

Blood Bounty



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A Tales From Omega Book

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Author's Notes

A note on the format of this book is essential. In trying to retain the flavor of a vast civilization which is, though technologically differing from our own, culturally similar, I felt it desirable to provide familiar language equivalents. This, in my view, will enhance for the reader a sense of internationalism which would be found anywhere one would find people very far advanced but not very unified.

The languages used herein are not the languages indigenous to Omega. They are, rather, those which will most approach the flavor of their corresponding tongues on Omega. I have limited their use to only a few isolated incidents, the majority of which will be found in PART VIII.

The Story is ostensibly about Erick of Kempdon. No one else. All others which have been included have been so to give the reader a greater sense of what this man has to face and with what he must deal. As the individuals Erick encounters are not minor, nor those who materially effect his destiny, they have been allowed their own life without this writer attempting to diminish or down-play their personalities. The implications of Erick's decisions and the effect of others' decisions on him have been given the widest possible scope while still trying to maintain a manageable story not overloaded with miscellany.

The PARTs have been arranged to flow more or less chronologically. They are divided, for the most part, between those dealing principally with Erick and those dealing with the host Erick was impacted by. Subsections denoted by * * * indicate that the source for that section is different from the one preceding it. Thus, tenses as well as perspective will change accordingly. This was necessary as Erick was not privy to all that occurred nor were any

others sufficiently informed that I could use a single point of view to any real advantage. I choose to not write this as an omniscient third person, desiring to retain the flavor of the Erick's point of view where practicable.

The elves referred to in the text are not the mythical beings we are used to. They are the people who remained on Omega at the time the Rings appeared around the planet. They are also those who are direct bloodline descendants from these people. They live to be very old. Many of those who were on the planet at the time the Rings were created are still alive at the time of this story. Their physical features are characterized by their high forehead and straight nose. Also, their digits are very long and slender, however not so much so as to be unbecoming or clumsy--more to the point, they appear a work of art. The tone and texture of their skin is strikingly luminescent. They all have straight hair which tends to be lighter though somewhat thinner.

I have made liberal use of editor's notes clearly marked by [Ed.]. These have been employed where greater clarity and illumination were desirable. Omega is a different world; to break the barriers which often accompany the unknown and the unfamiliar, these notes have been included. I have tried to make them as brief as possible. Where these possess any other than minimal length they will be found at the bottoms of pages where applicable. Though it is not essential for the reader to make use of them, those I have elected to include are intended to heighten understanding.

INTRODUCTION

How I came upon the Tales of Omega I am not yet at liberty to say. That I have is plain enough for you have the evidence before you. After great pain and many years, I have unlocked the riddle of the Omegan tongue referred to as the "Ancient Tongue of Lore" and since have come to an understanding of many of the languages indigenous to a distant planet called Omega.

Its stories were as many as there were stars in its firmament, tales that would raise the hair of the most wise and set at peace the most tormented heart. Its people were both rich in color and great of mind. So, too, did they have their great trials as well as their great defeats. Such seems to be the lot of homosapiens wherever they are to be found.

On Omega one could find both the very advanced (if one knew where to look and what to expect) and the backward. The great achievements stood side by side with the great follies. The scope and breadth of Omegan literature has brought me both delight and anguish. As the spectacle of its panarama unfolded to my view, my heart at once ached with the tender and roared with those who possessed a cause.

Their battles amongst themselves and with the forces of the Netherworld are telling to us even at this day. The stories of love and patriotism would fill the mere mortal with feelings of renewed vigor for their own daily lives and renew their sense of duty to their fellow man if one would but open their heart to the drama of life, love, death, and hate.

Omega exists (or at least existed) beyond the constellation of Pegasus, its distance of such great magnitude as to only now have its galaxy picked up

by the most advanced means of radiotelemetry and spectroscopy. Its rough location is to be found along the line extending from Sol, passing through the celestial coordinate of 0 hours 29 minutes 37 seconds at +27.1029 degrees.

It has a twenty-eight hour day and is about four times the size of our earth. The calendar in use at the time of this story had thirteen months and seasons which correspond with those on our own Earth. I have used the terms we use for our own months feeling such to enhance the understand as well as the names contemporarily use for the names of the days of the weeks; they having seven to a week as well.

Omega is a ringed planet which orbits on its axis of true north within a binary system referred to as Beta-Gamma-Seven, Beta being a white dwarf and Gamma-7, a red giant. Due to its peculiar plant life and the constant bombardment of radical radiation, our standard laws of physics would not equate cleanly to theirs. In consequence of the terrestrial physiology of Omega (and elements that I am at a loss to explain, such information not yet being available on the particulars), there exists on Omega what we would in less enlightened times call magic

In addition to humans could be found what on earth we would call myth and legend. Many of them are exactly as found here in our own past. Others have no parallel we may point to. The number of eons in the past these stories come from I couldn't begin to guess at. And whether the great civilizations told of--or for that matter, Omega itself--still exists, I know not. But that their stories were born before Father Adam breathed his first breath outside the fruitful bounds of Eden I am sure.

Share now with me the story I call Blood Bounty....

BLOOD BOUNTY

PROLOGUE

My memory is vague about most of what happened after I left the field. The pictures in my mind seem much a jumble of what I wanted to be and what really was. I still have trouble shaking the images that came to me in my fight with Cindrith, though I feel compelled to write it in the hopes that at last I will cease to be plagued by those images. Sometimes it's difficult to remember what I lived and what I sensed from her. But I feel that I must try to reconcile these things for my own sanity's sake, if not indeed for the boy.

* * *

So began the entries to one of the more strange episodes I was to discover in the writings which have fallen into my hands. I, too, after its reading, felt somewhat compelled to place these things on paper for my own benefit as much as for anyone else's. Here now is this tale for which I make no apologies and hope that in the writing I may find rest as well.

* * *

I remember quite distinctly being granted leave from the front. I truly needed the rest as I had grown quite heartsick from the continual letting of blood. The men of my unit didn't know that I had left till I was already gone; I always felt bad about that. Orders are orders, though. Once relieved it was a punishable offense to return to duties before the leave had expired. What a strange concept that now is to me--curious....

It was a small hamlet at the edge of a valley with a stream cutting angularly through it as though the inhabitants were afraid to channel it to more productive use. It wasn't even attractive the way it cut through the streets. But the people seemed friendly. When they saw me riding up, dirty and unkempt from the lines, they, recognizing me to be an officer, immediately accorded me every hospitality their town could afford. I couldn't pay for anything. The Mayor went so far as to insist that if I tried, the town would consider it bad manners. Officer's pay being what it was, I was a little reluctant, but it seemed a shame to spoil their genuine caring. I decided that I would accept as a representative of the King. While I bathed, they cleaned and pressed my uniform, polished my boots as they hadn't been for months, and provided me fresh underclothing. While I was shaving, a small boy, of no more than eight years, attempted to steal my purse. He was caught by the Innkeeper and nearly thrashed to an inch of his life for the attempt. They sent him scampering out of town. I discovered later that he was the Innkeeper's only son.

I don't believe that it was the war which caused those people to be like that. A malady had settled over the land shortly after Harthallow the Fourth became regent. It was as though the people had lost their ability to love. The only important thing was to keep the King's Wardens satisfied that absolutely none of the King's edicts were broken. The smallest infraction could bring the loss of all one possessed if not indeed their very life. Looking back, I feel ashamed that I allowed and even participated in any of it.

The townspeople seemed insatiable in their appetite to please one of the King's officers. I had lost a golden button from my sleeve a month earlier and discovered that they had found a similar one and sewn it in its place. No

one mentioned the deed. I ate a feast that no one there could afford, I drank the best the towns people had stored, I listened to music played on instruments which seemed to beg use. They had cleaned the Inn's hall till it fairly gleamed, and they tidied themselves as though I myself were the King. They hung on my every word, desiring most for any word of how the battles were going. The war itself hadn't touched that place directly, though a time or two it did seem as though it would be overrun. It was an out of the way place of no account to the army or the King. In the overall scheme of things it wouldn't bother in the least anyone that "mattered" should the whole of it cease to exist. I suppose the real reason that it seemed so queer to me was that in all my experience, I had never once visited any of these places scattered all over the country side during the days since joining the army. My experience was limited to the camps, large towns and fortresses. But, somewhere in all that they did and said there was something hollow--something which rang so out of tune that it wearied me to just be there. I drank till I couldn't see--or think.

I recall that the sky was crimson that next morning. The dew lay heavily upon the ground. There was no breeze and the air was thick. I didn't move. I just opened my eyes and watched as the crimson sky began to wash my room till it seemed bloody red.

The knock at my door was quiet. But there in the silence, so complete was my surprise, I found myself bellowing "Go away!" I listened, waiting to hear footsteps receding down the hall, yet I heard nothing. I leaned over the side of my bed to look through the crack between the door and the floor. There was no shadow, there were no feet. The small hairs on the nape of my neck began to prickle. I slowly reached for my sword and again bellowed, "I said, go away!" This time there was a sound, though not of this unwelcome

visitor leaving. It was the sound of coins being jingled in a sack. I didn't know what it meant. I wouldn't have been surprised at that point to find that the townspeople had decided to grant me further favors, but that is not what I expected from that knock.

When I opened the door, I saw her for the first time. Were it not for the shape of her thighs, mostly hidden by her leather pants, and the fullness of her blouse, I would have thought her a man. The hood of her dirty brown cloak shadowed her face. She had a bandoleer of throwing knives draped over her left shoulder, fastened on her right side. I could see the hilt of a long sword resting near the palm of her gloved left hand. Her clothes were blood-spattered and her high boots covered with bloody mud. She smelled of the thick of battle, and my nostrils flared. But there in her right hand was a bag. From the size and bulges I reckoned it to hold at least an hundred silver sovereigns.

She patiently waited as I ogled the bag, then shook it once for effect. I looked back toward her shadowed face. She nodded in the direction of my room. I let her in.

I didn't know her. I didn't know from where she had come. I'm still not sure why I didn't just send her packing in the first place--greed, I guess. Or maybe I was just too curious to let her go. But there she stood with her back to the window, silhouetted by that flaming red sky.

She had dropped the sack of coins on my bed as she'd passed it on her way to the window. She then tossed me a roll of parchment with the king's seal on it. She stood there staring at me. I couldn't see her eyes; I just felt them peering out from under that dark hood. Though my first impulse was to challenge her, I walked back to the bed and resheathed my sword. I asked what the scroll was. She said nothing. She motioned to it and shook the bag in

her hand. I opened the scroll:

HERE YE! HERE YE!

Wanted by the Crown for the crimes of treason,
theft and murder: Sean McEan, alias the Midnight
Warrior.....Dead or Alive.

2,000 Gold Sovereign
for either his head or his person.

Wanted by the Crown for the crimes of treason,
attempted assassination and theft: Cathrine
Dunnybrook, alias the Fallen Angel.....
Dead or Alive.

1,500 Gold Sovereign
for either her head or her person.

His Most Royal Highness

King Edmond Del Harthallow IV

It was a "wanted" poster signed by the king. I knew it had nothing to do with me, but I couldn't figure what she wanted. I thought that if she believed me to be one of them, she'd have to be a fool to confront me in so bold a fashion. Then I started thinking that maybe she was the Fallen Angel they were looking for, and she had come to purchase my help for something. I decided to play the hand she dealt me. I sat on a stool next to the door and looked into the darkness of her face, then folded my arms and waited.

Five minutes--ten more--finally, thirty minutes passed. The sky had grown bright with the rising of the southern sun. As the dew evaporated, it filled the air with strong smells of stink from the vomit left from too many nights of too much ale in the tavern below. We were playing some kind of waiting game. I had been taught to hunt as a young boy, and my tour in the army only served to sharpen my skills, so I felt confident I could easily outlast her....Towards noon my stomach began to growl. The foul taste of the previous night's mead was wearing off, and my tongue began to crawl with fire. I'd have given anything, even for a glass of water. But the game continued.

As the sun began to set, it streaked the sky with deep violets and pale corals against the fleece streamers of clouds coming in off the equatorial glaciers. The tavern started coming back to life with its distinctive sounds filtering through the window and echoing up the stairs. She hadn't moved! Hadn't shifted from one foot to the other. Hadn't scratched, yawned--nothing! My stomach was revolting; my tongue had long since died. My brain was on fire with the absurdity of some strange woman standing in front of my window for thirteen and a half hours never moving or speaking! And still the game continued.

All that seemed important was to out-last the she-devil standing in front of my window. I decided that I would spend every ounce of my strength to

accomplish that task. Never had any cause so inflamed me! Never had any prize been of greater worth! But in that night, every minute was an hour itself. I fought just to keep one eye open. Just to stay on that stool another moment. Just to keep...

When I awoke, I found myself lashed to the back of my horse. I couldn't speak. It seemed all the blood in my body was gathered in my head, hands, and feet. Every time I tried to protest, I was gagged by the pressure in my throat. At length my strength was entirely spent. I don't remember anything more of the ride.

The first thing I remember, after the ride, was the smell of incense. Its scent cradled my thoughts for several moments. As I shook off the effect, I detected the smells of the ocean. I as yet hadn't gained the courage to look at my surroundings, so I kept my eyes closed and tried to gain what I could by listening. In the distance there appeared to be a woman singing. I couldn't understand the words at the time but felt them to convey the most disturbing of feelings, though strangely they seemed to comfort as well. Her voice filtered in and out as a counter-point to the surf. I knew I was laying naked on a feather bed and covered with a light but warm quilt. As I had no sensation of rocking, I figured I wasn't aboard a ship. As I heard nothing else, I felt moderately safe in opening my eyes.

My vision was clear, so if I had been drugged, there were no lasting effects. I was in a tent made of a type of hide with which I was unfamiliar. As I looked around, I discovered myself alone in the middle of the tent. As I sat up looking around, I was amazed to see small golden flowers growing in this otherwise dark tent. My mind fully reeled when I realized that they were the source of its light, for in looking through the opening of the tent, I could tell that it was dark out. As I had no clothes on, I tried to use the

quilt as a cloak so I could get up, but it was sewn to the bed, which was staked to the ground.

That was it! My patience had run out. I decided that whatever it was that was going on had gone absolutely far enough. I shouted as loudly as I could for whomever was in charge to show me the courtesy of telling me the meaning of depriving me of my clothing and means of defending myself. The tent was immediately filled with the sound of children laughing as though at some private joke. At this I fairly raged! I began screaming for silence. It was insane! I couldn't begin to give you any justification; I simply went momentarily mad. At my outburst all sound except that of the surf ceased.

I was about to cry out again when the tent opening was pulled outward and in stepped two scantily clad women of uncommon appearance. They were both about twelve hands tall. Their skin radiated in the flower-light. They looked like well-seasoned fighters, but they weren't heavily muscled like the wenches I'd fought alongside against the Beermodians. They each had a fisherman's trident and a short sword. They were apparently uniformed as they wore matching girdles and skirts of a deep burgundy, and their peculiar breastplates bore the same device: a sea gull flying above a ship at sea.

Trying hard to take any sting out of my voice I asked, "Where's your leader? Do you speak Quintinesse?" They may have been deaf-mutes for all I knew. They didn't even look at me. I would have thrown something at them just to find out if they could even see, but the pillow was also sewn to the bed. I sat there (covered, of course) making plans to make good the least opportunity for escape, though I must admit I was only making plans for the sake of making plans as I knew nothing of where I was. I sat there amazed at just how little it took to overpower me. I could easily best the two guards, I thought; after all, I'd have had surprise on my side. But I wasn't yet

prepared to venture the unknown, not forgetting my almost livid curiosity over what I was doing here in the first place.

I don't know just how much time had passed as I sat there pondering my embarrassing predicament. I only half-noticed the presence of someone else in the tent. When I did realize their presence, I nearly jumped out of bed. It was she! She didn't look at all the same; she was clean and clothed in delicate flowing laces that somewhat had the appearance of sparkling. Even so, it was she. Though I'd never seen her face, there was no mistaking the feeling of those eyes. They were simple, pale green, but their intensity branded my thoughts. I knew I would never forget them. Even if I hadn't seen them there, I'd always remember her standing in front of my window...

"I see you're rested," she said, her words cutting into my thoughts. She walked around the bed not looking at me, continuing to speak. "I must apologize about your clothing; I had it burned." I listened intently. "Oh, by the way, you're dead."

At this I interrupted, "Well, thank you for this last night in a soft bed instead of the fleabag where I was."

She gave me a dagger-like glance and continued. "I see they were right: you are impudent. No matter. I need you alive; it's only your identity that died." I was relieved, but for what I wasn't too sure. She continued, "It should thrill you to know everyone thinks you died a hero in the last assault on the Beermodian stronghold of Breabark." Her last words placed her at the end of my bed staring at me again. Her eyes seemed to act like a pinion on my brain; forcing me to lock wits against her, not necessarily to fight her, just to resist her. After a few moments she smiled and said, "It's good you know, this gift of yours. It's undisciplined, but even in its infancy you've a great deal of strength. It may even grow to be stronger than my own." With

that she left me to ponder her meaning, still not knowing why I was here or what any of it meant.

When a young girl brought in my dinner, I realized I had forgotten all about eating. Which reminded me that I was a good five days' ride from that fleabag in Thistle. That is, if we traveled in a straight line to the ocean. But my muscles weren't sore from riding on the back of the horse, so I must have been here a couple of days. As she laid the tray at the foot of my bed, I asked her how long I had been here. She glanced at one of the guards who was returning the look, quickly said, "Two weeks," then left. It took a moment for it to sink in. I hadn't eaten for at least three weeks! There had to be an explanation. I began wondering if there were possibly more to what she said about my death. I looked at the tray of food. I wasn't sure that I was even hungry. After all, do dead people even need to eat? The fresh pomegranates, cooked sturgeon, and buttered mushrooms smelled good, and my mouth began to water. To get it, however, required my getting up. Fortunately, one of the guards apparently appreciated my plight and stepped forward to set the tray within my reach. I said, "Thank you." As expected she said nothing but returned to her post beside the door.

The food was filling, and I soon found myself growing tired. I sat the tray back on the floor and laid down. After all, whatever was going to happen needed my full attention, so I thought I should rest while I could.

When next I awoke, I saw that the guards were no longer in the tent. It was still dark out, and I could hear crickets. The flowers continued to give forth their golden light. I discovered a new addition to the furnishings as I looked about the room; behind the head of the bed was a large trunk with a robe draped over it. I marveled that, either I was sleeping sounder than I ever had, or these women possessed incredible abilities of stealth. That

aside, I didn't know how much darkness there was left; and if they had provided clothing in that trunk, this would be the last they'd see of me.

Peculiar, the clothing was of exceptional quality, but here, too, were a variety of weapons of expert workmanship. Had I been brought here for some strange tournament? Was I to run some form of gauntlet? I'm somehow a hero of Breabark if this woman's to be believed. But, why provide me with weapons? Didn't they know that it's natural to escape when being held captive? Did they expect one to just wait on their pleasure?...

PART I

(The Composition of the Web)

I have often wondered to myself where this had all begun. The vivid images which I acquired from her Highness have gone a long way toward helping me resolve the sequence of events. I have poured over the captured records and spoken with a number of the principles and all in all spent no little effort to this end. What follows here is some of my discovery.

* * *

Excerpt from the diary of the Abbot of Quintin:

May 16th 2132 - Noon

Today marks the 79th anniversary of the Black Badge of Harthallow's rule in Quintin.

Redmond came to see me again this morning. He was babbling something about his charge from his father....I think I should write it just to remind myself. Redmond's grandfather was killed defending King Michael when the King was only twelve. Redmond's grandfather was sixty-six this day 79 years ago. His grandfather charged Redmond's father to some dark secret, and this was passed to Redmond in turn. I somewhat fear that this unknown charge is all that Redmond has left. Must remind myself his birthday is next week; he'll be 63, I think.

-2 P.M.

What great joy! Just read a message from Colin and sent the accompanying missive to lady Cindrith. Must hurry along the necessary prepar-

ations. I think I'll give a sermon on the hand of providence this evening.

* * *

"The Lady Cindrith, daughter and only issue of King Edmond Del Harthallow III and Queen Regina La Flandours; third daughter of King La Flandours." She read it over again just to remind herself that she was half La Flandours and not all Harthallow. She rolled up the certificate and placed it back in the drawer, then began to comb her hair before the mirror. She was every inch a princess. Her narrow chin, straight nose, and flowing blonde hair only serving as a proper backdrop for her refined regal bearing, her soft flesh only hinting her one quarter elf ancestry. Her handmaid Lorell had often teased her about her hazel eyes, insisting that they were too kind for a sovereign. Cindrith stood still a moment before her floor-length mirror, her supple lines delicately tapering the length of her ten and a half hands height. As she dressed, she mused that Colin was watching her every move and practised the finer arts of being a woman.

She had just sat by the window when Hadrian, one of the Abbot's young acolites, knocked at her chamber door.

"M'lady Cindrith," he said, somewhat nervous about being in her presence. Cindrith turned to see who it was.

"Yes?" she said, "Aren't you Young Hadrian?"

Hadrian shuffled in embarrassment that she should even know his name. He bowed then continued, "Forgive me, M'lady, but the Abbot said I should bring this to you--I mean, er, give this to you."

He flushed as she walked toward him. He knelt and held out the missive.

Cindrith took it.

"Does he want a reply?" she asked.

"No, M'lady," his voice a little more confident.

"Then you may thank him for me."

Hadrian bowed again, then left. Cindrith returned to her seat by the window, her thoughts far away as she remembered again the last meeting she had had with Colin:

They were in one of the unused courtyards on the south of the castle, standing under an arbor overgrown with wild roses. The stars were bright, and the air was warm. She felt anew, burying her head in Colin's strong arms and smelling his youthful flesh. His soft chestnut eyes pierced her heart as she looked up at him. She remembered feeling the soft texture of his fine brown hair as she ran her fingers through it. But mostly, her thoughts lingered on the look of love and reassurance in his eyes, the lines of concern in his boyish face, and how he was trembling as he touched her cheek and kissed her brow. So, also, she recalled her own glow as he touched her and pressed his warm soft lips against the center of her forehead, followed so soon by his mounting his dark steed and spurring the beast into the night, his cloak shimmering under the silver moon. Then the deafening thunder as the mounted watch which her father had sent to kill him approached. Finally, she remembered her anguish at the thought that she might never see him again.

Her mind wandered as the many images of their few encounters played in memories. They had met by accident while he was playing one day in the yard of the Abby. He was very shy and ran when he saw her looking at him. From there their relationship sputtered then grew as each seemed destined for the other. Then the trouble began which she didn't understand. Her father seemed to feel it necessary that Colin die!

The missive fell from her hand to the floor. With a deep sigh more felt than uttered she reached down for it and unrolled it...

My dearest Lady Cindrith,

I will meet you behind the
chapel. The Abbot will provide us
with mounts and provisions. Bring
only the essentials. He will wed
us 'ere this night passes.

My heart aches in anticipation
of holding you. My eyes long to be
graced by your beauty. So, till
midnight then...

Your Devoted
Colin

Her heart leapt within her as the pall of darkness that had oppressed her mind was eased, for now the pain and fear of the past thirty two months had only a few hours before its final relief. But first, there was the Ball...

Her father had decreed a week of tournaments while the sun should last and Balls till it should rise again. This was in honor of his armies' recent slaughter of the armies of the Kennardites to the north. Often she had

thought that the Kennardite raid against Helm, Viceroy of Heartfieldshire, was a ruse, one engineered by her father as an excuse to go to war against Kennardia to subject their ports to his dominion. Even as recent as last week he had told her, "In a few years you'll be queen and rein over all the lands I gain for you." He was motioning to a map of the surrounding territories. Her thoughts burned, "Did he really think I cared about land and power? Couldn't he see that all I want is simply love and an end to all these wars?" (From the time her father had beaten her mother to death and framed a villager to hide the deed she had only one desire: that was to leave the castle and go as far away as Colin cared to take her.)

"The Ball!" The thought reverberated in her mind. "A lot has to be done by six, and it's already three. All the servants and officials are at the tournament with Father, so I don't have to worry about being seen packing. Father shouldn't miss me because I told him I wouldn't stay for his blood sport. He was drunk enough that he let me leave." While engaged in thought she leaned over the railing of the balcony and called to Lorell, whom was watering the newly blossomed lilacs.

Lorell looked up from the cloistered garden and said, "Yes, M'lady?" As she saw Cindrith's eyes and face, she continued, "My Lady, is that color I see in your cheeks?"

Cindrith could contain her feelings no longer as she called back, "Oh sweet Lorell, as you love me, please come up at once."

Lorell dropped her watering pot on the flagstone walk and ran up the garden steps. She sensed that Cindrith's appearance would not have changed so greatly save that her ladyship's true love had somehow managed to return. Nearly out of breath Lorell reached the bed chamber and spoke between breaths.

"Yes, M'lady?"

Cindrith's eyes plead as she spoke, "Swear now, upon your love for me, that what I'm about to disclose to you will go no farther than your ears, never to venture upon your tongue."

"My Lady," Lorell said, "more than upon my love for you I do swear upon the graves of my husband and son; never to betray you and your own true love."

Cindrith flushed and stiffened. "How did you know Colin was here!?"

