the world had closed in, covering itself in a thick fog that clung to their clothing like damp fingers. They had travelled a great distance into the north but the malevolence of the Dreyadim lingered like an immovable landmark. Beyond the range of his shrouded vision Mallen could feel the presence of the Keln'Kraag at their right shoulders, and the brooding malice of the Dreyadim receding at their backs. In a way the swarming spectres of the Eagle's Reach had become a stable point within the mists that now surrounded them, one which gave the Kalborean a clear idea of the course they were taking. No matter which way Gremorgan turned, the creeping chill of the Dreyadim could be felt, a palpable outreach of hatred that anchored his sense of

direction, and allowed him to know exactly where they were going.

Tomas did not have the same feeling, for Mallen had chosen not to tell his brother of the existence of the swarm. For Tomas Cael the uneasiness of the preceding days had passed and he thought no more of it. Mallen however, had looked directly at the Dreyadim through Gremorgan's nightglasses and had felt them look back. It was a connection that had proven difficult to break.

Mallen knew however, that it was not the Dreyadim that Gremorgan had been using to navigate the mists. Every so often the Dwarvendim would pull his Dirge-compass from his travel coat and study it, searching the range of its view for sign of the Hordim and of the Faeyen girl, Sil. In this manner the three companions had kept a steady path into the north, edging the foothills of the Keln'Kraag as they continued their pursuit of the warband.

But it had been hard, a grinding run that had been sustained only through the consumption of the Nahla Cake of the Jotun. Without it they would have been left far behind the Hresh, unable to make ground, and with no chance of rescuing Shemwe. At this point in their journey it was all that mattered. Mallen could understand Tomas' impatience.

Within the cool embrace of the mists Mallen remained close to the LoreMaster, Tomas keeping a station only a few paces to the rear. The ground had remained constant since leaving the Reach; a wide plain of desiccated, thinly grassed earth, covered in a sparse aggregation of acacia trees and wiry bushes. Through this desolate region the three had run, moving under suns and stars as they pursued their goal. The tracks of the Hresh had proven elusive, but every so often a simple arrow scratched into the hard earth by Sil had given them hope that they were still within reach of the warband. Then the fog had descended and the trail-marks left by the Faeyen had disappeared. At least for now they appeared to be on their own.

For his part Gremorgan showed no sign of unease. With the Dirge-compass in hand he could see the faint trails left by the Hordim, thin lines of blue across its face that showed him where they were going. Across the disc he could see a multitude of traces, the Hordim as deep blue against the metallic surface of its face, intermingled with the lighter and almost indistinguishable tracery of many other creatures that had also passed this way over the centuries. With few exceptions all moved towards a gap between the mountains ahead. It would be there that they would have the best chance of once again picking up

the trail of the Hresh.

Carefully Gremorgan peered into the white wall of mist and knew what lay ahead. It was an advantage the Hresh did not have, and it was his hope that the fog had brought the warband to a halt. If that was the case then there was still a chance that they might find the Hordim before they reached the mountains.

Using the device to track the Hordim had been a decision forced on him by necessity. Previously he had been reticent to use the Dirge-compass, for there was a possibility that its reach might be noticed by the warband, and in doing so bring them to the attention of their leader. But with all pretence of stealth abandoned; the Hordim making their retreat at great speed to the north, there seemed little to be lost. The Dirge-compass was not something though, that could be relied upon. Its great power had proven many times to also be its weakness. Sometimes it could sense far too much, and in the process tell the user nothing.

In the growing twilight of day's end Gremorgan brought his colleagues to a halt and pointed to a nearby acacia.

"We have travelled far today. A few hours rest will do us all some good I think."

Both Mallen and Tomas nodded, their weariness leaving no reason for argument lingering in the damp air. Quickly Mallen began a small fire as his brother cleared the area beneath the acacia to lay bedding. Gremorgan nudged the packs from his back, and in the gathering dark apportioned a small piece of the Nahla Cake to each of the Kalboreans. Sitting about the fire there was little conversation between the men. Even the Nahla could not mask the fatigue that quickly took each of them into sleep.



In the cool hours before dawn a noise brought Mallen back to wakefulness. Lying covered beneath his blankets he stared out into the fog, not sure that he had indeed heard anything, but there was a feeling in the air, and it grew stronger as he waited. Not moving he lay as if in sleep, his eyes searching the darkness. His patience was

soon rewarded.

Out of the mists there came the unmistakable form of a young girl. Immediately Mallen recognised her as Sil, but her approach was not one of happy reunion. In her hand she held a long dagger, and within the misted shadows she moved silently towards Gremorgan. Carefully the Kalborean moved his hand to grasp the hilt of his sword, ready to defend his friend if the need arise, but as he watched the Faeyen turned instead to the Dwarvendim's bags and quietly opened one of them. Without a sound she cut open one of the Nahla cakes and took a small piece, eating it slowly before turning towards Mallen himself. Before he could call to her she was gone, disappearing like a phantom into the fog.

Quickly he raised himself and called to the Dwarvendim in a hollow whisper. Gremorgan was also awake.

"Did you see her?" Mallen asked.

"Yes," replied the LoreMaster, "I was watching."

"Why didn't you grab her, find out what she's doing?"

Gremorgan raised himself and looked stolidly at Mallen. "You have seen what the girl can do Mallen. Do you think she would allow herself to be restrained? It is better that she be out there hunting the Hresh, than be here with us. On this you must trust me, for she is not what she appears to be. Anyway," he smiled, "a small amount of Nahla cake seems a fair price for the help she has been giving, don't you think?"

Mallen looked at Gremorgan and shrugged. He had seen what the Faeyen could do, and had to admit he would rather not have it visited upon himself. From the perspective given by the LoreMaster the loss of a piece of Nahla cake seemed fair enough, but he did not like the idea of anyone stealing through their camp with a drawn dagger in hand.

"Should we set a watch?" he asked.

Gremorgan nodded. "I will watch out the remainder of the night. There are only a few hours of dark left but it is prudent that someone keep alert. Sleep Master Cael. I will wake you at sunrise."

With the LoreMaster watching the camp Mallen turned on his side. For a short while though he could not find rest, instead peering out into the fogs, looking for some further sign of the Faeyen girl. It was a vigil that ended quickly when the exhaustion of his travels drew him back into sleep.

Gremorgan made himself comfortable and waited for the dawn.

For a long time he lay on his back, watching as the stars turned on their axis, following the ancient paths that were only theirs to traverse. He had said nothing, but he had seen the creature known as Sil steal into their encampment before, only on this occasion the girl had dared to come close enough to take food from his satchels. It was a worry for him, but one he did not believe he would share with the others. Sil could not come close without him sensing her, and the hard truth was that only he could do anything to stop her. There was little point worrying the others on that account. If she ever became a threat he would have no choice but to kill her, and in doing so her true nature would be revealed. For the moment however, it was a secret he preferred to keep to himself.



Just before the dawn, as the moons of Arborell dipped beneath the far western horizon, Gremorgan felt another presence moving upon the edges of the mists. He could not be sure if he was asleep or awake, perhaps tilting between the dark and the light of consciousness, when a voice came into his mind, as clear and as solid as flowing water.

“Gremorgan.” it whispered.

For a moment the Dwarvendim could not respond. He was paralysed by a force he had never felt before, one as powerful as the River of Life itself.

“Do not struggle against me, Gremorgan Hedj, for I am not here to harm you.”

Gremorgan could not move but he could feel everything. About him the cold mists of the plain clouded further, reality dissolving away until all he could sense was himself, suspended in space, surrounded by the glimmering light of another Being. In the solitary place that he now found himself he knew what it was. It was a Caer'dahl, a servant of the Silvan Tree, and in its presence he could barely find his voice.

“Who are you spirit, and what is your purpose here?”

The light flickered about him, but only momentarily.

“My name is Ulaal'serai, Caer'dahl to the Silvan Tree, Guardian of

all quiet waters, and here in your presence as Messenger from the Powers of the World. I come with greetings and a new task for you, LoreMaster.”

“You have been on a quest Gremorgan, one well known to the Three Powers. For more than the breadth of a generation you have been in search of the Word of Dissolution. I know that it was given to you by the Hra'gora, but that was only to keep you on your current path. I am here to tell you that the tribulations of your search are now ended, a new task yours to be fulfilled. Trust in the Silvan Tree, Gremorgan Hedj, for I tell you that although you have the Word in your possession, the place you seek, the sacred chamber from whence you can send all Oera'dim into dissolution, has been barred from you. In this matter, the mission entrusted to you by your King is over.”

“Over!” protested Gremorgan. “By what right can you annul the commission of my King? Do you understand that I am bound by oath and fealty to that mission? It is not something easily foregone.”

The Caer'dahl flared in response. “Is it you who has forgotten the terms of the Doctrine of Araheal? Think on it LoreMaster, for there are Powers greater than your King, and their claims supersede all others.”

Within the encompassing light of the Caer'dahl Gremorgan could not move, but he felt keenly the truth of the spirit's words. He knew well the Doctrine, the rules agreed upon by the Dwarvendim LoreMasters when the Shan'duil gave them access to the powers of EarthMagic. In his lifetime no LoreMaster had ever been called into the service of the River of Life, but in such circumstances his duty was clear. It was a request that could not be refused, for it was the Doctrine that bound the powers of EarthMagic to the LoreMasters and it could be recanted if the oaths were broken. He had no choice and the Caer'dahl knew it. He would honour his oath to the Shan'duil.

For a moment the Caer'dahl waited on Gremorgan's decision then continued.

“There is much you do not know, LoreMaster. Although Men are newcomers in this world, their fate has been interwoven with that of their enemies, and it is a connection that cannot be easily broken. The Oera'dim were created against the will of the Silvan Tree, and Men came into the world without knowledge of the Powers that maintain its balance. Against all the possibilities that could have transpired a balance has been achieved, and it will not be suffered to be undone yet again. The River of Life will not allow it.”

Against the backdrop of the ethereal mist Gremorgan found himself looking into a flowing stream of water, from which visions of the outside world coalesced into sharp imagery. To his surprise he found himself staring down upon a wide grassed plain, a valley caught between mountains, and cut through its centre by a wide, rapid river. The Dwarvendim recognised it immediately as the Shan Valley, an open grassland settled at the base of the Rift Mountains to the north-east of their encampment. As he watched the ground rushed up towards him, focusing on a group of figures running towards a wide ford in the river. Gremorgan's breathing faltered when he realised it was the Hresh Warband.

Numbering no more than twenty, they ran as if something deadly was stalking them, and only flight could save them from its grasp. In a single file they moved across the grasses, making for a natural causeway that spanned the river ahead. From their colours he could see they were the Denmar, and in two litters they carried the bodies of two red-haired women. Both were still alive, but haggard and worn from their ordeal. He had no doubt that one of them would be Shemwe.

At the head of the warband ran Ansolon'Denmar, and he was everything the Dwarvendim feared. Grim and determined, the powerful Hresh seemed untouched by the rigours of their long journey, urging his soldiers to greater effort as he led them into the east. The LoreMaster could see in his visage the surety of a Being without any doubt of the success of his mission. As a unit the Hresh ran, Ansolon looking to the sky, almost as if he could sense someone was watching.

The vision grew all the more detailed as it focused on the face of the Hresh Chieftain and then froze as a single moment in time. It was then that the Caer'dahl continued.

“This Hresh has been the object of your pursuit for these many days, but he does not hold the knowledge you seek. No Oera'dim knows the location of the Hall of Creation, and none can enter even if they were privy to such knowledge. To do so would strip the spark of life from them, sending them into the Dissolution that none seek willingly. Ansolon'Denmar cannot help you, but you must find him nonetheless.”

For a moment the spirit paused, as if collecting itself for a task that required great focus.

“I come to you with a new mission, one that you cannot refuse. According to the Doctrine of Araheal your first loyalty must be to the

River of Life, and only after the Shan'duil can you look to the Lords of Men for your duty. In this matter the River of Life claims the right to your obedience.”

“The Silvan Tree absolves you of all fealty to your King, Gremorgan Hedj, your place as a LoreMaster of the Grand Circle vacated. You will keep the skills and knowledge of your Order, but from this time forth you are a servant of the Tree alone; commissioned to a new task, one that will save both Oera'dim and Men from certain destruction. From this time forward you can no longer look to the Word of Dissolution as the means for Men to overcome their enemies. Such a path is no longer open to you. Instead you must find the leader of the Hresh Warband and convince him to take you to the Horns of Gorgoroth. There within the birthing grounds of the Oera'dim you shall find the task that must now consume you. Only there can the destiny of Men and Oera'dim alike be assured.”

“The world is changing Gremorgan, and you are to be the axis upon which it turns. There is danger growing in the East of this world, testing the barriers that have stood for millennia to keep it out. If Men choose to act alone they will be consumed by it. If the Oera'dim think that they can withstand the onslaught then they will falter also, and in good time all will perish.”

“But what is the nature of the task you set before me?” asked the LoreMaster. “And what of the Caels? I cannot leave them to an uncertain fate.”

“The duty you now have is to the Silvan Tree. Find a path to the Horns of Gorgoroth and your task will make itself known. It is better that you do not know what you must do until you get there. Only when you have found sanctuary within the Horns will you be safe.”

“On the matter of the Brothers Cael do not be concerned. They will stay with you until you have found Ansolon'Denmar, and once they have retrieved their fellow country-women they will be able to find their own way home. Fate tells us that it is not in these lands that the Caels shall find an unwelcome end. Their destinies lay elsewhere.”

Through the glimmering mists Gremorgan could see the first light of the suns rising against the silhouettes of the Keln'Kraag. He could sense that the spirit was about to leave, but he had one more question.

“And what of the girl known as Sil? You know what she is as well as I. Does she play any part in this?”

At the mention of the girl's name the Caer'dahl faltered, withdrawing from the word as if the echo of it caused pain.

“The Faeyen is the pawn of others who have no part in what is to come. I have told you that the Word of Dissolution is barred from you, but there will come a time when its utterance will be your only recourse. When that time comes you will recognise it. It will be best that you do not hesitate.”

“It is now time that I go, Gremorgan Hedj. With the coming of the dawn the mists that have covered these lands will recede, just as I must. The Hresh are making for Durgoz Hold and that must be your goal as well. Within its dark places you will find a path to the Lands of Perdition.”

Before Gremorgan could say anything more the Caer'dahl faded away, disappearing in a gusting breeze like smoke borne away upon the wind. In the twilight of morning it was gone, leaving the LoreMaster lying on his blankets, limbs stiff from the cold of the night. Carefully he sat up and looked about him. Both of the Caels were still asleep, the world around them waking to a fresh day of clear sky and open ground. For a short time he did not move, content to watch the sunrise and think on what had gone before. For the Dwarvendim life had changed forever.



Mallen awoke to find the second sun of morning emerging from behind the jagged lines of the Keln'Kraag mountains. In the bright morning light the sky was a wash of orange and purple, a clear vault untouched by cloud or mist. Feeling the chill air he pulled his travel cloak about him, and searched the surrounding plain for any sign of the Faeyen. It took a moment, but when he came more fully awake he realised that the mists had disappeared, and in the full light of the day was surprised to find how far they had come.

About their small encampment the plains spread for a great distance to the south and west. In the far south, the spire of the Eagle's Reach stood as a vague point against the horizon. In the west the grasslands reached as far as the eye could see, a vast open land of cold, dry grasses and ragged stands of trees. It was in the north and east that Mallen found his attention drawn however, for against the

deep blue of the sky, and the pastel colours of the dawn, there arose mountains so huge they seemed to hold the sky itself aloft.

“It is a sight almost worth the effort of getting here isn't it?” came a voice close at hand.

It was Gremorgan, squatting beside a small fire, his head bowed, attention narrowed on a small cooking pot.

“Where are we?” asked Mallen, as he pulled himself out of his blankets.

The Dwarvendim stood and scratched at his face, then pointed into the north. “What we have here is the Great Rift Mountains. I doubt there is a man alive who actually knows how high they are, but they stand as the northern reach of the lands of Men, and a solid boundary they are. There are few who have attempted to conquer them, and less who have come back alive to tell the tale. We can see nothing of it, but beyond them lay the Lands of Perdition, homeland of the Horde and a place where only fools, and possibly ourselves, might wish to tread.”

Mallen stood for a time and took in the sight of the enormous mountain range. At their base he could see the misted outline of a line of foothills, that rose from the dry expanse of the plain in ever increasing levels to a series of lesser mountains, grey and black against the sky. Dwarfing all these however, was the Massif itself, a solid wall of snow-encrusted peaks that rose as broken teeth, sharp and unforgiving into the clouds that streamed past them, tearing their vapours into long ribbons that dissolved quickly in the thin air.

It was obvious that they had no path northwards, but in the east the ground was very different. At some time in the preceding evening they had passed beyond the northern reach of the Keln'Kraag, and had made camp upon the outer edges of what could only be described as a pass, spreading as an area of flat ground between those mountains, and a further range of impressive hills that extended to the foothills of the Rift in the north. From their vantage Mallen could see the Keln'Kraag coming to an abrupt end; the pass a long, wide reach of verdant grasses that cut between the mountains, extending eastwards into shadow. Mallen turned to Gremorgan but the LoreMaster spoke first.

“What you see is the Pass of Adamant. An ancient route for armies wishing to find a path from the Shan Valleys in the east to the wider plains of the west. It is no exaggeration to say that more battles have been fought here than anywhere else in Arborell, except perhaps for

the Pass at Maenum. It is our fate that we too will have to take this route, for all indications say that the Hordim have passed this way. Somewhere beyond Adamant, within the valleys of the fertile Shan the Hresh are moving quickly. It is there that we will find them.”

Mallen noticed how confidently the LoreMaster spoke. There was a surety in his words that he had not heard previously. The Kalborean could sense that something had changed but he knew Gremorgan would tell him in his own good time. In the gathering light he turned back to the mountains and watched as the shadows of the Great Rift were pushed back by the rising suns.

It was a vista unlike anything he had seen, and he could not help but stand and take it in. As he did so Tomas came and stood at his side.

“I believe we had a visitor in the night.” he said quietly.

Mallen nodded to his brother, then turned and looked towards Gremorgan. “Did Sil return at all?” he asked.

The Dwarvendim shook his head then came and stood with his companions.

“The girl did not return, but I know now where we must go, and as soon as we have had some breakfast we will get on our way.”

Both of the brothers looked at each other and then followed the LoreMaster to the fire. From the cooking pot came the smell of boiled meat and vegetables. After the Nahla Bread of the past days it was a welcome aroma indeed.

“Where did you get the food Gremorgan?” asked Mallen.

The Dwarvendim smiled and stirred the pot. “Whilst you two were sleeping I was watching for Sil and happened to notice a Squoll burrow in the stand of trees ahead. It was a small matter to wait for one of the fat rodents to put its head out of the nest. The want of a decent meal can make one very patient indeed, and not too picky for that matter either. The vegetables are just bush-potatoes I found within the trees. A small amount of Nahla Bread for spice and here we have it, a hot breakfast.”

Both Kalboreans ran quickly for their plates, and soon all three men were enjoying a breakfast that couldn't have tasted better, even if it was Squoll meat and withered potatoes. When they had finished Gremorgan cleaned and packed away his gear as the two brothers organised their blankets and clothing for the day. Even in the bright light of the suns it was still going to be cold, and as they prepared the Dwarvendim came to them.

“I must tell you Mallen and Tomas that we had more than one visitor in the night.” He paused as the brothers put down what they were doing.

“Although it will mean little to you Tomas, it would be remiss of me not to tell you both that in the early hours a Caer'dahl came into my dreams, and in that encounter has given me information vital to our quest.”

Tomas looked to Mallen and then back at the Dwarvendim. “A Caer'dahl? What is that exactly?”

Gremorgan looked at Mallen and nodded his head. It was time to tell the younger Cael who the Dwarvendim really was.