"By the color in your cheeks and the excitement in your voice." Lorell spoke softly, trying to comfort Cindrith.

"Oh Lorell, how can I attend the Ball if I'm so easily betrayed in this my love for Colin? For surely if I don't attend, then father will think me ill and send his horrid physicians to watch me." Cindrith's eyes grew wild with fear as she continued. "I cannot live another night apart from my love knowing that he is so near! What can I do?"

"My Lady," Lorell spoke with the confidence of a friend, "surely it is I, your handmaid. Have I not sat at your side in sickness and shared girlhood games with you? Did not my mother attend your own mother at your birth, even as she was eight months with me? Did you not tell me of my love for my departed husband 'ere I was aware of it? In fine, have we known each other lo these twenty-nine years and not known each other at all?" Their eyes moist, they sat holding each others' hands.

Cindrith broke the silence, "Precious friend, after mother died I gave you your freedom, that you might marry young Duaine. I truly felt I had lost a part of myself. I grieved for your loss during my father's bloody wars to the east. Then, when you returned, I would of you to stay as a friend." They both smiled a knowing smile. "But you would not. If you couldn't earn your keep, you said, then you would have none. So it is that you are a servant and yet ever my friend."

Cindrith stood and walked to the window. She looked out, knowing she wouldn't be able to see the church, yet she knew that it was just the other side of the far tower. Her thoughts were of Colin. She spoke softly.

"It isn't that father would notice any difference. He will probably be too drunk anyway." She looked back at Lorell. "But--Sir Renald seems to notice everything about me. Long has he sought my hand in vain. Even now he is probably buzzing as a bee of proverb in father's ear for his consent... He would know the cause of my joy." She looks back out the window. "And so black is his heart he would reveal all to Father."

"Then my lady will think of a plan," said Lorell hopefully.

Cindrith sat down on her seat next to the window and said "But what plan, save risking all by going to meet Colin early, and hoping we could get away quickly enough?"

"Does My Lady remember the young Earl of Trent, and how he pined for his lost dog?"

"Yes."

"And that his father made him think that the dog was running an important errand."

"What does that have to do with this?"

"Think, My Lady. Couldn't you make this 'dog' think your joy was for him?"

"And?"

"And then excuse yourself to freshen up. By the time they discover what has happened you and your Colin will be married and long gone."

Cindrith bit her lower lip as she turned to face Lorell, "But what if something should go wrong?"

"What could go wrong, my Lady? Who would dare tell you you couldn't

freshen up? Even the king would appear a fool should he venture."

"Oh, of course you're right."

Cindrith went to her closet to retrieve a carpet bag. Lorell spoke again.

"Just one favor, my Lady?"

"Anything."

"Please allow that I may attend you. If not for your sake then for mine... Your father would have my head roasted and served to his swine were I still here after you're gone."

"Of course, sweet Lorell."

They began packing, talking of the road before them.

* * *

The Abbot of Quintin was busying himself with cleaning up the vestry when young Hadrain came running in. The Abbot continued sweeping as he spoke.

"Come in lad."

Hadrian stood panting.

The Abbot, putting away his broom, asked, "Well? Did you give her the missive?"

"Yes," said Hadrian, "and she said to say thank you."

"Good. You may go back to your studies."

"Thank you, Your Grace."

"It's 'Father,' not 'Your Grace.' I'm not the archbishop."

The Abbot barely missed Hadrian's backside with his not-so-swift foot as Hadrian left.

The Abbot hadn't seen the tall, slender Sir Renald standing in a darkened

corner of his chamber. The oversight was promptly rectified, however, when Renald spoke.

"You tell him, mad priest!" he said with a half sneer.

The Abbot turned to look just as Renald stepped from the darkness of the corner.

"What business have you here?" the Abbot demanded, "Why aren't you at the tournament?"

"Since when is it the business of the Abbot to know the business of a knight?"

"It is the business of all free men to know why a stranger is in their private quarters."

"Stranger? But you do know me; I am loved by the king and his fair daughter."

"Loved?" The Abbot shook his head, "only by yourself, you mean."

The Abbot turned and walked to the pulpit in the chapel as he continued to speak.

"I'll not dally with you, sir knight. You've come here for some reason or you wouldn't be here."

Renald leaned against the door post of the Abbot's chamber. He opened the Abbot's diary and began to thumb the pages as he spoke.

"Oh priest of toads," his voice heavy with pomp, "I've come to be converted."

"Then you'll need to leave off from stealing," said the Abbot as he watched Renald leaf through his diary, "won't you?"

"What? This? But, what was it the young pup called you? Ah, yes," his tone ever taunting, "Your Grace. I'm not stealing this. This contains valuable evidence of high treason. I am merely confiscating it as my first

act of devotion."

The Abbot remained unstirred by Renald's hypocritical posturing.

"Then I suggest you take your evidence, and your devotion to that darkness you call light, and leave my chapel. You have desecrated its halls quite sufficiently already.."

"Such boldness from one so slight of frame. And to think, I came here only to do a good deed before god for my king."

The Abbot didn't speak. He reached into the pulpit, withdrew a scroll, and began to read it to himself. Renald dropped the diary onto the floor and held up a golden dagger with a serpent sigil carved into its ivory hilt. The suddenness of the noise surprised the Abbot, whereupon he half glanced at Renald, and said "Haven't you left yet? You have what... you..."

The Abbot's words trailed off as he looked at the blade. Renald enjoyed his position and continued to taunt the Abbot.

"Oh, then you do recognize it?"

Renald turned side-ways in the doorway turning the knife over and then held it by its point. The Abbot was no fool. He knew that given half a chance Renald would twist anything he might say, he spoke cautiously.

"How do you come by Sean McEan's knife without wearing it, Sir knight?"

"Sean McEan," Renald played with the name, not yet having evoked the desired response from the Abbot. "Sean--Mc--Ean." He touched his forehead with the hilt of the dagger then swiftly held it aright as he looked at the Abbot. "You mean Colin, don't you?"

The Abbot felt his heart skip but maintained his demeanor and spoke not.

"Good," continued Renald, "you at least aren't denying it."

"There is nothing to either deny or confirm."

"Oh, your cool amazes even me, old priest." His words dripped with acid.

"If you have what you've come for, Sir knight, then please leave that I may prepare for this evening's service."

As the Abbot returned to his scroll, Renald screeched, "Not so fast, old priest of a dead religion!"

The Abbot cast a doleful eye at Renald. Renald, in a controlled maneuver (oft repeated), hurled the gleaming blade straight toward the Abbot's heart. The Abbot moved as quickly as his age permitted, but to no avail as he felt his flesh sliced into. Renald's laughter filled the small chapel.

"Your aim is off, foul knight," the Abbot gasped.

"Nonsense, you troublesome meddler," Renald leered at the Abbot's fallen body. "I want you to hear who it was that sent you the note you think you received from Colin." He leaned next to the Abbot's ear to speak the next, "It was I." He laughed again as the last spark of life dimmed from the Abbot's eyes.

* * *

The southern sun sat low on the horizon. The third moon was well nigh overhead. A little to the north the Rings of Omega glistened in the rainbow of sparks at sunset. The snow-covered peaks of Quintin's Range, which separated the former kingdom of Kennard from Quintin, seemed to be ablaze as the colors of the rings reflected upon them.

The tournament drew to the end of its first day. The King and his entourage moved to the grand ballroom. The King delayed his arrival to take full advantage of the pomp and circumstance of the occasion. "King Edmond Del Harthallow the III," the chamberlain announced in his fullest voice, "Lord Sovereign of all Quintin. Conqueror of all Lysantia, Erabidoria, and now of

Kennardia. Arch-Regent of all southern Vega. Long may he reign! Long live the King!" The hall reverberated as the throng repeated, "Long live the King, Kennardia is no more! Long live the King, Kennardia is no more!..". The tumult was defening as it continued, the echoes ever increasing the tempo.

At last the King raised his hand, and the exclamations ceased. The chamberlain then announced, "Her royal highness, the Princess Cindrith. Long live the Princess!" The crowd weakly cheered long live the Princess, once, then rejoined their cries of long live the King.

Cindrith took her place next to her father as the cheering quieted. The King then motioned to the General of the victorious forces to come forward.

"General Haiglai," the King began, "have you anything for me?"

There was a hush as Haiglai looked about the hall. Haiglai waved his arm, motioning for two guards to bring in the King's command.

"Here, great King, see the gift I bring to you and your eager court."

With that Haiglai removed the top of the silver tray which the guards had brought in. "Here be the Kennardite king's head!"

The ballroom came alive with cat-calls, abusive heckling, and blood thirsty cries issued to the severed head.

Cindrith dug her fingernails into her palm trying to hold back the wretched feeling that swelled inside her. She never gained her father's favor until she had learned to withstand this form of revelry. It was her hatred of her father that finally made it possible to endure such scenes. Though not because she wished him harm, rather, she felt that if she could hold on till Colin returned, they, together, might restore some semblance of peace to the land.

As the clamor finally died down, the King called his general forward.

"General Haiglai, having done such service for our weal as befits our

dignities, it is our pleasure to honor you for your service in our behalf." The King rose from his throne and held aloft the gift. "We, by virtue of our glorious right as King of these vast domains, confer upon you the most exalted award of the 'Quintinian Medal of Honor.'"

Cindrith's heart struck bottom. She knew, as did all others in the hall, that many centuries previous this award had been designated to be given to those few who through charitable contribution aided the cause of international peace. King Hecate of Mulbilantburg had struck some twenty of the medals in 1776 in honor of the birth of the various republics in the coastal states of Quintin. He then retired the medal with the following comment, "We here this day wish to honor the twenty nations here assembled. I have dreamed of this day, and it's been over fifteen hundred years in the making. We have warred amongst ourselves from the first meeting of our various tribes, each trying to gain an advantage over the others. However here we have broken the battle-axe, here we have buried the sword and cemiter. For the future of our mutual security, for the benefit of our unborn progeny, we strike this codex of confederation, and assure to ourselves peace in our time. These trinkets which I have had fashioned will hang in the chiehest places in our various lands that all may come and view, to bring before their minds anew the vexation that is the brother of discord..." All who knew those words were touched by them. However, Cindrith knew that this hall of vipers were long past being touched by the noble sentiments there embodied. There was but one republic left, if that it could still be called considering its degree of corruption, as her father gave this one which had been found hidden in an attic of Kennardia.

It seemed the roof would fly off with the swell of applause. The King motioned to the orchestra leader and declared, "Let the merriment begin!" The

ballroom was alive with its thousand plus occupants.

Cindrith's thoughts were on Colin. She was lost in thinking of him when her father spoke.

"You look surprisingly cherry this evening, my daughter." He didn't look at her; he just nodded at those who passed in front of them.

Cindrith's mouth went dry and her palms moistened as she replied, "Thank you, My Lord."

Renald's approach to the King's platform, through the crowd, struck Cindrith as being reminiscent of a snake winding its way in a briar patch.

"Your Excellency," Renald said as he swung in a deep bow.

"You may approach our presence," said the King.

"Sire, your daughter looks so fair and lovely this evening I couldn't resist asking for a dance with her."

Cindrith reflected on the curious similarity between Renald's voice and the stench of a cesspool. She felt her slender stomach tighten as she waited on the inevitable...

"You have our permission," said the King, again, never once looking at Cindrith.

Cindrith couldn't bear to speak. Instead she smiled and stood, offering her hand to Renald. As they walked onto the floor, the crowd of Dukes, Viscounts, Ambassadors, and sundry knights, all with their ladies, moved from the center of the floor for them. They then stood by to watch.

Cindrith had no illusions. She knew this show of respect was not for her. It was for Renald. The King's court cared little for the princess. They wanted her to support their various causes before the King. Her refusal was regarded as being an affront to one and all. Notwithstanding the fact that the only causes they seemed to want her to support were assorted

intrigues to be carried out against one another. She had long since vowed to stay her hands from the blood and sorceries of her father's courtiers. But as she wouldn't risk her life for the sake of vanity, knowing how her mother's life was forfeited, she was openly scorned by this court of jackals.

"I hope your sword is keener than your feet, Sir knight," said Cindrith as Renald continued to dance more upon her feet than the ballroom floor.

"Tell me, Princess, why is your tongue so sharp this eve'." He didn't wait for an answer as he continued. "Your appearance is much, much cheerier than when I last saw Your Highness." Cindrith did not respond. She was trying to hide the pain as Renald again missed the step. "Your Highness was so glum just this morning, indeed these past many months. And now it is as if some weight had been lifted. Whatever could have happened, my Lady?"

Cindrith's skin crawled as he clutched her.

"Thank you for the dance, Sir knight," she said as she pulled from him. There was polite applause as they left the floor.

"Sir Renald," Cindrith turned just before stepping back up to her throne, "would you accompany me in the garden for a moment." She thought she would faint as she spoke.

"Gladly, My Lady," was the oily reply.

"Please excuse me, father." The King waved her away as he returned to his whore.

The breeze was from the west, which kept the smells of the ball from infesting the garden. It was a bright night. Jourel, the smallest of Omega's three moons, played in and out of the rings. The air was spiced with the smells of cherry blossoms and young wheat. Cindrith thought that one of the villagers must be using hickory to cook their dinner as even that was upon the fresh breeze. Her thoughts were ever on Colin. How it would be to have him

again by her side, and not this horrid knight. Lorell's words came back to her, "Let the dog think it's for him." Time was passing so quickly...

"Sir knight."

"Yes, My Lady."

"Is it true you've been asking my father for my hand?" She thought she would vomit.

"You know it is, My Lady." Cindrith could detect no suspicion in Renald's responses. She continued, hoping all the while that Colin would forgive her.

"I make my own decisions, Sir knight. If you have a question of me, then you must address it to me."

Renald looked askance.

"Would Your Highness condescend to be my wife?"

"You may announce our engagement."

Renald nearly fell over from surprise. For all his cunning he had never imagined Cindrith to respond in this way.

He stammered, "M, my Lady, do my ears deceive me?"

Cindrith was fighting back her tears.

"I am not in the habit of repeating myself, Sir knight." She swallowed her tears as she turned her face from the light.

"No, of course you aren't, Lady Cindrith." He recovered from his shock. "Excuse me, my Lady, I shall announce it at once." He left her never knowing of her tears.

Renald was jubilant. For years now he had plotted and schemed to accomplish this very thing, and now she had given in so easily. He wondered if she knew the note was a fake, then decided it hardly mattered now whether she knew or not. It was fake, and she had placed herself neatly in his trap.

He could hardly stand himself, he felt so in command. He got the King's ear then the chamberlain's, and the announcement was made. The hall was filled with shouts of Long live Sir Renald, and May your house be filled with children, etc...

The time passed deadly slow for Cindrith as the harpies paraded by to congratulate her on her luck in finding such a man as Sir Renald. She wanted to cut her throat and probably would have were it not for Colin.

For Lorell, in Cindrith's chambers, time moved just as slowly. Lorell could scarce stop her brain from worry. For even though she assured Cindrith that all would be well, she knew from experience that it doesn't take much for almost anything to go awry when the plans involve anything besides oneself.

The day-glass had run to the twenty-seventh of Omega's twenty-eight hours. Cindrith excused herself after spilling some punch on her gown. She walked slowly through the castle halls, not wishing to appear in any hurry about anything. The occasional servant would pass and bow. When she arrived at her room, Lorell was pacing hard.

"Oh, M'lady, I was worried sick! Is all well?"

Cindrith spoke in sobs, "Oh wretched, horrid man!" She threw herself across her bed and cried fully. Lorell walked around the bed and kneeled next to Cindrith.

She gently caressed her long golden hair, then with a soft voice she asked, "Do we go, M'lady?"

Cindrith slowly looked up, her eyes filled with tears, and kissed Lorell on the cheek, nodding Yes. Cindrith dried her eyes and spoke quickly.

"Please help me with my dress."

Losing no time in completing their preparations they left through the garden gate.

The tower guards were drunk and ignored Cindrith and Lorell as they passed. Lorell thought to herself, Drunk or not, if they didn't have their whores, they'd stop us quick enough. As they rounded the tower they passed through the castle gate. Cindrith restrained herself from running to the churchyard. The chapel door was ajar, and there was a light inside. Lorell's stomach gave a half turn, and a lump grew in her throat as Cindrith reached for the door's handle.

The hands seemingly came from nowhere, one covering Cindrith's mouth, the other pulling her hand gently away from the handle.

"M'lady," Lorell whispered, "I've a dreadful fear..." Lorell released Cindrith.

"Have you gon..." Cindrith didn't finish. Two knights stood at the churchyard gate with their swords unsheathed. They both have gargoyle-esque smiles, Lorell thought. She was about to speak when the church doors were thrown open.

They turned and saw Renald. His face was black as the lantern light silhouetted his twelve and a third hands height. His vile laugh was unmistakable. He stepped aside and bade them enter. Cindrith didn't move till she felt the tip of a sword pricking her back.

The Abbot's body was swinging by its neck over the pulpit, Colin's dagger struck through a piece of parchment into his chest, his frock soaked with his own blood. Lorell no sooner saw him than she fainted.

"Leave her!" Renald commanded the two knights which started to reach for her.

Cindrith's eyes glazed when she saw Colin's knife. She knew the relationship that existed between the Abbot and Colin. They were like uncle and nephew. Either would gladly give their life for the other. Cindrith's

brain burned within her. Without warning she turned her eyes toward Renald and began. Renald winced once then fell to the floor clutching his chest.

Through the awful pain he cried out, "Stop her!"

Sir Brochnard had seen the late queen do something similar, so he lunged at the Princess, knocking her to the floor and unconscious. Renald coughed several times as he staggered to his feet. He leaned against the back of a pew and spat blood. His voice weakened, he spoke to the helpless body of Cindrith on the floor.

"You slut!" He gasped. "You will never do that again to me." His words dripped with venom. "Wake her up, Brochnard!"

Brochnard reached for the bowl of holy water. Renald cautioned him, "Keep her head down, or she'll do it again."

* * *

"Good afternoon," said the elderly man, coming out of the tavern as Colin was dismounting.

"Good afternoon to you, sir," replied Colin, as he tied his horse to the hitching rail.

"Have you come for the games, then?" The elderly man stood eyeing Colin.

"No..for the ball this evening." He finished tying up his horse and stepped toward the tavern door, saying, "Good day, sir."

The old gent was not easily brushed off. He then leaned across the entrance and said, "Then you'll be in need of finer attire, no?" He motioned to Colin's clothing.

"What is that to you?"

"Forgive my boldness, young sire. I merely felt... well, I'm a tailor.

I thought I could convince you to purchase your needs from me."

Colin was beginning to enjoy the old fellow. "You certainly have a way of pressing your point, tailor. So, where is your shop?"

"There, sire, next to the bridge." He pointed to an old building standing off by itself across the square. "We can go now, your Lordship. That is, if you'd like."

"You go on, sir. I mean to first wash the dust of the road from my throat."

The old man's demeanor looked pitiful.

"I accept your offer and will pay according to your worth." The elderly fellow continued to block the doorway looking down at the ground. "Now if you'll excuse me, sir."

"Oh, please pardon me, Young Sire, but I have some excellent brandy that Your Lordship would be welcome to."

"Well, as you seem intent upon my business, to the point of refusing me entrance to this tavern, you have won me by your importunity. But mark me, tailor, your brandy must be as you say." The old man started across the street. Colin added, "One other thing, tailor, there will be no more of this 'lordship' and 'sire' business. Some noble might hear you and have both of us in irons."

The old fellow turned and winked at Colin, then said, "This way." Colin looked skyward then followed.

There was dust everywhere in the shop.

"Business must be slow, tailor. Tell me, have you a name?"

"Yes, Sire. It's Redmond."

Colin had about decided that this Redmond had either been out in the sun

too long or cooped up here too long, he wasn't sure which. Redmond brought a chalice filled with brandy.

"I trust you'll find this to your liking, Lordship."

"Do you call all strangers by titles of nobility, Redmond?" Redmond began pulling out bolts of material. "I say, why do you insist upon calling me by such titles?" Redmond didn't respond. "Redmond!"

"Yes, Sire?"

"Look, I refuse to deal with you if you're half deaf!"

"Sire?"

Colin rose to leave. He sat a silver double-eagle next to the chalice.

Redmond knelt behind Colin and said, "Your Majesty, son of the just King Michael, directly descended from Quintin, the father of all Quintinians," his voice became weak with emotion, "I, your humble servant, Redmond, first son of Kevin the Second, whose father was Kevin the First, slain by the usurper Edmond Harthallow the First--I await your command!"

Colin had frozen in his tracks, then spun on his heels to stare at Redmond. His eyes were aflame as he demanded, "Who are you?!"

"As I have said, Lord."

"Why should I believe you?!"

Redmond kowtowed before the gaunt young Colin.

"Your Majesty, I have spoken the truth. Forgive me my boldness."

Redmond's voice cracked with dismay. "Are you not here to claim your rightful place on the throne?"

"Stand up," Colin said as he turned to close the shutters of the shop windows. Redmond stood searching Colin's face with his eyes. Colin sat on a stool that was near the door. Each felt an eternity pass in the silence which followed. Colin finally spoke.

"Redmond, please sit in that chair." Redmond obeyed and sat in the chair which faced the door. "When and where did you get this queer notion? You've

never seen me before."

Redmond's aged eyes began to moisten. "My Lord, mine is no queer notion, as you know."

Colin stood abruptly, causing Redmond to flinch from surprise. He stood looking down at Redmond's bent form.

"Tell me how you think you know this thing, and why you bring yourself to my attention!"

Redmond's voice echoed the confusion in his face.

"Forgive me, Sire. Is it possible that you know not of Kevin, my grandfather, and the charge your father, King Michael, gave him?"

"I know of a Kevin who tried to kill King Edmond the First. Are you now confessing to be the grandson of that traitor!?"

Redmond howled with grief. "My God, what have I done! Have I destroyed my sacred trust with overeagerness after so many years!?!?" Redmond crumbled to the floor repeating, between sobs, "I am undone, I am undone..."

Colin could bear no more. He placed his right hand on Redmond's right shoulder.

"Fo-forgive me young squire."

Colin felt Redmond's mighty sorrow and could bare it no longer.

"Calm now, Sir Redmond. I know of your trust. Our mutual friend the Abbot of Quintin instructed me according to my father's wishes. But you must tell me how you recognized me, that I may know fully these things that have passed."

Redmond had looked up at Colin as he was speaking, great tear drops rolling down his heavily lined face.

"S-sire--I saw you--ride up as I looked through the tavern window. My father said--I would know you by--my heart." He bowed his head and continued.

"My heart burned in a fashion I have never known when I saw you." He looked back into Colin's eyes. "Are you not he then?"

Colin reached inside of his jerkin and withdrew a medallion. Redmond recognized it at once. Its device showed a sea gull flying above a ship at sea. All at once Redmond was seized upon by joy, fear, realization, and dread; he could neither move nor speak. Colin took the medallion from around his neck and placed it into Redmond's hands.

"Now, speak," Colin said with quiet firmness.

"Sire, you are in great danger here."

"Am I not in danger everywhere?"

"No, Sire, I mean yes--that is, there is a special danger here that you know not of." Redmond's hands began to shake as tears again welled up in his eyes. "Sire, the Abbot..."

"Yes? What about the Abbot?"

"He--he was murdered last night with a dagger they claim to belong to Sean McEan." Colin grimaced. "They say he also murdered the Abbot's acolytes." Colin sat back down on the stool and stared into empty space. "My father said your name would be Colin, but that you would be known abroad as Sean McEan." Colin silently nodded. "But, Sire, how can it be your dagger?"

"It seems by the cruelty of a chance."

"Sire?"

Colin continued to stare but spoke softly. "I lost one of a set of three my father had given me." He looked at Redmond. "Describe this dagger. Have you seen it?"

"I've not seen it, My Lord, but I'm told it is of gold with a serpent's sigil on its ivory hilt."

Colin buried his head in his arms as his words come in sighs. "My

greatest ally, slain by some unknown assailant. With my very dagger." He looked heavenward. "Never has so great a curse come upon the house of Quintin!"

* * *

It was an overcast night. The meeting of the Secret Order of the Silver Loon (SOSL) had been in session for almost an hour. (Fraternal organizations had been encouraged during the days of the Republic of Quintin. Little did the founders know of how quickly and completely they would serve as the anvil which broke the back of the Union.) Thirteen men were gathered about a round table. They varied in appearance from fat to thin, from evil to saintly. Their interests were as divergent as fire, water, air, and earth. But just as each of them had part in the same universe, so too did these men share one elemental drive: power.

This was the second meeting of the year. It was marked by the fruition of their collective plans to destroy Kennardia. They took special pleasure in the perverse vivisection of King Alnuet (King of Kennardia), this due to that king's almost singlemindedness in trying to restore the Republics. A thing which sat particularly poorly with the members of this group. Their second common denominator was a decided hatred for all things free. It was of some interest to me in discovering who the membership of this ultra secret society were, so I offer here a brief description of each:

His Highness Von Kerist; King of all Croatinia, direct descendant of the rulers of the Bungdant Empires. In all the history of Omega I've had an opportunity to study this was the darkest period and those peoples ruled over were the most vilified of all populations. (Indeed it could

be compared easily with either our own Dark Ages or even the Byzantine Empire.) From the biographical sketches I've read, he was revered by the inner-circle as evil incarnate. His was the position of President of the society.