It was Mallen who spoke first. “Tomas. There is something I have been keeping from you, but only because it was important to keep such knowledge from Sil. A Caer'dahl is a spirit, part of a world that we have had little to do with, and which has passed before us without our realisation. I have come to know much about this hidden world, but only because of my friendship with Gremorgan. He is a trusted friend, and our companion on this journey; but he is also a LoreMaster, one of the Grand Circle, and privy to power unlike anything I have ever seen. He is much more than he seems.”

For a moment Tomas stood blankly, his simple question the cause of a sudden revelation. But it was not a surprise to him. Unexpectedly he smiled and slapped Mallen on the back.

“By the Fates Mallen, I was wondering how long it would take before you told me. Last few days I've been holding my tongue, not sure why it should be such a secret. Had my suspicions you know. Couldn't work out why a Dwarvendim of Gremorgan's size would be tagging along with a sorry pair like ourselves. A LoreMaster eh? All I can say is I'm glad you're on our side.”

With that he strode over to Gremorgan and extended his hand. “Tomas Cael of Callenfrey at your service, Maturi.”

Mallen laughed, but not with relief at Tomas' easy acceptance of their need for secrecy. It was the look on Gremorgan's face.

“How is it you know the title of my Order young Cael? I did not think such things would be known in the wider world.”

Tomas smiled wryly and turned to look towards the Pass of Adamant. “You'd be surprised what a person learns on the road. Although I never told Mallen, I once met another LoreMaster, a man known as the Maturi Len, whilst hunting in the forests outside Kal Orban.”

“You never told me.” protested Mallen.

“Our meeting was accidental, and because of the task he was pursuing asked that it remain untold. Until I met Gremorgan I had quite forgotten the whole incident, but his earnest attempts at keeping his Dirge-compass hidden from view got me thinking on it all again.”

“You have seen one before?” questioned the LoreMaster.

“Yes, actually. The Maturi Len had one. He explained he was using it to find something called a Sharyah. Wasn't having much success as I remember it.”

With that the LoreMaster shook his head and smiled broadly. “It would seem that I have underestimated you Tomas. I will not make such a mistake again. Perhaps we should prepare for the journey that is ahead of us.”

Both of the brothers agreed and turned quickly to the packing of their gear. When all was complete the three men stood before the wide mouth of the Pass of Adamant, looking down the enormous reach of the valley ahead of them.

“From what the Caer'dahl has given to me,” said Gremorgan, “the Hresh will be found within the Shan Valleys at the end of this Pass. They are making for an ancient fortress known as Durgoz Hold; and according to what I have learned it is there that they have a way of returning to their homes in the Lands of Perdition. If we are to rescue Shemwe we must catch them before they can leave the Shan.”

“Then we must move quickly.” said Tomas quietly.

There could be no further discussion. As one they began to run.

Under a clear sky the three men ran into the east, the suns of morning quickly warming a landscape as yet untouched by the first chills of winter. Before them the Pass of Adamant reached as far as they could see, their passage bounded at their right shoulder by the mountains of the Keln'Kraag, and at their left by the formidable hills that reached northwards to the Great Rift. Between these granite bastions the pass was a wide line of grass, perfectly flat and devoid of tree or obstruction. On the thick turf they ran, cutting paths of their own eastwards.

Morning quickly turned to afternoon, and in the hours before dusk a new landmark began to grow on the horizon ahead. At first it was a thin line of grey jutting from the edge of the Keln'Kraag at their right, but as the evening began to darken all the men were able to see that it was a line of colossal statues, carved from the rock of the mountains and set upon massive granite pedestals.

By the last glimmers of evening they reached the first of the statues and came to a halt. Before them arose a solid piece of carved stone, somehow artificed from the hard rock of the Keln'Kraag and formed into a massive representation of an ancient creature dressed in ceremonial robes. In its gigantic proportions it was perfectly carved, every detail of cloth and decoration finely etched, and untouched by weather or sun. It stood as if it had been raised yesterday.

In the ruddy twilight the statue stood at least two hundred metres tall, and to the east Mallen could see a further ten rising from the grassland. Both Tomas and Mallen looked to the Dwarvendim for a hint as to what they were.

The LoreMaster did not speak for a time. He had never seen these statues before, but he had heard of them.

“These statues are known as the Colossi of Adamant. It is said they were built by the ancient Trell'sara as monuments to themselves, their purpose to awe their slaves with their power. I cannot tell you if that is truth or for that matter how they were built, or give any reason as to why they remain in such condition. I can say however, that even though the Hordim destroyed everything the Trell'sara built after the Great Insurrection, they left these Colossi alone, seemingly content to leave these symbols of their Master's power intact. It is a mysterious thing.”

The two brothers considered the vast monoliths, watching the dusk wash across the smooth stone as the suns set at their backs. Each of the Colossi held a weapon in a scabbard at their belts, only the hilt and pommel showing from beneath a heavy robe. Their faces were covered by a peaked hood, but enough of the face showed to give an impression of their visage. To Mallen it appeared similar to the Hresh, but more alien, almost reptilian.

It was Tomas who spoke, breaking the silence of nightfall.

“We should move on. These Colossi are a wonder but we cannot afford to tarry here.”

Both Gremorgan and Mallen agreed, and together they turned again to the east.

Into the night the men ran, following the line of the Colossi as they moved towards the Pass of Adamant's end, and the promise of the Shan Valleys beyond. In the cool darkness there was little noise. With the onset of dusk the air had quickly chilled, the warmth of the suns lost to a northerly breeze that rolled off the Great Rift. All about the men there settled an unnerving silence, one broken only by the rustle

of the grasses as the cold winds blustered about them. Upon the grass their footfalls were muffled by its thick cover, and apart from the movement of their packs upon their shoulders, and the laboured breathing of their exertion, there was little that could mark their passage. In a world of stars and dark, cold mountains they could have been completely alone. But they were not.

Against the stars a dark shadow moved unnoticed, sliding through the air silently on leathery wings. The Kreeel was hungry, and on the prowl as it searched the ground for an easy kill. High above the grassland the winged reptile came to a halt, using the air currents to maintain a station directly above the running men. On this night hunger was its only motivation and it had found its next meal.

Carefully the Kreeel descended, maintaining a wide arc that kept it slightly behind its prey, but high enough that it was masked by the night sky. Keen eyes focused down upon the smallest of the running figures, and razor-sharp claws flexed in readiness for the kill. One lethal strike and it would be away with its meal.

Through the cold air the creature swung low, its wings increasing their beat as it accelerated, skimming the grass as it aimed directly for Tomas. For the Kreeel this would be an easy kill, and it savoured the memory of blood as it ran its tongue along jagged teeth. Swiftly and silently the flying nightmare arrowed in upon the Kalborean, all its focus concentrated on the back of the running man. When it was no more than fifty metres from its target the predator extended its claws, and it was then that its plan faltered.

Mallen felt the oncoming rush of the Kreeel as a cold chill against his spine, a strange tingling anxiety that he could not ignore. He came to a halt and turned, only to see the huge flying creature speeding towards them. Instinctively he knew it was Tomas who was in danger.

“Tomas!” he yelled, pointing into the darkness, “Kreeel!”

The younger Cael's life turned on a split second and there was no time for hesitation. Without turning to look he took Mallen at his word and flattened himself to the ground, rolling into the long grass and wet earth. The Kreeel sped over the position where Tomas lay, a single claw raking through the grasses. Mallen heard a sharp cry of pain before watching the creature rise up in a long arc, beating its wings to gain altitude.

Mallen ran for his brother and found him entangled in the grass. Across his back he could see a line of torn clothing, from which blood ran freely. Quick thinking had saved his life but Tomas had been

badly wounded nonetheless.

“Gremorgan!” Mallen called out. “I must stem this blood loss. Watch for the Kreel!”

The LoreMaster drew his axe from its fastenings and stood his ground beside the brothers. Mallen worked quickly on Tomas' torn flesh as the Dwarvendim searched the night for the return of the predator. He had no doubt that it would be back, for it had drawn blood and would not willingly leave its prey behind.

In the darkness the Kreel had disappeared, but it was not finished with the men. In a high sweeping arc the creature turned, finding a position directly above its prey, then dived, folding its wings close about its body. Like a stone it dropped, its long neck straight, its eyes pierced grooves in an armoured head as it fell upon them.

Gremorgan saw it first, a dark shape against the stars overhead.

“It is coming Mallen!” he yelled. “Get down into the grass. Now!”

Before the Kalborean could comply a great light erupted upon the grassland, a ball of incandescence that shone from Gremorgan's open palm, illuminating the Pass of Adamant and outlining in sharp detail the plummeting form of the Kreel. Within that light the Kreel recoiled, caught by the bright radiance of the orb, but still determined to have its feast.

Upon beating wings the creature came to earth and then attacked.

Without hesitation Gremorgan met it head-on. In the faltering illumination of the glowing sphere he ran at the beast, swinging his axe in wide arcs, forcing the Kreel to retreat away from the two brothers. The Kreel was not about to have its meal escape however. With a thrust of its wing it swept the Dwarvendim off his feet and advanced upon him. Gremorgan barely found his feet as he cut at the creature's head, tearing a deep gash across its jaw and throat. In the half-light of the battle Mallen could only see the thrashing limbs of the Kreel and the glimmering reflection of Gremorgan's axe, but above it all arose the screeching wail of the creature as it felt the sharp edge of the LoreMaster's blade. Within the space of a few heartbeats the deadly confrontation was over.

For a long moment the night closed in around Mallen as he peered into the gloom, looking for a sign of his friend. The orb of light had dissipated and in the darkness there was no movement, only the flickering stars above, and the first hint of a breeze blowing out of the north.

“Gremorgan!”, he shouted into the night. The call travelled out into

the Pass and then echoed back off the near mountains. The LoreMaster's reply came quickly.

"It is alright Master Cael. The Kreeel is dead."

The Dwarvendim walked out of the darkness cradling his axe. Mallen could see pain spread across his face but there was only concern in his voice.

"How is your brother, Mallen?"

Mallen turned to Tomas and opened the back of his shirt. Across his shoulders lay the ragged mark of a claw. One of the Kreeel's talons had cut deep, tearing muscle and shattering bone. The younger Cael had lost an unhealthy measure of blood.

"Right." said Gremorgan as he knelt beside the Kalborean. "Find my bags and dig out the pouch of white powder you have seen me use to close wounds."

Mallen made for the LoreMaster's bags and found the leather pouch. There was little enough of the powder left.

Gremorgan took the pouch and poured some of its contents over the open wound. In a fine cloud of mist the powder did its work, drawing the edges of the injury together and binding them with a thick layer of scarring. The LoreMaster poured a small amount of water over the wound and then reached for Mallen's arm.

"Your brother is lucky Mallen, in that he has someone of the same blood close at hand. If we are to bring Tomas back to a state where he may continue his quest, you will have to give up a small amount of your blood."

Without hesitation Gremorgan took his knife and cut into Mallen's arm, but only enough to bring blood easily onto a piece of cloth. With the blooded rag he wiped it across Tomas' wet skin and Mallen gasped as the scarring fell away, leaving his brother's shoulders clear of any visible injury. Gremorgan turned the Kalborean onto his back and wrapped him in a blanket.

"The wound has been closed, but the deeper effects of his injury are not so easily repaired. He has lost blood, and the tearing of his flesh will take longer to heal. I am afraid that we will have to camp here for at least a day whilst he recovers his strength."

Mallen slumped back onto the grass and rubbed at his arm. "I am only glad that Tomas will live, but he will not take such news well. I fear that Shemwe is now lost to us."

Gremorgan sat beside his companion and looked out into the darkness, towards the motionless shadow of the Kreeel. In his mind an

idea was forming.

“Have you heard of an artifact of the Trell'sara known as a Callingstone?”

Mallen shook his head. He knew enough about the Dwarvendim to know that no question asked was ever just conversation.

“Well Master Cael, it appears to me that there is little chance that we can now catch the Warband. Tomas is injured, and even the recuperative powers of my powders, and some Nahla Cake thrown in, will not see us going anywhere quickly until he has healed. If we are to make ground on the Hresh we must find a means of transport that will give us an advantage over them.”

“What is your idea, Gremorgan?”

“In ancient times the Trell'sara found a way to gain control of the beasts of the world. Using a talisman known as a Callingstone, they could bring any creature to them, and for a short period of time hold them in their thrall. For what purposes I do not know, but the memory of such talismans gives me an idea.”

Gremorgan pulled a small camp stove from his bags and cleared an area of ground for a fire.

“Do you have such a stone?” asked Mallen.

The Dwarvendim shook his head. “No. The talismans used by the Trell were tools produced only for the use of their slaves, so that they need not leave the comforts of their palaces to do the work themselves. A true wielder of EarthMagic does not require tools to do so. I am a LoreMaster Mallen, and for this task I need only wait for the dawn.”

“But what could you summon that might help us? To carry us across the Shan Valleys we would need something large...” Mallen stopped as he got the first inkling of the LoreMaster's plan.

Gremorgan nodded and pointed to the north. “Within the mountains can be found the resting places of the Kreel. At dawn most will be returning to their nests after feeding, and it is the best time to take control of them. It is my thought that we take two of the Kreel and use them to make directly for Durgoz Hold. They will be able to cover in the span of a single morning what it would take us six days to run. I believe it is a risk worth taking.”

Mallen was not convinced. “But Gremorgan, the Kreel are monsters; nightmares that inhabit the waking hours of any who live near the Great Rift. How can we make such a passage in safety?”

The LoreMaster looked up from the small fire he was coaxing into life and smiled at his friend.

“Control of the Kreel you can leave to me. There is only one thing that we need if we are to make a success of this venture, and unfortunately it must be hand-made before we can begin. Tomas will not be able to be moved for at least a day, so I propose the following. We camp here for the coming day. Let your brother recover his strength and then I will call the Kreel. If we do this we can yet turn our pursuit of the Hresh into a real race.”

Mallen looked at Gremorgan and nodded. After what had happened to Tomas it seemed insane, but regardless of the danger he would do it because he knew his brother needed him to.



Tomas did not wake up that night, and Mallen spent those long hours watching over his brother. In the light of the small camp-stove the Kalborean could do little but wait as the recuperative energy of the white powders worked. At first Mallen had thought that Tomas had lost consciousness due to a blow to the head, but an examination of his scalp showed no injury. On this concern Gremorgan put his mind at rest. For the powders to work effectively against such a major wound it was necessary for him to remain at peace, unknowing of the battle being fought on his behalf.

As his brother breathed quietly beneath his blankets Gremorgan explained that Tomas should be dead, the tear in his flesh too deep to heal naturally. As they waited the powders were regenerating torn muscle, searing together bones broken, and resisting the inclination of Tomas' will to leave this world and pass into the next. The LoreMaster smiled at Mallen and assured him of the only thing that now mattered. His brother would live.

For some time Mallen remained focused on his brother's breathing, waiting for that fateful moment when no further breath would come; but Gremorgan was right, as the hours passed his breathing grew in strength and then colour returned to his face. In time he came to believe that his brother would indeed survive.

Surrounded by darkness he felt the cold chill of a growing wind, and with a need to find his travel-cloak arose from the grass to find

his pack. He had thrown it to one side when he had gone to his brother's aid and had thought little of it. As he stood Mallen took the time to stretch his legs and survey the ground about them. In the chill night air the stars burned brightly, and at both sides of the Pass he could see the dark silhouettes of the mountains that bordered it. Within this vacant space of rippling grassland only the fire shone out, and in its light Mallen could see that Gremorgan had been very busy.

Scattered about the contained flame of the camp-stove were all the LoreMaster's belongings. He had brought four satchel-like bags with him and all but one had been cut apart, the contents of the other three spread about as Gremorgan took to them with knife and scissors. All his rope and climbing gear, the leather of the three bags, and the thick cloth of Gremorgan's own travel-cloak were being cut and stitched, tied and plaited into what Mallen soon recognised as a harness.

"For the Kreel?" he asked.

The Dwarvendim nodded and threw him a piece of the Nahla cake. "There is more to riding a Kreel than simply calling them. If you are to control the beast it must be harnessed, and unfortunately we must make do with what I can put together from this meagre supply. From what you have told me in the past Mallen, you are no stranger to horse riding. The Kreel is different only in that you must take mastery of it in three dimensions."

"Yes, but a Horse won't tear you to pieces and eat your still-beating heart." said Mallen dubiously.

Gremorgan laughed then shook his head. "Today you saw a creature in the midst of its need to kill for survival, clear-headed and in control of its own destiny. There can be no doubt that they are dangerous beasts, but the two Kreel we will take to the Durgoz Hold will be unable to cause us harm. When they are called it will be against their will that they shall answer. All the energy of their existence will be consumed in trying to break the hold I will have upon them, and they will fail to do so. Where they will fly, and who they will carry will be of no moment to them, for they will be engaged in a battle that EarthMagic will win easily. When we leave them they will remember nothing and we will hopefully be closer to our goal."

The LoreMaster returned to his work and waved Mallen back to his brother. "Find your blanket and sleep Master Cael. It has been a long day and one I am sure we will both be glad to see the end of. I will continue with the artifice of these harnesses until the dawn, then I will ask you to stand watch for a time whilst I sleep. We may seem to be

alone but it is better that we remain alert nonetheless.”

Mallen grabbed up his pack and unslipped the straps that held his blanket tightly rolled. It had indeed been a long day, and with nothing more than the stars overhead made a place beside his brother before falling into sleep.

Morning came bright and clear, a strong northerly wind blowing off the cold summits of the Great Rift. For a moment Mallen collected his thoughts, the sound of the wind rushing through the grasses around him a curious distraction that kept him huddled within his blanket. Gremorgan was close, the product of his labours during the night coiled at his side. When he noticed that the Kalborean had awoken he lifted a steaming pot of water before him.

“It will be better that you have something warm in you before you start this day Mallen.” Purposefully he pointed towards the mountains and made an arc with his hand. “There will be no storms today but the wind carries with it a heavy scent of rain. We can only hope that the weather does not turn before we can make our flight into the east.”

In the keen bluster Mallen pulled his blanket about him and made for the fire. In the early light he noticed that Gremorgan had erected a small windbreak, made from sods of earth, to ward the worst of the chill from Tomas. It was a small consideration that Mallen appreciated. As he looked about the Pass he could see the last of the Colossi rearing up before them to the east. He had become used to their size, but as he peered into the morning haze there arose a darker silhouette, and it dwarfed the Colossi as a mature tree might overreach a sapling. Although it stood at a great distance it appeared as a robed, kneeling figure; one arm straight at its side, the other outstretched before it, holding in its hand a sword pointing at the ground. Its head was tilted earthwards as if in prayer.

Mallen said nothing but Gremorgan could see he was awed at its dimension.

“What you see Mallen is the Fortress known as Adamant. It is what names this pass, and the Colossi that have been our silent companions. In the ancient world Adamant was the seat of power of the Trel'sara, both their capital and their last resort in the war of Insurrection that brought them down. It is said that a betrayal opened the gates of Adamant to the besieging Hresh and the Trel were forced to flee into the far north-west, where they met their doom at Nem'haleen. It is a place that we shall not be visiting.”

“It is huge.” whispered Mallen, “Why does it still stand?”

The LoreMaster cocked his head towards the nearest Colossi. “I can only assume for the same reason that the Colossi show no age or weathering. It is something that I have no answer for, but there must be a reason regardless of my ignorance of it. One day both Adamant and the Colossi will serve a purpose, but until then it is wise to keep a safe distance.”

For a time Mallen looked on the fortress and then turned to his brother.

“How long until Tomas will awaken?” he asked.

The LoreMaster shifted his gaze to the younger Cael and then back towards Mallen. “It will be no longer than midday. The powders have done their job but it will take a few hours yet before he will be strong enough to rise on his own.”

Mallen nodded and looked to the north. The wind was rising quickly, a blustering gale that rippled through the grassland in giant waves, sending loose ground litter voyaging southwards. He could tell it was going to get very cold.

“Is it possible that we might call the Kreel now, and make our way into the east before the weather grows any worse?”

Gremorgan shook his head. “Your brother may awaken shortly, but it will be at least another half-day before he will be able to make the ride safely. Do not worry too much on this Mallen. Fate will give us the opportunity we desire. We need only be patient.”