His Highness Clarvignon; King of upper Sclascia. His great-grandfather had been one of the original members of the Order. Little is said of him in the histories; however, it is known that he was the chief supplier of mercenaries to both sides of the Beermodian uprisings. His position was that of Recording Secretary.

His Highness Ithkarstan; crown prince of Thyme, second city of the Spice Kings. Head of S.O.L.E., the ancient assassin cult. Recipient of every international peace award of his time. His family had created most of Omega's philanthropic organizations. (Wherever they were, discord was sure to follow.) Revered as a truly "Renaissance Man."

Riska Cannia; world renown publicist. Chronicler extraordinaire. It had been said that he had an uncanny knack for knowing where trouble would flair. And, amazingly enough, this petite man accurately predicted the assassinations of those heads of state which were so during his long tenure as the owner of the "Consortium Gazette."

Michael De Sallier; arch-industrialist. Something of a financial mountebank. Vashlee La Flandours once said of him, "If he sets his lust on it and doesn't acquire--he'll destroy it." He and his close associates owned or held controlling interest in eighty-four percent of Omega's

various mines and manufactures. The Consortium Gazette paid relentless tribute to him as the "New Age Man." He operated a series of rigium (derivative of potent rare drugs) dens around the world.

Brooks De Bergieré; head of the world grain cartel. Its was a well kept family secret that the hundreds of members of the cartel were only names. De Bergieré and his sister were the sole stockholders. Aside from the usual manipulation of the prices of staples (which monopolies always create), they reigned as regents of the slave trade.

Erick Von Kerist; head of the Organization of World Banks. (It was a habit of this ruling junta to call their operations by names which connoted large numbers of members, this to dissuade the casual investigator.) He owned fifty percent of the Organization through which governments were obliged to borrow to cover their extensive war debts. Almost needless to say there was little money left to the honest nations for the purpose of internal development. This assured little domestic tranquility and almost perpetual war. He "liked it that way."

Jochiem Von Kerist; the other half of the World Bank. They were the third cousins of King Von Kerist.

Velvet Du Tanners; he with the help of four rogues managed to take over seventy-five percent of the cattle production, an operation which saw no small amount of blood letting. It isn't at this point known whether or not this is the same Baron Pendeavory who deserted during one

of the battles in the Desert of the Etherial Lords. If it was, he had a fine beginning. The story recounts it that this fellow sold out some one hundred and thirty-nine thousand of the home guard in the Domain of La Flandours, resulting in the deaths of all. His body was never found, though all others were accounted for.

Jeremy Bender; something of a metaphysical whiz. It isn't exactly clear as to how old he grew to be. However there seems to be no mistaking that this is the same Jereme Benther who was one of the Arch-Lords released from his cell before the first venturing across the seas. He was imprisoned by the Grand World Council about twelve years before Beta (Omega's northern sun) was expected to nova. The transcript of the sentencing read, "Never in the course of civilization has there come up a more just reason for capital punishment. You have combined with those whom you seduced to overthrow not a government, not a people, but the culture of thousands of years of progress--and this for the sake of the power you thought to gain. It is the judgment of this tribunal that you have committed evil unto death. It is not in our power to usurp the laws of this land and take your life. If it were, I would work to remove that kind of power from existence. However, it is in our power to sentence you to spend the remainder of our preparation to venture toward the stars in solitary confinement and to be left behind with those others which have chosen a similar fate. May God have mercy upon your soul."

Houston, Darryl, and Thorndyke Phykeré; ambassadors at large.
Founders and principle supporters of the World Brotherhood Council (WBC),

and International Workers Association (IWA), the first being their organ for putting down workers' rights movements, and the latter, that instrument which creates unrest in workers' movements. (One may justifiably ask how it is possible for anyone to want anything to do with an outfit which works both sides of the picket lines. The answer is painfully simple: when you're the only show in town and you actively put all others out of business, you seemingly can't help being popular.) Of course, the average "Joe" had no idea that such was the situation, but those who had figured it out had a way of disappearing or being assimilated into the hierarchy; "brains" were always in short supply.

The first portion of this meeting was taken up with the usual back-slapping in appreciation of each's efforts in dismantling Kennardia.

Due to the nature of these meetings, it was always necessary to maintain the strictest secrecy. It was not unusual, however, to invite in their favorite henchman of a particular operation. Such was to be the case with today's meeting. The following account was conveniently provided in the memoirs of this meeting's guest, Sir Renald of Trent.

3:15 pm May 17, 2132sc

Met with SOSL heads. Was thanked for the Heartfordshire raid. Paid 20,000 gold sovereigns. Told it was my turn to be King. (If I keep my nose clean, I would live to old age.) Ordered to find and execute Colin Quintin. Given my leave with the Lady Cindrith. Instructed to find a suitable time and place to grant King Harthallow the laurels of the past. Further instructed to assemble the ablest and most exposed

to control of the officer corps that a proper time table might be prepared for the swift and complete destruction of that obdurate Unicorn*. I've never been so impressed with a group of men in my life. Just to be in their presence gave me a sense of the divine. To have been honored by the gods themselves by a private audience is more honor than such as I deserve.

I resolve this day to be the best King the world has ever known. I will excel in giving to (the gods) all that they ever could hope for from one in their divine service. I will erect shrines where couples may offer the warm blood of their new born babes to them. Today I have seen the future. I now understand the past as never before. I have been called to be one of the very gods' pets!

*[ED. Unicorn was not the only remaining Republic in name. What it was was the last functioning Republic. It appeared to be common practice for this band of conquerors(?) to use to excess exalted titles while establishing the most diabolic organizations. Unicorn is important to this writer's perception because of the great similarities of general condition it has to my own native soil, that of the United States of America.]

PART II

(The Fulfillment of a Pact)

Renald made good on his bid, if that it what one calls the reward for thralldom. What follows are excerpts which allow for illumination of the efforts the SOSL put forth to attain the end of that fateful meeting.

Annotated Excerpts from the Chronicles of the

Lord High Chamberlain of Quintin

May 18, 2132sc [since crossing. Ed.]

Judgment pertaining to the proceedings of the inquiry into the death of the First Abbot of Quintin and his two Acolyets, Hadrian and Spenser. Having reviewed the unimpeachable evidence presented by Sir Renald, First Knight of Quintin, a warrant shall be issued naming one Sean McEan as the offender. A bounty of not less than one hundred and fifty gold double-eagles shall be established, to be paid upon the presentation of either his head or his person for trial in the above named case. One Lorell Strothfern, for complicity, shall be removed to the dungeon, there to await the time of her execution as proscribed by law on the twenty-first day of May. The form of death shall be to be hung by the neck until dead.

(What they managed to leave out of the Chronicles was that there was never a hearing of any form. Renald was given carte blanche by the King whose brain was so eaten up by syphilis he could do no better than drink to mask the pain. I haven't found in my research any reason for this sudden turn in the

King's health unless it could be that he was going to turn the kingdom over to his daughter before his death. Somehow the necessary papers were never signed, and the King was kept under constant observation by his chief physician.)

July 1, 2132sc

His Majesty, King Edmond Del Harthallow III, Arch-Regent of Quintin and the Commonwealth, was slain this morning as he was hunting the "Silver-Fox." The alleged assailant, a young peasant boy, was executed by Duke Renald of Southwick in the field.

(There was talk in the countryside as to what really happened on this day. Volumes I and II of the Charter Epics allude that the boy who supposedly did the deed was all of seven years old. There is no other reference to the youth's age. The exact manner in which the King was killed was reported to be by a crushing blow to the head. The King had gone off with the Duke of Southwick outdistancing the rest of his retainer. When the entourage caught up with them, they found the King dead and the boy broken over a large rock. These are interesting tidbits which have been scattered around various pieces of literature; however, according to Lady Cindrith's diary, which covers this period, "...Father had to be put to bed last night. He said he was having a terrible headache. I fear this may be the last chance to tell him I forgive him. He was coughing blood as they took him to bed." And the next entry, "...they told me Father had gone out hunting this morning. I wanted to leave a note on his pillow, but they wouldn't let me in...." The date of the latter entry was July 1, 2132sc.)

July 5, 2132sc

The Coronation of her Royal Highness, Princess Cindrith Del Harthallow, Duchess of Southwick, was completed at noon this day. Her husband, Renald Duke of Southwick, during the ceremony adopted the name of Edmond Del Harthallow IV in reverence for the late King. The Queen became ill immediately after the ceremony and had to be rushed to her quarters. Edmond announced that all would be done to insure her speedy recovery from whatever ailed her.

(In all of Lady Cindrith's diaries there is no mention of ever having gone through with the announced marriage to Renald. The entry for July 5, 2132sc reads as follows, "...still a prisoner in my own house!" There also is no mention of being declared Queen on this day. Indeed the next entry, which was July 6, read, "I think I have found a friend in one of the maids who brings me my food. I will ask her tomorrow how my father is coming in his illness..." That was the final entry into that set of diaries.)

July 6, 2132sc

Her Royal Highness Queen Cindrith was abducted from her garden court last evening at approximately the twenty-seventh hour. None of her belongings, nor any of the crown jewels, were taken. The worst is feared.

(It appears that they were so busy plotting the overthrow of Unicorn they forgot about her and she slipped away under the cloak of darkness.)

July 7, 2132sc

Edmond Del Harthallow IV, Duke of Southwick, confirmed a story in the Consortium Gazette alleging one Cathrine Dunnybrook guilty of the Queen's

abduction.

(There was no explanation offered on the hows and wheresofores. The report did say that there was an uncanny resemblance between the Queen and Miss Dunnybrook; however, the way to tell them apart was that the Queen had blue eyes and Miss Dunnybrook's were hazel. This was a direct fabrication which no one who knew the Queen's eye color bothered to question.)

July 7, 2133sc

The Duke of Southwick, as acting sovereign, declared his wife legally dead.

(Every major press carried stories that the Queen had been killed while in captivity. The few publishers that contradicted the reports of her death found effigies burned in front of their establishments and their staff beaten. The Consortium Gazette remained strangely quiet until July 6, at which time the banner headline read "Queen's Skeletal Remains Found.")

July 13, 2133sc

Coronation of Edmond Del Harthallow IV, Duke of Southwick, as King of all Quintin and the Commonwealth completed at the thirteenth hour of the morning. At this same hour war was declared against Beermodia in the southlands, and an ultimatum was issued to the Republic of Unicorn to the west.

(Some said this was Black Friday. Others said nothing. There was a curious note stuck in-between the pages of this chronicle. I discovered it the first time I leafed through its pages. I didn't understand it then, but I include a portion of it here: "...Hold from Unicorn. Free to proceed, Beermodia. Congratulations on the fait accompli to the south. SOSL." There are various reports concerning the cause for war with Beermodia, yet the Beermodian Kings [Three of them. Ed.] failed to record any information

correlating in any degree any of the purported reasons.)

December 16, 2137sc

Breabark taken from the Beermodians. They now have no remaining tactical strongholds from which to draw support to continue the war....Posthumous decoration of The Most Magnificent Order of Quintinian Valor to be presented to the family of one Erick of Kempdon for his service in that battle.

(Breabark was a small village which had been fortified. It was defended by what remained of the Beermodian Armies, some forty-three thousand souls. An army of three hundred thousand were arrayed against them. No Beermodians survived. There remained of the assaulting armies only fifty thousand that went home. It is not this writer's belief that Erick of Kempdon was even present during these battles. An obscure report was filed under the hand of the corps adjutant previous to the assault which read "Field Lieutenant Erick of Kempdon given leave due to battle fatigue.")

From the recordings of Erick I have found only marginal references to the above. However, those references indicate clearly that he did come to know the who, what, and where of the issue. And now, on with the story....

PART III

(The Hand of the King)

The clothing well-suited my frame, but such was its craft I felt a pretender. I closed the lid of the trunk, without hefting the steel, then sat on the bed and pondered my captor's next move.

"Interesting, isn't it?"

She was back. I didn't bother to turn around as I wasn't overly eager to pursue a losing conversation. She continued.

"Is it because you're wise or foolish that you've not armed yourself when given the chance?"

She stood behind me. I could feel her eyes on the back of my head.

"And now you don't even speak," she said. "Good. You may have the makings I need, yet."

She clapped her hands, and two women servants brought a chair and sat it in front of me. It was a simple chair. Along the crown of its back was a carving of the device that the guards wore. Its seat was covered with what appeared to be the same material of which the tent was made. At length I spoke.

"Madam, I know not your name. I don't know where I am, though I suspect it to be somewhere near the ocean. You've both fed and clothed me. I do appreciate the form of hospitality I've received here. I'll not hold a grudge for how I came to be here,..." I could sense her move around to my left slowly as I spoke, "...but if you don't tell me what you want, you'll be in need of killing me to keep me here,..." thinking about what I had said,

"..though I make no promise of staying even if you do tell me."

She now stepped over to the chair and sat down. Her eyes were just as intense, but not biting, and her features appeared softer somehow. For a moment nothing was said. The silence wasn't at all awkward. Her eyes radiated as she began to speak.

"My name does not matter. I am called Hawk."

The name meant nothing to me and she apparently didn't expect it to.

"You have a talent of which I have need. You must willingly join me before I can make any use of it." She spoke so plainly and dispassionately I thought the wind itself to contain more emotion. "Do you know of the two in the poster I showed you?"

I was caught somewhat off guard; I hadn't expected to be asked a question.

"Who hasn't?" was my response.

She said, "Tell me."

"There is hardly an unsolved crime in the kingdom that isn't laid to their fame."

She neither spoke nor moved, so I continued.

"Their names are held in high regard amongst some whom I've met. Others curse if they're mentioned."

Still she spoke not.

"Beyond this, of myself I know nothing save rumor and the mead's gossip."

She didn't speak. This time I heard her voice though not with my ears. I had heard of those who possessed this power; this was my first occasion to meet one.

She said, "Few there are who know the full story of those two; yet, it is because of them that you're here."

I started to speak, but she continued.

"I did not choose you for your brawn, for though you are strong, many are there who are stronger. Nor did I choose you for your intellect, as you are no mental giant; nor wisdom, nor stealth, nor any of those attributes one normally associates with war, for many there be who are better than you."

Then she stopped. She wasn't visibly distracted.

She tells me I'm mediocre, then stops! I was indignant. Many is the man I've beaten at pouli, and at physical feats I'm no lame duck as I've bested those stouter and bigger at arm-toss...

I smiled and asked, "For what frolicsome ditty am I noted that you should select me?"

She smiled, raised her left eyebrow, then within my brain continued, "That which you use yet don't use is your greatest strength. Is it possible you do not know yourself?"

She paused to let me think for a moment.

"You would not be able to hear my thoughts so easily if with a little effort you couldn't read the thoughts of others as well."

I was mesmerized! Of course I didn't believe her. There was no reason to. I'd spent the whole of my life trying to out-guess my opponents. Whether sports, games, or on the battlefield made no difference; the object in all cases was to win as decisively as I could manage. The only thing that changes is the stakes. If it were possible, I thought to myself, for me to read anybody's mind, I would have begun a long time ago.

I heard her in my mind again.

"Yes, if you had thought of it you would have, but you never tried. You tried to out-guess or second-guess them, but you never actually tried to read their thoughts. This ability would make it possible to know the truth to most

questions you would ever ask. It is this quality I want you to develop. As you develop this one, others will come to the fore. But enough for now. Does this interest you?"

I nodded yes.

"Then if you choose to stay, you must arm yourself. My guards have other chores besides protecting you."

With that she left me.

She was gone a good twenty minutes before I decided to look over the steel again. I was amazed as to the workmanship. A king would be hard pressed to have better in his arsenal. I selected only weapons with which I was proficient.

The great sword had a black blade that was warm to the touch. Its leathered hilt had an agate set in its pommel. The long sword I recognized as being made of adamantite. I wasn't sure I wanted to take it; it was reported that only the Spice Kings were in possession of such blades. The long sword was my best ability though, so I didn't see as I had a substantial choice: it was the only one in the chest. The set of four daggers didn't look like they even belonged in the same chest with the other weapons. They were old and didn't look to have much use left in them; however, they had good balance and would do well when thrown. Their blades were still in fine shape. There was a heavy crossbow with a broken windless, useless; several other arms of which I was not able to make potent use; and a small, white alabaster box. I slowly opened it. Inside was a necklace of fine silver with a pendant in the shape

[Adamantite was referred to as the "Star Diamond." One crystal was long enough for a dagger; rare indeed was it to find one even a thirty-second of an inch longer. Ed.]

of a heavy crossbow with a quarrel of bolts and windless. I put it around my neck and closed the lid of the chest.

I had the weapons but nothing in which to sling them. The blades were too sharp to try carrying them under my arm, so I slipped two of the daggers under my belt and left the remainder on the top of the chest. This was my first chance to leave the confines of the tent. It wasn't without a degree of misgivings that I put my head through the opening.

About fifteen good paces from the opening stood a large building made of some kind of blond stone. It looked to be about four heights [Four floors. Ed.] tall and about forty rods across the base. There were several buildings on either side of it. No one was in sight, and I didn't hear anything except the surf. I turned to go back into the tent and get the long sword. As I did so I realized that the tent was apparently in some kind of town square and it could be seen through from this side so that anyone who passed by could see in, while I couldn't see out. The realization made me a little embarrassed.

I got the sword from the top of the chest and went back out into the street. I looked up expecting to see the stars and rings of Omega, but it was pitch black. I later discovered the whole of the town to be in a cave set back into the cliffs off the Sea of Quintin.

I went up the steps of the blond-colored building. As it was the largest I figured it to be the most likely to have someone inside. As I reached the top row of steps, I heard the sound of a great many horses' hooves. I turned to look. I now saw that I was in a cave, and in through the mouth of the cave came riding about a hundred women clad much as the two guards which were guarding me. I watched with awe as they rode in precision column along the winding street till they stopped at the foot of the stairs on which I was standing.

I was saved the trouble of explaining why I was there when Hawk, who had apparently been above me for several moments, spoke.

"Sisters in arms. Thank you for your prompt attention. This is Erick of Kempdon. He is to be trained to become one of us."

A murmur rolled across the mounted women.

"Ladies, we need his help. If he will join us, perhaps, if not ourselves, our sons and daughters will be able to return to life as we once knew it, no more to take up war."

I was astonished. I was scared! What did she mean by introducing me like that? I figured her to be mad to suggest that anyone could stop war, now or ever. I turned and just looked at her. She looked at me and continued.

"Erick, we ask you to sit in counsel with us now and hear what we mean to say, then we will allow you time to make your decision. If you will not hear us, you are free to leave now."

There was no passion in her eyes. She didn't speak with any heavy emotion; the offer was straightforward. What she thought I could do for them I didn't know. I did know it wasn't because she had anything other than a professional attraction for me. In the final analysis I think she hooked me just on the basis of my infernal curiosity.

A young girl brought horse from the crowd and laid its reigns on the bottom row of the steps, then stood looking at me waiting patiently.

I said, "Okay."

The ladies dismounted and several boys and girls came streaming out from behind buildings where, I guess, they were waiting for the resolution for what just happened and took their horses. Hawk motioned for me to follow her up the stairs. The others followed.

We entered a grand chamber where a dais stood in the center of an

enclosed amphitheatre. On the stand were three chairs set to the rear facing the entrance. Hawk took the left chair facing the door. The hundred other ladies took seats in the stands. Hawk then motioned for me to take the center seat.

I had hardly sat down when one of the ladies, objected to my so doing.

"What gives him the right of the High Ones' place!" she hollered.

"Is that the proper fashion in which to address the counsel, Almetra?" Hawk responded.

Almetra said, "What has custom to do with it if he sits there?"

Hawk returned, "His credentials will be examined for the counsel to choose, just as the merits of our case must be judged by him. Is it not proper to first hear then object if objection be necessary?"

Cool as a blade, this Hawk, I thought to myself. Almetra sat down. I don't know what kind of magic it was that was used, but the next thing I knew there was a giant ring about thirty-six hands across.rising out of the center of the dais. Then another one rose and offset the first one so that it was a ring within a ring. If its sides were completed it would have been a giant ball. I heard a strange humming sound; then the inside of the rings started to churn and turn milky white. When it stopped spinning I nearly lost my breakfast. I had seen enough Spice Kings' maps that I recognized Omega when I saw it. It was beautiful. It was impossible. I thought I was going to cry.

Hawk began to speak.

"This is Omega. If you will look at the yellow light which is now circling a portion of the southwest hemisphere, you will have a good idea of where we are."

The light was circling above the old Coastal States of Quintin.

"If you will now look at the red light, you will see where we are."

I knew where we were--the southern tip of Hand Peninsula.

"This location was selected for its secrecy. The city was here when we first arrived with our husbands. We don't know how old it is. We came here to try to find a place where our families would be safe from the wars that were breaking out on every side. We lost our husbands early. They had gone back home to gather of our belongings what they could and then return with them. We've not heard from them since. As we have never had to deal with intruders, we know that either they were killed to a man, or if they were captured, they never said anything that would endanger the lives of their families. For this we owe at least our security; at most, our lives. It has been over thirty years since we arrived.

"We formed a council after we realized our husbands would not be returning." She looked at me. "We waited eighteen months."

She again faced the image. "We decided that ours was a safe refuge, but that we would shortly die without provisions. That which we brought when we arrived would last but a month or two more. In that council it was decided that we needed a plan to return to our homes unless we wanted to spend the remainder of our lives in this cave. It was voted upon, and the plans were worked out. The final decision of the council was unanimously agreed to by all those old enough to have a say."

The image of Omega was now awash as it swirled inside of the rings. When Hawk started speaking again, the rings presented images of women travelling back roads and sneaking through underbrush trying to escape the ravages of war. Some were mothers with children, others were alone, some in groups, from all walks of life. The images were so completely compelling it's hard to remember exactly what Hawk was saying, but it went something like this: "We were to become scavengers of life. We made it our business to gather those

families which the wars left bereft and homeless. Here they would be able to nurture their families to adulthood, to live free of the yoke of tyranny. We would practice every form of art and equity. Here wholesome would mean growth-oriented, not expedient. We trained in the art of war and science. We discovered that this town within these cliffs had many strange devices. Through trial and error we were able to gain an understanding of them and use them to our benefit. This image machine is just one of the many marvels we discovered. Families have come here from all over the region. We are now more than fifty thousand souls. Our men are few as it was the deaths of our fair husbands and sons that caused most of us to come here. Of the two thousand males of our number only fifty-three are above twelve years in age. They are our chief captains. In respect for us, their mothers, they have chosen to allow us to continue the governing of our people."

The images within the rings dimmed to open air so that we could see through again. A whirring sound occurred, and the rings sunk back into the floor of the dais. There was again light by which to see. Hawk arose and walked to the center of the platform and started to speak again.

"You have viewed our past and know of our hopes to return to our homes. We feel we have the means to accomplish our ends; however, the people which lived here before us left this place for good reason: the only natural resource that we have the skill to make effective use of is fresh water. We therefore need money to purchase the things which will help us achieve our desired ends.

"I have brought you here in the hope that you would be able to help us with that portion of our need. We would like you to find Sean McEan and Cathrine Dunnybrook. We will outfit you, give you the necessary training, and reward you beyond imagining--if you will accept."

When she finished she just stood there. Every eye in the stands was upon me. I was awe-struck. I was flabbergasted. I was doubtful. I folded my hands in my lap and decided I had best ask some very good questions, quick.

"Tell me," I said, "what makes me so desirable for this task? When you yourself were able to take me in so easily?"

There was another murmur which rolled around the ladies.

"The ability which you possess, that we've already discussed, makes you the most suited to the task," Hawk said.

"But you already have the ability. I'm not even sure I want it. So why don't you go?"

"I shall, but I can't go alone and be assured of success."

"Doesn't someone else here possess the ability?" I asked.

"No."

I could feel my breakfast coming up again. There was deadly silence. I wished Almetra would complain and say she objected or something. Worlds could have revolved to an end in the moments that passed in silence. I could hear silent thoughts rumble around me. I had to say something just to break that long horrible silence.

"Look, I'm not a mercenary. I have heard some pretty good things about the two you want me to find. And you know as well as I do that we can't take them alive. That Dunnybrook is said by some to be a witch."

"It's because you're not a mercenary that makes you so ideal for what we have in mind," came a voice from the stands, followed by several yes'.

"So, too," Hawk enjoined, "when your own power has come to the fore, she will be no match for the two of us."

I felt stupid, like I had already given in and wasn't willing to admit it. All that was left to say was, "I suppose I can't say no," at which point

Almetra reasserted herself.

"Now may we see if he is what we want?"

"Speak, Almetra," said Hawk.

"I have three questions that haven't been resolved. First, will he submit to the Helmsforth Loyalty test."

Several ladies stood up protesting, "We are not in Helmsforth, Sister!" The remainder spoke amongst themselves. I had no idea what she was talking about, but I had the distinct impression that I didn't want to find out.

"Ladies," Hawk said, "She has the right to speak."

"Thank you, Hawk." Almetra continued. "Second, once he knows what you know, Hawk, can you guarantee that he won't use his new found powers against us? And third, we have still seen only the merest of circumstantial evidence presented as to the validity of King Edmond's warrant. Would any of us care to be hunted down on such flimsy evidence, no matter the price offered?"