On the need for patience Mallen could not promise restraint. He felt the need to move on keenly and knew that Tomas would have felt the same restlessness, but there was nothing that could be done. They would all have to wait.

The day marched on slowly. In the blustering winds Mallen contented himself with watching over Tomas as Gremorgan slept, and trying to find warmth in a land that had been firmly grasped by the chill of winter. Small pieces of the Nahla cake helped, its strange effects taking the numbness from his hands and feet; but none of them were properly equipped for a northern winter, and he wondered how they might survive the harsher conditions that were sure to come. There was however, a surety in Mallen's mind that Gremorgan would see them through. No matter the difficulty the LoreMaster had always found a way. It seemed to be in his nature and Mallen was glad for it.

Midday came and as Gremorgan had predicted Tomas awoke. It

took some further hours for him to find strength returning to his limbs, and it was not until dusk that he was strong enough to be told of their plan. For Tomas it was the answer to all the fears that had haunted his dreams.

Tomas had not slept peacefully. The quiet slumber of the long hours of his recovery had been a prison for the young Kalborean. Within the grasp of the healing powders he had been confronted by all the fears he held for Shemwe, played out within his dreams in chilling detail. Deliberately he recounted the nightmares that had visited him during his sleep and they left Mallen cold. They were not a surprise to the LoreMaster however.

As they sat by the small fire, chewing on Nahla cake and watching as the suns disappeared slowly into the west, Gremorgan explained the nature of the visions Tomas had experienced.

“The powders must succeed in two ways if they are to save a person from deep injury. They must first bind flesh and bone so that natural healing can begin, and they must bolster the will of the injured so that they might find a path back to health. As I have said to Mallen, it is easy for a man, badly torn and abused, to succumb to the call of the other side and find peace away from the pain and grief of his wounds. But how the powders work is different for those who must use them. Those who are lucky find themselves wandering within a void that has no pain; a grey nothingness within which they exist until they return to consciousness. A few however, troubled by tasks not yet complete, are assaulted by the worst of their fears, drawing the consciousness of the injured away from their pain and into a frightening melee of frustration and horror. This is the path you took Tomas, and no matter its difficulty it has brought you back to the living.”

Tomas nodded. “It is a truth that it was a hard path, but it has passed now. I can only hope I do not have to experience it again.”

In the firelight Mallen could see that his brother had not yet recovered from his ordeal. The younger Kalborean's face remained drawn from the effort of his healing, and his shoulders sagged beneath blankets that gave little defence from the blustering winds.

“I believe it is time for sleep Tomas.” he said.

“It is time that you both find rest.” interjected Gremorgan. “I will take the first watch, and wake Mallen at midnight to guard the remainder of the night. The Kreel will be out, but the moons will rise early. If we are lucky they will keep to the mountains. All of us must

be awake at dawn. It is then that I will call the Kreel.”

Mallen helped his brother back to the windbreak and covered him with his blanket and a thick layer of grass. When he was sure that Tomas would settle into sleep he found a space at his brother's side and made ready for his own rest. He did not remember closing his eyes.

To his surprise it was in the first glimmers of dawn that Gremorgan roused Mallen from sleep. Above him the sky was clear of cloud, the last of the brightest stars faltering in a vault of deep blue. He could hear still the wind rushing over the grassland, but it was the shadow of the LoreMaster that he focused on.

“Was I not to do a watch during the night?” he asked sleepily.

Gremorgan shrugged and pulled the Kalborean up from his resting place. “In the end I decided to take the night for my own Master Cael. It has been a long time since I have had the opportunity to simply sit and think, and it has been of great benefit to me. But come now, it is time for us to prepare. Wake your brother and we will call some monsters to our side.”

With a smile the LoreMaster made for his remaining satchel as Mallen roused his brother. Gremorgan had already packed his gear and he waited as the brothers organised themselves for the day. Quickly they worked, stowing their bedding and making what ablutions they could before the LoreMaster handed them each a piece of Nahla cake.

“There is one thing that must be explained before I call the Kreel, gentlemen.” he shouted into the growing gales. “The Kreel we call cannot be chosen. The two that are closest will come, whether old or young, energetic or diseased. There is a good chance that one will prove faster than the other, and quickly we will become separated when in flight. Of all the things that can be controlled, the speed at which they fly is not one of them. Because of this you must know the way to Durgoz Hold. The Hresh are heading there and it must be our objective as well.”

Gremorgan pointed to the Fortress of Adamant. “The pass extends beyond the fortress and opens into the Shan Valleys beyond. Once you are in the air you need only follow the pass to the east and then keep on that heading. In time you will meet with the Shan River, and then you must follow it northwards. The River is a landmark you cannot miss and it will take you to a long bridge that crosses the waters. The bridge is an arrow that points directly to Durgoz Hold in

the north-east. Follow that heading and you shall find the Hold.”

Both the Kalboreans nodded. They had not thought that there might be a chance they could be separated, but the directions were clear enough.

“And one last thing. Whoever arrives first at the gates to the Hold must wait for the other. The Kreeel must be released from their bondage together, and only when we are not within their sight. If this is done correctly they shall not remember what has been done, and they shall return to their nests.”

Mallen took up his pack and looked at Tomas. “Are you ready?” he asked his brother.

Tomas nodded and both men stood at a short distance behind the LoreMaster. Gremorgan laid out the harnesses on the grass and placed his pack by his side. In the early morning light he began.

Mallen had seen the LoreMaster work his magic before, but as he stood beside his brother he felt something deep and powerful rising through the ground beneath them. It was a sense of expectation, of powers seldom used being gathered in the bedrock of the world. And yet he could also perceive there was no malice in its essence. It was just power, and it was marshalling itself to be released.

Standing in the face of the growing winds Gremorgan raised his hands and began to chant. It started as a bare whisper, a long exhalation of breath that echoed within his thoughts, and then grew as the words found strength and purpose within the cold gales. At first his dirge was incomprehensible in the bluster, a flowing stream of ancient incantation that wove its way into the winds, turning the gales about him, focusing the energy of the rushing air upon Gremorgan himself. Within the swirling air Mallen felt the power beneath his feet growing, a potent energy that strained for release; but only a small part of its power was required, and the LoreMaster took it piecemeal as it was needed.

In rushing gusts the winds that had been caught within the LoreMaster's vortex were thrown back towards the mountains. With each charge of power Gremorgan shouted into the gales, the ancient words clear as he loosed his incantation.

“Krehl, commen ahn mahre!” he commanded, and as he did so the winds coalesced into writhing packets of EarthMagic that sped as arrows towards the far mountains. Over and over again he did so, calling the words and throwing his messengers out into the cold peaks of the Great Rift. When he was done he staggered backwards for a

moment, then took a deep breath and straightened himself.

"It is done." he said softly. "Now all we must do is wait, and it will not be long."

All three men watched, waiting for Gremorgan's call to be answered. About them the winds remained constant, the suns climbing slowly in the east as the world embraced the light of day. It was no more than twenty minutes before the first speck of black against the sky heralded the coming of the first Kreel.

"It is there!" shouted Tomas as he pointed towards the mountains. Upon the jagged outline of the Rift a shadow raced across the grey stone, then grew into the discernible shape of a Kreel winging its way directly towards them. Within minutes it took up a station directly overhead, maintaining a wide circle at high altitude.

"Watch what the Kreeel does Gentlemen. It is their way that they do not descend or ascend in a straight line unless they are plummeting upon a kill. In normal flight they change altitude only in long sweeping curves and it is something you must remember. If you wish to rise or fall whilst riding the beast it must be in that fashion as well."

Mallen watched as the huge winged lizard slowly spiralled above him. It was an effortless glide, borne of a lifetime of experience using the strong winds to keep itself aloft. Silently it made its orbit but did not come any closer. It was definitely waiting for something.

"Why does it remain on high?" he called to Gremorgan.

"I have commanded it so." replied the LoreMaster. "It will not descend until it has been met by another of its number. If we are to be successful we must have two of the creatures close as we harness them."

The Kalborean turned and watched intently. It was Tomas who saw the next Kreeel flying in from the north.

"Another comes!" he cried into the winds, and all eyes turned towards the second. Slowly it also found its own station high above, then began a wide spiral that brought it, and the first, to ground only thirty metres from where the men stood. Neither Mallen nor Tomas moved until Gremorgan called. The Kreeel were enormous.

In the bright light of day the creatures sat squat against the grass, their huge forms resting upon powerful legs that sported long dagger-like talons. To the surprise of both of the Kalboreans the Kreeel were not the drab grey they had assumed them to be. Both were a pale bone colour over most of their bodies, but across their backs and heads a mottled green predominated, thinning in a spreading wash of

blue over the upper surfaces of their wings. The Kreel stood more than two metres at the shoulder and although their wings were folded in about their bodies, Mallen estimated their wingspans at more than twelve metres each. Upon the grass the creatures sat and waited, seemingly entranced and unmoving.

“Quickly,” yelled Gremorgan as he threw one of the harnesses to the brothers. “Follow my lead and drape the harness across the back of that Kreel. I will tighten it properly once I have finished with this one.”

The LoreMaster had pointed at the larger of the beasts and tentatively Mallen and Tomas approached, testing the intent of the Kreel before getting too close. It seemed oblivious to their presence, but up close the creature was a nightmare of razor-sharp scales and teeth. Both men avoided its head as they followed Gremorgan's directions on how to place the harness.

In essence the harness was similar to that of a cart-horse's, but on a much larger scale. The LoreMaster had built two seats into its design, and as the leather and rope lengths were draped over the Kreel's body Mallen came to understand the logic in its manufacture. Long lengths of rope would extend around its body at two points, both in front of and behind the Kreel's wings, other lengths of plaited leather held the seats firmly to the creature's body between the wings. Gremorgan had provided a set of reins and a metal bit to allow a rider to pull the creature's head in any direction required. Mallen decided immediately that he would not be the one to place the bit in the Kreel's mouth.

Quickly Gremorgan fitted the harness to his mount and then did the same to the other. As he pulled and tightened the ropes and leathers he explained how the creature had to be flown.

“These Kreel do not know where they are, nor will they take any notice of who rides them. All that is required is to keep the creature pointing in the right direction and it will do everything else itself. If you must turn in any direction pull upon the reins so that the creature's head moves towards that path. If you must gain altitude pull on both reins so that the Kreel's head is pulled back, it will then turn upwards. If you need to descend, pull down on one of the reins and the Kreel will begin a slow spiral downwards. When you must land pull down on one of the reins and kick the creature with both your heels. It is as simple as that.”

“And how do we get the thing in the air?” asked Tomas.

Gremorgan smiled and pointed at the top of the Kreeel's bony head. "Hit the Kreeel upon the back of the head. The Word that keeps the creature in thrall tells it how it must react to your directions. A good crack on the plates upon the back of its head will get you going. Just hold on tight. It is quite a ride."

With the harnesses secure Gremorgan helped the Kalboreans onto the back of their Kreeel. First Tomas was placed firmly within his seat and strapped down, then Mallen took up his position, the reins of the beast his to command. Upon the back of the Kreeel Mallen could feel the creature breathing, a slow steady rhythm that he was afraid might change at any time. He could sense the enormous strength coiled in the muscles and sinew of the flying predator, and he could not quell the anxiety he felt that it would turn on them. But in the cool morning air the beast sat quiescent, and above all else he trusted the LoreMaster.

While they waited Gremorgan took his place upon the other Kreeel, strapped himself to the harness, and then motioned to his companions. It was time to leave.

Mallen hit the Kreeel with his fist on a ridge of bony plates at the back of its head. Immediately the beast raised itself upon its legs and sprang forward. Almost before the two men could take a firm enough hold the Kreeel beat its wings, huge flight muscles contracting as its leathered limbs clawed at the air. In three beats the Kreeel was airborne, and for the first time in his life Mallen left the solid confines of his world.

As he struggled to take control of the Kreeel the ground fell away, and as it did so a terror came upon him. Never had the ground been so distant, and as the creature gained altitude he held to the reins, hoping the straps that secured him to the harness would not fail. All about him was air, and the buffeting rush of the wind as the predator rose higher and began accelerating. Carefully he turned and looked to his brother. Tomas was holding onto the harness with a death-grip, but his face was looking down at the earth below, and he saw upon his visage a look of wonder that calmed Mallen and forced him to focus on what he was doing.

Tentatively he drew the Kreeel into level flight and searched the sky for Gremorgan. The LoreMaster was at their left shoulder, a few hundred metres above their position, but he was moving away, veering into the east. Mallen adjusted the heading of the Kreeel, falling in behind the Dwarvendim; and as the ground moved slowly beneath

them he took the time to search out the landmarks that would show them the way to Durgoz Hold.

Ahead lay the enormous edifice that was the Fortress of Adamant. Even from their altitude the fortress remained impressive, and as they drew closer Mallen began to realise the real scale of the structure. It was in fact, not a kneeling figure at all, but a series of cunningly interconnected towers and walls designed to give the impression of a praying form at a distance. The towers could be seen as clearly defined structures, but all about the edifice spread the remains of a city, of walls long destroyed, and roads covered by millennia of neglect. As Mallen peered down he saw also the vague outlines of other buildings, of entire towns and complexes, connected by straight roads and interspersed between ancient farmlands and vineyards. All were now nothing but grass, but somehow their height gave him the ability to see what remained, even though it was buried beneath the thick grasses of the Pass.

Quickly the Kreeel took them out of the Pass at Adamant into the wider lands of the Shan Valleys. Here the ground was open and fertile, a wide vista of river plains bordered by mountains, and cut along its centre by the Shan River itself. From their vantage Mallen could see the river as a dark line against the horizon and he made for it, the Kreeel steadily covering the distance with each beat of its enormous wings.

As they flew it was difficult not to ponder the enormous landscape that moved beneath them. All through the Shan Valleys the strange markings of a long dead civilisation showed itself as lines and dark patches upon the verdant green below. From what Gremorgan had said there had been a great empire centred in these valleys, one that had met a ruinous end at the hands of an enemy that had showed no mercy. Almost everything had been destroyed, yet the Fortress and Colossi of Adamant remained pristine. He could see the mystery of it, but knew it was a question he would find no answer for.

As he looked down at the ground Mallen felt Tomas grab his shoulder. He turned to find his brother pointing to the north.

"Its Gremorgan," he shouted into the rushing winds. "He is gone. I cannot see him anywhere."

Mallen quickly surveyed the horizon and could see nothing. "Whatever happens Tomas," he replied, "we will keep to the plan. I am sure he will be there!"

It was a sentiment whose surety disappeared as quickly as the

words were lost to the wind. Mallen had been watching the ground moving beneath them and had not noticed Gremorgan's departure. For a fleeting moment he found himself doubting his ability to control the beast alone, but he knew where he was going and stuck to the heading, letting the Kreel forge on towards the Shan River.

Two hours brought the men to the flow of the Shan, and carefully Mallen turned the Kreel to the north-west, following the meander of its waters. The river itself was enormous, a wide but shallow watercourse that had its source in the distant mountains. Mallen knew that the Shan was not as long, nor as reliable as the Laneslem to the south, but he had heard much discussion on the possibilities of using the river to settle the valleys. Apart from the lands of central Kalborea in the far south there were few places as fertile as the Shan to be found in Arborell. But for the fact that the Great Rift was so close, and therefore the Hordim as well, it would have been already been settled.

The Kreel did not falter as Mallen carefully steered it along the line of the river. The day had remained clear, their visibility reaching to the haze of the horizon in all directions. As Mallen kept the Kreel on course Tomas searched the banks of the Shan, looking for the long bridge that would be their landmark to turn in towards the mountains. If the LoreMaster's directions were correct the entrance to Durgoz Hold should be easy to find. Not everything about their flight however, was proving to be as straightforward.

Since entering the Pass of Adamant the weather had turned cold, the winds of the north strong and relentless in their passage from the high mountains of the Rift. At the altitude they were flying the winds were chilling, and in the rushing air there was no escape from its effects. Slowly the cold had found its way through all their clothing, and it had been only the small amount of Nahla Cake they had carried with them that kept the frigid air at bay. Even so Mallen could feel his hands numbing, his lower legs tingling as if the blood supply had been cut from his limbs. It would not be long before he would lose all feeling in his feet and he knew he could not allow that to happen.

Behind him Tomas was fairing no better.

"The cold is becoming too much for me Tomas." He shouted to his brother. "I am going to put the Kreel down much closer to the ground. We may find some respite at a lower altitude."

Tomas nodded and held on all the tighter as Mallen dragged the

reins to the right and downwards. Immediately the Kreel responded, beginning a slow spiral that took them in a wide arc, descending towards the flowing waters of the Shan.

When they were no more than fifty metres from the ground Mallen levelled the Kreel, and then returned to following the banks of the river. Around them the winds still blew, but the cold proved less insistent and Mallen began to feel some life returning to his legs.

At this lower altitude the speed of the Kreel seemed almost overwhelming. At altitude the progress of their flight had been marked by the slow march of the ground beneath them. It was a deceptive impression of steady travel, without any indication of the true speed they were flying at. Closer to the ground the creature's velocity took their breath away. Upon the Kreel the ground sped past like a blanket being pulled quickly from a bed. Trees darted past the creature's wings, landmarks and shallow hills slipped away before the Kalboreans could recognise what they had left behind. It was an inexorable parade of speeding terrain that led them directly to the bridge at the Shan River.

From the flat grassland ahead a tall tower arose, high and solid against the river's edge. Quickly the brothers searched the river for sign of a bridge, and found it as a long line of derelict arches that spanned the rushing waters. At both ends of the bridge stood a tall watchtower and as Mallen turned the Kreel he lined up the towers, marking a deep cleft in the far mountains as his objective. Without stopping to consider the ancient structure he turned the Kreel onto its new heading and made for Durgoz Hold.

At a rapid pace the fertile grasslands fell behind the brothers, and soon they rose into a thickly forested woodland, then a series of foothills that the Kreel followed faithfully, using the air currents to maintain a consistent height above the cold hills. To the north the Massif of the Great Rift lay as an impassable barrier of grey stone, barren and windswept, crowned with summits of gleaming snow and ice.

Within the confines of the foothills Mallen strove to keep the Kreel on its heading, the creature's natural inclination to follow the curves of the terrain drawing it to the south, but the predator was under the thrall of the LoreMaster and it took Mallen's commands without hesitation. Quickly they made the edge of the mountains themselves, and beneath an enormous crack in a shear cliff found the remnants of a wide plateau of stone. Upon this shelf of rock opened the entrance

to Durgoz Hold.

At great speed they made the plateau and Mallen turned the Kreel in an arc that allowed them to search for any sign of Gremorgan. He was not on the plateau but the bright colouration of his Kreel could be seen in a shallow depression to the east of the rock-shelf. Without really knowing what he was doing, Mallen pulled the Kreel's head to the right and kicked it in the flanks with his boots. The beast screeched once and then turned, spiralling down in a flat curve towards the other of its kind. Quickly the ground rose to greet them and with a bone-jarring crunch the Kreel came to rest upon a slope of loose scree. For a moment both brothers did not move. It was Tomas who spoke first.

“Lets get off this thing before it remembers who it is, eh?”

Mallen did not feel like arguing and moved to unstrap his legs. It was then that he felt the full affects of the flight. Both legs were numb, all sensation lost to them in the insistent cold of their travels. Carefully he pulled one, then the other over the side of the beast, but too late he realised his error. Without being able to stop himself he slid from the side of the Kreel and hit the ground, rolling onto the scree and stopping directly under the head of his mount. The Kreel looked down at him and then sniffed at his hair.

“Probably not the best place to end up, Master Cael.” came a voice from further down the slope. It was Gremorgan, and he appeared hurried.

“You have arrived in a timely manner, but we will have to move quickly. The Kreel must be set free for we will shortly have visitors.”

Without ceremony the LoreMaster scooped up the older brother and placed him further up the edge of the depression. Then quickly he stripped the harnesses from the Kreel and directed Tomas to give Mallen another piece of Nahla cake. When the harnesses had been discarded the LoreMaster turned to his companions.

“Before we do anything we must release the Kreel from their bondage.” Purposefully he surveyed the scree slope and pointed to a gathering of large boulders. “We shall hide here whilst I recant the Word that has held them to our service.”

Carefully Tomas helped Mallen into the shadows of the boulders and Gremorgan followed. When all were out of sight the LoreMaster whispered quietly into a handful of powdered rock he had scooped from the ground. As the two brothers watched Gremorgan let the dust go, the wind taking hold of it, carrying it in a writhing plume

towards the squatting Kreel. The moment the wind-borne dust touched the first winged lizard the manner of the predators changed. From docile and compliant the larger Kreel became angered, shaking its head and snapping at the smaller. The other Kreel covered and retreated, taking no time to rise once again into the air. The larger Kreel raised its head and let loose an ear-piercing screech that echoed off the nearby cliff-face and sounded loudly out into the foothills below them. Before Mallen could take his hands from his ears the creature was gone, a quickly shrinking shadow against the perfect blue of the sky.

Gremorgan turned to his friends and smiled slightly.

“It would seem that Fate has treated us kindly. We have arrived in safety and I can tell you now that the Hresh are only minutes from our position.” He pointed into the west, towards the edge of the depression and the plateau beyond.

“Just on the other side of the rock-shelf the warband is struggling up an ancient path towards us. Their intention is to make for the entrance. Somewhere inside the Hold is what they need to make for the other side of the Great Rift. If we are to retrieve Shemwe it must be here that we do it.”

Tomas stood and unsheathed his sword. Mallen found the warmth returning to his legs and struggled to his feet. “We are ready. Let us take back that which is ours.”

All three men climbed up the loose scree and took positions against the edge of the plateau. From where he lay Mallen could see the rock shelf as a wide, open rectangle of broken stone, once a perfectly laid floor of flagstones, but fractured and worn by millennia of exposure to the elements. The entrance to Durgoz Hold sat against the sheer cliff-face to the north, a gaping arch bordered by two huge statues, each a smaller representation of the Colossi they had left far behind in the Pass of Adamant. Between the statues he could see something else although the distance did not allow him to recognise it properly. It seemed as if something had been chained to the statues but he could not be sure. Gremorgan was also looking towards the entrance intently. He did not seem pleased.

“This is an unforeseen complication, and it is one that makes our need to retrieve Shemwe here all the more important. See between the statues? There is a creature there; what the Hordim would call a Grievous. It is a guardian of sorts, and a formidable one to place at the entrance of such an old ruin. There must be something truly

important within the Hold to warrant such a sentinel.”

Tomas peered over the lip of the plateau and then turned back to Gremorgan. “What is it exactly?” he asked. “And why does it make Shemwe’s recovery any more urgent?”

Gremorgan pointed to the entrance. “The creature itself is a Hresh, but one that has been turned and distorted through cruelty and hunger. Such has been the treatment it has received that it has lost its mind, reduced to a ravening chained animal that will kill anything that comes within the reach of its bonds. Only those that have set it here will be able to pass safely, and I have no doubt the Denmar Hresh are its masters.”

“But it is not the creature itself that is the problem. Around its neck it will be carrying a talisman of the ancient world known as a Shieldstone. Although we cannot see it there will be a wall of energy covering the entire entranceway. The Hresh will be able to get through it for they will have a key. We do not.”

“Then we must take Shemwe here. This is the place where we make our attempt.” Tomas had a tight grip on his sword and Mallen could see the determination in his brother’s eyes.

Gremorgan nodded. “Yes, it must be here. But I must tell you that there is one other surviving prisoner, and she must be recovered as well.”

Mallen stood and walked out onto the plateau. “There seems little point in hiding then. If the Hresh are coming we must stand between them and the Hold or all will be lost.”

Gremorgan also stood and Tomas followed. Quickly they moved out onto the open ground and waited. The Grievous saw them as well, and howled like a wild animal as it strained against its chains. Mallen did not hear it. All the struggle of their pursuit; the endless days of fatigue and privation had come to this, and he was focused only on the battle to come. All he could sense was the presence of Tomas and Gremorgan at his side, and the cold weight of his sword in his hand. And then he saw them. Over the edge of the rise the Hresh were coming.

## Chapter 15 - Perdition



The first warrior crested the rise as if moving in slow motion. Struggling against the steep slope the Hordim found a footing upon the edge of the plateau, and hauled himself onto its hard stone surface. Captured in the bright light his visage was worn and fatigued, his clothing and armour dusted and scarred. Long weeks on the march had left their mark upon the Hresh, and as he caught his breath he looked long and hard at the three men standing between him and the entrance to Durgoz Hold.

Behind him the others of his number made their own way onto the plateau but there was no pause for them, no respite when the object of their long journey was so close. In a line they formed, drawing scimitars as they ran, not deviating from their intended path as they charged for the entrance to the ruined stronghold.

Standing before them the Men waited steadfastly for the inevitable clash of arms that would see them either dead, or in possession of Shemwe. For his part Mallen watched intently as the Hresh closed upon them. Of the hundreds of warriors that had attacked Callenfrey only a handful had survived the long trek back to the Rift Mountains. As he stood waiting he could count only twelve, but all were large and strong, though each had wounds and burdens of their own to carry. Across one of the warrior's shoulders he could see draped Tomas' fiancée, unconscious but alive, and on another's the emaciated remains of another red-haired woman. At this closer range he recognised her as Enika Torres, daughter to a silversmith who had lived no more than three doors from his own shop. He could not tell if she had survived but he knew they would soon find out.

It was Gremorgan who acted first. Throwing his remaining bags to the ground he called out to the approaching Hresh.

"Ansolon'Denmar, I know who you are! Give over those you have taken and you may pass freely here. Continue on and you shall find yourself at the gates of Hallen'draal sooner than you should."

The Hresh Chieftain smirked slightly but did not falter. He had the advantage of numbers over the Men who stood in his way, but he had lost far too many of his own crue to wish any confrontation here. As was his way he had a plan, and without hesitation he put it into motion.

Deftly Ansolon pulled a small metal canister from his breastplate and depressed a lever upon its upper edge. He waited only a moment, judging when he should throw it before lobbing the device towards the Men. It was Gremorgan who recognised it for what it was.

“Flash-charge!” he yelled to the Caels, “Cover your...”

Before he could finish his warning the charge detonated, an actinic pulse of light and sound erupting from the canister, throwing the three men backwards as the Hresh closed the distance between them. Caught completely within the explosion the Dwarvendim and Kalboreans disappeared in a roiling cloud of dirt and smoke. When it lifted the men lay unconscious, stunned by the power of the charge and unable to defend themselves.

For a moment Ansolon brought his warriors to a halt and looked at the prostrate forms of his enemies. In other times he would have killed them out of hand, but he could not help but admire their persistence. He had felt the presence of their pursuit since the battle upon the Surgis'Ka and had done all that he could to shake them. In truth he did not know how they had come to be here ahead of his own warband, nor how they knew where he was taking his captives, but their appearance now gave him an opportunity unforeseen. Tomas had escaped him once before and it would be the red-haired one that would now stay his hand.

Quickly he ordered one of his warriors to take Tomas, hoisting the Kalborean's limp body onto his broad shoulders as they turned again for Durgoz Hold. Before them lay their way home, and if all went well they would soon find sanctuary once again within the lands of their brothers.

Mallen found his way back to consciousness only to find Gremorgan standing over him. The Dwarvendim loomed tall against the sky, but for a moment he could remember little of what had happened. Only as he tried to rise did his head begin to pound, and unable to resist the agonies that lanced across his skull he fell back onto the stone plateau.

“What in Arborell was that?” he whispered into the air.

Gremorgan put out his hand and helped the Kalborean to his feet. “The Hresh used a flash-charge. A cunning little device that stuns without causing injury. We are unharmed but I am afraid that the warband has found its way into the Hold, and we have once again no option but to pursue them.”

Mallen looked to the huge entrance and noticed that the Grievous

had gone as well.

“Are we now lost then? Is Shemwe beyond our reach?”

The LoreMaster took the young Kalborean by the shoulder and looked him squarely in the eye.

“Mallen, they have retaken your brother. Tomas is gone.”

In a fog of disbelief Mallen could say nothing. It was only as he surveyed the now empty plateau that the truth of Gremorgan's words became clear.

“Tomas. The Hresh have him again?”

The Dwarvendim nodded and then pointed to the entrance to the Hold. “He may be gone but he is not yet lost to us. The Grievous has been taken as well and so to is the shield that protected the entranceway. Whatever is within the mountain is now open to us as well. I say we find out, and get back your countrymen no matter what it takes.”

“No matter what it takes.” muttered Mallen. All the energy remaining to him had been drained away by the news of his brother's capture, but he also knew that if there was a chance to recover him he would take it. Quickly he gathered up his equipment and began to run for the entranceway.

The two men entered Durgoz Hold and found themselves quickly lost to the shadows of the ancient ruin. Like other delvings of its type the stronghold was old beyond the reckoning of Men, and in its weathered and fractured state it reached into the rock as a series of long chambers connected by a network of passages and defensive positions. Within the dust and broken stone the clear trail of the Hresh made a path straight for the heart of the mountain.

Through wide arched halls and dark corridors Mallen followed the deep imprints of the Hordim. Gremorgan trailed close at his shoulder, watching the surrounding stone for any sign of traps or devices as they ran. It was a gruelling chase, one that left them little choice but to charge through the silent corridors, giving no regard to stealth or caution.

On Mallen's face Gremorgan could see nothing but torment. The Kalborean had lost his brother once before to the Hresh and had embarked on this journey to recover him. It had been through some strange act of Providence that the Caels had found their way into his life, and then to a complete turn in his own destiny. He knew that his fate had been intertwined with that of the Kalboreans, and that the Powers of the World were using the brothers for a purpose that he

could not yet fathom. Whatever was now to happen would unfold as another step along a path that had been fashioned by others, and one upon which he now had little control.

Only once did the two men stop to rest within the upper levels of the Hold, and then only for enough time to quickly eat a few pieces of the Nahla cake. In the cool darkness of a debris strewn hallway both ate quietly, the rich, spicy smell of the cake spreading about them.

“What are the Hresh doing here, Gremorgan?” asked Mallen softly. “Could there be any other place in the world more ruinous than this?”

The LoreMaster looked to the way ahead and shook his head.

“I cannot answer your question Master Cael. The Hresh do nothing without a purpose though it escapes me as well. I have never heard of a path leading beneath the mountains here, and all logic tells me that we are pursuing the warband into a rather long and dangerous dead-end.”

For a moment Gremorgan stared at the ground beneath his feet then turned to Mallen.

“You know Master Cael, it occurs to me that there is one thing in this world that might aid the Hordim, although to find it here would be unusual indeed.”

Without saying anything more he rummaged through his pack and found a tightly wrapped cloth. Carefully the Dwarvendim lifted his Dirge-compass from its bindings and opened it before him. To Mallen's surprise the entire hall about them brightened to the intense light that shone forth from the small device. The reaction on Gremorgan's face was clearly illuminated as well.

“By the Powers, Master Cael. There is indeed something down here, and by the hand of Providence it remains active. If we hurry this chase may not yet be over.”

Quickly Gremorgan re-wrapped the compass and shouldered his pack. “Put your nose to the trail Mallen. At the end of these tracks we will find a way to your brother.”

Mallen could not understand what the LoreMaster meant but he trusted him completely, and in the light of a small orb conjured by the Dwarvendim he followed the Warband's footfalls further into the root of the mountain.

For an hour the men chased down the Hordim, and as they ran through the dark spaces the air about them became heavier and more humid. Ahead of them the Hresh kept to a single path, one that found its way through a succession of large halls and ancient corridors.

Mallen kept focused to the trail but he noticed also the incursion of large stalagmites that grew out of the Hold's flooring, oozing up the sides of high vaults and spreading in wide cascades of frozen crystal from the walls. In the light of Gremorgan's orb the crystalline flows glistened and sparkled as they passed, a rainbow of colour highlighting how much the natural world had encroached upon the ancient delving.

Within this alien world of shimmering stone the two men gave themselves no time to rest or falter. The Hordim moved with no concern for going unnoticed, and upon their clear trail Mallen found himself charging forward, Gremorgan urging caution but just as anxious to find Tomas and the captive women.

Through the quiet chambers the men ran, pausing only to examine the body of a dead Hresh that had been cast to the side of a long corridor. From their first glance it was evident that the Hresh had been killed, his throat cut and his equipment spoiled from his body. One piece of clothing remained though, and its coloured markings were not the same as the Denmark Hresh they were pursuing.

"This is not one of the warband, is it?" asked Mallen.

Gremorgan nodded his head and tested a blood stained piece of cloth between his fingers. "No Master Cael. This is indeed a Hresh of the Tomsk Kraal, and he has been executed here probably because he was following the main Denmark warband when they first entered these halls. You have no doubt noticed that the tracks you have been following go both ways. Both down into the mountain, but also the other way, following their path back to the surface and the lands of Men beyond. The politics of the Hordim are as complicated as our own and it would not be unknown for the Kraals to keep tabs on each other. I would say this fellow got a little too close to the Denmark and paid for it with his life."

Mallen stood and caught his breath for a moment. "How much farther?" he asked.

The LoreMaster took out his Dirge-Compass and turned to the way ahead. "Not very far." he said simply, and the two men began to run again.

As they descended the ground slowly changed. Soon they found shallow pools of water and wide falls of stone edging the path, obscuring and then obliterating the smoother surfaces of carved stone walls, only to be replaced by the rougher edges of a network of natural caverns. It was at the bottom of one of these caverns that the

men found an end to the trail left by the Hordim, and the objective of all their long weeks of travel.

Within a small untouched chamber of black crystal a platform had been raised more than five metres high, shining and smooth in the shadows. Upon this imposing dais a wide circle of dark stone stood upright, intricately carved as an intertwined sculpture of tree branches and vines. Within the space encompassed by the ring its interior roiled with a thick undulating mist, and from within its vapours Mallen could hear voices, although he could not understand them.

Gremorgan placed his finger to his lips and bade Mallen to silence. Carefully they backed away from the ring before Gremorgan spoke.

“This is a Gate, Master Cael, a way to connect two points and travel between them without the expenditure of either time or effort. Such Gates are rare indeed and I have no knowledge of one here within the Durgoz Hold. And yet here it stands and it is still active.”

“But who is on the other side?” asked Mallen.

“Guards probably,” replied the LoreMaster. “A Gate is not an easy thing to open and you cannot be completely sure where it will take you, or when it will close. I would say though, that the voices we can hear are Hresh stationed by the Gate to ensure no-one else comes through until it closes itself down. If we are to make use of it we will have to do so now, but you must understand Mallen, that there is a chance this device could take us anywhere in the known world. A simple step into the mists may leave us with months of travel to return to the lands of Men.”

The young Kalborean looked to the swirling mist and knew what he had to do. Drawing his sword he walked forward as Gremorgan readied his axe. Somewhere on the other side of the Durgoz Gate he would find Tomas.



In the moment the Kalborean stepped into the swirling mist he ceased to exist. Although his consciousness remained intact it was as though he had stepped into a void, one that stripped him of any senses, leaving him twisting disincorporated in a nothingness from

which came no sound or brush of air upon his face. In this strange emptiness he paused, but only momentarily, for from somewhere outside of his own thoughts he began to feel a presence, one that pulled firmly at his consciousness, propelling him deeper into the limitless void.

Within this nothingness his speed increased, accelerating quickly to a velocity that left his thoughts scattered in the void behind him. In the maelstrom Mallen swirled and spun like a leaf in the wind, the power compelling him forward, until there was nothing in the emptiness but the terrible rush and an absolute helplessness to do anything about it. It was a ride that left him vertiginous and numb, but it was a ride that ended in a fractured second as he returned to the real world.

Tumbling out onto a wide shelf of rock Mallen lay still, his head reeling from the headlong rush of his transit through the device. Prostrate and helpless he could do nothing but watch as Gremorgan attacked the two sentries guarding the great ring of stone. Before either could turn the Dwarvendim descended upon them, cutting down one, then the other in a succession of deadly blows with his axe. For whatever reason the Hresh were standing sentinel at the gate, but their attention had been focused upon the wide plains beyond, not at the possibility of others making their way through. Surprise made the combat quick and Gremorgan did not pause once the fight had ended.

Quickly he ran to Mallen and hauled him to his feet. Standing on the stone platform the Kalborean found himself looking out over a vast plain, covered with tough grasses and suffering the first effects of a cold winter. To the north he could see fresh falls of snow against the horizon and above him the bluest sky he had ever seen.

“Where are we?” he asked in a whisper.

Gremorgan raised his eyebrows and smiled. “It is a good question Master Cael. I cannot say exactly; but seeing snow in the north, and the Great Rift behind us in the south, provides a strong clue that we have found our way into the lands of Perdition. This is Horde territory Mallen, probably the homelands of the Denmar Hresh themselves. We must tread carefully for here we are interlopers in a realm that will not suffer us kindly.”

Mallen turned and looked to the south. There the mountains of the Great Rift were little more than a dark haze spread upon the horizon, only a few indistinct peaks any semblance of the vast mountain range they had journeyed beneath. The Kalborean could not fathom how

they had been transported here, but in his heart he knew that only with the help of the LoreMaster could he ever get back.

As Mallen steadied himself Gremorgan searched the plains beneath them for a sign of the warband. The stone ring stood upon a hill that commanded a view of the desolate land about them and it did not take long to find the Hresh.

“There,” he shouted as he pointed just west of north, “The warband is now ten strong and encumbered by the weight of their captives. If we make haste we will have them by nightfall.”

Mallen could not see the Hordim, but he took Gremorgan at his word and followed as the Dwarvendim made for the edge of the stone platform. In the bright light of day the two men descended a winding stairway cut into the side of the hill, finding another landing and then the remains of a road that led northwards. Immediately Gremorgan took to the path and together they began their sojourn into the lands of the Denmar.

Upon the hard ground Gremorgan and Mallen ran. It was a state of existence that the Kalborean had become accustomed to, the endless fatigue of the chase, the hurried meals of Nahla Cake and the continuous searching for sign as they hunted the Hresh. In this fashion the day passed slowly from clear skies into dusk, the lands about them opening up as a windswept tundra of frozen ground and clumps of stunted grasses.

Under a darkening sky Mallen followed the trail left by the Hordim. Safe within their own lands the Hresh had divested themselves of any pretence of stealth or concealment, and the footfalls of the warriors were clearly marked upon the trail and in the surrounding grasses. About them the landscape proved empty, and strangely it was nothing like what Mallen had expected. In his mind's eye he had imagined the lands of the Hordim to be barren and tortured, a scene of roiling fumes and steaming lava pits. Instead he had found solitude and an overwhelming sense of isolation. Upon the broad tundra it felt as if they were alone, travelling within a world devoid of life, and in the grip of a clinging cold that could not be escaped.

From the north the winds blustered in a constant ebb and flow of chilled air, that arose from the permanent ice caps before them and which found no warmth on their journeys across the flat plains. All about him there was nothing but the tundra and he could not help wondering where the Hresh were going. If anything they seemed to be passing further into the cold desolation of the plains.

“What is their plan Gremorgan? Why are they not making directly for their homes?”

The Dwarvendim stopped in his pursuit and took a moment to catch his breath.

“As I have said Master Cael, the machinations of the Hordim are unknown to me, but you know that what the Denmar Hresh are doing is not in the interests of the Clavern'sigh. I can only assume that for the moment they wish to remain unnoticed here as much as they had desired to be in the lands of Men.”

Mallen was about to ask more of the LoreMaster but Gremorgan turned and began to run once again. Quickly they passed over the plains, keeping a heading that ran slightly upon the shoulder of true north. Finding the Hresh was their only concern and by the first glow of twilight both came to a quiet halt near a wide spread of scattered boulders. Gremorgan motioned Mallen to the ground and both men crawled into a space between two large stones. Beyond the outcrop the Kalborean could see the Hresh, camped around a small fire and organising themselves for the coming night. To one side sat Shemwe, Tomas and Erika Torres.