Almetra sat down.

Again the rush of voices, one calling, "We already discussed the evidence." Another said, "He did not arm himself when he had the chance." After several more comments Hawk raised her arm and silence prevailed.

"Cassandra," said Hawk looking at a woman of about forty sitting closest to me on the bottom left of the stands, "will you please respond to the third question and explain to Erick the first?"

Hawk sat down, and Cassandra stood up.

"The evidence was indeed circumstantial, but we reviewed it at length. It has been the majority vote that we accept it as proof enough to capture them and allow justice to work. Hawk has indicated that she, joined with the trained powers of Erick, would be able to capture them without death. That was the reason we approved of the plan in the first place. The money is paid

for live delivery as well as dead. Besides, if they are innocent, would they mind the guarantee of safe delivery? Also, we have noted at length your just argument that one cannot expect fair and just treatment in Quintin; however, at worst they will be put in jail to await the carrying out of their sentences. Given the lag of four months awaiting the headman's axe, we expect a new power to be in control by then if all goes according to plan. They would then receive a new hearing from the new government.

"It is our considered opinion that we all live by the same rules; therefore, it is not in our power to impede the freedom of Erick any longer. If on the other hand he should decide to submit to a loyalty test, whether the Helmsforth or some other, it is totally at his discretion. It has been and will continue to be my opinion that such a test be put off as long as is practicable to afford Erick an opportunity to see if he wants to be loyal to us."

With that she sat down. Hawk then stood.

"I think it would be good for Erick to take some form of loyalty test prior to the completion of his training. It must be left up to him; our laws decree it so. We knew it was a gamble when we undertook this course. With or without me, Erick will eventually gain full use of his powers. The only difference is that with training it can be accomplished in a relatively short space; on his own, it could take years. Finally, who knows what tomorrow holds? None of us really knows what a totally new power would do to us. Ultimately, it is our individual faith in our creator that makes us what we are. With the new artifacts we discover here, almost daily, what chance do we take by exploring those new 'powers'? I for one am willing to take a chance. The only other course we already know leads into the same kind of slavery each of us came here to escape."

Hawk re-took her seat. We all sat there, no one saying anything for about half an hour. I finally decided the best way of making a decision was to find out just what they had in mind, so I took the chance of standing up and speaking.

"Uh, excuse me, ladies. I don't know if it's okay for me to say anything here, but it seems to me that it's my neck about to be put on the line here, that is, with Hawk's." She half smiled at me. "Anyway, I kinda thought I wanted to say something." They didn't tell me to sit down, so I kept talking. "You see, I don't have a family anymore. I think I understand what you folks have been going through; that is, as well as anybody can that hasn't lived through the same thing. Listen, I'm not rightly sure what it is you ladies mean to do with the world you plan to make; that is, once you manage to get control of it. Of course, you have to get control first; I guess you know that though. Well, anyway, I've never seen anything like what I've witnessed today. And I've been in on a few council meetings. I mean, they are usually presided over, kinda like Hawk here." She half smiled at me again! "But the ideas you've put up here today--well, I know a fellia that was hung just for saying them in the barracks. They would've tortured him first if he'd said it in counsel. Well, it just seems right that people ought to be able to be allowed to say what they want, so long as it doesn't hurt anyone else. And the fact that you'd tell me all about you, then say I can walk out, no strings attached, I respect that. Well, I guess what I'm trying to say is that I don't know if I can go the whole road with you, but I'm sure willing to start out and try."

I stood there for a moment feeling awkward, then said, "Thank you for listening," and started to sit down. Someone said, "We're glad to have you, brother Erick." Then they all started to applaud. I sat down.

It was left to Hawk and her son Cleat to be my trainers. We began every morning at sunrise and didn't stop until well past dark. About the second week into training Hawk cut the day short; she had something she needed to do. She and her son left saying they'd be back in a couple of days. I had gained a bit of an understanding into what I was supposed to be learning, but as Cleat said, I had "about as much control as a brick has to hold water."

I took advantage of the time off by exploring the beach. In spite of the numbers of people that lived in the cave, the beach was desolate. It wasn't as though they had a preference for the dark of the cave, for its interior was just as well lit as outside. I thought it was some kind of magic, but they said they had light panels in the roof of the cave. Actually the reason for their not venturing out of the cave had more to do with their desire for secrecy than anything else.

As I left the cave, I couldn't see the water; I just heard it. From the looks of the cliffs there must've been an earthquake at the Time of the Rings.* Before the waters gave way, this must have been an inlet and the cave a natural cavity formed by the long action of the water.** The rock formation beyond the opening must have been a natural island. It separated from the

*[Time of the Rings; The period when Beta threw out considerable cosmic dust and plasma which created the ring system around Omega's equator. It was reported that there was much terrestrial havoc rearranging the entire surface of Omega. Most intelligent life, save those on the island of Homer's Half, died in the commotion. Hence is derived the dating system of "sc" meaning "since" the first venturing, or 'crossing,' out from Homer's Island, across the water. Ed.] **[He was part right. This location had been above the water level many centuries longer. Ed.]

face of the cliff about halfway up, then jutted above the top of the cliff. As I walked along I could see a great number of these rock formations jutting out into the sea.

The sea. I had never seen the sea before. I had heard many a tall tale from the ex-sailors who were in the ranks of the army, but nothing they said prepared me for what lay before me. Vast and barren. The mighty waves thundered toward the beach, breaking against the majestic rock pillars again and again. I felt a sense of eternity standing there, alone, dwarfed by surf, rock, cliff, and sky. There were no birds, trees, people--nothing except Omega and me.

I sat on the beach until well past sunset just taking it in, trying to understand what it all meant. There I was--nothing, really. And there was the sea--almost all-powerful. It just seemed that it all ought to add up to something more than what it was: just an ordinary man sitting on (what I supposed to be) an ordinary shore.

I woke up to see a great white bird sitting about three rods length from me. It was eating a large fish. When I realized it was really there, I wasn't sure whether to attack it or run away from it. The bird was half my height just crouching there, with wings at least twice my height. It was completely white with a deep yellow bill and eyes that sparkled like gold. I heard a high scream overhead. When I looked up, two more were waffing down to the first. The first moved to one side to make room for the other two. The first to land was only slightly smaller and the third about half the size of the one already on the beach. They had ostrich-like legs of the same coloring as their beaks. They were graceful in spite of their enormous size. I had seen giants from around the hills where I grew up which were some of the most uncoordinated beings I've ever seen. Since I had been told it was because of

their size that they lumbered so, I never expected to see grace in anything larger than normal.

I had been slowly edging back from them (I didn't want to be dessert) when I backed into a large boulder sticking above the sand. I supposed them to be a family because none molested the other, and the two larger ones helped the smaller one strip the meat away from the bones of the fish. Using the rock as cover I continued to watch them. I could see others further out to sea. It was a full league back to the cave's entrance. Watching for a moment longer I found it was obvious they were moving toward the shore. A better time would not arrive for me to return to the cave.

I had been given a room in a place called The Merchant's Cross. The walls weren't see-through, so I accepted it. It wasn't bad. It had a sitting area with a sleeping room attached and--something I had to get used to--an indoor privy. Even as I'm writing this I know you won't believe me, but it even had hot and cold running water! Hunger had overtaken me, so I ordered some food from the service. (They served food in the room there.)

The window in the sitting room overlooked the winding path that came in from the beach. It had become my custom to watch this window, feeling that if trouble came, it would have to come in the direction of the cave entrance. Of course, I had never heard what was at back of the cave, so I maintained concern about that direction as well.

After I ate I took a nap and had the strangest dream I ever remembered upon waking. I dreamt that I had ridden from the southern tip of the coastal plain to Behemoth Ridge in the far north. Nowhere was there strife, war, or envy. But, strangest of all, there were no classes; everyone was accorded the same rights and privileges, and everyone had a say in what happened in their community. I awoke and thought upon its singularity. I finally drifted back

to sleep when I had the same dream over again. This time, however, added to it was the following:

After arriving at Behemoth Ridge I turned around and rode back down the same course I followed to arrive. Everything appeared the same, but this time dissatisfaction seemed to rule the countryside, and crime rose in the cities, towns, and villages. I got the distinct impression that no one really knew why. New committees were formed, and new branches of government opened up, all with the stated goal of returning to "normality." Yet, the more they helped, the more desperate the situation grew; again, no one seemed to know why.

This time I awoke in a cold sweat. It made no sense. I had fought in battle from the time I was twelve, which meant I'd spent half my life in war. It was absurd for a dream of peace to affect me so. I went out for a walk to get my mind onto something else and didn't return till late. I didn't eat dinner; I just laid down and went to sleep, having forgotten the dream. But I wouldn't be left so easily; I dreamt it again, only this time the following was added:

The situation grew so bad in various parts of the land there was talk of starting new countries. The people felt that the old government no longer cared nor had the best interests of its citizenry at heart. The cry went up that they were too busy politicking to remember just what the government was for in the first place. Amidst this clamor I saw armies moving from the eastern reaches. They rode in strange grey metallic boats and carried forms of lightning rods which sparked and sent pieces of metal flying through everything which got in their way. The people, being unprepared, fled as so many sheep being driven before lions as the foreign armies pressed toward the inner cities. Pockets of resistance which did form were ruthlessly crushed in detail. I saw

the builders of this city in the cave working feverishly to complete their work before the enemy arrived. As the new government worked to establish its own brand of peace upon the people, I saw many of those which had been elected previous to the war wringing their hands in glee. I saw documents drawn up before the trouble and disaffection began pledging the enemies' sufferance of those who helped to overthrow the peace, a part in a new all-powerful government. I watched as each of those who worked to overthrow the peace were executed as being too dangerous to the new peace, as each enumerated how the new government would never have been able to launch the war with any degree of success were it not for their instrumentality. The new peace saw the end of the way of life the people had led before the war. The people existed upon the sufferance of the government. Any that spoke their minds (where their thoughts were out of sync with the dictates of those in power) were first beaten, then killed.

I saw no reason for the dream to affect me, but when I awoke this time, I had a splitting headache. I chose not to tell anyone the dream. I write it now because of what was to follow.

When Hawk and Cleat returned, we picked up from where we had left off, which didn't seem like anywhere to me. My studies consisted of sitting in a darkened room and concentrating on my breathing. All I had accomplished so far was to stave off sleep a little longer each time. This time there was a difference: I didn't fall asleep. I felt like a zombie, but I was awake. It was a strange sensation. I knew where Cleat was in the room! My mind just seemed to naturally differentiate between the echoes of him breathing and the source of the sound. It was amazing.

Cleat didn't possess what his mother called vysionpas. [A highly refined

ESP skill. Ed.] What he lacked was at the time lost on me, however. Hawk had trained Cleat to relax and accept the world around him, which was the reason I realized that there must be something to what she was telling me. Cleat was just seven, but I had met men in their age with a lot less vision and understanding. Don't misunderstand me; Cleat was like all other kids inasmuch as he was just as prone to a practical joke or liked to play and run. But, he paid attention to detail, like it was the most natural thing to do. And he wouldn't quit! He just kept on until he figured it out, overcame the obstacle, or bested the situation in at least some way. And his mother wouldn't let him quit. He had black hair and deep brown eyes, which were quite a contrast to his white skin. He was four feet "big," as he would say. Altogether a very handsome young man.

Anyway, back to the story. The idea of concentrating was to gain a feeling of what was around me without being able to see it. Basically it was an exercise in restricting my dependence on my eyes, which forced my ears and nose and even my skin to become more sensitive to sound, scent, and even air pressure. The latter was for motion detection. I didn't say anything, but I didn't think the last was very practical for anything besides being in a closed room where there was no wind.

Cleat somehow detected that I knew where he was. He sprang from his corner, to my left, rear. I didn't move in time and got a pretty sizable lump on my head. Hawk wasn't in the room while I was trying to concentrate on breathing, so she instructed Cleat to pounce the first time I was successful. I gained a few more lumps as the days passed, but they were getting lighter as I slipped away faster. I finally realized that I wasn't in that room for the stated reason. What they were doing was teaching me to gain control. For every moment that I spent giving up my "personal" freedom I was purchasing

real freedom.

The battle of Cedartown comes to mind. I was just fifteen and was sent with a bunch of kids to fill part of the line. We had been told the enemy would have Magicians; they didn't tell us what one of those guys was capable of. The sky was boiling and spitting lightning. The place we were to fill in was the near left flank of the front lines. It was a series of trenches with a breast-work thrown up to the rear of a stream. The battle had started to the far left. It was the intention of the Szarlanks to roll up our flank and get behind our defenses, but our captain wasn't so easily out-maneuvered. He had had our best chasseure take up a mobile defense the night before. The chasseure fell back in a fighting retreat. Just as the Szarlanks thought the battle theirs, Captain Thrugood charged from a reverse ridge with his Twelfth Corps; Heavy Cavalry. The assault on our flank was repulsed and rolled past their own flank to where the fighting now was. They threw up a defensive screen to save what they could of their lines. We were to attack with the units along the front. I was in charge of my section, but all I had were kids who had never been in battle before. They had received only half the training considered to be minimum for the kind of war into which they were thrown.

The time came for the counter-attack. The center led off, and we followed. I couldn't believe my eyes--there was a man standing in mid air, just out of missile range, drawing in the air with some kind of stick. I couldn't continue watching him as we had entered melee. We had made it to their first defense line in good shape. Just as we were breaking through I thought eternity had come. Our lines exploded! Bodies and earth were flying everywhere. Then came the blast of heat from the fireball which caused the explosion. My sword became so hot I had to drop it and carry on with my fists. (A ten and a half hands tall fifteen year old should never go up

against an opponent twice his size with only his fists.) I felt something slam into the back of my head. The next thing I remembered was waking up in the field hospital with two broken legs. I vowed to myself that I would never be taken by surprise like that again. And I haven't been, but when I think of all the effort to make good on that commitment I've expended, I sure wish I'd known of Hawk's method a long time ago.

When I finally got to the point I knew where he was, and controlled my breathing so he didn't know it, it was I who did the pouncing. That finished the dark room. Now I had to do it with my eyes open in a field above the cliff (in the wind). It took me a month, but I was finally successful. It was like no other kind of experience I'd ever had. It was thrilling. When I had gotten good enough that Cleat couldn't help me further, increasing numbers of guards were given the task; first two, then five, finally thirty. It was a little intoxicating; then I had to out-maneuver Hawk--alone. After who-knows-how-many tries, I realized she had something I didn't.

She sat on top of my chest with a dagger against my throat as I asked, "Is there something I'm doing wrong?"

She laughed. I thought she'd split her sides. She laughed so hard, tears formed in her eyes. I'd never even heard her "ha-ha" before. I crossed my legs, leaned on my hand, and waited for her to stop.

When she gained control of herself again, she said, "I'm sorry. I just didn't expect you to say that now." I just bit my lip and looked at her. "Now," she said, "you are right; there is something you're doing wrong. It's called 'linear thinking.' You see, the problem is that you have gotten the idea that all you have to do is relax, control your body, and use your own past experience." She cut off my thought, "Yes, it was good enough against all except me. But remember: our quarry is not like all the others. If the

information I've gotten from the King's Court about her ability is accurate, I am no match for her. That is why we need you."

I thought for a moment, then started to speak, but she stopped me. I heard her voice inside my head again. It was the first time she'd "thought" to me since we started training. She said, "Listen to my thoughts, then try to project your thoughts into me."

I started to ask how, when she again cut me off.

"Don't speak. Think only."

It took some time for my mind to settle down. Not using my tongue was infinitely harder than not using my eyes had been. First one week passed then two, three, four, six weeks. I hadn't said a word to anyone for the last three weeks. I wasn't allowed to sign or write. "If you want to communicate, think" was what she said.

The snows began to fall ushering in a new winter. I sat in my room at the end of another day, just looking at the mouth of the cave,. Though it was quite late it was still light out. The occasional flurry would swirl into the mouth of the cave. I had worked especially hard, but I wasn't very tired. I thought about how cold it must be out.

A light fog had been forming inside the mouth of the cave. I decided a brisk walk would do well for me. I threw on a heavy cloak and set out for the beach. It was cold but not as much as I had expected. The snow was already gathering in drifts along the base of the cliff. In the chill air the surf sounded louder than usual. Along the water's edge there were what remained of the hoof prints of two out-riders that had just come back.

There was a natural break in the wall of the cliff about two leagues from the cave. This was the only way to leave the beach besides by boat or continuing on another seven leagues down the beach. The incline was difficult

when the weather was dry; with snow it was treacherous. I made it to the top of the cliff and looked out to sea. Over the roar of the surf I thought I could hear the sounds of a herd of whale which I saw swimming off the point. The bluff was covered with a light pack of snow which mostly accumulated around patches of dead summer grass and wild stump-corrinus. [A variety of hedge. Ed.] I sat behind one of the stump-corrinus to get out of the wind which always blew hard across the bluff. After a few moments the snows stopped. I laid a blanket on the ground then laid on top of the blanket. I pulled my cloak over me and put my hands under my head and just looked up at the sky.

The front which brought the snow was broken and moved on revealing a brilliant star- and moonlit night. This far south it was hard to see the ring system during the day, but at night it was brilliant. The first layer was a shade of deep coral. The second was a vibrant red. The third reflected the red of the second and blended through deep burgundy to the violet of the fourth. The outer three rings changed from season to season, from hemisphere to hemisphere. I never understood what made it do that, but it was a sight to behold no matter where you were. I had watched the rings from the time my father first pointed them out to me when I was five. (Before that time I never thought to look up at night.) Tonight the outer rings were changing colors every few minutes. First orange, yellow, and pale-blue; then gold, silver, and white. I had never seen them do that before. Jorrel wasn't up this time of the month, but Gammapleez (the largest and southern most of Omega's three natural satellites [The size of Saturn's Titan. Ed.]) was cresting the arctic mountains to the south.

As I watched the shimmering stars, I spotted a meteor streaking through the edge of the seventh ring which burned out in the upper reaches of the sky.

As I watched it, I saw a face appear in my line of sight. It scared me half to death! I started to pull my sword, but he placed his boot on my wrist and his own sword on my throat. I decided to not say anything, thinking that he might give me a chance to know what he wanted before severing my head.

His was an ugly face, the kind that even a mother would find hard to love. His voice sounded shrill even though it had a base register.

"I don wanna 'ere a word 'rom ye." I nodded my agreement. "'at's righ'. Now I'm gonna as' yo ah co'pal keston's, an' yo' gonna nod yea or nea, yo unnstan?" I nodded. "'at's goo'. Ish yo' nam' Erick, an' er yo 'rom Kem'dom?" I again nodded. "Yo's a nice fella--I got's som'thin' 'ere fo' yo'."

With that he dropped a scroll on my chest and literally vanished into thin air. My heart was doing double time. My palms were wet. I was mad! What was that nonsense about, anyway!? I screamed out into the night.

"I'm a soldier! I'm not a play-toy for some hair-lipped magician or whatever you are!" I jumped up with my sword and began hacking at the empty air, hoping against hope that he might be somewhere around, hoping I might be able to take a piece out of him for scaring me so. He was gone, though. I slumped onto the ground, panting from the workout.

I questioned myself, "What am I doing here? This isn't my fight. I could be back in the barracks with my friends. I could be fishing in the stream back home. I could be a million other places besides here. So what am I doing so far from home?!" I buried my head in my hands.

I heard people approaching from across the bluff. I hid in a thicket and watched. I heard Hawk call out, "Erick!" Then I saw them. Hawk was leading about twenty armed women. She called out again, "Erick, where are you?" With all my might I tried to project just one thought into her--"YOU STAY, TELL THE

OTHERS TO GO BACK DOWN." There was quiet. She motioned for the others to withdraw to the beach. She walked straight toward me. I stood up, hefted my sword over my head so as to cleave her head into. She just stood there. She dropped her own sword and stood looking me in the eyes. Then I heard in my head, "If you must kill me, then do so. Only please, don't quit the cause now." I threw the sword and walked into the wood. She followed me at a distance. I "thought" to her, "What good is any of this?" She said nothing.

We must have walked an hour. I was exhausted. I imagined Hawk was also. I felt so helpless. Whomever that man was, he could have killed me. I was totally defenseless. There were no tactics or strategies to what we were doing. I was lost. I had spent the last four and a half months learning how to be lost! I sat next to a shagbark hickory tree and pulled at its strands. Hawk stood about twenty paces back and looked into the sky.

"Big, isn't it," she said, then looked at me.

"Yes," I said.

"Do you know why we happened to be coming up the hill at that time?"

"No." Actually, I hadn't even thought about it before she mentioned it.

"Would you like to?"

"Yes."

"I heard you scream."

I looked up. She looked back up into the sky. I did scream, but she couldn't have possibly heard me leagues away in a house in a cave, so I asked, "How?"

"I heard your thought projection. Didn't you mean for me to?"

"Thought projection? But, I didn't scre--," or--did I?

She was now studying me. I didn't know what to say, so I closed my eyes and bowed my head. I began concentrating then thought, "Can you hear me?" I

looked at her. She nodded! It was possible! I could do it! What good it was I had no idea, but I could do it!

We worked till the sun came up, trying to get some control for me. As the first rays of the morning came filtering through the trees of the wood, we headed back. We came out of the thicket, and I told Hawk I wanted to retrieve my blanket from where I had left it. While I was rolling it up, Hawk noticed the scroll laying several rods away. I had forgotten about it in my rage.

"What's this?" She said.

"What's what?" I said, turning to see what she was talking about.

"This," she said, as she held up the scroll. "It was laying here, near where you threw your sword last night."

"Oh, yeah," I said as I remembered. I was so angry because he disappeared before I had a chance to do or say anything that I forgot about it immediately.

"Do you know what it is?"

"As a matter of fact, I don't know..." I told her of the visitor I had had before she came up.

"I'm not surprised that you raised your sword," she said. "I think I would have also."

"Look, I am sorry. Is there anything I can do to make it up to you?"

"Yes, buy me breakfast." We both laughed as we went back down the hill. The scroll could wait until we had eaten something.

After breakfast we retired to the city library. We were joined by Chief-Captain Swan, a tall strapping man of about twenty-three, and the librarian Carolyn Poindexter. (They called her Index.) We went into a basement room, which I was told would be below the water-line. The room

wasn't a room; it was a vault. The door was massive, three rods high, three rods wide, and one rod thick! The inside was coated by a specially treated lead and dichor [A rare mineral on Omega, with no counterpart on earth. Ed.], which prevented any form of eavesdropping. The room itself was four rods cubed. There was only one relatively small rectangular box sitting lengthwise in the center of the room; there were no other furnishings. There were no books, shelves, nor any of the paraphernalia one usually associates with a library.

Index had brought a grooved cone with her which she proceeded to place into a grooved hole in the top of the rectangular box. When it was flush with the top of the box, she depressed a small (button) which had popped out of the cone. There was a low humming sound followed by some kind of wedge-shaped box which extended from the side of the box. The face had letters, numbers, glyphs, and runes, with assorted words to either side of the main part. Index said it was a keyboard. She said she "keyed" in the information she wanted and what happened was a result of what she "keyed" in. They tried to tell me it wasn't magic. "Well, all I know is you can't do what she's doing with sticks and hammers," I said. Anyway, she went to pressing away on her buttons, and things started popping out of the walls, floor, and ceiling. When she was done they took the scroll over to a place where light was shining through a piece of opaque glass. It had metal rods and fingers on it. They fastened the scroll to the metal fingers, and we all stepped behind a see-through wall. Index pressed some more buttons, and the metal fingers put the scroll against the glass then started to unroll it. No sooner had it been unrolled than there was an explosion. When the dust cleared a voice from nowhere said, "A gift, from the King." This was followed by shrill laughter which slowly died away.

PART IV

(A Dispossessed Crown)

"Sergeant of the Guard! Sergeant of the Guard!" the sentry called out as he knelt over the lifeless body of one of his fellows. The camp alarm bells sounded wildly as the encampment came to life.

The sky was heavily overcast, and the distant sound of thunder pealed along the northern coasts of Kennardia. The armies of Quintin were massing along the Channel of Unicorn preparing for the attack on Unicorn. This year's freeze had been predicted to be exceptionally hard in the Channel. Edmond IV would take no chances, however, and had summoned the ancient Mages to assist in freezing the Channel.

"Fan out and keep your eyes open!" bellowed a crusty sergeant. They had expected minor infiltrations as the day drew nearer for the Channel crossing. The last body made three sentries dead in as many hours. "Keep your guard up an' stay with a buddy!" the sergeant barked again.

The Channel of Unicorn was eighteen miles across at its narrowest point between Unicorn and Kennardia. Every fourteen years the solar cycle of Gamma-7 was at its lowest ebb. This marked the coldest of Omega's winters. This year a celestial dust storm had blown across the face of Gamma-7 which dropped the temperature to a record low. The Channel had never frozen before, and the armies waited to see if this would be the night of the assault.

"You can call off the search, Serg! We got 'em." Two soldiers dressed in heavy furs came into the light of a camp fire. They each held a lifeless hand of the dead Unicornian they were dragging across the snow.