“Can you see how they are?” Mallen whispered.

Gremorgan stared intently into the gathering darkness but his attention was focused more on the Hresh, and particularly the Grievous, who sat chained to a rock only a short distance further from the fire.

“All are alive,” he answered, “and that is something we can be thankful for.”

Mallen looked at the Dwarvendim and pointed at the three captives. “When shall we recover them? I believe that they will be best taken in the dark of night, whilst the Hresh sleep.”

Gremorgan shook his head and drew back from their vantage point so that he might sit with his back to the cold stone. When Mallen had found a position next to him he took a piece of Nahla Cake and handed it to the Kalborean.

“You know the capabilities of the Hordim, Mallen. Even as we sit here they will be organising their camp, setting sentries and ensuring their captives are well secured. In the dark they have better eyesight than ourselves and I doubt we will be able to find a path to your brother undiscovered. For us there must be a harder and more dangerous course of action. If you trust me Mallen, you must hold your need to retrieve your brother until the first light of dawn. Then

you shall have Tomas and he shall finally have back his fiancée. More importantly we shall all be alive.”

The young Kalborean moved to argue the point but Gremorgan put his fingers to his lips and bade him quiet. The Hordim were no more than fifty metres from where they sat, and as they would not be able to light a fire of their own he knew it was going to be a long, cold night.

Mallen did not like it but there was nothing else to be done. Without Gremorgan at his side there was no way he could rescue his brother, and the LoreMaster would not be swayed. In the darkness he waited, watching the night sky revolve upon its axis as Elanna and Shabel journeyed from the eastern horizon to their resting places in the west. In the camp there was little movement, only the infrequent shuffling of the guards as they changed watches any indication that there was anyone awake at all. It was a quiet night broken only by the cries of animals in the distance, and the smooth rush of Kreeel as they circled about the plains looking for an easy meal. Mallen was not surprised that the flying reptiles left the Hordim well alone.

Dawn came as a wash of colour that spread across the eastern horizon, growing brighter until the first sun of morning rose into the sky. The Hresh were already about, the rituals of their morning completed before the sunrise that heralded the new day. Behind the rocks the Dwarvendim and Kalborean lay patiently, watching the Hordim as they prepared to break camp. It was only as the warriors were forming to move out that Gremorgan finally moved himself.

“Do you trust me Mallen?” he said quietly.

Mallen nodded but he could not know what was to happen next. He was expecting a fight, and although it would come, it was not in a manner that he could have foreseen. Before the Kalborean could stop Gremorgan, the LoreMaster rose from the stone outcrop and walked boldly towards the assembled Hresh.

“Ansolon'Denmar!” he shouted into the blustering winds. “I know who you are, and I know the purpose of your mission in the lands of Men. Hear me Oera'dim, for there is an assassin in your midst, and treachery follows in its shadow.”

All the Hresh turned at the sound of the Dwarvendim's voice and began to run for him, but their Chieftain called them to a halt and instead answered Gremorgan's words.

“I can only say that you are a persistent *vehmin*, Gremorgan of the Grand Circle. Yes, I know of you too, but you have me at a

disadvantage for I know not your purpose here. Speak quickly LoreMaster. In these lands we do not suffer Men to walk freely.”

Gremorgan pulled his axe from its sheathe and dropped it onto the hard ground. He called for Mallen who also rose and stood at his side before he continued.

“I know of your purpose in the lands of Men and I am here to tell you that your chosen path cannot succeed. The spark that gives Men life is different from your own and you cannot use it to sully the River of Life. It will not work. I am here to tell you of a different path, one that will take the Word of Command out of the hands of the Clavern'sigh. You can be free Ansolon'Denmar, you need only listen to me.”

The Hresh warrior smirked but the LoreMaster knew altogether too much of his plans and purpose.

“Why should I trust you stone-eater? My crue has been all but destroyed but I have what I need. These red-haired vehmin are my captives and I will do with them as I wish.”

“True,” answered the LoreMaster, “but heed this carefully. I may know of your plans but I am not the only one. The Clavern'sigh knows also of your intent for they have placed a *shadi* amongst you, and it waits only for the opportunity to kill you all.”

Without waiting for the Hresh's reply Gremorgan walked forward and pointed at the Grievous.

“Come Sil,” he said firmly, “it is time that you show yourself for what you truly are.”

In that instant the camp turned to chaos as the insane Hresh went berserk. Screaming in a blind rage the Grievous broke its chains as if they were string and swung them in a wide arc towards the LoreMaster. Caught by surprise the nearest Hresh was torn apart by the flailing ends of its restraints, but the Grievous was not going to wait for the warriors or men to attack it first.

Thrusting its fists into the hard earth the disfigured and tormented Hresh began to change. As if it was drawing earth and stone into its own body it used the material to grow and expand. In a matter of a few heartbeats the creature stood five metres tall, a swelling and distorted form that looked down at Gremorgan with murder in its eyes.

“It is a *dweo'gorga*.” the LoreMaster yelled at Ansolon. “A shape-shifter sent to infiltrate your warband and destroy you all. Stay clear or you will die.”

To Gremorgan's dismay the Hresh did not fall back. Instead they rushed the giant, scimitars drawn against the massive limbs of the shape-shifter. It proved a futile gesture, the warriors insignificant against its growing bulk, and giving them no heed the shape-shifter charged at Gremorgan, the Hresh swept aside as it ran. With one crushing blow one of the Hordim was smashed to earth and before its rage another two of the warriors died before the LoreMaster could take action.

In a searing explosion of light a ball of energy erupted from Gremorgan's hands. It was a sun in miniature, burning brightly against the softer light of the day. All retreated before its blinding glare except for the creature. It stood heaving and striking out with its now clawed hands, but it did not know what was about to happen.

Without warning the ball of energy flew towards the *dweo'gorga*, enveloping it tightly in its powerful grasp. Paralysed within the encompassing sphere the creature struggled to escape but Gremorgan could not let it live. Holding his arms before the burning power of his magic he looked the shape-shifter in the eye and chanted.

*:oel viis emur a'd u sa' nuul:*

Like a thunderclap that erupts out of a clear sky Mallen could feel the air about them break and contort to the power of Gremorgan's words, his body serving as a conduit, channelling a rushing energy that erupted from the *Dwarvendim*'s hands, reaching out and enveloping itself firmly about the struggling form of the Shape-shifter.

In wonder the Hresh stood quiet as the energy conjured by the LoreMaster tore at the body of the *dweo'gorga*, lifting it into the air so that it hung defenceless before them. In desperation the creature changed form again, this time mimicking the diminutive form of the *Faeyen* girl, *Sil*.

At the sight of the girl Mallen ran forward but was stopped by Gremorgan with a quick wave of his hand.

"Do not be fooled by this creature Mallen. *Sil* is long dead, and now her killer is about to be brought to account."

Before them the *dweo'gorga* twisted within the vice-like grip of Gremorgan's magic, and as it came to realise that it could not free itself it stopped struggling and looked towards the *Dwarvendim*.

"Why do you do this LoreMaster?" it cried pitifully. "Am I not your friend, and your only true ally here?"

Gremorgan did not answer. His focus was concentrated on controlling the power of the Word he had conjured, and it took all the strength he had to stop it from erupting outwards and destroying all the Hordim around him as well. In reply he drew the power into a tighter embrace, holding the girl-creature all the firmer.

For Sil there could be no escape. The LoreMaster had used the Word of Dissolution upon her and its power would not ebb until its job was done. As it held the girl in its hold the Word began to delve deeply into the creature's form, searching out the spark of existence that was its life-force. In a tearing jerk the girl's body opened up, and for just an instant a bright speck gleamed in her ragged chest. But it was for only an instant. With an agonising scream the creature's spark evaporated and with it so did her body. When the EarthMagic receded there remained nothing but a thin vapour that dissipated quickly into the winds, and for a long moment nobody moved. It was Tomas who broke the silence.

"Mallen, get me out of these stinking ropes so I can see to Shemwel!"

The Kalborean moved to oblige but a gesture from Ansolon had his remaining warriors already moving to intercept him. They did not attack Mallen though. The Hresh Chieftain knew he was standing before the wielder of a power that could remove him from the world with just a few words, and for the first time in his life he felt fear.

"What is it you want of us LoreMaster. You have the Word of Dissolution at your command, why do you not use it?"

Gremorgan stood before the Hresh, power still coruscating in a sparkling aura around him. It seemed that at any moment he could do exactly what the Hordim feared, but it was not his intention nor his want.

"I am not here to destroy you Ansolon'Denmar. I am a servant of the Silvan Tree and I now do the bidding of the Powers of this world regardless of my prior allegiances. They have given me a greater mission and I have come to this desolate place to tell you that you must be a part of it."

The Hresh shook his head and looked to the north. "There is nothing that I can give that could aid the wielder of such power. In this world I am a chattel to the Clavern'sigh, and although I plot against them it would seem they already know my intent. It can only be a matter of days before another assassin will find its way to my side."

Gremorgan moved closer to the Hresh and gestured towards the

Hordim's captives.

“It has been foretold that you must take me to the Horns of Gorgoroth. The task of doing so has been placed in your hands Ansolon, but I must ask that these captives be released to my companion and then returned safely to the Lands of Men. The Caer'dahl has divined that their lives will not end here, and I do not know the consequences if you act rashly towards them. I have the sense that they also have a part to play in this endeavour, even if it remains hidden from us. Make it your duty to see these things done and you may yet see the downfall of the Clavern'sigh.”

Ansolon did not wish to hear the words but he could not refuse either. Although he had only heard rumours of the dissolution he had just witnessed, he knew enough to know that the Word required not only knowledge but the proper place to invoke it. Spoken in the Hall of Creation the Word of Dissolution would remove the Oera'dim from the world, and in its wake leave nothing but wisps of vapour to mark their passing. The fact that the LoreMaster had been able to use it on the dweo'gorga, and keep its wild need to destroy bound to just that creature was a testament to the power inherent in the Man himself.

In the end however, it was his duty to his Kraal that compelled his agreement. He was a Chieftain, and with that came the responsibility to do what was necessary to ensure the survival of the Denmar. Under the Word of Command uttered by the Clavern'sigh his brothers had been turned into nothing better than slaves, and he would do anything to save them from such a fate. If the vehmin truly had a plan to bring down the power of the Mutan he would be at his side no matter how much he hated his kind.

“And what is your mission LoreMaster? The Horns of Gorgoroth are the birthing place of the Oera'dim, sacred to all and undefiled by the presence of Men. What can you do there that could not be done in the halls of the Clavern itself?”

Gremorgan smiled and shrugged his shoulders.

“My task has not yet been revealed to me. You know as well as I that the Powers do not give a Being in their servitude such knowledge until it is needed. A Caer'dahl came to me in the night hours and commanded my obedience, giving me only the task of finding my way to the Horns. The mission shall be uncovered only when I reach them.”

Turning to the Hresh he gave over his hand. “We are both servants to the whims of greater powers than ourselves, Ansolon'Denmar.

What say we carve a destiny for ourselves that will shake the halls of the Clavern'Sigh to their foundations.”

The Hordim hesitated then took the LoreMaster's hand in return.

“You have my oath, Gremorgan Hedj. May we not live to regret it.”



Mallen did not wait to find out what Gremorgan and the Hresh were talking about. His brother lay no more than twenty metres from where he stood and he was not about to ask for anyone's permission. Running for Tomas he brushed aside the one warrior that stood in his way and quickly cut the ropes that kept him bound. Stiffly at first, Tomas rose and steadied himself.

“Well you took your time.” he said smiling.

Mallen laughed and hugged him, not quite understanding how they had once again come together. Tomas however, was not so sure what was going on.

“What is Gremorgan up to? Something particularly clever I should imagine.”

Mallen looked to the earnest conversation between the two and shrugged his shoulders. As long as there was no violence at hand he had other concerns. With Tomas at his side he quickly made for Shemwe and Enika Torres. Shemwe was conscious but her companion proved difficult to rouse. Her drawn features and shallow breathing a sure sign that she was near death.

Tomas cut Shemwe's bindings and rubbed her hands to try and return life to blue-tinged fingers.

“Shem, I am sorry.” he whispered. He could think of nothing else to say. The time it had taken to recover her had been a torment that had left his fiancée ragged and emaciated, barely gripping to life even as she lay in his arms. But at a moment when she should have looked to her own well-being Shemwe had no thought except for her friend.

“See to Enika, Tomas. I will live but she needs help now. Do not let these creatures take another friend from us.”

Tomas turned and found Mallen working on Enika, and he could see that she was faltering, desperately close to taking her last breath.

Beyond his brother Gremorgan stood talking with the Hresh and it stirred something primitive within him. The source of all their woe stemmed from the machinations of the Hresh Chieftain, and he could not abide the Hordim to live. Quickly he rose, grasping the scimitar of one of the fallen Hresh and advanced upon Ansolon'Denmar. In his heart was revenge but Shemwe's words could not be left unbidden either.

"Gremorgan," he called loudly, "Enika Torres is in need of your help. Tend to her quickly whilst I have a few quiet words with the Hresh."

The LoreMaster saw hatred burning in the younger Kalborean's eyes and he stood between the two. Ansolon'Denmar had seen the same thing and waited silently, more than ready to defend himself.

"Tomas," Gremorgan answered. "There has been enough death in this endeavour. Drop your sword and return to Shemwe. It may pain us all but we need each other now, whether we like it or not."

"Need them!" Tomas shouted. "Those murderers have killed hundreds of our number and driven defenceless women to the point of death. We do not need them, we only need kill them."

The Dwarvendim grabbed Tomas by the arm and stayed his advance. Pulling him to the side he whispered roughly in the Kalborean's ear.

"You are right Tomas. For what they have done they should all die, but think before you surrender yourself so easily to the needs of vengeance. You stand in the heart of the lands of Perdition. There is no human settlement for two hundred leagues, and no less than the Great Rift itself stands between us and our homes. It is only with the help of the Hresh that you will be able to return to the realms of Men alive. Think on it before you raise that scimitar my young friend. Will it do any good to rescue Shemwe only to lose her again because of an ill-temper?"

Behind them Mallen had risen from Enika and his face was drawn with worry. "Gremorgan, you are needed here. Enika is failing."

The LoreMaster turned from Tomas and made his way to Mallen's side. Kneeling beside the frail woman he took her hand and tested her pulse, though one look was all he needed to determine she was only minutes from death.

"Mallen, go to my bag and search its interior. It is where I held the white powder we used to heal Tomas. There is none left but search the inside anyway. See if you can find even a few grains. They shall

be all we need if they can be found.”

The Kalborean ran for Gremorgan's bag as the Dwarvendim dug a small piece of Nahla Cake out of his pocket. Looking around he yelled at the nearest Hresh to bring water, and with Ansolon's nod the warrior gave over a water bag and a shallow dish. Gremorgan busied himself with the dish and cake, crushing it to a paste into which he poured a small amount of the water. It was only when Mallen kneeled at his side with his bag that the LoreMaster set to work on Enika herself.

“I am afraid Mallen, that the powder is not the best medicine for the girl. She has no broken bones or torn flesh, instead her death will come from malnutrition and fatigue. The powder cannot help her with such afflictions. It can however, give her the few hours she needs to pull back from the edge. What did you find?”

Mallen gave over a small pinch of a powdery residue, collected from the inside corner of the LoreMaster's bag. Gremorgan smiled and carefully placed the few grains under her nose. With Enika's next laboured breath the powder disappeared and its effect was immediate. In a spasm Enika's body stiffened and arched upwards, her arms flailing at her side as if some great agony had overcome her.

“What is happening?” cried Tomas. He had heeded the LoreMaster's words and had thrown away the scimitar. “Is she in pain?”

Gremorgan looked at the girl and shook his head. “No, there is no pain here. She is in the midst of a terror that will last for some hours. Remember Mallen what I said about the medicinal power of the powder. It heals but it also bolsters the will of the sufferer to survive. Enika has been placed in a private nightmare of her own creation, and while she uses the last of her resources to fight whatever confronts her in her dreams we are going to give her the means to heal properly.”

Carefully he took the dish filled with the now liquid Nahla Cake and poured some into a small vial. Motioning Tomas and Mallen to hold the girl still he called to Ansolon'Denmar to hold her head. The Hresh had been standing close, intently watching what was going on and without thinking he complied with the LoreMaster's command. With Enika still he poured the Nahla into her mouth. Gagging against the strong taste of the ad-hoc medication, it took two attempts to empty the vial as she swallowed, but as with the powder the effect was immediate.

Like a soporific the Nahla swept through her body, putting her to

sleep and withdrawing the terrors of the powder. As her body relaxed the Men let go of her arms and the Hresh laid her head to the ground.

“What must we do now?” asked Mallen.

Gremorgan began to fill another vial with the liquid as he answered. “As with Tomas we must wait a day for the full effects of the powder and the Nahla to do their work. It will be better that Enika have one more dose of the Nahla before dusk, and Shemwe could do with some as well. It will be both sleep and the regenerative power of the cake that shall bring both back to a state where we can travel.”

Gremorgan handed the vial to Tomas and he went back to Shemwe. For a time they talked and then Shemwe took the liquid. Within moments she too was asleep.

As the women slept Gremorgan pulled Mallen aside. He had something for the Kalborean and he needed it to remain secret.

“Mallen,” he began, “I am afraid that we must now take different paths. You have found your brother, and he in turn has found Shemwe. Finding your way back to Kalborea can now be your only concern. For my part I have a new mission that requires I head west, to a place known as the Horns of Gorgoroth. What I shall do there is for the Powers of this world to arbitrate but it is a task for myself alone, you cannot go with me. Your place must be with your brother and the others.”

Mallen did not understand for he had heard nothing of the LoreMaster's agreement with the Hresh Chieftain.

“You cannot leave us here Gremorgan. Once you are out of their sight the Hresh will kill us.”

The LoreMaster shook his head and looked towards the warriors. “They are many things Master Cael, but they have a sense of honour that is important to them. Their Chieftain has given his word and that oath will keep you safe. Although it is a strange thing we are now allies, standing against a far greater enemy. These Hordim are now bound to us in a common cause and whether we like it or not we must make the best of it.”

Mallen was not convinced. He trusted the LoreMaster but he was not as sure as Gremorgan about relying on the honour code of the Hordim for their safety. He moved to protest but Gremorgan was not finished. There was something that Mallen would need if he was to make it back to the lands of Men, and the Hresh could not know of it.

“Before I call the Hresh over I must give you something, and it is

imperative that you keep it to yourself.”

Quickly he turned his broad back to the Hordim and reached into his tunic pocket.

“Remember the Gatheringstone, Mallen? With it I was able to search out the ghosts of the Surgis'Ka and reach into the memories of the Dragon near Meshaal. It is a powerful talisman that has one property little known to most who might use it. That property will take you back into the lands of Men but you must listen carefully.”

Handing the device over he waited as Mallen placed it into his own clothing.

“Do you remember the tpush we hid within near the Forests of Meshaal? The one that gave us sanctuary as the Dragon came to rest? Do you have a clear picture of its interior in your mind?”

Mallen nodded even though he did not yet understand.

“The Gatheringstone has the ability to gather memories and the remnants of life itself, but it also remembers the places a traveller who holds it has visited in the past. If you stand in a similar place, say another tpush here in Perdition, and say the right Word of power it will take you, and whoever might be within the tpush as well, back to that previous place. Think of where you wish to go, say the Word and it will take you there. But be mindful Mallen, that it can only do this if there is a strong connection between the places you wish to travel.”

“And what is the connection here?” Mallen asked.

Gremorgan looked to the Hresh and smiled. “The Hordim built the tpush in a time long before Men came into the world, and although the shelters appear simple in design and function they all have one thing in common. Each has a small piece of stonewood buried at their core. All stonewood is connected, no matter how far the distances between them, and this makes them particularly reliable for the use of the Gatheringstone. Believe me Mallen, the connection between all the tpush is strong, we need only find one and you will be back in safer lands.”

“And what is the Word that shall activate it?”

Gremorgan lent closer to Mallen and whispered in his ear. The LoreMaster could not afford to utter the Word aloud, its power too unstable when spoken in the open. Caution demanded that it should remain a secret until such time as it was required.

“Remember the Word Mallen. At that time when you need its power most it will be ready for you.”

Calling to Ansolon, Gremorgan gestured to Mallen for silence on his

possession of the Gatheringstone. When the Hresh was at his side the LoreMaster changed his tone completely.

“Ansolon'Denmar, this is Mallen Cael of Callenfrey. His brother is Tomas Cael and the two women are Shemwe Sandofel and Enika Torres. These four are under my protection and from this time forward they are your responsibility as well. You are coming with me to the Horns. What I need is two of your warriors to take them to the nearest tpesh, preferably one further to the north.”

Ansolon's forehead furrowed at the request but he did not care to question the LoreMaster. Instead he called to two of his fellow Hordim who presented themselves before him.

“This is Hallan'Denmar and Alladil'Denmar, brothers of my house and Chiefs in their own right upon my passing. To them shall be given the task of taking your countrymen to tpesh'erenthel. It stands no more than fifteen leagues to the north, and although I cannot see why it must be so, they shall guide them until they succeed, or death takes them.”

Gremorgan looked the two warriors over and nodded his approval. They were powerful Hresh and good enough for the task.

“We shall go our separate ways at first light then. Mallen, you must see to the needs of Shemwe and Enika. If all goes well overnight we shall depart at sunrise.

It could not be said that in any reasonable measure the night went well. From the north a blustering gale lashed at the tundra, and the full chill of the encroaching winter descended upon the camp with a vengeance. Huddled around a small campfire the unlikely allies looked at each other across the struggling flames and wondered quietly how they had come to such a pass. Overriding all their hatreds and discomfort however, was the surety that the Clavern'Sigh knew what the Denmark Hresh had been attempting and that they would not allow such disobedience to go unpunished. The dweo'gorga may have failed but it was certain that new dangers could not be far away.

Mallen sat close to Enika and tended her until the small hours of the morning. The aid given by Gremorgan had worked a marvel upon her, and although she was still weak her life had been returned to her. He had no doubt that by sunrise she would indeed be fit to travel. As he looked about the fire he wondered on what the Hresh must be thinking. Somehow the LoreMaster had turned them to his cause, but centuries of animosity could not be erased so easily. He determined in

his own mind that these creatures were now allies, but he would not trust them, and he would not expose his back carelessly to them either.

In the face of this uncertain truce Tomas had settled down, his attention turned instead to the tending of Shemwe and to catching up on all that had transpired since her kidnapping from Callenfrey. It was a tale of fire and death, and of the endless march that had left so many of her fellow captives cast aside. The night passed quickly in the telling of her long torment at the hands of the Hresh. To tell it whilst the perpetrators sat at the same fire gave it an unreal quality, one that left them all wondering where their strange alliance might ultimately lead them.

At first light the Hresh broke camp and each party of travellers prepared to go their separate ways. For the Hordim it was the start of another day, one that begun with the setting of the moons in the west, and the ritual of the enkara. Quietly the Men and Women of the South waited and then said their own goodbyes. For Mallen it was particularly painful. The LoreMaster had become a trusted friend, a comrade through many battles and trials.

“It does not bode well that you will not be with us Gremorgan. Are you certain that you wish to stay in this desolate place?”

The Dwarvendim smiled and extended his hand. “Sometimes we do not choose the paths we must take Master Cael, but I will tell you that I fully intend to return to the lands of Men. When I do you will be the first stop on my way home.”

Mallen shook the LoreMaster's hand and smiled, although it was both half-hearted and anxious in its delivery. He had found Tomas and Shemwe only because of the skills and equipment brought to the chase by Gremorgan. All would have been dead but for his intervention, and he was not sure how they would survive when reliant upon the Hresh instead. As he looked about the gathering parties he knew that he would now have to return to another state of mind, one where he would need to rely upon himself alone.

As the suns of morning rose from the vast tundra in the east Gremorgan and the remaining Hresh moved off, their path leading them directly for the western horizon. In mists and blustering wind the figures soon were lost to the expanse of the cold plains, and Mallen and Tomas were left alone, but not completely.

At their backs the two Hresh stood quietly, as inscrutable as any Hordim and showing no warmth or regard for the Kalboreans they

would now have to guide northwards. For a short time they all watched the others recede into the mists then turned to their own task. Tomas helped Shemwe to her feet and Mallen did the same for Enika. The night had worked a great balm upon the two women and both stood ready for the day's hard road ahead. Without any word Hallan'Denmar turned northwards and began to trek into the dissipating fogs of the morning. The Kalboreans followed and Alladil'Denmar took up the rear.



As had been the case on so many other days the hours of daylight were spent moving, walking at a measured pace towards a horizon that was as alien as any Mallen or Tomas had seen before. About them the tundra had flattened, its terrain a cold, hard plate of frozen ground where the only anomalies of note were large upthrusts of stone that appeared infrequently upon the plains. Tall and jagged, the stones were immense in scale, set within the chilled earth as if they had been pushed through the impenetrable surface by some great power beneath.

With their knowledge of the terrain the Hresh used these massive stone fingers as navigating points, and soon the order of the party changed as the two warriors conversed on the best way forward. For the Kalboreans there was little to do except follow on, and watch closely that there was no treachery in their actions.

To their credit the Hordim did not push the party at any speed, and mindful of the weak condition of the women they kept their pace easy upon the cold ground. For the better part of a day they moved northwards in this unhurried fashion and by the morning of the second found themselves upon a ground undulating before them in an endless series of shallow hills. By the time they had travelled deep into this new landscape Shemwe and Enika had recovered most of their strength, and with that their Hresh guides increased the speed of their advance.

Quickly the party made its way further into the lands of Perdition. Before them the ground swelled like a vast ocean, frozen in time and

just as cold. Upon these hills Hallan and Alladil led the Kalboreans until they came upon a wide ridge of stone. Here Mallen recognised the weathered outline of a crater, although he could not tell what had created it. Carefully the Hresh negotiated a path through a narrow gap in the fractured rock and then came to an abrupt halt.

“We have travelled enough.” Hallan said in a guttural voice. “Wait here until we return.”

The two warriors moved to return back through the narrow path in the stone but Tomas stood in their way.

“Where are you going?” he asked suspiciously. Mallen waited at his back, unsure also as to the motives of the Hordim.

Alladil'Denmar smirked at the two Kalboreans, seemingly unmoved by any thought of the men as a threat, but Hallan raised his scimitar to the south and for the first time looked them directly in the eyes.

“For the past day we have been followed by a scouting party of Morg. They are a long way from their kraalim in the Dead Forests and they will not be alone. We will keep watch for any further sign then return. Do not worry yourself with the nature of our motives *vehmin*. We are concerned only with getting you safely to tpush'erenethel and then being rid of you.”

Tomas weighed the likelihood that the Hresh were telling the truth but the Hordim were inscrutable. In the end he decided that if their guides did desert them he would not mourn their absence. Quickly he stepped aside and the Hresh moved for the pathway without a further word.

“What do you think?” Asked Tomas once the Hresh had gone. “Will we see them again?”

Mallen shrugged his shoulders. “I cannot say. Their faces give no clue to their thoughts, but if Morg are on our trail it is best that we know it for sure. Come Tomas, let us find some food for the girls and get what rest we can.”

Together the brothers moved back to Shemwe and Enika and found the last remaining pieces of Nahla Cake that they had brought with them. With the absence of the Hordim the Kalboreans relaxed quickly, talking easily as the day moved inexorably towards evening. It did not pass the notice of Tomas that his brother had taken a liking to Enika. He could not say if it was an inevitable bonding that came with the danger they now found themselves, but there was something in her presence that drew Mallen closely to her and he was glad of it. For far too long his brother had been focused only on survival,

whether it be now, or in their lives before, and he knew it had hardened him in his expectations of what life might offer. Mallen was a survivor but it was a state of mind that was hard to overcome. He recognised Enika as the balm that might finally soften his brother to the world, and he could see it only as a good thing.

For a while they talked, mostly on what would happen when they reached the tpush, though only Mallen knew of the key to their return to Kalborea. He had taken the LoreMaster's words as a bond and had said nothing about the Gatheringstone. Instead he enjoyed the company of his brother and their new female companions. For the first time in many days they had a moment of rest and it was a quiet that was difficult to resist. Within the wide, cratered depression there came a measure of shelter from the winds, and as they waited for the return of the Hresh all fell slowly into sleep.

Mallen felt as if he had only closed his eyes when a commotion along the path brought him back to wakefulness. Immediately he was on his feet, kicking at Tomas to wake as he reached for his weapons. From beyond the jagged gap in the stone he could hear running, and it was full of urgency.

In the half-light of the pre-dawn he readied himself, his brother also reaching for a scimitar as the women rushed to find weapons of their own. Before any could fully awaken however, the two Hresh rushed out of the shadows, a growing cacophony of shouting and yelling echoing from the path beyond. Hallan was in the lead, behind him Alladil. From the second Hresh's shoulder there protruded two arrows.

"We found the Morg," shouted Hallan, "but I am afraid there are a few more than we had anticipated. If we are to survive this day we must run."

Without another word he scooped up his equipment and motioned the rest of the party to do the same. Pausing only to speak for a moment with Alladil he pushed the Kalboreans northwards.

"Where must we go now?" shouted Tomas.

"To the other side of the crater. If we can get out of sight before the Morg make it through the pass we have a good chance they will not follow."

Neither of the men could see why the Morg should not continue their pursuit, but they had no time to ask. At the run the party made for the other side of the crater. In its fullest breadth it reached more than four hundred metres in extent and it took some time to traverse.

Only when Mallen had made it to the other side did he take the time to look back, and it was then that he saw Alladil, still waiting at the gap and armed with two scimitars.

When all had made it over the crest in the crater's jagged wall Hallan came to a stop and gestured for them to wait. Carefully he climbed back to the lip of the ridge and watched as a terrible scene unfolded. Curious, both Mallen and Tomas crawled up beside him.

"What is Alladil doing?" Mallen whispered.

"He is waiting for the Morg." answered the Hresh simply. "He is injured and would only hamper your escape to tpush'erenethel. He is instead going to ensure that the Morg do not follow."

The Kalboreans did not see how a lone warrior could withstand the assault of the other Hordim, but as Hallan did not move from his vantage they had no choice but to watch what was about to happen.

From out of the narrow gap the Morg poured into the crater. Standing at its opening stood Alladil, and as each small creature appeared he hacked them down, cutting and tearing their flesh until a pile of bodies filled the gap's threshold. From where the men lay in hiding they could hear the screams and the frustration of the injured, but the Morg could not be stopped. From the crest above the crater wall small black figures began to appear, sliding down the steep scree slopes and onto the harder ground of the crater floor. As they fell Alladil advanced upon them, slicing at them with his scimitars and throwing their own spears at any who might attempt to close with the warrior.

Carefully and methodically the Hresh continued the slaughter, using his strength and skill to cut down as many of the diminutive Hordim as he could, but as the battle's intensity increased the Morg were able to form an effective resistance by sheer numbers alone. Forming into a battle unit, a group of more than a hundred of the creatures closed in upon Alladil and for all his skill he fell beneath their number, disappearing within a tangle of dead bodies and flashing blades.

For a moment the Kalboreans said nothing. The Hresh had fought a courageous and futile battle though Hallan seemed well pleased with the outcome.

"What is it you are not telling us Hallan?" Mallen whispered to the warrior.

The Hresh looked at the Kalborean and slid down the edges of the ridge. When he hit hard ground he sheathed his blade and hoisted his

pack upon his shoulders. Only for a moment did he wait for the others to ready themselves then he spoke.

“The Morg are spiteful and lazy creatures. They will not pursue an enemy if there is a chance they can first find out where they are going. Alladil put himself in their path so that he would have a chance to kill as many of them as possible. Enraged by the loss of their brothers the Morg will not kill, instead they will set to torture and spend time at it. My brother Alladil is not dead. He will have been subdued and bound, and when the main units of the Morg arrive he will be put to torment, their hope that he will give up our destination, and in doing so make their pursuit easier.”

Both Tomas and Mallen looked at each other, each undecided as to whether they should be appalled at the callous use of Alladil, or grudgingly impressed at the bravery of his sacrifice. Neither wanted to think what was going to happen to the Hresh, but both knew that he had saved their lives.

“And how long shall he hold out under such torment?” asked Mallen.

Hallan cast his eyes to the sky, its blue vault darkening now towards evening. For a moment he paused then turned to the north.

“The Morg are skilled at what they do but Alladil is stronger than most. He will resist the Morg's efforts and not succumb until mid-afternoon. By that time they will have lost patience, and as the information they seek will not be forthcoming they will kill him. Only then will the Morg return to the hunt. If the True Witness looks kindly upon us we will have reached tpush'erenethel before then and Alladil's sacrifice will have been worthwhile.”

The warrior took a moment to stand in the cool wind and then motioned for all to follow. In the growing light of the new day they went carefully forward.

Under a dome of brilliant blue the small party ran into the north. At the lead was Hallan, alone now in his mission to take the Kalboreans to tpush'erenethel. Behind him his charges ran, keeping pace in the cold air as he navigated his way towards the Hills of Erenthel. Within the smooth slopes of the ancient mounds would be the tpush they sought, and although he would say nothing he knew what they were going to do once they were there.

Eight hundred seasons had passed for Hallan'Denmar in the long course of his life, and in that time he had learned many things. It was with the Living Book at Shalamai that he had been told of the

Gatheringstones. The ancient Hresh, who all the Denmar had known simply as the old Book, had lived since the Great Insurrection and much knowledge had been passed to him over the years. Not the least of his knowledge was the Lore surrounding the talismans and devices of the Fallen Masters, and of those artefacts Hallan had spent much time learning of the powers they gave to those who were privy to their secrets. Prudently the old Book had not given him the Word that would activate them, but he had explained what each could do. If these vehmin had one in their possession it would be a boon worth the dishonour of killing them for.

It was a thought however, that he quickly discounted. He was sub-chief of the Denmar now that Alladil had fallen to the Morg, and he had greater responsibilities to consider. Duty required he follow Ansolon's orders to the letter, and although it pained him to do so he would complete the mission. In his mind though, the thought lingered, discounted and withdrawn but there nonetheless.

Behind him the Kalboreans kept pace, the morning air cool and crisp as they ran. Soon the plains returned as a wide, perfectly flat expanse, but ahead the grey silhouettes of a higher range of hills rose into view. These were the Hills of Erenthel and without stopping the party made a line directly for the highest point in their dark undulation.

By midday the hills had risen so that their great slopes obscured more than half of the horizon. By early afternoon the party stood at their base, and it was only then that Hallan brought them all to a halt. As they caught their breath he pointed towards the loose, rocky slopes.

“Here are the Hills of Erenthel. Within a saddle of ground between the two highest points of their rise can be found the tpush you seek. I will take you to the entrance of the shelter and then my task is done. Once you have entered do not come back out.”

“Why not?” asked Tomas.

“Because vehmin, my orders are to deliver you to the tpush safely. Nothing has been said of any protection being offered once that is done. If you come out of the shelter I will kill you and leave your bodies to the Kreel.”

It was a threat that Tomas did not appreciate, and although he was well disposed to test the Hresh's mettle he held back. Mallen interjected quickly to change the subject.

“How long will it take to reach the tpush, Hallan? If you are right

the Morg will now be on our trail once again.”

The warrior nodded. “If we begin now we will find the tpush within the hour. The hills are widespread but the highest of their range is close.”

“Then we should start now,” spoke Shemwe. “The sooner we are out of these lands the better it will be for all.”

Stopping only to recover their breath the party were soon climbing precariously across the slopes of the ancient hills. Long ago the Hills of Erenthel had lost any vegetation that might have held them together. Now nothing more than broken stone and grit the slopes proved to be a moving mass of rock that had to be negotiated carefully. Hallan knew what he was doing however, and by a process of the careful use of boulders and old pathways was able to find a way onto the upper ridges of the Hills. From there they moved carefully, and it was as they climbed higher that Mallen began to notice the signs that others had trodden the same paths. Soon it was undeniable that other Hresh had followed the same trail only hours before.

Hallan noticed Mallen's scrutiny of the trail and paused. “Yes, there have been others here. I fear that we may not find the tpush abandoned, and because of it we must go all the more carefully.”

The morning wore on and the winds grew stronger. Soon a strong bluster had taken hold of the hills, sending plumes of fine grit billowing across the stony ridges, obscuring the trail and blinding the party in their advance. Only Hallan could find his way, and in the grip of the blizzard of rushing dirt and dust the Kalboreans were forced to take hold of the Hresh as he guided them along the narrow paths.

Buffeted by chilling winds, and stumbling against the loose, unstable terrain their climb into the Hills proved a tortuous route, one that eventually brought the party to a sharp ridge of jagged rock. Here Hallan again stopped and climbed up the ridge to peer into a wide depression that spread beyond. All of the Kalboreans followed him, finding vantages between large upthrusts of stone where they could also survey the open area ahead.

Cradled between two high points of land lay a wide saddle of bare earth. At the centre of this saddle stood the domed roof of a small tpush, but any elation that might have been felt at its discovery disappeared at the sight of the huge Horde encampment that surrounded it. Filling the entire plateau lay the tents and activity of at

least six hundred Hresh, and at all sides more were filing into the camp. Mallen looked to their guide and he could see the Hresh smile.

“What are we to do now?” he whispered to Hallan.

The warrior shrugged his shoulders. “It would seem that we have a problem, but do not worry I will think of something.”

Mallen slid down the face of the ridge and then helped Enika. They were now no more than a few hundred metres from the tpush, and between them and safety stood an entire Hordim army. As he waited for Hallan to make his way down from the ridge he wondered where Gremorgan was, and felt all the more keenly his absence. As the wind cut across the crumbling slopes he looked to his brother, and realised that their safety now depended on the trustworthiness and intelligence of an enemy warrior. In truth he did not know what to do.

## Chapter 16 - Caerum



Each of the Kalboreans looked to the other and then turned towards the Hresh. In the bright light of the day Hallan'Denmar stood apart, staring down the steep slope towards the base of the ridge. Although Mallen did not like it their safety had been given over to the Hordim, and as they waited for him to speak none knew whether he has forming a plan for their escape, or deciding instead the best way to abandon them to the Hresh encampment. Mallen could wait only so long before he approached the warrior.

“Hallan, we must decide what it is we shall do. It can only be a matter of time before we are discovered here.”

The Hresh nodded, then motioned for all to draw closer. He had a plan, though it would not be an easy one to effect.

“The Hresh you see beyond are Tomsk, enemies of the Denmar and willing servants of the Clavern'Sigh. In truth I cannot say why they are here. They are in the lands of the Denmar and have no call to be, though it is my suspicion that they are here to cause harm to my Kraal.”

Tomas looked at the Hresh and could see a burning fire in his usually indefinable eyes.

“What is your plan Hallan? Can we get beyond this camp and into the tpush?”

The warrior looked hard at the Kalborean and shrugged his shoulders. “It is possible, but it will require a deception, and one that will be difficult to achieve.”

Before any of the men and woman could ask what he meant, Hallan pulled a length of rope from his hip bag and played out its frayed ends.

“There is only one way into the camp that will see you alive, and that is as captives. If we are to make it to the tpush you must be restrained and spoiled of all your equipment and food. Only if you appear as prisoners will the Tomsk give me right of way to lock you within the shelter, and having done that my responsibility will cease. What you do once there is not my concern.”

Both Mallen and Tomas turned to Enika and Shemwe. It was a plan, but to place the women back into captivity, no matter how fleeting or voluntary, seemed cruel.

“And what will stop you from simply handing us to the Tomsk?” asked Tomas. “Are we not a prize worth betrayal?”

Hallan'Denmar moved forward as if he was about to assault the younger Cael but stopped with his face very close to that of Tomas'. Neither blinked.