* * *

The pier stood out in the light fog which had settled along the coast of Unicorn. Huge bonfires burned every two leagues along the beachs. Their light twisted through the fog and reflected off the bottoms of the clouds. Colin had chosen Pointer's Cove for landing. It was a fresh water bay, but it was heated due to its proximity to the volcanic activity on the floor of the bay. He tied the skiff to a post, then he and Redmond helped Cindrith onto the wharf. Cindrith wheezed as she almost lost her balance on the slippery wharf. She put her arms around her stomach to protect the child in her womb should she actually fall. Colin helped her over to a short barrel then assisted Redmond with their few belongings.

"Colin, there are no lights about," said Cindrith, looking toward the town.

"It's okay, Dear, I shouldn't think there would be any. Remember, the attack could come at any time," said Colin. Cindrith was clearly dissatisfied with Colin's response.

Colin opened the door of a warehouse which was on the pier. "Redmond, please help me put the baggage in here." He turned to Cindrith, "Dear, I will be back shortly. In the meantime I'm leaving Redmond with you. You'll be safe enough here."

As Colin walked into the fog (which was growing steadily heavier), Cindrith felt a deep longing not to be parted from him. Redmond put his arm about her shoulders and took her into the warehouse then closed the doors.

The town appeared to be deserted. Not only were there no lights, there were no people. Colin had made arrangements to meet an old associate at a local inn. When Colin arrived, however, the doors were locked. As he was

about to return to the pier, he heard the sound of laughter. When he knocked on the doors and called to see if anyone was about, there was a crash, as of dishes falling.

"Is anyone about?" Colin called again.

"Sure'n thar is, an you bes' not be-a movin' none to quickly now," came a gravelly voice from behind him.

"Oh, wa' we go' 'ere Pet?" came a second voice, this one feminine.

"Loo's li' company."

"Wi' a right nice coat, too, Pet."

Colin spoke. "I'm looking for a Mr. Phillip Croup. Would you know him?"

"Mr. Croup, ya say?" said the woman. "Wha' migh' ya be-a needin wi em?"

"It's a matter of personal business. May I turn around?"

"Turn a-r-o-u-n-d!" the man said. "Mister high-an'- mighty, arn't ya!"

You'll TURN AROUND' when ah says ya kin!"

"Aw, le' em turn aroun, Pet. 'E cain't 'urt nothin."

"Oh, alrigh', but ya bes' min' yor manners!"

Colin turned around and slowly opened his coat to show that he only had a dagger in his belt for defense.

The man and woman were a sight. They looked like walking refuse heaps. The woman made small circling motions with the tip of her long sword and spoke. "Wha' migh' ya be a-doin' aroun' 'ere when ta whole town be deserted, anyway?"

"I had no idea that the town would be deserted. You spoke as though you know Mister Croup; do you?"

"Whas in't fer us, if'n we do?" said the old man.

"My gratitude, and the honor of having given help to a traveler in need."

"Ah sai', whas in't fer us! Noo, kin ah be o' service. Ere ya deaf?"

"'Ere now," said the woman, "migh'n ya be a Quin'inite?

"Yes," said Colin.

"An' a mighty bold un, too," she said.

"Be ya a spy, then?" inquired the old man.

"No, just a refugee with a pregnant wife and a friend."

"Wha'!" the old man exclaimed as he spun around looking into the mists.

"I've come ahead looking for my friend--you'll not be tricked by me."

The woman's eyes narrowed as she spoke, "Pregnant, ya say? Whar'd ya leave 'em?"

"Forgive my audacity, but I don't feel quite right about telling someone I've never met where my wife and friend are, especially when they're holding a weapon on me."

"We cou' leave ya 'ere bleedin' ta deeth. Ah think ya bes' answer the missy," said the old man.

"Which is precisely the reason I will not tell you."

"Now why's tha'?" she said.

"If you would kill me with so little reason, wouldn't you kill her just as easily? And my friend also? No, if you would kill me, then please be about it. Otherwise, I'm in need of finding someplace warm for my wife to deliver our child, and you're keeping me from doing that."

The man and woman just stood there looking at each other, not sure what to make of Colin. Then the old man shrugged and put away his sword; the woman followed suit.

"Ah, i' wou' no' been no fun killin' ya anyway. Ya make i' ta easy," complained the man.

"Please," Colin said, "if you do know my friend, would you tell me where he is?"

"We ain't never 'eard o' 'em. We jus' wanted ta know wha' ya wanted 'em fer," said the woman. "Lis'en, thar's rooms in 'ere. Why don' ya bring yer missus 'ere? Ta army's gone, so won't nobody bother ya none."

"Thank you," said Colin. "I will accept your offer. Again, thank you."

* * *

Renald was asleep in his room. He had left express orders that he wasn't to be disturbed. When the knock came on his door, he jumped, screaming, from his bed, "No--no--no!"

"King Edmond," said the Lord High Chamberlain, "it's extremely important. Are you well, My Lord?"

Renald hollered back, "I said, I don't want to be bothered tonight! And that includes you, whoever you are!"

"Yes, Sire, forgive me, but it's news from the front. You ordered me to bring whatever news came as soon as it arrived. This dispatch came only moments ago. I do think you should read it, Sire."

"A-u-g-h! Well--alright--just a moment!" Renald turned to throw on a robe. The day had been a hard one for Renald. First came the news that there were uprisings in the southern towns of Eribador, then the report from Hawk saying that there had been an attempt on Erick's life. Just before retiring for the night he received a report which had arrived from the Eastern Marches indicating that the SOSL had cut a deal with a rival king because of Renald's refusal to use his newly found power for their benefit.

"This dispatch would bring good news, though," thought Renald, "for it would signal the opening of the attack against Unicorn. His armies would easily sweep the decrepit Republic away," his thoughts continued. "Long has

this day been hoped for by the SOSL. But, it would not be they which experience this victory; it would be me!"

Renald threw open the doors, and the Chamberlain handed the report to him.

To His Most Royal Highness, King Edmond Del Harthallow IV

Sire, General Haglia assassinated this eve by infiltrators. The Channel remains impassable at this writing. Have assumed command.

Gen. Emile Fielding

Renald's fingers gripped into the Chamberlain's throat, his fingernails drawing blood.

"How dare you wake me for this!" Renald released his grip and let the Chamberlain fall to the floor, gasping for air, as he slammed the doors shut.

"No more!" shouted Renald as he opened his wall safe. He pulled out an old leather-bound text of the Necro-Deamon-Codex. [An ancient volume which was said to have been written by Baalzebub himself. There was only one known copy. Renald had been using it since he found it some four years earlier. Ed.] "Breathe fire into me, oh Baal!" shouted Renald as he dropped the tomb onto the floor. He grabbed a large candle and began to pour its hot wax out forming a necromancer's circle at the foot of his bed before the hearth. When he had finished, he began reciting the blasphemies written in the book. He then slammed it closed and mumbled over and over, "EROC TWINE VARGUXE--EROC TWINE VARGOUXE..." He was soon in a trance and pulled out a dagger with which

he cut open the veins of his neck. As his blood trickled onto the floor, it popped and smoked till the room was filled with vile vapors and the sound of his hideous chanting.

There appeared before Renald, outside of the circle, the appearance of a very handsome man with glowing red eyes, dressed in black robes, who spoke.

"The sweetness of your words are music to me, oh King. But, tell me, for what glory do you call upon me?"

"Oh, Dark Messiah, you have ordered me to destroy Colin and Cindrith, and I gladly comply. Yet, someone works against me in trying to kill he who was chosen to do the deed."

The vapors swirled and hissed, and the hearth burst forth with flames, licking the robed figure as the cackling of wraithes flew about the circle.

"Do you desire release from our bargain?"

"No, My Lord, I but desire to know who has tried to foil my plans. Then I shall remove them and continue according to our agreement."

The wraithes began to chant, "To kill, to kill, t'was La Flandours' will."

Renald was stunned. "How could he have known?" he asked.

The wraithes replied, "A Spirit risen of an Abbot, slain! Ha, Ha, Ha, Haaa!"

"NO! Tell me, Dark Lord. How can I combat the tongues of the dead?"

"I will send one," said the Dark Lord. "He three only of your commands will obey."

With that the whole scene vanished from Renald's view.

* * *

"Where do you intend to look, Vashlee?" said the portly counselor of Vashlee La Flandours.

"To the ends of Omega, if that's what it takes, old friend," said La Flandours.

"Will you not reconsider taking someone else with you? Perhaps Elif Tinselman?"

"Would you have me risk the life of another, where their heart's interest is not best served? No, this I must do alone."

From behind the door of Vashlee's bed chamber came the voice, "Noble benefactor, would you deny to one who owes his very life to you an opportunity to repay through service a debt so great?" Elif had entered the room as he was speaking. Vashlee turned to him and taking him by the shoulders he spoke.

"You are too young, Elif." Vashlee then returned to packing.

"I'm not too young to be appointed as the captain of your household guard. What, then, makes me too young for this that you undertake?"

Vashlee turned to his counselor. "You're supposed to keep my secrets, not spread them."

The old counselor obsequiously bowed. "I was called upon to render service to you. Is it not appropriate then that I do all in my meager ability to render the best service possible?"

"But to call forth a babe of so tender years you do him a great disservice. No, Elif, you will not go with me. It's too dangerous."

"Dangerous? I suppose it wasn't dangerous to lead the vanguard assault which repulsed the recent breakthrough in the Desert of the the Etherial Lords? Nor was it 'danger' to escape the encircling action carried on to my rear in that same action? And in the last three attempts on your life was I cowering in some corner like some babe as which you'd describe me? No! I was

at your side! I was where my heart is. Do you think I would have ever married if it were not for the fact that it was your able leadership which has preserved us a land where each man may enjoy the fruits of his own labours without fear of onerous taxation or unjust confiscation of our possessions? What kind of trouble could even in the remotest instance be considered sufficiently dangerous to render my loyalty as naught?"

Vashlee had listened to Elif's impassioned delivery, then looked again to his counselor, "Tell me, old friend, is it right to place a fishing net in the hands of one who has no way of knowing he could be pulled overboard if the net is too full?" He then looked back at Elif and spoke, "Never would I question either your courage or your loyalty. At the moment I question the wisdom of my chief counselor, but of you I have no doubts. Before you tie your heart in knots, though, there are some things that you need to understand."

Elif knelt before Vashlee and said, "My life is yours to command."

"If it is mine then hear my words. I had a daughter whose name was Regina. She married a man of whom I didn't approve. He was king of Quintin, on the other side of the world. He was an evil man and there are but a few who would mourn the passing of such a one as he. One of those who did mourn was my granddaughter, Cindrith. Regina loved me and her mother very much and named her only child after my wife. The report has gone abroad that Cindrith was kidnapped and killed. I don't believe this to be the truth. Regina had sent me a letter before her sudden death which indicated that Cindrith possessed the latent talent of vysionpas, and she was working to develop it. You, Elif, may not know of vysionpas, but suffice it to say that one in possession of such a talent will not die at the hands of an ordinary kidnapper. It is my intention to either find her and bring her home or to find the one that did kill her and bring them to justice. In any instance

I've received word that SOLE has received a contract with my name on it. You have had no opportunity to know of this group so I will now elaborate that you may understand the content of your fisherman's net.

"SOLE is the common name for the Society Of Least Expectations. They are an assassination organization which are given safe-haven by the Spice Kings. I only know of one contract they've been given over the years which they haven't fulfilled, and even that one remains good to anyone successful at fulfilling it.

"Elif, the journey will be a long one, fraught with many difficulties that would be totally new to you. You have a family here. You are captain of the Household Guard, which gives you employment. Are not these things important to you?"

Elif didn't speak. That he had a family was true. It was also true that as captain he had responsibilities which needed attention. His heart was not divided, though, for it had been Vashlee who saved him as a small child from the burning wreckage of his father's house. It was Vashlee who saw to it he had a place to stay. It was Vashlee at every major junction of his life, guiding, aiding, uplifting, teaching and reproving. His life was filled with Vashlee to the point he could not help feeling the loyalty of an adopted son to sire. The question was settled; he would go with Vashlee or die trying, for he owed even his family to Vashlee. At length he spoke, "Sire, I have a debt I shall never be able to repay. Would you deny me the peace of at least trying?"

Vashlee held the young elf to his bosom and spoke, "Your life is your own," he released him, "so please accept it and do not throw it away in so bold a fashion. Your children have need of nurturing now. They need the guiding hand of a father now. What would you say to your fair wife, what

would you have her to do in your absence? If you truly have love and affection for me, then be the father and husband I know you can. This is my decision to go; I would not that you should sacrifice so deeply when there is no need. There will be many opportunities for you to do that which is right; accept them as they come, leave this one to me."

"And what of the country? What will we do without your leadership?" said Vashlee's counselor.

"There will be no difference. The judges have been appointed by the vote of the people, a system which has worked very well for the last fifteen years. It is not appropriate that a people should look to one man to be their ruler and judge. Our people must govern themselves. I would die sooner or later. Would the country be disrupted if I journey for a year or so? You are my counselor, and here my good friend, do both of you think so little of your countrymen?"

"Vashlee," said Elif. "You've never commanded me save in matters of military action; always you've given me choice. My wife would not be able to bear my presence were I to desert you in your time of need. My children would rise up in rebellion against their father were I to do so. No, it is just that I should be at your side. If your daughter were alive, she would be the only kin you have left in all of Omega. You have sacrificed everything you ever loved to the welfare of your people. At the merest request you should make, I and all who have lived beneath your loving hand would go to war and sacrifice ourselves and our families. Would you strip your country of her honor because you think this your duty alone?! Was it not you who set about taking a bereft people and restoring unto them dignity when foreign masters had bled them white? Were you not the very one who said that it is the duty of every man to view all creatures as equal in deserving their love and

support? What did you do to establish so noble a cause in the hearts of this people? Were you as other tyrants when you conquered those which had enslaved us? Did you establish your houses of harlotry and reign with an iron hand? Did you force your code of justice upon us? No. You held elections for representatives to a national committee to establish our own laws. In overseeing the process you acted as only a wise counselor, guiding here and there with suggestions. Then fifteen years ago when the country threw off the yoke of that committee because they had grown too corrupt to be of service, it was you who devised that just system of judges to settle our quarrels. No, there is no man on the face of all Omega with a greater right to ask of help in his time of need. Yet, I only heard of it because Jericho, your chief counselor, intercepting the note, invited me here this afternoon. I didn't know of SOLE, and it doesn't matter because my duty lies in doing all I can to see to the future security of my family. I know of no better way of doing that than to help assure that the man to whom we owe our security be aided when undertaking so great a task. You may now order me to stay behind; it would be the first order outside of battle you've ever given me. Because you are our chief general and I am in the soldiery, I will have no choice but obey; however, I will have lost all respect for you as you never allowed anyone else to do anything alone when it was possible for them to be benefited by help."

Vashlee's eyes were moist. It had been his desire to help develop a people that would possess the moral character of this young elf standing so boldly before him. And now when he felt that he had failed and all that was left was to try to rescue his only remaining daughter, hoping that she may feel to continue what he had started, Elif stood before him an example that all was not wasted.

"I feel ashamed," he said. "No, I will not order you to stay. We will leave at sunup on the morrow. Now if you will leave me, please. I have things to do in preparation, and so do you now."

Elif smiled then left. Jericho understood and left as well. After they were gone, Vashlee walked over to his window and looked out across the distance spreading from his mountain fortress to the coast and out to sea till he was looking past the horizon. His thoughts were of a granddaughter he'd never seen. He closed his eyes and wept.

* * *

"Whaaa!" cried the baby.

"It's a boy, Sire," said Redmond.

"An a righ' fine un, too," added the old man.

Colin looked around, holding his newborn son in his arms, "Where's Jessie, Bill?"

"She wen' ta fetch some more wa'er. She'll be back in a momen' ah suspec'," said the old man.

Cindrith watched as Colin tied off the umbilical cord then cut it. The woman returned with some fresh water, and Colin and she washed the blood off the baby. Colin then wrapped the child in a soft blanket and placed him next to Cindrith to nurse. As he did so, he bent over and kissed her on the cheek. Then speaking quietly into her ear said, "I love you." She kissed him on his cheek as he spoke.

Colin turned to face Bill, "It isn't too late to back out, old fellow."

Bill scratched his chin, "Well, ya know this'll be ta firs' time ah been able ta do somethin' good since as left ta army. Nah, ah'm a goin'."

Colin then looked at Redmond, "My very good friend, will you be alright?"

"Just bring yourself back safe, Sire."

Jessie returned with a pail of water and Colin turned to her saying, "I'm not sure what we would have done without you. Thank you."

"Ah, go-on."

"Cindrith," Colin said. "I should not be very long..." His eyes moistened as his words trailed off.

"I have confidence in you. I will be here when you return. Redmond and Jessie will keep me company."

Colin kissed her lightly, then he and Bill left. Cindrith watched them walk down the street through the snow in the early morning light.

* * *

The Regional Commander for the forces of Unicorn, which were stationed in the northeastern frontier, sat with a dour expression as his guards escorted Colin and Bill into his command center atop Raven's Peak.

One of the guards spoke, "We found these two coming out of Pointer's Cove after it was evacuated, Sir." His tone was crisp, not in the least perfunctory, almost perky.

Regional Commander Marshal Saphglite's eyes blazed in the direction of his Chief of Staff. The Chief of Staff looked back blankly then hollered out, "Major Espagasl!"

Immediately Major Espagasl came in from the door through which Colin and Bill had entered. "Yes, Sir!" he said, snapping to attention.

"What is the meaning of this relaxing of discipline, Major?" said the Chief of Staff.

The Major began to explain when he was interrupted by the same Sergeant which spoke earlier.

"Begging the Marshal's pardon and meaning no disrespect to the Major, Sir, may I show the Marshal what the Major said I should take to routine interrogation, Sir."

The Marshal was interested and motioned for the Sergeant to continue. The Sergeant handed the Marshal Colin's medallion and dagger. The Marshal then looked at the Major.

The Major, still at attention, said, "Sir, one week after you issued an order for all who had a medallion like that to be brought to you, someone flooded the streets with imitations and every urchin had one. Would the Marshal have me to bring him each one of them?" The Marshal began to glare at the Major who continued, "Sir, we only know of one of those things which are genuine, and for all we know the woman who had it lied about there being others, Sir."

The Marshal then spoke, "Has it been your custom, Major Espagasl, to interpolate my orders?"

"No, Sir."

"Did the Major think to question these 'street urchins' as to who gave them their 'fake' medallions, and how is it that the Major is an expert on what a real medallion looks like as opposed to a fake one?" The Major's eyes darted about the room as the Marshal spoke again. "Major Bendol!"

The Major entered through the same door as the others had.

"Yes, Sir."

"You will relieve Major Espagasl of his duties. Find a suitable replacement for yourself as communications officer and throw Private Espagasl into the brig till we have time for a formal Court-Marshal."

Major Bendol flinched then said, "Yes, Sir."

"Major," said the Marshal. "After the Private has been secured, come back here, don't make any side trips. Is that clear, Major?"

"Yes, Sir," said Major Bendol.

Major Bendol left with Private Espagasl. The Marshal glanced at Colin as he studied the medallion. He then went to his desk and pulled out the one that had been taken from the girl to whom Major Espagasl had earlier referred. He then sat and compared the two. Colin's was well engraved; the body of the sea gull was made of diamond dust, the boat was of powdered sapphire with its sail of pulverized pearl, all set within a golden frame the edges of which were laced with modalite [A rare mineral on Omega. Its color is bright red, and it is said to have alchemical properties. Ed.]. The other was cast pewter with a small azurite set in the eye of the sea gull.

While the Marshal sat pondering the medallions, no one spoke. At length Major Bendol returned. Upon entering he stood at attention and said, "Major Bendol reporting as ordered, Marshal Saphglite."

"At ease," the Marshal said. He then looked at Colin and Bill while speaking to the Sergeant who had brought them in. "Sergeant, you may now give your report."

With that the Sergeant began. "Sir. At approximately three p.m. one of our patrols came back with these two in tow. The Lieutenant took one look at that medallion and ordered that a volcano was to erupt before I was to let anyone stop me from bringing these two to your personal attention. So here we are, Sir."

The Marshal just sat for a long moment looking at Colin and Bill. Then he said to the Sergeant, "Did they give you any trouble of any kind?"

"Well, Sir, that's the strangest thing. The good-looking fella there

seemed to actually want to be brought to you."

"Well, 'good-looking fella,' you're here, so what do you have to say for yourself?" said the Marshal.

"Sir," said Colin, "I'm on an important errand. It's imperative that I find a Mister Phillip Croup. I'm sorry for all the fuss, but I felt the best way of finding him was to speak to the Regional Commander. It was here I was headed, so I had no objection to being brought by the Sergeant."

"That may be well and fine, but you see you've presented me with a considerable problem by being in possession of one of these." He held up Colin's medallion.

"I'm sure I don't understand the dilemma, Sir."

"And I'm sure that you say you don't understand, but let's see what you do with the following. About a fortnight past there was a young woman who had this one," he held up the pewter medallion. "She didn't want to see anybody except me when she was captured landing on the beach in a small boat. Only when she got here, she tried to kill me. Before she died, she said she was doing it for the bounty which King Harthallow had put up for my head. She bit her tongue off before we could get anything else out of her. Now you show up with one even fancier than the one she had, so I think that maybe you're just a slicker bounty hunter than she was. What do you think of that, 'good-looking fella'?"

Colin looked down to the floor then back up into the Marshal's eyes, "Sir, I'm not so sure that I wouldn't be thinking exactly the same thing that you are."

"That's refreshing. Tell me then, what would you do in my shoes?"

"Be sure of whatever it was that I decided to do, lest I should send an innocent man to an untimely end and his blood be on my hands."

"Somehow I had a notion you might say something like that. Well, my hat's off to you. You are no fool. You speak straightforwardly, but do you lie or tell the truth? Yes, I can see that this won't be easy."

"Forgive me, Sir, but it seems to me that your difficulty could be considerably eased if you would go to the trouble of finding Mister Croup."

The Marshal smiled, "It certainly couldn't hurt. You must understand that I have duties that require my attention, so I trust that you won't object to being placed in the brig till we find him?"

"We are at your disposal."

"You know, I don't even know your name, but it would sadden me to have to put you to death."

* * *

There was a moist chill in the air. Sunrise was but a few hours away. The Arch-Mage Zampheia floated thirty feet above the cresting waves. Behind and before him were several lesser Mages, all hovering over the Channel. Over them were the dark horse-head clouds of Omega. Zampheia had nearly begged to be allowed to wait another day or so till they passed, but General Fielding was too afraid of the possible ire on the part of the King should there be any further delay.

When Zampheia was young learning his trade, he didn't know that the horse-head clouds had anything to do with anything. They were just curious clouds that looked like horses' heads. One day while he was mastering the spell called "Sparks" (used for igniting small fires), the horse-head clouds were overhead. His old master had gone to town for some alchemical supplies and told him not to practice any spells till he should return. When the old

Mage did return, it was to find his home burned to ashes and his young pupil badly burned. Time and other lessons were to make Zampheia a great respecter of the horse-head clouds, knowing that they could easily cause even the most foolproof of spells to be incomprehensibly skewed.

With some degree of reluctance he reached into his belt-pouch and pulled out a handful of skagtite [A mineral which has the curious effect of causing the salt which has been dissolved in water to recrystallize for a period of time. Ed.], then signaled the others with him to do the same. They cast the skagtite so as to cover about two thirds of a league on either side of the six league narrow of the Channel of Unicorn. When that job was done, he signaled the other Mages to return to shore. He had had a premonition that all who were out above the water when the binding portion of the spell was cast would breathe their last breath only a moment later. He took a deep breath to relax. His right hand reached into another pouch and pulled out a flawless diamond. He then concentrated so that his altitude would be reduced sufficient to touch the crest of a wave with the tip of his staff. When he was at last in place he spoke the words, "Betwine Igntusu Figrondauso, Betwine Sulag Harwinduso, Eraglao!" and placed his staff in the water at the same time he dropped the diamond into the water. If all were to go well, the waves would slow till the surface of the water were smooth as glass; there it would freeze solid for about a fortnight.

Thunder rolled and belched from the clouds overhead, crashing into the water! Hundreds of bolts dropped from the skies, causing the waters to boil and churn. Zampheia dodged the first several which flashed by him, but when he stopped to try to cast a spell to escape the torrent of lightning, he was struck. He then fell into the bubbling sea.

Morning had come; the clouds of a few hours before had passed. The sky

was bright in the crisp morning light. The waters of the Channel had indeed frozen, though not to the smooth surface desired. Everywhere lightning had ripped jagged holes into its surface. The water itself had frozen with boils and crests of waves intact. "A nightmare across which to try to move an army," said General Fielding as he viewed it in the morning. His heart was breaking for the loss of Zampheia, the General's only friend. "Move out!" was all he said. His armies started out across the torturous ice.

* * *

"Sir," said Major Bendol.

Marshal Saphglite opened his eyes and looked up from his cot. "Has it started then?"

"Yes, Sir. The Channel froze during the thunderstorm last night."

The Marshal arose from his cot and walked over to a water basin to wash his face. "Assemble the unit commanders. We only have a few hours before the fight begins."