“Those Hresh are my enemy, *vehmin*. Too many of my brothers have been lost to their snivelling obedience to the Sigh, and I would be just as dead if I walked into their midst as yourselves. It is what I will say to the Tomsk that will keep us all alive. You need only concern yourself with looking helpless. A task, I think, that will suit you well.”

At the insult Tomas pushed the Hresh away and moved for his scimitar, but the Hresh proved faster. Before the Kalborean could lay a hand on the hilt of his blade the warrior had the edge of his own hovering against Tomas' neck. It was Mallen who pushed aside the Hresh's sword and stood between the two of them.

“Remember your duty, Hresh.” he said firmly. “We will do as you say, but it will be a hard thing to ask of the women.”

The Hordim backed up and placed his sword in its leather sheath. “I do not need reminding of my duty. And do not be concerned for your women-folk, it will not be as hard for them as you may think.”

Mallen did not ask what the Hresh meant but turned and looked at Tomas. “Care is needed here Tomas. There will be no time in our lives more dangerous than this and we need Hallan's help to survive it. Try not to antagonise the Hresh, I believe he is in as much danger as ourselves.”

The younger Kalborean shrugged his shoulders. “Sorry Mallen, the Hordim just gets up my nose, that's all.”

Mallen smiled and then turned to Enika. “Are you alright with this?”

Enika looked to the warrior. It was plain that she could not disguise her misgivings.

“Can we trust this Hresh? Will he not give us up if it serves his purpose to do so?”

Mallen touched her hand and moved closer. “I cannot tell you what is in the mind of the Hresh. Know only that there are reasons why this Hordim will carry out his orders. If nothing else we must trust in ourselves, and hope that Hallan's plan will see us all safe.”

Enika nodded her agreement. “Let us go home then.”

Deliberately the Hresh went about the process of returning the Kalboreans to a state of captivity, and it proved an unsettling

experience. As the wind eddied about the barren hills, Hallan took all their bags and rummaged through them, taking anything of value that would have normally been spoiled from them upon capture. The women had nothing, but from Tomas and Mallen he took everything of use and placed the equipment in a bag of his own. Their weapons he threw down the slope, though he kept Mallen's sword. This Hallan placed in his belt.

Mallen did not give over the Gatheringstone, it was the key to their return to Kalborea and as far as he knew it was a secret, one that he preferred to keep close. With all the equipment taken Hallan'Denmar then used the rope to bind the party together, taking one end to fasten himself firmly to the line of captives by a small metal fitting attached to a chain at his side. It was only once this was done, and the Kalboreans were effectively bound, that the warrior advanced upon Mallen.

"Give me the Gatheringstone, Mallen Cael. It will do you no good to keep it from me."

Mallen went to protest but the Hresh swung his fist before he could say anything. With a sickening thud his gloved hand struck the Kalborean across the side of the face and toppled him onto the loose slope. Tomas moved forward to help his brother but the Hresh turned and punched him cleanly in the stomach. Hunched over by the pain Hallan then hit him again, this time with an open palm across the head, dropping him like a stone. Held firmly by the ropes his body slid down the loose incline, dragging both of the women behind him. All would have continued down the slope but for the Hresh anchoring the line and dragging them back to their feet.

"Why are you doing this?" whispered Mallen, blood dripping from his mouth.

Roughly Hallan searched the Kalborean's clothing, located the artefact and took it for himself.

"If you want to live vehmin, you are going to have to look the part. The women appear as they should after such a long journey. You however, are untouched and it will not pass the notice of those we wish to fool that your condition is better than it should be. If I had told you of my intention you would not have had the courage to allow it."

Mallen spat a mouthful of blood onto the ground and looked the Hresh in the eye. "Do what you think..."

Before he could finish the Hresh hit him again, this time across the

shoulders and neck. As the rest watched the Hordim beat his captive, being sure not to break bones but not holding back either. When he was done Mallen could barely stand, let alone put up any resistance.

“Now you look like a captive of the Oera'dim Master Cael. The damage you have received will heal, and perhaps it will leave you with a few scars you can tell your grandchildren about.”

“And what of the Gatheringstone, Hallan. You know we need it to find our way home. What is your intention.”

The Hresh smiled. “Don't concern yourself with my intentions. You are the one tied up. I'll do what I damn well please.”

With the rope properly secured to his captives, Hallan stood close, his voice now low and conspiratorial.

“Listen carefully. You are captives of the Oera'dim and you must not forget it for a moment. Do not raise your head. Do not talk. Do not look at any other Hresh, or make any expression that could be construed as defiance. Do not notice anything going on around you. Do not appear to listen to conversations, or try to help each other. Do any of these things and the nearest warrior who takes offence will kill you out of hand. Do you understand?”

All the Kalboreans nodded, the men bloodied and bruised, the women bound and frightened by the Hresh's brutality. For Hallan'Denmar there was nothing else that could be done, and although he would not tell his charges he was looking forward to what was about to transpire. He had seen something in the camp that could not have been recognised by the Men of the South, and it was an opportunity he was going to grab with both hands. With luck this day would pass with the vehmin out of his hair, and a few old scores settled as well. Pulling at the rope he dragged his captives along the trail and out into full view of an approaching Tomsk patrol.



The news of the approach of Hallan'Denmar ran through the camp like a wave. Mallen kept his head down, but he could feel the malevolence and the sheer numbers of the Hresh crowding them as they were dragged unceremoniously through the encampment. About

him the Tomsk shouted abuse, though he could not be sure if it was directed at the captives or Hallan himself. For his part the Denmar Hresh gave no sign that he cared for the taunts of the Tomsk. Instead he strode purposefully for the centre of the camp and ever closer to the tresh which lay only a short distance beyond.

As they made their way into the heart of the camp Mallen kept his head low, but from a few fleeting glimpses he was able to make out much of its general organisation. It was apparent once he was within its borders that the Hresh spread their bivouac in a structured and disciplined manner. At the outer perimeter stood the tents and equipment of the warriors themselves. Each row of black canvas lined a narrow avenue that stretched towards a central parade area, and as Mallen found his way further into its centre he began to also see temporary armouries, cooking houses, aid stations and all the supporting functions of an army on the march.

Amongst the activity of the camp there was one tent in particular that took his attention. At the edge of the parade ground there arose a smell, an odour of which he was well familiar. Years working as a labourer in the mines of the Iron Hills had taught him to recognise the tang of Black Powder, an explosive dust used to blast rock deep within the earth. As he passed the Powder Tent's flapping entrance he could see at least a dozen barrels of the unstable substance, closely guarded by heavily armed warriors and locked by chains to long iron pegs driven into the frozen ground. It was a recognition that proved momentary as he was pushed roughly forward and then out onto the parade ground.

When finally Mallen came to a halt most of the encampment had surrounded the small party. Enclose within a dark ring of hundreds of Hresh Hallan stopped before a large tent and called out clearly for all to hear.

“Here stands Hallan'Denmar, Brother-Chief of the Denmar and ally of the Tomsk. If there is any Hresh in this camp worthy to stand before me let him come forward now!”

For a moment there was no movement, then from within the tent came a single Hresh Chieftain. Large in size and tattooed heavily about his right arm he stood dressed in an ornate battle-suit of black leather armour embossed with silver sigils. Pausing only to command quiet from his warriors the Hresh moved in front of Hallan and looked him up and down.

“Hallan'Denmar. It has been a long time since I have heard any of

your Kraal call himself an ally of the Tomsk. What is your purpose here?"

Mallen risked a quick glance at the two Hresh and he could see that the Tomsk Chief might have been speaking to Hallan, but he was looking at his captives, and he could not disguise his curiosity. Hallan must have noticed the interest as well and immediately decided to use it to his advantage.

"Hear me Hresh'na of the Tomsk, whilst you wander these barren lands and tend your Yunta-Beasts the Denmar have been taking war to the vehmin of the south. Let it be known that the plague-port of Callenfrey has been destroyed, its citizens and buildings put to the torment of *hera'pyrim*. This was done by Ansolon'Denmar and in his name I claim a battle honour for our Kraal. As proof of our victory I bring before you captives, and a sword taken as trophy from a Captain of the vehmin."

As he spoke his last words he threw the sword onto the ground and dragged the Kalboreans close to him. About them the camp erupted into what Mallen could only assume was a raucous applause. Within the cacophony of shouts and foot stomping Hallan provoked the crowd, knocking Tomas to the ground and exhorting them with his raised fists to a greater enthusiasm. Within all this the Chieftain stood quietly, but only for a moment.

Raising his arms he called for quiet and the camp fell into an expectant pause.

"You have not yet answered the question Denmar. What is your purpose here?"

Hallan turned again to the Chief and gave no obedience to his question. "I need no purpose to travel within the lands of the Denmar. These are my lands and I journey upon them as I will. I see your banners Feltig'Tomsk. I know who you are and I see the strength of the warriors you command. It leaves me to ask why you wander upon ground that plainly belongs to others."

Feltig'Tomsk smirked, but before he could respond the attention of all turned to a darkly robed figure that emerged quietly from the tent beyond. Tall and grey-skinned the Being moved to stand next to the Tomsk Chieftain and all about him kneeled at his emergence. Even though Mallen could not raise his head fully he felt a prickling aura of power radiating from the creature, and to a fashion it reminded him of the magic harnessed by Gremorgan. But it was indeed something else and far different from the Hordim surrounding them. It was a

Mutan, and unlike the LoreMaster it proved an unsettling presence, one that seemed to stifle the very wind itself.

“Hallan'Denmar.” came a voice, soft and whispered. “You stand before Canen'Set, Dominus of the Clavern'Sigh and Imperator of all things in these Lands of Perdition. In this world I own all, and grant it upon license alone to those who dwell here. The Tomsk are here on my authority and I will not have it questioned by one such as you. Tell me, Hresh'na, why should I not kill you now and take your captives for my own?”

Hallan'Denmar stepped back and for a moment Mallen thought he had lost his resolve. He was not prepared for the seeming betrayal that was to come.

“Dominus, I mean no disobedience to the Clavern'Sigh. I am here on a mission given by my Chief to pass on intelligence gained, and give over the gift of these vehmin for your pleasure.”

Canen'Set bent down to look upon the face of the Hresh. “The vehmin I accept. But what is the knowledge deemed so important that it should be delivered into my presence by a Brother-Chief?”

Hallan looked at the Kalboreans and smiled, then turned back to the Mutan.

“I have news of the passage of a LoreMaster, Dominus; one known as Gremorgan Hedj, who even now trespasses within the lands of the Oera'dim. In this intelligence is both his path and objective.”

Tomas yelled at the Hresh to keep his mouth shut, and Mallen would have done the same, but there was something in Hallan's answer to the Mutan that was not right. Even Gremorgan did not know why he was going to the Horns of Gorgoroth, and it bade the Kalborean to play along with whatever the Hresh was planning. For Tomas the distinction was not apparent, and for his trouble a warrior stepped from the surrounding throng and clubbed him to the ground. To a raucous cheer he fell, Enika behind him being dragged to the cold earth as well.

All this passed unnoticed before the gaze of the Mutan. Canen'Set had no capacity for humour, his focus centred instead upon the name of Gremorgan Hedj.

“How have you come by such knowledge?” The creature hissed into the wind.

Hallan turned and pointed at Mallen. “This vehmin was in his company till two days ago. A Denmark scout followed them until they parted and overheard their purposes in the lands of Perdition. For a

reason I have not yet been able to determine their party split and this one began to move south, back towards the Mountains of the Divide. I captured him and placed him with the rest of these captives. They are now yours to do with as you wish.”

Canen'Set paused and then motioned towards the tent.

“Bring the captives Hallan'Denmar.” Then he pointed to Feltig. “What must be spoken within cannot be heard by others. Create a cordon about this place and let none come near. Once this is done return to the tent and bring a tearing-frame.”

Feltig'Tomsk nodded and then began to bark orders. Immediately the camp became a commotion of running warriors and moving equipment. Against this backdrop the four Kalboreans were pushed towards the billowing entrance of the Chieftain's tent and then forced into its dark interior.

Within the shadows of Feltig's home Mallen found himself surprised by the Hresh's taste in fabric and furniture. The tent was in all respects a mobile home, fashioned of blackened Sempaca skins and supported at its centre by a thick pole of white timber, carved and inlaid with symbols and pictograms. From the central pole a series of thinner limbs branched out, radiating from the support's apex in long curves down to the ground. Each thinner limb had been dug into the earth and the edges of the tent-skin itself set into a trench that ran about the diameter of the abode. Beneath this the floor spread as a patchwork of grey and russet hides and all about there lay scattered the furniture and accoutrement of a powerful Chieftain. Mallen could not help but notice that much of the Hresh's possessions were Kalborean-made and he could only imagine how the Hordim had acquired them.

Outside the wind had begun to gather strength, sending dust and desiccated brush cascading through the camp. Within Feltig's tent the bluster was held at bay, not a breath of the rising gale finding its way inside. Except for the undulating motion of the tightly sown Sempaca skins above the air remained unnaturally still. Beneath this canopy the Mutan settled itself upon a high-backed chair and motioned for Hallan to push the Kalboreans into a corner. This the Hresh did, but there was something in the Hordim's demeanour that Mallen recognised as the warrior preparing himself. The Hresh had a plan and it was about to be initiated.

“Hallan'Denmar,” the Mutan whispered. “You say that you found this vehmin heading south. How is it that you could not take the

LoreMaster as well?"

The warrior stood at attention and looked to the creature without emotion.

"Once we had the vehmin we tracked his movements back to the boulder field at Ell'ash. There the mists closed in upon us and the trail dissipated on the hard ground to the east. As we were unable to find any further sign I left my scouts to continue searching and came on to Erenthel."

Canen'Set stroked at the corner of his cloak then looked towards the Kalboreans. "That is as it may be. But tell me sub-chief, by what device of coincidence is it that these vehmin all have red hair? It is neither common nor desired amongst their ilk and it seems strange that so many should be found together."

Mallen looked to the Hresh and wondered what could be his answer. Hallan however, seemed to have thought long on what he was going to say.

"It was Ansolon's idea, Dominus. After putting Callenfrey to the flames we took many captives. Unfortunately the requirement to move quickly in our retreat meant that we had to kill most of them. My chief decided that as trophies we should keep only the red-haired ones. It is not coincidental that the vehmin we captured in our own lands also has red hair for he is in fact the brother of one of the original captives. We can only assume his purpose in these lands was to recover his brother from captivity."

"And it would seem that he did not succeed." mused the Mutan. Before he could speak again Feltig shouldered his way back into the tent, hauling a large wooden frame behind him. None of the Kalboreans could recognise it for what it was, but as the Hresh Chieftain began to work on it, it became clear that it was a restraint of some type.

For a moment Canen'Set watched the Tomsk work at the device then rose and moved to stand before Hallan.

"Tell me now, Denmar, what is your intelligence on Gremorgan Hedj?"

"Dominus, it has been reported to me that the LoreMaster entered the Lands of Perdition some two days past, using the Durgoz Gate to find his way undetected into our homelands. From what was heard by my scout he is heading east towards the Morglands, specifically to find a ruin beneath the Barak'Tor. The reason for his search is unknown but it was identified that he was carrying a Gatheringstone,

and that he had one other companion, a Korep'mutan acting as a guide.”

In the pause that followed Canen'Set seemed to fall into a deep reverie, almost as if he was conferring with others unseen. When he opened his eyes he looked carefully at the Kalboreans then returned his gaze to Hallan.

“A Korep'mutan you say?”

“Yes Dominus, and from what I can gather this vehmin knows all regarding the plans of your Enemy.”

Hallan stood with his head bowed as he spoke. As a spectator Mallen was impressed. The Hresh had lied through his teeth and pulled it off convincingly. But as he wondered what a Korep'mutan might be the Mutan continued his interrogation of Hallan.

“You say Denmar,” said Canen'Set, “that the LoreMaster used the Durgoz Gate? If your story is true it must be tested on evidence that can be verified. Feltig, take the Denmar's weapons and place him with the vehmin.”

Quickly Feltig took Hallan's blades and threw them out onto the ground beyond the tent's threshold. Unarmed, the Hresh backed up and waited beside the Kalboreans as the Tomsk brandished a scimitar in his face. He seemed unworried and calm in the face of the lack of trust placed upon him.

As Mallen watched the Mutan pulled a small sphere from his cloak and settled it upon the ground. Stepping back he whispered something quietly and then waited as the globe began to crackle with a vigorous energy. All the Kalboreans took in a breath when it rose into the air and then burst outwards, spinning rapidly as it enveloped itself within a bright multicoloured light. At first it was too glaring to look at directly, but as the energy diminished there arose before them the projection of a highly detailed map of the entire breadth of the Hordelands.

From the mountains of the far west to the oceans in the east the dominion of the Horde spread in an infinite detail that seemed to Mallen as if they were hovering above, looking down with the capacity to see everything in crystal clarity. At first the map coalesced as a vast depiction of the terrain, however as the Mutan continued to murmur to himself there began to appear bright points of light scattering across its surface like stars upon a clear night sky. Except for Mallen none of the others knew it for what it was. He had seen Gremorgan's Dirge-compass at work and recognised the points of light as traces of

movement, the spectral trails of every living thing that moved within the Hordelands, and all now identifiable beneath the Mutan's cold gaze.

One point however, was brightest of all. It was a single focus of light that blazed upon the map and at first Mallen thought it might be Gremorgan, caught by magic and uncovered for the Dominus to track. As he looked closer though, he realised that it was something else, an after-image of power that resonated on the map, pointing directly to the Gate that they had used to enter the lands of Perdition.

When the apparition had solidified completely the Mutan touched the bright point with his finger. Immediately the map rushed outwards, the shining light expanding and focusing into an image of the Gate standing upon the desolate hill that had been their entry point into Perdition. Once surveyed a click of the Mutan's fingers dissolved the map, its form and imagery falling away like dust.

“You have been proven truthful Denmar, the Gate has been used and I feel the presence of the LoreMaster, as do my brothers in the Sigh. The purpose of our Enemy must be uncovered, and to do so we must start with the *vehmin*.”

With a quick gesture of his finger the Mutan pointed at Mallen and then towards the frame that the Tomsk Hresh had erected. Feltig pushed Hallan aside and grabbed at the Kalborean, dragging him by the arm towards the frame. Tomas could do nothing and Shemwe and Enika struggled weakly as they protested the cruelty they knew was to come. With no chance to defend himself Mallen was roughly fixed to the structure, his arms and legs secured by strong leather belts. When the Hresh had finished the Kalborean could not move and the intention of the frame became apparent. It was a torture rack, and as the Mutan moved purposefully towards him Mallen could see the creature relishing the pain that he was about to inflict.

“What is Gremorgan Hedj's purpose here, *vehmin*?” the Dominus hissed as he leant over Mallen's bound form.

“We know he travels within the lands of the Oera'dim, but we must have his intent as well. Tell me all that you know and I may spare your countrymen the pain that will be yours to endure.”

Mallen looked to the others and saw the helplessness on their faces. He could not know what Hallan was planning but it did not look like his comfort had been factored as a part of it. He did know however, that he had come through too many encounters with the Hordim to be intimidated by the Mutan, no matter how powerful.

"I will tell you nothing you pile of Kreel dung." With that he spat at the Mutan, but the creature's face was a blank canvas, one that radiated malice like a forest fire.

"It is curious," the Mutan whispered in Mallen's ear, "that Hallan'Denmar should mention in his claim of battle honours over Callenfrey the torment of herapyrim. It is an old term, and one that is used to describe any trial by fire. It occurs to me that such a trial might be useful here as well."

Mallen snorted at the Dominus, but the Mutan wanted information and did not care for the Kalborean's defiance. Standing back from the tearing frame the Mutan began to murmur once again, and as the strange, low chant filled the shadowed interior of the tent all could feel the air about them begin to change. Above the Mutan flickers of red light began to emerge, nothing but spectral embers that burned and then died away, however as the intensity of the Dominus' chant increased the flames grew in strength, forming a swirling vortex of fire that quickly concentrated itself above Mallen.