"Yes, Sir. I took the liberty of ordering it before I woke you."

The Marshal stopped washing to look at the handsome Major, then with a half grin said, "You'll do."

"Begging the Marshal's pardon, I looked in the file to see if I could find any mention of the man that fella we caught yesterday was looking for."

"That's good, Son, but he can wait. We've got a war to fight just now."

"That's just it, Sir."

" What's it?"

"I didn't find anything in the personnel files, Sir. However, when I was cleaning out Major Espagasl's belongings to have them sent to the

Quartermaster, I found this." He held out a satchel with the initials P.C. stamped on the flap. "I took the liberty of looking in it. I think the Marshal will find it of immediate importance, Sir." The Major's voice was breaking as he finished.

"Then I suppose the Marshal should look at it, if it means that much to his Security Officer," said the Marshal as he took the bag and dumped its contents on to his desk.

The satchel contained a rudimentary map of Unicorn and the nearby islands, the street address of the Ambassador to Unicorn from La Flandours, a small amount of Unicornian money, and about the same amount in Spice Kings' Silver. There was also a letter of "Diplomatic Passage":* with the following names affixed: Sean McEan, Cathrine Dunnybrook, and Lawrence Redmond.

Marshal Saphglite had never seen such a document. He did, however, know that any person named in such a document must be handled with extreme courtesy. He recognized the first two names as being wanted by King Harthallow; the third he had never encountered before. After thinking for a moment, he looked at the Major standing beside him and said, "Bring Espagasl here."

"That isn't possible at the moment, Sir."

"Soldier, I gave you a direct order."

"Sir. Yes, Sir; however, Private Espagasl and several Quintinians escaped during the night. They were tracked to the forest, and the search is

*[A Diplomatic Passage meant more than declaring diplomatic immunity for whoever possessed it. It carried with it the same privilege of one's own Head of State. Such passage was only accorded to those who had gained the favor of the Ancient Mage Homer. Ed.]

continuing."

"What of the other two?"

"They didn't escape, Sir."

The Marshal stood and walked over to a balcony.

"Sir?"

"Yes," the Marshal said without turning around.

"I don't know how important it is, but when we discovered the others gone... well, Sir, the cell door of those two was wide open. As the Corporal was closing the doors, he discovered that they hadn't escaped, Sir."

"Are you saying they had a chance to escape and didn't?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Well, that's interesting. You're dismissed, Major." As the Major was leaving Marshal Saphglite said, "Who else knows of this?"

"Sir?"

"Does anyone else know of that bag?"

"Private Espagasl, and whomever he may have told, Sir."

"After I've met with the Unit Commanders, I want to see those two again.

It may be nothing, but it may have something to do with them."

"Yes, Sir."

* * *

The Unit Commanders had just left as Major Bendol brought Colin and Bill into the Marshal's command center. They stood in front of his desk and waited. Colin could see by the map on the wall behind the desk that the assault had already started, and that one of the flanking maneuvers was headed straight for Pointer's Cove--and Cindrith...

The Marshal came back in from the outer office and took his seat. "Now, who is Phillip Croup?"

Bill looked at Colin, then Colin answered the question. "He is an employee of Hembrick. Hembrick is an associate of Donalbain, the Ambassador from La Flandours. Do you require further information?"

"Why did you wish to meet this Mister Croup?"

"He was bearing a document for me, my wife, and my retainer."

"And your name is?"

"I am known abroad as Sean McEan."

The Marshal had suspected that to be his name but was surprised to hear him admit it with so much forthrightness. "I could have you put to death just for being a Quintinian on our soil during war."

"You could, but then what would you do with the Diplomatic Passage bearing my name?"

"What makes you so sure I have it?"

"Marshal Saphglite, is it? We both know that you have it. If, however it is your intention to know from whence my intelligence comes: I already know that your Major Espagasl is a spy for King Harthallow. They tried to persuade us to go with them. I think he knew who I was and intended to collect the reward should he make good his break for the sea after making your men think he headed for the forest. I knew that Phillip was headed to meet with you so that there would be no problem with the transfer of the Passage to me and my company. As for Phillip, he was long overdue. Knowing his dedication to duty, only two reasons existed for his tardiness: one, he had been killed, and two, he was dying. I reasoned that, as Espagasl appeared to be your chief of security, Phillip would need to pass by him first. It would then be a small matter for Espagasl to conveniently sidetrack Phillip with a

ruse and then kill him at the earliest point practical. To back up my theory, Major Bendol should ask the orderlies in the security office if anyone fitting Phillip's description had been seen within the last, say, seven days."

"That's a rather neat package, McEan," said the Major.

"Would there be any distinguishing appearance to remember him by?"

"Excellent, Marshal Saphglite. I knew you would be a shrewd man. My father always spoke highly of you. Yes, he would be easily recognized and remembered; he was from Flourac. Flouracites never grow to be taller than eight hands tall."

"He was a dwarf?"

"Flouracites aren't misshapen as is a human dwarf. They are just small men."

"That would be incredibly conspicuous for delivering such important material."

"More importantly, it makes my theory easily proved or disproved."

The Marshal was convinced. "Major, send in two guards, and check with your office and see whether we have just heard the truth or a fantastic tale."

"Yes, Sir." With that the Major ordered two guards to come in to watch Colin and Bill then left to check with security.

"Excuse me, Marshal," said Colin.

"--What?"

"I realize I am in no position to be asking for favors, but I see on your map that Pointer's Cove is about to become a battlefield."

"Yes?"

"If you would spare one man to take my medallion to my wife and retainer and bring them to safety, you would have me in your debt." He paused and swallowed. "I ask not for myself, but it would spare her the shock of war."

"Your wife no doubt is Miss Dunnybrook?"

"Yes."

"And, your retainer, Mister Redmond?"

"Yes."

"Then who is this beggar you were caught with?"

"Ta nam's Bill, Sir," chirped Bill.

"Bill, is it?" Bill nodded. "What would you be doing with the likes of
Mister McEan here?"

"Well, Sir, ah reckon i's onna coun' o' he tales a migh'y fine tale."

"Yes, Bill, that he does. Did he promise you something in return for
your service?"

"He sai' ah cou'd get mah sef kilt. Bu' ah figur's i's ba''er ta go
down in-a figh' than ta be taken prisnor."

"No money--no power?"

"I promised him," Colin interrupted, "that he could be something more
than a beggar. And that there would be a slim chance that you wouldn't kill
us. If you did spare us, I knew somewhat the caliber of man you were and that
you might consider taking on another volunteer to help wage this war.
Finally, I told him that I would try to convince you that you needed all hands
now, especially since we both know that as soon as the armies make contact,
fully half of your men will either desert altogether or defect to the other
side."

"Yep!" said Bill.

The Marshal stared at Colin. The two guards were amazed by Colin's words
and bearing. It was well known that the armies of Unicorn had fallen into a
general state of decay. It was infested by those who had nothing better to do
with their lives, and others that were in just for the benefits they had been

promised by a recruiter. The propaganda that King Harthallow had been pumping out, which was carried by the major news services in Unicorn then funneled down to the smaller presses, had done much to destroy any semblance of patriotism. But to hear a foreigner say such a thing brought forth a high degree of mixed emotions. The guards wanted to string them up for speaking such a truth, with the insane reasoning that if you rid yourself of the fellow pointing the finger, the truth goes away. The Marshal wanted to cry; he knew that the best he could do was to fight a losing war in the extreme hope that a peace might be achieved. He didn't fully believe it possible, in light of what had happened to every other country Harthallow had conquered; nevertheless, such was his hope.

The Major returned after about a score of minutes. He then reported to the Marshal, "Sir, his story checks out."

Marshal Saphglite leaned on his hand and rubbed the two days' growth on his chin. His wasn't an easy decision. If only one tenth of the things Colin had been accused of were true and he released him, he would be allowing a murderer to go free simply because of a piece of paper that said he had passage. If he were to hold him or even have him put to death, who-knows-how-many murdered men would rest better in their graves. Failing that, it wouldn't be the first time Harthallow issued a warrant on false charges; so, what if this man were innocent?

Then he remembered that Colin said his father had known him. At the time he said it the Marshal had cast it off as a clever ruse. So he asked, "Who was your father?"

Colin's eyes flashed, "Michael of Bowden, I believe he said, was how you knew him."

The Marshal nearly had apoplexy at the hearing of the name. The Major

asked if he was all right but was waved off. The Marshal stood and started to say "Sire," but stopped himself. Instead he said, "Sergeant, take Bill here and give him some decent clothing and a good weapon. Then Private Bill will take you to Pointer's Cove where you will safely escort whomever you find there back here as quickly as possible. Major, get Colonel Buckmaster; he's on that front. And if he has to use a division to keep that town safe till they come back, do it."

The Major was startled, "Would the Marshal like me to return Mister McEan to his cell?"

"Major, your job is to follow my orders. Mister McEan will stay here with me. Now move!" They all scrambled out of the office except Bill and Colin. Bill walked up to the Marshal and took his hand, "Whil' ah's still a c-i-v-i-l-i-a-n, Go' bless ya, Sir." Then he followed the others out.

"Colin, isn't it?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Please, sit down." They sat on a couch in front of the balcony. "We were told you were dead. Can you talk about it?"

"Not without unnecessarily imperilling your life, Sir."

"Is there anything we can do for the rightful heir to the throne of all Quintin?"

"You've already done more than I could hope for, Sir."

* * *

It had started snowing again, so Redmond placed another log on the hearth to try and drive out the chill. He and Jessie had fixed a bed near a window so Cindrith could watch the street and see when Colin and Bill returned. The

wind began to howl while the logs in the fireplace quietly crackled and hissed.

Cindrith's voice broke the stillness, "Redmond, quick! Get me away from the window."

Jessie hurried to her side, "Wa's ta ma'er, luv? Re'mon', he be righ' back. Now yu jus' lie still."

Cindrith pulled Jessie back from the window by yanking on her tattered coat and said, "The armies of Quintin have just landed! They're about two leagues from here and will be here shortly. Please go find Redmond and bring him here, quickly!" Cindrith's eyes reflected the terror in her heart.

"'Ere now, luv, yer tremblin'! Ya mus' be kinda deeleeerious or sume''in'."

"Jessie, please--I don't have time to explain. Just, please find Redmond!"

"Well, all righ', but, ah don' see nuthin' ta be a fussin' abou'."

She left, and Cindrith breathed a sigh of relief. The baby had fallen asleep, so she covered him and got out of bed. She felt rested, it being over a day since the child was born. Still, it had been a long, hard delivery and it had taken a lot out of her. She knelt next to one of the trunks they had brought with them and opened it. She reached inside of the trunk and pressed a button which was recessed into the side of the trunk. There was a faint sound as of a metal wheel turning followed by a delicate "click." The face of the trunk revealed a false bottom which enclosed a drawer the length of the trunk. Cindrith pulled out the drawer and got out a pair of bracers, a silver long sword, and two rings. She then reclosed the drawer and locked the trunk.

She had finished getting dressed as Redmond and Jessie returned.

"Lady!" Redmond said when he saw her dressed.

"Ah tol' ya she was deeleeerius," said Jessie.

"Redmond, I'm not delirious. And I feel well enough to walk."

"But to fight, Lady?" he said motioning to the sword on the bed.

"Would you surrender, then?"

"Of course not, Lady. My arm is yours to command."

"Did you find a cart?"

"Yer boff crazy!" Jessie exclaimed as she threw her hands in the air.

"Wha' ya gonna figh'--snow flakes?"

Cindrith looked at Jessie, "My, we must look a sight to you. Could you humor us--just a little while?"

"Ah guess ah has ta."

"Thank you," Cindrith said looking back to Redmond.

"Yes, Lady. I had to take two broken ones and put them together, but I think they'll hold."

Redmond was old. He had just gotten over a serious case of the flu as they were leaving Quintin. His eyes were weary from his sixty-eight years of viewing the hatred that grew up in his native country with the advent of evil kings.

Redmond carried the baggage down the stairs to the cart he had pulled up outside. Jessie helped Cindrith make a frame for her to carry her son on her back. They put out the fire and tried to make it look as though they hadn't been there. When all was set, they started off in the direction in which they had seen Colin and Bill leave. As they neared the edge of Pointer's Cove, they heard explosions. Looking back they saw flames rising where the Quintinian armies were setting the town to blaze.

They hadn't moved another step when a troop of cavalry charged by on the road followed by an endless array of armed foot soldiers. The road was so

crowded with the onrush of men-at-arms they had to stay off the road in some trees. After the space of two score minutes, another group of mounted men approached. The one in the lead hollered out when he saw the refugees. The others slowed and approached the little group. Jessie fingered the pommel of her long sword as one of the men dismounted.

"Jessie!" Bill called. "Ta bloak di' i'! Ah's in ta Army!"

"Tha's yu, Bill?"

"Purty fancy duds, eh?"

"Boy, ah'll say!"

"Is Colin all right then, Bill?" queried Cindrith.

"Ah reckon so. We's sen' ta bring ya saf'ly bac'. All dee's sol'iers is so them Quin'in's don' do ya'll no 'arm."

They fastened the cart onto one of their spare horses. Cindrith, Jessie, and Redmond rode in the coach brought by the men with Bill. (When Bill told the quartermaster that Cindrith had just had a baby, they got permission to use the Marshal's private coach for her to ride in.) The Army then carried on a fighting retreat. Marshal Saphglite had told Major Bendol to give the assignment to Colonel Buckmaster because his was the only division out of which they had ferreted all potential non-patriots. The Marshal silently felt it fortuitous that the Colonel's unit was already assigned to that quarter.

* * *

10 AM: February 13, 2138sc

Battle opened against Unicornian forces. First contact along the hedge rows behind the beaches; resistance light. Forces along the front progressing on schedule. Notable exception, being on the

perimeter of a small town to the extreme northeast called Pointer's Cove. Town considered to be of questionable military value. Orders given to bypass it and cut supply line. Garrison escaped before penetrer movement could be completed.

Body Count: 150,000 prisoners

1,987 enemy casualties

540 lost in the battle for Pointer's Cove

28 lost elsewhere along the front

4 missing in action

(See attached letter

for citation recommendations.)

Territory gained after first six hours of combat: 290 leagues (approximately). Deepest penetration accomplished by Thaxis 5th light cavalry along the southern axis. Latest reports had them about twelve leagues south of the town of Ponicet, which is four leagues from their landing sight.

All is progressing either on, or a little ahead of, schedule, the notable exception being the slowing of XX Corps around Pointer's Cove.

Lt. Colonel Helphand

Adjutant

* * *

Colin watched from the window of the Marshal's office as the coach was

pulled up to the front of the building. He turned to Marshal Saphglite and said, "If you will excuse me, the coach is now here."

The Marshal had been arranging for several passports to enable Colin and company to travel across Unicorn unimpeded. "Sire? Is there nothing I can do to help in your quest?"

"Marshal Saphglite, my father did well to call you friend. No, there is precious little even I can do. We both know that it's important that Renald's forces be held back as long as possible. I can think of no more capable hands to trust such an assignment to than yours. We both know that to be the reason the Counsel of Unicorn put you in charge here."

"Can you tell me where you are taking your journey?"

"There is little I can tell anyone. That which my wife knows has been the result of her guessing. As to where we are going on our course, that has been laid out by others and I myself don't know where I will be going after we arrive in the capitol. I will tell you that we need your prayers for from here we end our journey at Sin's End."*

Marshal Saphglite took Colin's hand and shook it, nodding that they would have his prayers. He then handed Colin the papers he had been working on, as well as the Diplomatic Passage. They parted with nothing further said.

Colonel Buckmaster burst into the Marshal's office saying, "Sir, we made them pay for the town! But, begging the Marshal's pardon, it is my concerted opinion that we'd better pull back while they're still regrouping."

*[Sin's End; an enormous active volcano with a circumference of close to 9,800 statute miles. The massive volume of ash it puffs out has caused the equatorial area to become glaciated and barren. The ring system seems to have a somewhat localizing influence upon the dust cloud keeping it from generally

"Do you have any figures on casualties, Colonel?"

"It's just a preliminary report, Sir."

"Well?"

"It looks like we may have lost three dead, with thirty or so walking wounded. There seems to have been one deserter, Corporal Vanch--you were right about him after all. The best guess of enemy casualties is around five hundred dead. We caught them totally off guard!"

"Prepare for a fighting withdrawal, Colonel."

"Yes, Sir!"

[covering the globe and creating a general ice-age. Weather patterns rarely have sufficient strength to affect the constancy of it. The notable exception are what are called Horse Head Cloud formations. These have spread a fair quantity of the ash and soot over both of the poles creating extremely cold polar regions. The extent of the pollution seems to be somewhat limited and allows for a great deal of climatic norms below the 40 degree mark and above 3 degrees. The only place where general glaciation of the equator hasn't occurred is directly around Sin's End itself, owing primarily to the great deal of thermal activity. The phenomenon began at the time of the first appearing of the rings system, about the time of the expected nova. There are other thermal "hot spots" but nothing even remotely comes close to comparing with Sin's End. Ed.]

PART V

(Picking Up The Trail)

"Where there is no fear of failure, progress is measured by grains of sand," said Hawk.

"Yes, but the difference between jumping off a one story building and a three hundred rod precipice isn't a small difference!" protested Erick.

"True. That is why this is so much better than a single storied building. Where there is much fear to be overcome, there is much progress to be made."

"And if by some strange happenstance I fail, what then?"

"Then I find another bounty hunter."

With that she pushed Erick off the cliff as he began to say, "Thaaaaaa..."

Hawk then called after him, "See you at the bottom." She then stepped off the side of the cliff herself.

Terror took on an altogether different complexion for Erick as he fell toward the sand. His thoughts raced as he remembered not being in the slightest successful with the one story building. He was supposed to concentrate on slowing himself by touching the wall at brief intervals, but all he had ever managed to do was peel the skin off his hands. He had now passed the halfway point to the beach. He stretched out his body to glide toward the edge of the cliff; at the same time he concentrated on breaking his fall. At the first touch his adrenaline surged and he grabbed at the wall too hard, succeeding only in pushing himself back from it. The next attempt resulted in the same. He then relaxed accepting his fate but continued to try

so no one would say he just gave up. This time it worked! Only a little, but it was worth a second try. He cut his speed in half. Upon successive contact he slowed to the speed of a moderate walk just as he made contact with the sand.

Within a moment Hawk was standing at his side. Erick was sweating heavily and out of breath. She looked at him and shook her head, "We must do it again; you have terrible control."

Erick looked back up the side of the cliff then passed out. Hawk looked down at him and said, "Okay, we rest first."

After the seventh try Hawk told Erick that there was hope for him yet. Erick didn't say anything. When the day was finished, Erick was bushed. What he didn't know was that so was Hawk. They bade each other a good night, and Erick went straight to his room for a long hot bath and then to bed. Hawk had called a meeting for this evening after training to confer with the Counsel.

"Ladies," said Lysantur, "it appears that Hawk won't be joining us this evening. I move that we adjourn. Are there any opposed?"

"Yes," said Hawk as she came in through the door, "my apologies for being tardy, Sisters."

She looked so frazzled Almetra stood and said, "Hawk, we can reassemble after you've rested."

"Thank you, Almetra, but there is little time." She walked over to her chair and sat. "Forgive me for sitting; I hope you understand." Various of the ladies offered assurances of their acceptance. "I received word last week that McEan and Dunnybrook had escaped capture by the armies of Unicorn and are now on their way to Sin's End." The room came alive with chatter. "Please, allow me to finish." The talking died away. "We do not have any knowledge as to why they are headed there. I think it because Sin's End is such a

forbidden place that they feel no one will look for them there. They could already be there or are on their way. In either instance they have now become nearly impossible to find. Erick still needs training, but I think what little he lacks can be learned on the way there. I have called this meeting as we agreed at the start. It is now up to you to pass final approval or disapproval upon the venture."

Cassandra stood, "Sisters, I think before we go on to the business at hand we need to, as a body, thank Hawk for having sacrificed so much of herself on our behalf over the past half year in finding and preparing Erick of Kempdon for this mission."

She was seconded, and everyone applauded for Hawk. Cassandra then sat down.

"Thank you very much," said Hawk. "The floor is now open for discussion before the final vote."

They all sat quietly for several moments. Almetra stepped down to the dais and addressed the assemblage. "Sisters. Is it not right that Erick should now be given an opportunity to prove that he is loyal to us before we send him off with Hawk? Would not this be an effective means of being sure of her safety with a man who now possesses, or shortly will, the same abilities as she? Lest my intentions be misunderstood, I don't suggest this out of a feigned love or concern for Hawk, but out of concern for the security of the peace we here enjoy." She retook her seat.

"Unless there is an objection," Hawk said wearily, "this meeting will be postponed until tomorrow morning at which time we will reconvene to provide Erick an opportunity to take a loyalty test. Should he decide not to, our laws are binding; no one may impute any interpretation to any decision he may make!"

Hawk was having trouble controlling the rage she felt toward Almetra. She knew full well that no one who'd been through what she had put Erick through could ever be considered to be a traitor to a cause.

The ladies began to file out of the hall. Brenthia was one of the last to rise from her seat. It was very rare that she would make any comment before the Counsel; however, Hawk knew her to be ever attentive. Hawk had worked hard to get her a seat on the Counsel. Brenthia was noted for her calm and her disciplined mind. Hawk often wished there were a way of bestowing vysionpas on an individual just so she could teach Brenthia. Of all the members of the counsel Brenthia and Cassandra alone truly tried to be Hawk's friends.

Cassandra and Brenthia spoke to each other next to the doorway. Hawk continued to sit in her chair, afraid to rise before she had cooled off, lest her emotions should rule her head. At length the two Counselors approached Hawk. Cassandra spoke first.

"Hawk?"

"Yes?"

"Do you feel well enough to speak freely?"

"It shows that much?"

"You're tired," Brenthia said trying to comfort her.

Hawk smiled, "Please," she said as she motioned for them to make themselves comfortable. "I am delighted to speak about anything that concerns you."

Cassandra continued, "That about which we wish to speak with you is called treason."

The exhaustion that had filled Hawk's head fled. She looked with amazement at the two women before her. Her duty was clear as elected Regent

of the Counsel. "Before another word is spoken, before another thought ventures upon unsullied lips, hear me. That which you now speak may not be taken back. The Third Law of the Counsel states, 'The crime of gossip shall be punishable by the People of Unity, by stoning to death.' Before you protest that you know the laws as well as do I--I know that you do. And I know that there is little reason for me to say what I've said, but the law requires it. Now speak with the boldness of truth."

"Before I present the evidence for your assessment, I will first convey how I acquired it. Two years past there was a disturbance to the south out to sea. I chanced to see it while taking a walk atop the southern cliffs. When the waterspout I had been watching ceased, I watched for a moment longer before resuming my walk. I then became aware of voices originating on the beach below me. I then knelt down and pulled myself into position to view who it was. Were it not for the dialogue I had already overheard, I would have revealed myself to the speakers. Two men dressed as members of King Harthallow's newly created Draconian Guard were conversing with a member of our Counsel."

Hawk's expression had become increasingly dark as Cassandra was speaking. Treason was the ugliest crime of which anyone could be accused. Hawk knew she had to do something before an ugly scandal could be created. She needed to leave no later than the next night to even stand a chance at catching Sean and Cathrine before they reached Sin's End. Hawk began to concentrate using her mind as a vice to split Cassandra's thoughts.

Cassandra's words trailed off till she was muttering mindless gibberish. Brenthia had been watching the entry-way lest any one should enter unexpectedly. When she realized what was happening to Cassandra, she turned her head to face Hawk. Hawk's eyes sparkled like diamonds, small flames

periodically shot from her eyes to Cassandra's. Each time they did, Cassandra became less intelligible.

Brenthia found herself becoming mesmerized by the spectacle. She forced herself to look away from Hawk's eyes and pushed Cassandra off her seat to break the eye contact.

"Cassandra wouldn't tell me who it was she saw and heard on the beach, but it was you!" Brenthia said as her heart was breaking.

Hawk looked at Brenthia, "Brenthia, why did you push Cassandra like that? Dear, you may have caused her great harm, even brain damage."

"How could you?! Everything you could ever want we would have given to you! You were one of the first ones to arrive here. You sat on the original Counsel where the laws were drawn up. How could you have become seduced by the likes of the wretched King Harthallow?! What deal could he make that is sweeter than the love of your friends?"

Hawk looked down at Cassandra muttering and spitting on the floor then back at Brenthia. Hawk drew her sword.

"I believe you tried to kill Cassandra, Brenthia. I must take you into custody at once."

Words fled from Brenthia. Her insides were a mass of knots which made her feel like vomiting. She pulled her sword and stood against Hawk, determined to not let her get away with her crimes.

Hawk played with Brenthia, her sword slashing within a finger's width of Brenthia's own sword, maneuvering her off the dais, then back into a corner of the hall, all the while trying to penetrate Brenthia's highly disciplined mind.

"Come now, Brenthia, let me into your mind. Then you can forget all about this dreadful thing and go on about your life," she said as her sword

cut the strap of Brenthia's dress.

Tears rolled down Brenthia's cheeks as the last shred of respect for Hawk vanished from her heart. She launched a violent attack which surprised Hawk and gave her the upper hand. The advantage was fleeting, though.

Hawk recovered from her initial surprise, then, using the power she possessed, her mind ripped the sword from Brenthia's hand and threw it across the room.

"You may kill me, traitor, and blame me for the death of Cassandra," Brenthia said, her voice resolute, "but the day will come for you to pay the reaper for your deeds of odium."

Hawk held Brenthia at sword-point, concentrating on the dress she had cut off earlier. It raised off the floor, floated over to Brenthia's head, and wrapped around her head cutting off her air till she at last passed out. Hawk collapsed on the floor from exhaustion and pulled herself over to Brenthia. Hawk pulled the dress from about her face so she could breath. Placing her hands next to Brenthia's temples she unlocked Brenthia's mind and began the process of making her forget.

* * *

I hadn't rested very well in spite of the strenuous day I'd had before going to bed. I tossed and turned half of the night. When I finally did go to sleep, I had nightmares. I awoke with a feeling worse than if I had stayed up all night. I kept thinking that I should know something I didn't. It was crazy! I would look out the window and imagine I was in a ship with waves crashing against the window; not like an hallucination, as I supposed such to

be--I knew it wasn't real, and I could still see that I was in the cave. I didn't imagine I was on a ship--I guess it was almost like I was looking through someone else's eyes. As my head cleared, I shook free of the whole thing. I chalked it up to overwork.

As I finished shaving, I heard Millie's familiar whistle coming down the hall, which meant breakfast. I think I could have eaten an ox that morning. She knocked on the door, brought in the tray of food, and said the Counsel would like me to meet with them by seven.

I didn't know what it was about, but I couldn't say no. While I ate breakfast, I couldn't help wondering what they might want to see me about. Hawk had said that we still had a bit of training to do, so I didn't think it was to congratulate me on a job well done. I didn't think I was doing badly enough for them to tell me to hit the road. (Come to think of it, their wanting to see me was probably why I'd had indigestion that morning.)

There was a crowd gathered outside the Council Hall when I arrived. I didn't think I was being called to attend a social. When I got close enough to hear some of the talk, I could hear them saying things like, "What do you suppose they'll do now," and, "Frightful shame, isn't it." I didn't bother to ask what they were talking about, figuring I'd know pretty quickly anyway.

As I entered the Hall, the Counsel members all stood up and faced me. Almetra was standing in the center of the platform, holding her hands behind her back. I didn't see Hawk, and as I looked around, I could see Cassandra wasn't there, either. I looked to see if anyone else was missing and saw one more empty space. I didn't know who it belonged to but felt better that someone else was gone besides Hawk and Cassandra. I don't know why; it just made me feel better.

"Erick of Kempdon," Almetra said, "we here assembled wish to give you an

opportunity for great honor amongst us."

She had to be kidding, I thought to myself. I concentrated to see if I could detect what she was really thinking and why there were some missing from the meeting. I walked slowly to give myself time to listen and them time to think something coherent. (I learned pretty quickly that people think in symbols and images more than words.) The one clear thought I did catch before she spoke again was, "Now we'll see what kind of man Hawk brought us." There was something about the way she thought it that gave me the willies. I stopped at the edge of the platform.

"It has become customary to inform you of our law before speaking to you, that it may not be said that you didn't know your rights."

The whole thing got spookier and spookier.

"Here individual freedom is prized above all save our collective security. Even when that security is thought to be compromised, we tread lightly lest there should be undue infringement in the domain of unalienable rights. What we therefore offer you an opportunity to do is, and can only be, an offer. There is no law to make you accept, and we have been admonished that we may impute no blemish to you no matter what your decision."

I wasn't relieved.

"We, the members of the Counsel for the People of Unity, would like to ask you to undertake a loyalty test before going on the mission for which you have been trained. Cassandra suggested at the first that you should be given time to determine our character before we asked you to do so. It has been nearly seven months since you arrived here. We have never abridged your freedom since our first meeting with you. However it must be admitted that we share equally in the guilt for your abduction. Now we ask that you do take a voluntary loyalty test." She motioned for me to take her place to speak, then

she sat down.

"Uh, Ladies," I said, "I'd like to thank you for this chance to prove myself before you. The last time I heard of a loyalty test was from a friend of mine who had witnessed it while he was held captive by some strange folks out toward the Eastern Marches. I would like to take a moment to tell you about it so you'll understand a little, I guess, what I think about this--uh--opportunity. The guy who told me what I'm about to relate to you was a mess sergeant, an'--well--he was a real mess. He, he. That's kind-a a joke." Nobody laughed. My smile died, and I cleared my throat nervously. "Ah hem, anyway, he was staked out between these two trees by his ankles, which gave him an interesting perspective on the proceedings 'cause he was upside down. His wrists were tied together and staked behind him. He said he was right uncomfortable." There were a couple of snickers from some folks standing next to the door, so I waved to them. "Now these Eastern Marchers had dug a great big pit about two rods' length in front of him and built a ramp across it out of two skinny tree trunks. Now one of their braves (that's one of their men folk) ran across it so as to show Sergeant Myeers how it was supposed to be done. When he got to the center, he squatted. Now the important thing to know is that these people had filled the pit with water and put some shimmers in it. [Shimmers; a small carnivorous fish. Ed.] Now this brave smiled as these fish at-e." I remembered they were women. "Well, they ate it off!"

Half the room was snickering. All I could do was stand there and blush. After everyone quieted back down, I continued, "Well, I would just like to go on record that I knew Sergeant Myeers before and after his little experience. And--well--I--I'm just not that loyal to anybody!" The hall was filled with ribald laughter. I sat down.

"La-dies," said one of the women trying to control her own laughter, as she stood up. "This is a tender subject. We must b-e dig-ni--fiha, ha ha haa." She sat back down.

After what I swear was at least two hours, Almetra stood up and took the floor. She was stern faced and quickly brought the meeting to order when she said, "Sisters!" As they recomposed themselves, I lost what remained of my dignity. "We are here on serious business. I strongly suggest we get on with it." She turned to me. I wanted to crawl away. She said, "I assure you that you will be in no way maimed or humiliated by any test we may administer to you. Ladies, I would like to suggest we as a body ask Erick's forgiveness for taxing his dignity so shamefully." There was a unanimous "Aye" from the gallery, followed by someone at the door saying, "Me, too." Almetra turned to the door and said, "Thank you." She then said, "Sabrina, would you please administer the loyalty test?" and sat down.

Sabrina stood up and displayed a short silver rod. She turned to me and asked me to stand. I did so. She came over to me and pulled a string out of the end of the rod and fastened the whole of it around my neck. She said, "Do you, Erick of Kempdon, wish to subject yourself to our loyalty test, which we as a body have decided as being appropriate to our desires to be assured of your loyalty?"

I scratched my arm and looked down at the thing hanging around my neck. I looked around at the faces of the Counsel, swallowed hard, and said, "I guess so."

"Then I now administer the Oath of Loyalty. Should you lie, the string about your neck will constrict and strangle you." She paused. "Do you, Erick, swear or affirm that you will never use any power or strategem to inflict any harm upon the members of the People of Unity, and will abide by

the just laws while in our midst, and that you will never divulge the location of our cave of sanctuary should even it require the loss of your or someone else's life?"

She said a mouthful. I had already decided these things for myself. What she asked was easy to agree to. I only hesitated to answer because I didn't trust the string around my neck. I finally cleared my throat and said, "I do." It came out a squeak.

She removed the string and extended her hand. I took it. We shook hands, and she sat down. I was baffled; they started to applaud. Was that it? I wondered. That was it! I gave a half wave, sat down, and breathed a sigh of relief.

Another woman stood up whose name I didn't know and said, "Congratulations, Erick. Ladies, we must now leave so that the Security Board may meet with Erick."

Everyone except five women left. I remembered Hawk telling me that there were seven members of this Board, so I asked about the other two. A woman named Theul answered.

"Yes, there are seven of us. That is what we are here to talk to you about."

Not knowing what else to say I said, "Okay."

The same woman spoke, "My name is Theul." She motioned to each of the other four as she said, "This is Loreli, Brophy, Wisterphil, and Shannon." They each nodded as their names were said. "Last night after you and Hawk had finished for the day, a meeting of the Counsel was held. following the meeting, the other two members of our board stayed behind to talk with Hawk. None of us knows what they were talking about. You no doubt noticed that Hawk wasn't here this morning. You may have also noticed that there were two other

seats vacant as well. Those two seats belonged to our other two members."

"Was one of them Cassandra?"

"Yes." She looked curious.

"I did see that there were two seats empty. I remembered Cassandra, but I couldn't even tell you what the other one looked like."

"Had Hawk said anything to you about going somewhere?" said Wisterphil.

I didn't think they were joking, so I didn't mention what I was in training for.

"No."

Loreli said, "We know that you haven't finished your training yet, but have you learned how to 'far-see' yet?"

"I've been working on it." They all breathed a sigh, so I asked, "Why?"

Theul said, "We would like for you to concentrate on Hawk and tell us where she is."

"I can't."

"Why not?" demanded Brophy.

"Brophy!" said Theul.

"No, it's okay," I said. "I would like to help you. What you're telling me sounds very serious. It's just that I've already tried." They looked at me with varying degrees of doubt. "Look, right after I figured out how to do it--use 'far-sight'--that evening I tried to see Hawk. I couldn't. I could see anything I wanted to within a league, but I couldn't see Hawk. I don't have any explanations for you. I asked her about it the next day, and she laughed."

I wasn't sure exactly what was bothering them, but apparently I wasn't of any great help toward alleviating their dilemma. "Have you checked with Cleat?"

"Yes," said Shannon. "Just before you got here I returned from Hawk's house. Cleat was in bed when I arrived and didn't know if his mother had been in last night or not."

"Don't the other two have families you could check with?" I asked.

Shannon answered, "They live in a duplex next to each other. They're both childless widows."

"They live two doors down from me," said Loreli. "I knocked on their doors to ask them to walk with me to the meeting this morning, but neither of them were in."

"It may seem rude, but has anyone gone back to see if either of them is in but unable to answer the door?"

"Not rude at all" said Loreli. "After seeing that they weren't here, I sent a runner to discover if that is the case. We should be hearing from her soon."

"You ladies have the best of me. I haven't anything beneficial to add to your own exhaustive efforts."

"Perhaps you can, yet," said Theul. "You said that you remembered what Cassandra looked like?"

"I remember her name and where she sat. I won't swear to being able to remember her face."

"Could you try?" said Theul with not a little degree of hope.

"Sure. Pardon my lack of grace, but I haven't been doing this very long."

"Whatever it takes is fine by us," said Brophy sarcastically.

I got on the floor and did a short stretching exercise, then raised my legs so that I was standing on my shoulders, holding my back with my hands. I saw Brophy's expression, so I told them what I was doing.

"The-re's a, a nerve at t-the nape of the neck. To set up the nec-essa-ry physica' conditions, it has to be saturated with sensation. AUGH! That's it." I then sat in a lotus position and concentrated. (It used to be necessary for me to hum to do this one right, but I think it bothered Brophy no end.)

It worked. I could see Cassandra as she was the first time I saw her. I hadn't paid any attention at the time, but I then noted that she was very beautiful. Next I concentrated on the surrounding area trying to get some indication of direction. I got something. After several moments, I pinpointed the location. They told me it was her house. I concentrated some more and found what I had latched onto--it was her dress, the same one she had been wearing when I first saw her. Well, anyway, I went back to concentrating, trying to keep my mind off of anything in the cave.

I saw a small sailboat, and then I saw Cassandra. Her face had little trickles of blood oozing from her pores and her hair was matted. They asked me to try and see if anyone else was aboard the boat. After considerable work I saw another woman. I described her and they said it was Brenthia. At that point they were too far away for me to see anymore.

I was so drained I only vaguely remembered the runner saying that there was no one at home. "Far-see" was always one of the hardest things for me to do. I never could figure out why, but it took a long time before I could do it without all the contortions.

When I came to my senses, Theul was patting my wrist.

"Are you alright?" she said. "You fell back on your head when you couldn't see them any longer. We thought you had hurt yourself."

"No, I'm fine. They were out to sea, and I was facing inland.":

They smiled.

"There you are!" said Hawk, startling one and all. She hurried through the doorway and came up to the dais. "Ladies, I would have been here sooner, but I stopped by Erick's to bring him with me. You already know he wasn't there. As I see this is a gathering of the Security Counsel, you've saved me the trouble of assembling you. You no doubt have noticed the absence of two of your members. I learned last night of a plot to overthrow the Counsel. The two who are missing came to me last night asking my aid. I resisted, but they gained the best of me. I hadn't dreamed they would stoop to violence. When I recovered myself, there wasn't time to call for help, so I followed them alone. I caught up with them as they were putting out to sea. I couldn't swim after them, so I attacked the only one I could see clearly using a 'mind-disrupt.' I felt it justified as it would mean one less person who would give away our location."

We all sat there with our mouths hanging open, each for their own reason. I didn't know the women in question, but, from what I'd seen in my years of service with the army, treason didn't much bother me. These ladies had a different view, though. What really struck me was that it was possible for Cassandra and any other one person to surprise Hawk. I decided that they must have been formidable to have pulled it off. I heard all kinds of questions in my mind. (Apparently when someone thinks a coherent thought while in a highly emotional state, I pick it up as though they were shouting.) Basically they couldn't believe that it was possible for Cassandra to do something like that. Brenthia was a different story. Finally they started speaking and my mind got a rest.

"Sit down, Hawk," said Theul. Hawk did so. "As acting head of the Security Board, in the absence of Cassandra, it is my duty to hold a hearing. As this is impromptu, there may be the need of holding another hearing at a

later time."

I said, "Well, I guess you probably want privacy, so I'll go and practice my lessons."

"No," said Theul. "For the purpose of this meeting your testimony may be needed."

I couldn't gain a clear idea as to what she was thinking, but I knew Hawk knew exactly. She sat in her chair, a picture of composure. Theul continued speaking.

"Wisterphil, please go and find Almetra. We will hold the proceedings until you return."

Wisterphil left to find Almetra. I caught Wisterphil's thought: Almetra's the only other person left who arrived at the same time as Hawk. Where Hawk was acknowledged for her extraordinary powers, Almetra, too, had a gift. I didn't get what it was, but there was no doubt that Hawk knew all about it.

"I didn't know that it was the habit of the Counsel to have Almetra present at a Security Board meeting," said Hawk.

"That's right," said Theul. "Nor have we ever had occasion to have you present at one, either."

After the exchange the room was deathly quiet till Wisterphil returned with Almetra. During the interval Theul occupied herself by trying to formulate an appropriate line of questioning. Brophy, Loreli, and Shannon just mentally "licked their chops" at the prospect of having the chance to cross wits with the "glorious" Hawk. It was all very strange. On the surface there was cool decorum and deep respect for Hawk; in their private thoughts they each despised Hawk, each for different reasons. I wondered that Hawk bothered to stay around; I knew full well how easy it was for her to tap their

thoughts. I became amazed at Hawk's fortitude and the deep sense of loneliness I imagined her to feel.

Almetra was visibly disturbed at being asked to sit in on this meeting and said as much as she came into the hall. "Theul, this is highly irregular!"

Theul nodded and said, "Forgive the inconvenience, but I'm sure you'll understand shortly." After everyone was settled into their respective seats, Theul took the floor and started the proceedings.

"For the benefit of our two guests, Almetra and Erick, I will first give an introduction. Never before in the history of our people has a case of treason come up."

"What!" Almetra screamed. "And there won't be now if I have anything to say about it." It seemed she thought the Board to be accusing Hawk.

"Almetra, please," said Theul. "What kind of fools would we be if we had no evidence with which to back up the statement? Now if you'll please be patient, all the evidence will be laid out before you."

Almetra maintained her composure, but her eyes sparked her conclusions regarding the proceedings.

"Being as this is the first time that such a case has come up, I felt it justified to ask that Almetra join us so that the two oldest, she and Hawk, would be present to give guidance as it may be needed. I decided this quite independently, so if there is any objection I will happily do something different should sufficient cause be shown for so doing. If we truly face a case of treason today, then logic dictates that we will again face such a situation. Therefore, if we are to set a precedent, let us set the best one possible. Are we agreed?"

The other four members said, "Aye."

"This is a preliminary meeting which will be followed up by investigation by the counsel members. We will establish from Hawk's testimony exactly the nature of our case. We will then ask any questions that may have arisen pursuant her testimony. We also ask that should either of our guests have any comment or suggestion that they feel free to offer it. That said, we will begin. Hawk, though you are not a member of the counsel, you have been elected as having swing vote power in case of a tie amongst voting members. As there has never been a tie vote, only an occasional argument before the voting, you serve the Counsel in the capacity of a Speaker and set our agenda. As such you wield considerable power. In your capacity as Speaker, have you ever noticed any actions on the part of any of the members of the Counsel as being possible to construe as treasonous?"

"With no hesitation, I haven't."

"Being specific, have you ever noticed any unsavory activity on the part of either Bishatina Cassandra or Violet Brenthia which could be imputed treasonous?"

"Counting last night, or just previously?"

"Let's start with before the events of last night."

"No."

Almetra sat very pensively, not wanting to miss a word.

"Then would you tell us again what occurred last night? This time leave out no detail that may be seen as important to our hearing."

"Last night I was very tired after the meeting had been postponed to give Erick an opportunity to take a loyalty test, which I suppose has already been administered this morning."

"Yes," said Almetra before anyone else could, "now get on with it."

"I remained after sitting here. They lingered at the door after everyone

else had left. They came over and asked if they could speak frankly. I told them that they could speak about anything which concerned them. They then told me that our cave had been discovered by Harthallow's men and that the only escape was by water. They wanted me to go with them. I asked them where they acquired their information and they hedged, so I pressed them to tell me. At length I discovered that it was they who had revealed our location. Brenthia, who had won my love and trust, said that the confinement of the cave had grown to be too great a burden for her. Harthallow's men met them out beyond the south cliffs two years ago and there, I believe, seduced them. They said that they were desperate for the company of men and were promised wealth and acreages which would make the rest of their lives assured of peace.

"I rejected immediately their proposal as it was treason, at which point Brenthia jumped me. I fell back and hit my head, which caused me to lose consciousness. I was only unconscious a moment, it seemed, because when I awoke, I heard the sound of horses. I went to the door and saw them riding toward the mouth of the cave. Seeing no time could be wasted if I hoped to catch them and bring them back to justice for the great harm they have done, I myself mounted and gave swift pursuit. I caught up with them as they were launching a small boat into the surf. It was then that I used a mental attack I call 'mind-disrupt'. (Erick can tell you about it). I hoped, should they make it to wherever they were going, that only one would be able to speak.

"As I went back to my horse, I saw where they had hidden the boat. It was well concealed and unless one were looking for just such a thing, it would not be found. I then came back as quickly as I could to tell the Security Board of the malfeasance. On the way back I thought about how Erick had developed a small use of 'far-sight' and decided that he may be able to locate the boat and give corroborating testimony."

Theul had sat down during Hawk's testimony.

Brophy stood up and said, "Sisters, I have a question of the witness. Hawk, what time was it that you heard the horses riding toward the mouth of the cave?"

"I don't recall, but I would calculate it to be about two thirty a.m."

"And what time was it that you went unconscious?"

"About eleven."

"That would make the period of your unconsciousness somewhere near five and a half hours, rather than a few minutes. Would that be correct?"

"Yes."

"Thank you," said Brophy as she sat down, obviously pleased with herself.

"Hawk?" said Wisterphil. "How is it they were able to surprise you?"

"I trusted them."

"Didn't you have any idea they would react unfavorably to being rejected?"

"I was so surprised, I hadn't thought about it."

"What do you suppose they did in the time from eleven to two thirty?"

"I was unconscious; how would I know?"

"I, for one, think it highly fortuitous that you woke just in time to hear them riding off. Was the door open when you came to?"

"I think so."

"It must have been, else how could you have heard them riding off?"

"I suppose it was, but I don't remember checking."

"You don't remember whether you had to open it when you left?"

"No."

"Thank you."

"Ladies," said Almetra as she stood up, "may I speak with you outside?"

They looked at each other then agreed and left with her, leaving Hawk and me alone. After a moment I spoke.

"Hawk?"

"Not just now, please, Erick?"

I forgot what I was going to ask her. The ladies returned, and Theul addressed Hawk.

"Hawk, how long before you must be off with Erick to catch McEan and Dunnybrook?"

"Tonight at the latest."

"Who will be going with you?"

"My son Cleat. Why?"

"In view of the circumstances, the Board has decided you will take two others with you: Almetra and Shannon."

"Wise of you. This is no doubt because of the possibility of the mission being compromised?"

"No," said Shannon. "We think it highly unlikely that if Brenthia has turned so, she would pass up a chance for revenge." She then addressed her remarks to me. "You see, Erick, each of us who sits on the Counsel has proven in battle our ability to kill. In addition each of us possesses our own skill in our chosen profession. Brenthia is a Mage. She is far and away the best Mage amongst our people. I am no match for her skill, but I am the closest to being able to. That is why I will go. Almetra is a Druidess; since the majority of the search will be in the wild she may prove indispensable. Originally it was thought that McEan and Dunnybrook would be hiding where there were many people. Hawk has now revealed that they are taking their journey to Sin's End, and that is the reason for our coming as well."

I didn't believe my ears.

"Sin's End!" I said. "You folks have got to be nuts!"

"Erick," Hawk said.

"No-o-o. Don't 'Erick' me! I'm no half-witted child. Have any of you ever been even within a hundred leagues of that place?"

They looked at each other each admitting that they hadn't.

Then Shannon said, "What is it that frightens you so about it?"

"That's okay. I'm sure that you've heard all kinds of strange tales about the place, and like most of those tales we throw them off as adults. Well, let me tell you. Of all the places in the world where you can discount rumors and 'ghost stories,' Sin's End isn't one of them! You say that Brenthia is a Mage? Let her get within twenty leagues and try and cast a spell! And Almetra's a Druidess? Let her get within ten leagues of the marsh foothills, then let her try and talk to those trees! Crazy women! That's what you are if you think that that place is anywhere anybody would want to go! You said Hawk said those two were going there?"

They nodded.

"Well if they are, they aren't going to hide--they're going to die!" I sat down.

They were all looking at me, totally surprised by my outburst. I figured it was just as well. They needed to have some sense put into them.

"Erick," Brophy broke the silence, "when were you there?"

"Not long enough ago," I said.

"Yes, I understand that. But how long ago?"

"Fifteen years."

"Why did you go there?"

"I was drunk!"

"That isn't true," said Almetra.

I looked up at her with new respect. Brophy looked at Almetra then back at me and said, "You mean he never was there?"

"No. He told the truth about being there. He lied about being drunk."

"Look," I said. "I went there because I didn't have any better sense. Well, I've got better sense now." I folded my arms and started thinking about the beach so that Hawk wouldn't be able to read my mind.

Hawk knew what I was doing and wouldn't let me off so easily. "Then it is indeed fortunate that we have a guide who's already been there."

It was a dirty shot, and she knew it. I couldn't let them go alone, so I said, "The first one of you says it's too rough, I'm gonna remind you of this."

* * *

We didn't get started until late. The suns had already set, but it was a beautifully clear sky with all three moons to light our way. We made camp about fourteen leagues up the peninsula under some live oaks. We had a clear view of the surrounding countryside, and I got to stand first watch. I always liked taking the first watch; it meant I could sleep without having to wake up more than once.

We had brought two mounts each, and Cleat drove the wagon which was loaded with provisions. I didn't think this a very inconspicuous means of tracking someone but kept my objections to myself for the time being. Hawk had checked my equipment before we left and said I didn't have the right gear. I had packed clothing for every climate. I had my weapons. I had the usual accessories for long expeditions, such as rope, mountaineering clamps, and hooks. So with a bit of sarcasm I asked, "What am I missing--a bathtub?"

The look she gave me stung. She said, "You'll need a silver mirror and thread. I like the weapons you selected out of the trunk when you arrived, but I would like for you to use a different shield. I have it and will show you how to use it. Come to think of it, you've never actually used any of your weapons in combat, have you?"

"I'll have you know I am completely skilled in every weapon I have." I was a little perturbed.

"Erick, for the past several months to nearly everything I've said you've found objection."

I was a little embarrassed.

"We both know I am not in the habit of saying anything which is truly useless. So could you--now that you're going to be out of the cave--please accept that I'm not trying to tell you your business? I am truly trying to help. These weapons which you now have you've never used in combat, true?"

"True," I said sheepishly.

"Fine. Now I'm going to show you something you do not know about these particular weapons. Is that okay?"

"I'm sorry. I was out of line. It's just I've felt inferior to you ever since you hog-tied me to my horse. I'll get over it."

She smiled. (She didn't smile very often.)

"Now," she said, "you no doubt know that the material your long sword is made of is rare. If you will look at the crosspiece above the hilt you will notice two protrusions. These may be depressed. I'll demonstrate." There was a red and an orange button. When she pressed the red one the blade became polychromatic, like the rings of Omega. It pulsed at regular intervals so as to be somewhat entrancing. I had to work to maintain my presence of mind as it scintillated through the color spectrum. Hawk moved it as though preparing

to parry a thrust and it seemed to give off faint swirling sparks in its wake, enhancing the effect it gave off. She said she never used it in battle but had seen the previous owner kill a Sugglath* with one stroke with it. I was impressed. I had once seen one as a child and immediately ran the other way. She next depressed the orange button at which point the blade began to vibrate lightly. She walked over to the table and set the blade's edge on the table very lightly for a fraction of a moment, then took it away and told me to look. The place where the blade had touched was cut completely through.