"Do what you will Mutan. You will get nothing from me."

The Mutan moved his finger in front of the Kalborean and by his command the fires followed, drawing a line of burning flame across Mallen's chest. In the dark air the Kalborean cried out in pain, then screamed as the Dominus concentrated his magic upon the hapless Cael. In a conflagration of scorching vapours he worked upon the Kalborean, testing his resolve as he tried to break him. Focused completely upon the task at hand the Mutan could not sense what was coming, and it descended upon him like a lightning bolt.

Out of the shadows Hallan moved with a speed that left Feltig'Tomsk dead even as he fell to the ground with his neck broken. Scooping up the falling Hresh's scimitar the Denmar ran for Canen'Set, bringing the razor-sharp blade down upon the creature's unprotected head. Only at that last moment did the Mutan realise the danger, and in a desperate act brought his arm up to protect himself from the blow. The limb fell to the floor as Hallan brought the full weight of his scimitar down onto the Hordim's skull. In a gush of blood the Dominus reared backwards, then slumped to the ground his head cleaved from crown to collar-bone. Stopping only to spit on Feltig's corpse Hallan checked the dead Hordim then turned to help Mallen from the rack.

The Kalborean was weak but his skin had somehow not been harmed by the Mutan's magic.

“It is a means of creating pain without causing injury.” explained the Hresh. “Given time Canen'Set could have worked on you for days and you would have told him everything.”

“What are we to do now?” Mallen asked as he rubbed his chest.

“It is time that you left,” the Hresh responded, “but to do so we must cause some trouble here.”

Quickly he cut the Kalboreans' bonds and gave each a scimitar from a weapon rack. “It is no simple thing that has been done today. A Dominus of the Sigh has been killed and his Brothers of the Clavern will know of it soon enough. In this world my life is forfeit, but there are few of my Kraal who can boast of the honour of such a kill. It will be fitting that the last thing I do in this lifetime is fulfil my mission.”

“What must we do Hallan?” Tomas asked as he peered through a split seam in the tent's covering.

“There are hundreds of Hresh out there and no way that we can move undetected.”

Hallan smiled and grabbed a torch from its sconce.

“The tpush stands no more than twenty metres beyond the centre of the camp. When you hear me yelling I want you to run for it. Do not stop, and take no time to try and fight your way through. You only chance will be to move quickly within the chaos that is to come. Run and then use the Gatheringstone. If the True Witness gives his blessing you will soon be home.”

Deftly the Hresh threw the talisman to Mallen, then without a further word moved carefully out into the light.

Standing within the shadows of Feltig's tent the four Kalboreans waited, unsure of what was to come. Amongst the activity of the camp there came no sign that Hallan had done anything provocative, and as they waited Tomas looked to Mallen for the answer to the one question that was on all their minds.

“Mallen, what must be done once we have reached the tpush? What is the secret of the Gatheringstone that will see us home?”

Mallen surveyed the camp and explained quietly the directions given by Gremorgan. “It is our only hope.” he said at the end. “If we are to escape the clutches of these Hordim it must work, or else we are doomed.”

Enika grabbed Mallen's hand and helped him remain stable. The torment of Canen'Set had left the Kalborean uninjured though he had been weakened by the hera'pyrim's touch nonetheless. As they waited he could feel the after-effects of the Mutan's magic still upon him,

drawing away his energy like some malignant disease. Only once did he look back at the dead Hordim and Mallen knew that it would be some time before he could forget the pain the creature had inflicted upon him.

For all the Kalboreans the interlude following Hallan's departure seemed an eternity, but when the Hresh made his move it was unmistakable. Out of the normal order of the camp arose a single voice, and it carried clearly in the air like a trumpet call. It was Hallan.

'Hear me Hresh'na. I am here to tell you that you have been deceived, the ones you look upon as Masters nothing more than pretenders worthy of dissolution and contempt. In your midst stands a Hresh of the Denmark and we do not cower to the dictates of the Mutan as if we are dogs. Hear me, for a great truth is about to be spoken and it will fall upon this place like a hammer!'

Mallen looked to the others and saw each turning to him to give the word to run, but for a moment he hesitated. Whatever Hallan was doing was having an effect. From all over the camp warriors were moving to the parade ground, and he definitely had their attention.

"There are those amongst you who must remember the Great Insurrection that brought down the Fallen Masters and left us Free Beings in this world. Do you not turn with longing to those times when the Sigh were nothing but Oera'dim like ourselves? I tell you that these Mutan are piles of Kreel dung unworthy of our reverence. Let it be proclaimed that the Denmark give no allegiance to them, and any Hresh that does is unworthy of calling themselves Hresh'na."

From the throng a great shout arose, catcalls and remonstrations pouring out of the forming crowd, and in its wake an anger grew that seemed barely restrained as Hallan purposefully tormented the warriors and brought them closer. To the sounds of clanging scimitars the Denmark cajoled the entire camp to its feet.

"Hear me Brothers! We are held by a Word of Command alone that binds us to the rule of the Sigh. They use us as fodder for their needs and they are no better than the Fallen Masters themselves. Only one question must be answered, and it separates those who are free from those who are slaves. Are you prepared to live as Free Beings like the Denmark, or are you Tomsk, nothing more than dogs whimpering at the feet of the Mutan?"

The crowd of Hresh exploded into a riot of anger and curses, and as they closed in upon the lone Denmark Mallen understood what was

about to happen. Without hesitation Hallan threw the torch he was carrying into a tent that sat beside the parade ground. It was then he knew they had to run.

“Move!” he yelled, and with Enika in tow broke out of the shadows and made a rush for the small tpush. With Tomas and Shemwe behind they had taken no more than five steps before the first explosion rocked the plateau to its root. Mallen had seen the tent that edged the parade ground before and realised in a heartbeat the warrior's plan.

In a coruscation of fire and trembling earth the Powder Tent exploded, sending burning barrels and flying metal arcing across the length of the encampment. In turn the barrels began to detonate, and although Mallen only had one chance to turn it was a vision of carnage that confronted him. Caught completely within the first blast Hallan died, engulfed in an expanding ball of flame that consumed everything about him. More explosions erupted quickly, throwing bodies and dirt in great flowers of destruction that rained fire and death down upon the survivors.

Within this chaos the Kalboreans ran, obscured by an acrid mist that plumed from burning tents and wind driven dust. All about the running men and women there grew a terrible pandemonium. At all sides detonations crumpled the air, flying metal borne upon shockwaves of fire and sound buffeting everything moving on the high plateau. Wounded Hresh staggered out of the mist only to be cut down by Mallen and Tomas as they made their way to the stone shelter. They did not wait nor deviate from the path and within moments they found themselves at the door to the tpush.

“Inside!” yelled Mallen as each disappeared into its shadows. The older Cael waited until last, turning only to pull a heavy timber door closed behind him as he made his way across its threshold. Immediately the sounds of the destruction outside became muffled, but the stone itself trembled to the explosions as Tomas found a timber beam to bar the door completely.

Turning to his brother the younger Kalborean could see no reason for delay. “Whatever you are going to do, you'd better do it now Mallen. It sounds like the entire camp is going up!”

Quickly Mallen pulled the Gatheringstone from his clothing and placed it in his open palm. Within the darkness of the tpush it glowed like the horizon at dawn, a smooth soft illumination that seemed to only hint at the power it was about to unleash. As a great crashing

sound impacted against the door Mallen focused on his memories of the tpush that would be their destination, and then carefully whispered the Word that would activate the talisman's power.

*:caerum:*

In a vortex of light and rushing power the Gatheringstone ignited. Within the confines of the tpush its brilliant glimmer spread outwards, obliterating everything until all Mallen could sense was a void of white and a terrible force that grabbed at his body like a monstrous fist, holding him immobile as the world itself turned on its axis about him.

Unable to speak, or call out to his countrymen, Mallen felt then the inexorable push as he was propelled forward, accelerating into the void until he lost all sense of time or direction. It was a feeling of absolute helplessness that ended in a jolting, broken moment as the Kalborean pitched forward onto his face, landing in a tangled heap amongst Tomas, Enika and Shemwe.

"I am absolutely sure," said Tomas angrily as he tried to get up, "that I shall never do that again. By the Fates I feel ill."

Mallen picked himself up and moved towards the women. Both had emerged from the power of the Gatheringstone disorientated and sickly, and neither could rise for the moment.

"Tomas, you tend to the girls and I'll see where the Gatheringstone has brought us."

About him Mallen could see only the ancient stone of a tpush, and in the sudden cold of its interior he had a moment of doubt, his mind racing as to the possibility that they might have ended up anywhere in the world.

Carefully he made for the doorway and then paused for a moment. Listening hard at the threshold he took a deep breath before making his way outside.

Within the tpush Tomas took the time to regain his balance before moving to Enika and Shemwe. He knew that the magic of the Gatheringstone had worked for he could hear nothing of the tumult that had been raging about them bare seconds before. Gremorgan had been right once again, though where they had been deposited was a question still to be answered. The women however, were not in a good state. Both Enika and Shemwe had been weakened by their treatment at the hands of the Hordim, and the journey they had just

taken had left them worse for the experience.

“Where are we?” asked Shemwe.

“I don't know yet,” replied Tomas. “but Mallen is out having a look. He should be back soon enough.”

When Tomas turned to Enika he found her cradling her arm. She had fallen awkwardly and a quick test of her shoulder proved her collar-bone to be broken.

“I am afraid Enika, that you will have to lay still for a short while. We will have to organise some cloth for a sling.” He smiled at her and then rose and called to his brother.

“Mallen! Is everything alright?”

There was no answer, so he motioned the women to quiet and made his way outside.

Only a few metres beyond the threshold Tomas found Mallen standing in the grasses and looking to the south. Above them the sky was clear, though darkening as the suns of Arborell found their rest against the horizon. When Mallen heard his brother he turned and smiled.

“We are here Tomas, where we should be and somehow alive to tell the tale. The Gatheringstone has brought us into the lands of Kalborea and for the first time since I can remember we are safe.”

Tomas nodded and stood beside his brother. “Why did he do it?” he asked simply.

“You mean Hallan?”

“Yes. Both he and his brother gave up their lives so that we might make our escape. It seems unaccountable, no matter how you look at it.”

The older Cael thought for a moment. It was a good question that did not have a satisfactory answer, but there was a reason nonetheless.

“Gremorgan told me one night that the Hordim are cursed beings, Tomas. He said that the Hresh especially are creatures without purpose, created for war alone and unable to find meaning in peacetime. It is their fate he said, that they live brutally then die by violence, only to be reborn to repeat the cycle forever. In the face of such lives the Hordim have given themselves honour codes, rituals and an unabiding hatred for Mankind to temper the emptiness of it. Hallan and his brother did what all Hresh do, they completed the mission given to them no matter the cost. I am just glad that Hallan succeeded, for here we now stand.”

Tomas smiled and looked back towards the tpush. “For that I am most grateful as well. What do we do now?”

Mallen held up a small bag and gave it to his brother. “It would seem that amongst his many accomplishments the LoreMaster has a talent for divining the future. This is one of his bags. I found it against the threshold of the shelter. He must have left it here when we made our way westwards towards the forests of the Meshaal. It has food, a compass and a small map, enough to get us to the coast if we scrimp it. How he could have known that we would return here is beyond me.”

Tomas rummaged through the bag and shook his head. “I wonder if that Dwarvendim ever surprises himself by being wrong.”

Mallen laughed and grabbed his brother's shoulder. “Come Tomas. Let us see to Shemwe and Enika. Tomorrow we will start on our journey home and I could do with seeing Callenfrey again, no matter what state it might be in.”

Together the brothers returned to the tpush and the women waiting within. Enika's shoulder needed tending, and as Tomas divided up some of the food left by Gremorgan, Mallen tore a length of fabric from his shirt for a sling.

“Are we safe then?” she asked as he fitted the cloth.

“Yes,” Mallen answered. “We are within the borders of Kalborea, though we are still some way from home. It is almost dark so all we can do is rest. In the morning we will get on our way, but for now I am afraid you are going to have to take care with this injury. Your shoulder is going to require the attention of a skilled Healer and the sooner we find one the better.”

Enika nodded and leant back carefully against the bare stone. Mallen helped her to settle then found a place to rest himself. In his life he had never felt so tired, yet in the dark confines of the tpush he found himself planning their route back to the coast. It would indeed be good to see Callenfrey again he mused, but it would be a homecoming fraught with sadness for the many friends they had lost. In that quiet moment he looked to Tomas and listened as he spoke with Shemwe. All that had been important to him had been recovered and for the first time in weeks he felt as if he could relax. As he fell into sleep he knew that he had brought his brother back to safety, and for Mallen that was all that mattered.

THE END



## Warriors of the Oera'dim



It is said in the lands of Men that there is nothing feared more than the Hresh of the Horde. Roughly humanoid in size and stature they are weapons of destruction, purposefully designed by their long-dead masters to fight and die in the forgotten wars of the ancient world. Constructed from the dark earth of Arborell, and imbued with a spark of EarthMagic that sustains them, they are the ultimate warriors of their kind, ruthless fighting machines who live without fear or the restraint of mercy.

The Hresh of the Horde are easily recognised from amongst their fellow Oera'dim. Slightly larger than most men they are heavily muscled with flat uncomplicated features. Each sports a long braided tail of black hair that trails from the nape of their necks, and all display the tattoos of their kin and status upon their right arms. As is the practice of all Hordim, Hresh also tattoo the sign of the Three Tears under their right eye. Why this is done is unknown to Men, the meaning of such adornment a mystery that has not yet been uncovered.

Unlike other members of the Oera'dim the Hresh have no specific skin colour, the ancients who created them having given them the ability to change their skin tone to match their surroundings at will. It is recorded also that Hresh have excellent night vision and acute hearing.

Since the end of the Third Horde War all Hresh live within the cold wastes of northern Arborell, in an area of tundra and crater lakes known as the Lands of Perdition. As is the case with most Hordim they maintain a strong loyalty to the Mutan of the Clavern'Sigh. Only the Hresh of the Denmar Kraal have been known to operate independent of the dictates of the Sigh, and they have suffered much because of it.

Although it is not common knowledge, it has been ascertained that the ancients, whom we know as Trel or Trel'sara, did not deem it necessary to provide their warriors with a finite lifespan. Unless killed by combat or accident Hresh are for all practical purposes immortal, and it is rumoured that at least one of their number has survived more than eight thousand years in the world.

To the Men of the Four Nations the Hresh are the epitome of

cruelty, but as with all Oera'dim they are bound by the dictates of the Code, the rules of behaviour enforced by the Dreya Tree that govern all aspects of Hordim society. It is this Code that determines the social and economic structures of Hordim affairs and it is the tenets included in the Code regarding duty and honour that govern how they prosecute their eternal war against the Men of the South.

It is a truth that the Hresh are warriors, created as weapons of war and then misused as slaves by the cruel Masters that brought them into the world. In these modern times the Hresh remain warriors, their only true purpose to prosecute war and enforce the power of the Clavern'sigh. They are a force to be reckoned with, and one that the armies of Men cannot ignore.

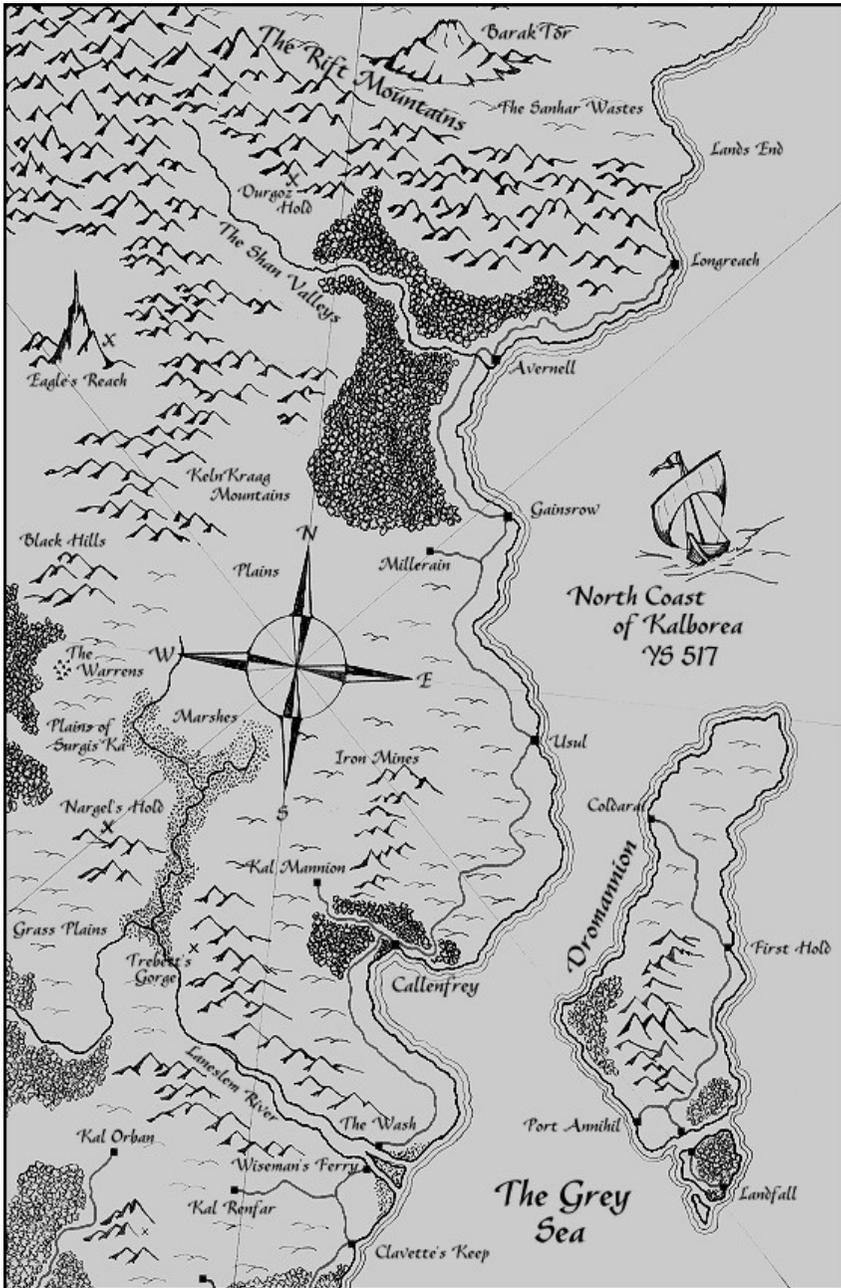
## Maps



Very few maps have survived the years since the epic journey of the Cael brothers to the Lands of Perdition. These examples were discovered by a Kalborean Historian known to his Guild as the Tak Lovar. Although these maps have not been authenticated they do maintain a reasonable level of accuracy and can be considered useful.

## The North Coast of Kalborea

Year of Settlement 517



# The Lands of Perdition

Year of Settlement 517





# BLOOD AND IRON

HERE CAN BE FOUND THE TALE OF MALLEI AND TOMAS CAEL, MEN OF KALBOREA AND METALSMITHS BY TRADE. THEIR STORY BEGINS IN THE YEAR OF SETTLEMENT 517, SOME 400 YEARS BEFORE THE DEMISE OF THE DRAGON WINDHAMMER. IT IS A TIME OF CALM IN A WORLD THAT HAS NEVER KNOWN PEACE, AND IT CANNOT LAST.

FOR THE BROTHERS CAEL LIFE IS UNTRoubLED, THE VIOLENCE OF THE HORDE A DISTANT MEMORY FOR THEIR COASTAL HOME OF CALLENFREY. IN ONE NIGHT OF CHAOS AND DESTRUCTION HOWEVER, THEIR QUIET EXISTENCE IS STOLEN FROM THEM AND THEY ARE THROWN INTO THE GREAT QUEST THAT IS THE SUBJECT OF THIS EPIC TALE.

HERE FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION IS THE SONG OF BLOOD AND IRON. MAY YOU ENJOY THE JOURNEY.