"Our Artificer assures me that the harder you hit something with it, the cleaner will be the cut," she said. She then picked up an older sword and handed it to me saying I should swing it as hard as I could, and she would parry it with the sword. I did so. Instead of parrying my blow she turned around. I couldn't stop the follow through and nearly had my arm wrenched off as the sword was repelled from her.

"How did you do that?!"

"With both buttons up it reflects all metal objects coming within a rod's length of it with the same force with which it is approached. We haven't tried it with anything larger than conventional weaponry, and it only works on

*[Sugglath; Bipodal plant form vaguely shaped like a man. Sentient, possessing moderate intelligence. Carnivorous, feeding mostly on cattle which stray into its domain. Grows from a seedling when ingested by cattle. Germinating in the first few minutes then eating its way through the intestines of the animal till it comes into contact with fresh air, at which point its leaves dry and it is carried on a convenient breeze to grow up ravaging the countryside. Reaches up to a rod and a half height at full maturation. Ed.]

metal-- that is, with one exception," I looked at her. "Our Alchemist said there's a metal called 'aluminum' against which the function doesn't work. So don't turn your back on somebody wielding a club. ...And this will be your shield." It was a ring. "You will observe." She pressed the top of the ring with her finger, and it flared out till it was a full sized shield. She handed it to me and said, "Try it." I did and found it to be the same weight as while it was a ring. I felt like I did the first time my sergeant told me I could pick any weapon I wanted to fight with, and he would train me how to use it. I was giddy.

"Next we will look at your necklace," she said.

"What?"

"Your necklace."

I took off the necklace with the crossbow and bolt pendant on it and handed it to her. She fastened the fine silver chain around her own neck then pulled on the pendant so that it came off the chain. No sooner had she completed this maneuver than she was holding a full sized crossbow with windless and score of bolts. I'd never seen anything like it! She said, "Unlike the sword and the shield, this is the result of magic. I say that because no one here has been able to duplicate the phenomena with science. We are convinced that it is possible, but until we can reproduce the effect, we must call it magic or deny it's existence." She touched the crossbow to the necklace and immediately the whole was reduced to miniature again, becoming nothing more than a pendant on a chain which she returned to me as she said, "We have discovered that it is possible to aim as much as thirty-five degrees away from an intended target and still achieve a dead center hit. Each degree beyond that will result in a corresponding quarter degree shift in accuracy. There seems to be something about the weapon which picks up whatever you're

seeing and uses that for guidance. These bolts are irreplaceable. Under countless tests they've never chipped or broken. However, it has been shown that they react violently with some types of acid." I didn't know what she was talking about, but I listened anyway.

She had brought with her a battle axe. Of all the weapons I've ever had the fortune to use and become proficient with, the battle axe was by far my favorite. So I asked, with some degree of hope, "Is that an extra battle axe you've brought with you?"

"I show you these and you ask about a battle axe?"

"You know it's my favorite weapon. The only reason I didn't have one when we met was that my handle broke in the last fight I was in."

"Well, it does so happen that I did bring that one for you, but may I present these to you first?"

I nodded.

"Good. May I see your great sword?" I handed her the great sword. She picked up a lantern from the bureau, unscrewed the top, and poured out some oil onto the floor. She told me to light the oil (I had developed a great deal of faith in Hawk, but there were times she strained the limit). I did so. She touched the burning oil with the black blade and the fire extinguished. "The mere possession of this sword," she said, "somewhere on your person will make even the fires of Sin's End seem a cool breeze."

"Has it been tested?"

"We've tried it with burning coals."

"The fires of Sin's End, eh?"

"That's what the alchemist said."

I drew a controlled breath and said, "Okay."

She looked askance at me as she proceeded. "You may wish to put new

hilts on your daggers, being as the blades are still in good shape. Have you ever heard of 'Striglts'?"

"Isn't that some kind of assassin's weapon?"

"It's been used that way. What I like about them is that they're easily concealed." She took my arm and attached a soft leather pouch upside down on on the inside of my right arm. There was a long strap attached to the opening; this she put under my bracer. "Now, pull your wrist outward, then cup your hand and bring it back under the pouch."

After she demonstrated I tried it. There were five of them which dropped into my cupped hand as smooth as silk.

"That's neat!" I said.

"I'll show you the best way to throw them as we go along."

"Now the battle axe." she said. I could tell it was formidable from the grunt she gave just lifting it. She tossed it to me and said, "Look closely at the blades. You will notice that the edges are hollow, giving the appearance of having two separate edges to a side. Index would do a better job of explaining it, but it has something to do with harmonics. It works very well against normal foes. Its main use was designed to deal with creatures which are 'out of phase,' or on a different elemental plane than ours...."

My watch passed without incident and was now up, so I woke Amletra and hit the sack.

* * *

We traveled along the coast northward to the port of Thistle. It was about a two weeks' journey. There we embarked on a ship bound for Releigh on

the eastern boundary of the Eastern Marches. I finished my training aboard ship. This leg of our journey took six months and crossed over seventeen thousand miles along the coasts of Quintin. [The entire continent is called Quintin. Ed.] Releigh was a small outpost port where Spice Kings' ships would put in to take on the exotic furs and minerals collected in the Marsh foothills. It was a rugged town. There weren't many women in the town, and what few there were tended to be meaner than the traders and miners. The law consisted largely of who could hire the most mercenaries. It was truly mob rule.

We arrived during mid-morning. The dock was loaded with traders and miners waiting for the ship to dock so that they could start dickering with the representatives sent from the Spice Kings. No sooner had Shannon, Almetra, and Hawk hit the gangway than they became much more important than the Spice Kings' representatives. It took only a matter of minutes for the chief mob-o-crat to approach us through the ogling mass. We were watching the seamen lowering our wagon onto the dock when he came up behind Hawk.

"H-e-l-l-o. My name's Clint Doshine," he said.

Hawk ignored him, but his manner so annoyed me I couldn't help but notice. I forgot that was the wrong thing to do in this town. Three of his "boys" moved around behind me.

About the same time Cleat, who had gone to get the necessary port papers, was coming down the gangway. He saw them moving behind me and hollered out, "Behind you, Erick!"

It seemed like there was no better opportunity to try out a few techniques I had learned on the trip, so I concentrated on sending out a

"confusion" attack behind me. It worked! They had started to grab me, but turned to fight each other instead. I heard Hawk say in my mind, "Not bad."

Mr. Doshine wasn't easily distracted though and followed up with, "Ladies, I'd like to welcome you to my town."

The wagon was about to set down on the pier as Cleat came pushing through the crowd to join us. As he did so, he bumped into Mr. Doshine. Mr. Doshine took an instant disliking to Cleat and picked him up by the shirt collar to tell him so. Hawk then turned around and looked at Mr. Doshine. She wouldn't tell me what she did, but Mr. Doshine very carefully sat Cleat down and apologized.

The crowd was amazed. It seemed Mr. Doshine wasn't in the habit of saying "I'm sorry" to anybody, least of all to children. We were pretty much left alone after that. One thing you can say about Releigh and towns like it: they have a healthy respect for what they can't explain.

Once the horses and gear were off the ship we all went to the portmaster to find out if anyone matching the descriptions we were given for McEan and Dunnybrook had been spotted. Hawk said we were an expedition party which was paid to meet up with them. The portmaster said that he hadn't, but suggested we check with one of the local outfitters thinking they may have gone to one of them to buy supplies.

The shops of Releigh were all laid out on a single street leading off the pier. At the far end of town were the two outfitting stores, one called the Lucky Lady; the other, the Black Dragon. Nobody could make up their minds as to which one to start with, so Cleat headed off toward the Black Dragon. What can I say? We followed.

It was a large store with several clerks. We split up to ask each of them if they had seen McEan or Dunnybrook. It seems that the owner had dealt

with them late one night the week before we arrived. He was a cagey old man with no left leg and no left eye. We didn't ask how he came by the loss of either. After we left, Hawk wasn't satisfied with the information he had given us.

"Almetra, what do you think?"

"He told the truth, but he didn't tell all of it."

"Yes, I didn't think so either."

"What do you want to do?" asked Shannon.

Hawk said, "You and Erick stay around. After he closes tonight, watch and see if he goes anywhere. Cleat, Almetra, and I will take the wagon up to the woods on that hill behind the Lucky Lady and wait for you. In the meantime let's go over to the Lucky Lady and see if they've seen them as well.

I never liked pressing my luck. Going into the Lucky Lady seemed like we were going to be pressing our luck, so I said, "Why?" They looked at me. "Why do we need to confirm that they've been through here when Almetra just said that the old man said the truth?"

"How did you ever get to be a field lieutenant thinking like that?" said Hawk.

"Thinking like that, kept me alive long after my superiors were dead!"

"What will it hurt for us to go and ask here," she motioned to the Lucky Lady, "if they have seen them? They may be a little freer with what they know, or I might be able to more easily read their thoughts. I couldn't get anything from that old man."

We were all surprised at her confession. We went into the Lucky Lady.

As we left the Lucky Lady, Shannon was missing. Hawk sent Cleat back in to get her. I stopped him just as he was reaching for the door and said, "Maybe I should go?" Hawk nodded. As I reached for the door, Shannon

appeared around the side of the building and called to us. We went around the side of the building and followed her to a place beneath an open window. There were voices, so we listened. It was two men talking.

The first one said, "All I know is what I saw on the pier."

"I'm tellin' ya, yer out o' yer flamin' gourd if ya think ya saw what ya claim ya did," said the second one.

Shannon whispered, "The man who just spoke said he was the manager."

We heard a door open, and a man to whom I had just spoken spoke.

"Mister Learhaman?"

"What is it?" said the second man.

"You said I should tell you if someone came around looking for that blonde who was here last week."

"Has someone?"

"Yes, Sir. Three beautiful women with a man and a boy."

"See!" said the first voice. "I told you they meant trouble."

"Are they still here?" asked the second one.

"They just left."

"What did ya tell them?"

"I said I hadn't seen her. I came to tell you as soon as they left."

"Get a couple o' the boys and follow them." The third man left the conversation. "Hank, ya better go and help him out." We heard the door open and close again.

Shannon motioned for us to follow her. We made it back to the front of the building. Cleat got on the wagon, and the rest of us mounted our horses. We took our time leaving the town. Instead of going up to the trees behind the Lucky Lady, we decided to travel till we were out of sight of the town then make camp.

The only problem with that was as this was the only road leading either into or out of town, it was very busy. We agreed at length to pull off to the side and travel for about half a league then make camp.

The countryside between the Marsh foothills and the coast was basically flat. Only the occasional stand of trees broke the panorama of tall grasses extending from the foothills to the Volidon Sea.

As dusk approached, Shannon and I got ready to go back to the town and watch for the owner of the Black Dragon. We arrived after the suns had set and saw the owner walking toward the residences south of town. We tethered our horses and followed him trying to keep a low profile. He went into a large manor on the beach. Shannon turned to me and told me to stand still. She sprinkled a powder onto my head and said, "If you keep your voice low and move quietly, we should pass unnoticed."

We went up the stone steps and knocked on the door. The servant who opened it said, "Hello," but saw no one in front of the door. When he stepped out of the doorway for a better look, we went in. We saw the owner going up a flight of stairs which were exposed to view. We followed him. At the head of the stairs were two guards standing next to a door. As we needed to go through the door, I took out one of my daggers and threw it against the wall next to them. They started. The one to the left pulled it out of the wall while the one to the right raced by us down the stairs. The one who stopped to pull the dagger out of the wall opened the door to tell however was inside about it. Shannon tripped him, and we stepped inside as he was trying to explain how he tripped.

The owner of the Black Dragon was sitting in a chair. Another man was sitting behind a desk. My knife had fallen from the guard's hand, so I picked it up. Shannon and I stood in a corner next to the window and listened.

"What dagger?" inquired the man behind the desk.

"I swear there was a dagger!" said the guard.

The owner of the Black Dragon began to look around the room nervously.

"Chet?" he said.

The man behind the desk looked at him and said, "Humm?"

"'ave yoo ever 'eard of peeple 'oo could make theemselves inviseebble?"

"Why, Jock?"

"Maybe that's what we've 'ere."

The guard added, "Mister Hockins, I swear there was a dagger stuck in the wall, if you'd just come and look for yourself."

"I'd believe him eef I were yoo, Chet," said the owner of the Black Dragon.

"Okay, okay! Mitch, go back to your post and check out every sound."

Shannon whispered to me that she would go back out and create a diversion so that they would feel freer to speak. I had my doubts but agreed none the less.

She didn't tell me what it was she was going to do. Judging from the amount of noise and commotion that went on right after she left it was sufficient to convince the two men I was watching that they weren't being watched. They did speak freely, and Mr. Chet Hockins started off the conversation...

"You look white as a ghost, Jock."

"Yoo weell, too, after I finish telling yoo what I came 'ere about," said the owner of the Black Dragon.

"Suppose you tell me what you're talking about."

"Thees afternoon a group of peeple, three women with a boy and a man, came into zee store looking for McEan and Dunnybrook. I don' think they knew

about Redmond, at least they didn't ask about 'im."

"What did they say they wanted?"

"They claimed they were hired by them to go on an expedeetion. But they didn't buy a thing. They had a wagon loaded weeth supplies they brought on zee ship with them. Their travel papers showed them to 'ave come from Craineometus, but they don't sound like any I've ever 'eard before."

"What do you think they're doing?"

"That eez why I came over here right after work. I think I was followed, and that dagger may have been meant for me."

"Do you really think there are people who can make themselves invisible?"

"I'm not sure what I think. But how woold you explain eet? I think that zee guards scared them off. I'm just hoping that they aren't in here with us. I'm gambling that that noise outside was them being chased off."

"If what you're saying is accurate, is there any way of knowing for sure?"

"I don't know."

"What do we do?"

"I'm not sure. I saw them riding out of town heading toward zee foothills. Do you think we should send somebody out to warn them?"

"Listen, is Tulip back from wherever it was he took off to?"

"He came back yesterday. Why?"

"He's supposed to have one of those peep stones, isn't he?"

"That eez what I 'eard, but I've never seen eet, and he certainly hasn't shown eet to anybody I know."

"Have you ever asked him if he has it?"

"Yoo know yoo don't just ask Tulip anything."

"Seems like this may just be good enough an excuse to make an exception,

doesn't it?"

Jock drew a long breath and said, "I suppose." He rose and shook Chet's hand then turned to leave the room.

Chet called after him, "If that dagger was meant for you..."

"Yea, I know."

He then left. And I was still in the room. I didn't know what else to do, so I tried a trick Hawk had taught me. I threw my voice and said, "Mister Hockins!"

He got up and went to the door. This time I threw my voice around the corner. It worked, and I hurried out of there. I looked around for Shannon for a while. Finally I figured she had gone on back to camp and headed for my horse. Her horse was gone, so I returned to the camp.

When I got back Shannon wasn't there. Almetra asked me where she was, but I had no idea. We were about to mount up and go out looking for her when we heard horses' hooves approaching. It was Shannon. She looked as though she had just been visited by the business end of a fierce fight. Her hair was matted from sweat, and her clothing was torn and cut. She dismounted by herself, but fell down as soon as she made contact with the ground, moaning from wounds which couldn't be seen.

Almetra propped Shannon's head onto her lap and caressing her forehead said, "It's okay, Shannon. What happened? Is there anything we can do?"

Cleat was unsaddling Shannon's horse and called out to his mother to come over. Hawk came back to the camp fire holding a map. Almetra was feeling better and asked me what had happened. After I told her, she asked Hawk for the map.

She said, "After I created what I thought to be a sufficient diversion for Erick, I waited across the street for him to come out. Instead of Erick,

the one-legged shopkeeper came out in, what for him would have been, a considerable hurry. I saw him head his buggy toward the wood atop the hill behind the Lucky Lady. I thought it more important to find out his hurry than to wait for Erick. I mounted Shelia [Her horse. Ed.] and followed him. When I arrived at the top of the hill, he had already been there a while. I put Shelia's reins under a rock and quietly entered the side of the wood. I was very stupid in doing so; I should have suspected something when I couldn't hear any noises coming out of the wood--it was an illusion! In entering I was swarmed by first fire then ice. I had walked into the workshop of another mage, unprepared and uninvited. He must have had every protection trap in the book set for just such an occasion. When the last of the traps went off, we entered into melee with spells going off everywhere. He about had me when he ran out of spells to throw. I encased him in a Pentagonal Prism* in case he was badly hurt and to keep him from interfering. The workshop was a mess. As I looked about the debris I remembered the shopkeeper whom I had followed."

"I saw him driving his buggy down the hill frantically. I blinked next to him in the driver seat and cut the reins. I shoved him off the seat and jumped off myself. Without his crutch he couldn't get away, so he sat up and waited for me to speak..."

*[Pentagonal Prism; Highly complex spell where the subject is suspended in a miniature pentagonal prism. The effect is to restore life force and to rejuvenate the subject to a state where when they are released it is as though they had had optimal sleep and food for any form of activity. (Altogether quite refreshing it seems.) The reverse is possible. In such an instance all life force is drained, to be made use of by the mage, who did so at their leisure. Ed.]

'You're a hard man to keep up with.'

'Eef eet's my purse you're after, eet won't be worth eet to yoo.'

'You know I didn't stop you for your purse.'

'You'd best take eet. Eet's zee best you'll geet from me!'

'Look, it's very important that we find McEan and Dunnybrook. If you want, I'm willing to pay you for the information.'

'I'm not een zee information business! Yoo best go somewhere else eef you're looking for me to betray anyone to a She-devil!'

His words stung. I have never been called any kind of evil in my life.

'Look, I'm not a devil, but I'm about to lose my patience with you!'

I held up the prism with Tulip inside.

'All I have to do is destroy this, and your friend goes up in a puff of smoke, and I'll know everything he knows. So if you don't start talking to me, it won't matter if you told him what I want to know. Do you understand?'

'So, you're no she-devil. Theen why threaten me with an innocent man's life?'

Again his words stung. What am I becoming? I thought to myself. I'm not a murderer; what I said was only a threat.

'Look,' I said, 'I would not hurt him. This prism will restore his energy to where it was when he got up this morning. It's a healing device. We need your help if you can. If we can find them, it could well result in the saving of untold thousands of lives. Please, if life means anything to you, and you aren't using my love of life to trick me, tell me anything you may know

of where they are. It is not my, nor anyone's in my party,
intent to do either of them harm.'

He appeared perplexed by my words. After a moment he looked at
me and said, 'Whose lives?'

'Those of my friends and family as well as the thousands of
widows and orphans with whom we live. And maybe be the rebirth
of the Republic that Quintin once was.'

'You're a 'freedom fighter' then?'

I thought about the connotations of his question and gave a
reasoned, 'Yes. How would you know about us?'

'Eet's a long story. I 'ave a map 'ere,' he pulled it out from
under his jerkin. 'Yoo can find them on Blue Island. Good luck.'

I helped him back onto his buggy then headed back for camp."

Shannon pointed to the center of the map Hawk was holding. "Blue Island
is that thing sticking up in the middle of Sin's End."

PART VI

(The Scent of Death)

The wind was shrill as it blew through the mountain passes of the Isthmus of Unicorn. The sky was clear which portended no good to the men serving under Marshal Saphglite. Clear skies meant that soon Edmond's Griffin Riders would swoop down from the skies and push them from their defensive positions. The war hadn't gone well at all for Unicorn. Sixty percent of the soldiery deserted from Unicorn's ranks within the first few weeks leaving those few remaining to try and take up the slack in the already thin lines of defense. It took only two short months before the whole of Unicorn's armies were pushed back to the Isthmus. There under cloak of winter Marshal Saphglite used every device his considerable skill could muster to hold the armies of Quintin at bay.

Over the past four months Edmond IV had hung four Generals and fired three more for what he termed "dereliction of duty." Now he gave the command of his armies over to General Southall. General Southall had a very impressive record. His last assignment was to the east where he annihilated the invading forces of the Eastern Marches. Before that he completely reduced the resistance of Eribador through means that earned him the disgust of one and all, save his beloved King Edmond IV. It was now his turn to try and dislodge the Unicornians from their advantage of the Isthmus and to slaughter them on the plains of Vali in western Unicorn.

The armies which faced each other over the last four months had seasoned each other to their ways of war. The Unicornians faced a force of fifty times

their number, but through excellent use of the terrain and high moral they had succeeded in only giving up a few leagues of the Isthmus in the hard fighting. Hunger and fatigue were rampant, supplies were growing scarce, and now the weather would cease to be their friend. "Now," said General Southall, "is the time for victory."

* * *

Lieutenant Wilkes was squatting behind a boulder looking at the trail which wound past his position. His was the "hot seat." It was here that the expected assault would have to begin. He was on a suicide mission and he knew it--he volunteered. His mission was to set off a signal rocket as soon as he saw the advance. Colonel Buckmaster told him he wouldn't have to wait long, then thanked him. He could see dust rising above the rocks where the trail wound out of his sight. He wondered if this was another feint, to make him set off the rocket too soon and thus lose any benefit of his being there.

Corporal Hodges lay in the crevice of another rock overlooking the same trail--he, too, volunteered, as did all of the men of what remained of First Chasseurs of Unicorn, all thirty two of them. The pass was the hardest one to take but the only one of suitable size for General Southall to mount the kind of offensive he needed to overrun the defenders' positions. It was this same pass which saw the defeat of all the previous generals. But General Southall was nothing like his predecessors. General Southall didn't care about his men's lives; his love was the "glory" of the fight...

Lieutenant Purvis sat on his horse waiting for the signal to be given for him to move his men forward for yet another assault against the defenders of the Isthmus. He didn't like his job, but he was a soldier. "Soldiers don't

question orders!" he would say over and over to himself. He was selected for this duty because he survived the last three charges. It was to be his duty to sweep the pass free of what remained of its defenders. If he survived this time, he might be given leave to take a short rest of a week or so. If he didn't, it hardly mattered.

Sergeant Strickland stood on a ledge peering over the jagged rocks of the pass watching the pass for any signs of its defenders. He scratched his two weeks' growth and spat. In spite of the cool breeze he was sweating. He was second in command from Lieutenant Purvis because he had survived the last attempt to take the pass, like three of the corporals under him. The rest of the troupe were green, just like the Sergeant was two weeks previous. All four hundred braced themselves as they saw the signalman wave his flag, signaling for the attack to begin. They were to be followed by nearly two thousand footmen. Sergeant Strickland spat as he looked up and saw the Griffin Riders fly up from the south. Lieutenant Purvis raised his hand and hollered out "Charge!" as the Sergeant slipped onto his own saddle and spurring his horse called out, "Come on, you greenies!"...

The pass echoed the thunderous hooves mounting its approaches. Corporal Hodges waved his hand for his men to hold their fire till the first wave had passed their position. Lieutenant Wilkes' hand trembled as he held the burning twig near the fuse of the rocket. One of the Griffin Riders had spotted the Lieutenant and pulled out of the flight with several others and began to dive on him. He prayed for enough time to be able to launch the rocket before he died. The charging cavalry churned into the pass as vortexes of dust spiraled in their wake.

The last horseman passed Corporal Hodges. He raised his hand for the prepared avalanche to be commenced to block the infantry which would appear

but a moment latter. Lieutenant Wilkes lit the fuse of the rocket just as a lance thrown from one of the Griffin Riders pierced his left lung and left him gasping for air. The avalanche closed the pass and Corporal Hodges called out, "Let 'em have it, boys!" They filled the pass with arrows guided by their deadly accurate aim.

The battle was brief. Lieutenant Purvis accomplished his mission with great acumen. The cost wouldn't matter to General Southall, but the three hundred of his men dead did matter to him. They then began the process of helping the infantry clear the pass to continue the attack. The Griffin Riders swooped down keeping any Unicornians from being able to retake the pass before it was cleared, while the broken and spent bodies of the brave thirty-two lay upon the rocks in mute witness to the short battle.

* * *

Colonel Buckmaster stood in the mouth of a cave below Eagle Ridge watching the dust swirl up from Malcome's Pass. Major Sphinx briskly walked up to him and said, "Sir, it's been confirmed. The pass has fallen, and the enemy is on its way."

Colonel Buckmaster didn't look at Major Sphinx. He just kept looking at the dust rising above the rocks as he said, "Is Major Scott in position?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Has the signal come from Marshal Shaphglite's headquarters yet?"

"No, Sir."

"Let me know when it does, will you, Jerry?"

"Yes, Sir."

The contrails of dust seemed to grow by the moment. The Colonel was deep

in thought about the preparations they had accomplished. Marshal Saphglite knew that it wasn't possible to stop the enemy and reach a truce before the end of the rainy season. He had instructed the few commanding officers he had left to prepare a defense in depth which would extract the highest toll in lives from the advancing enemy. Colonel Buckmaster was given charge of the South Central Sector of the front, the same sector over which Unicorn Road passed.

He had worked to destroy the road by creating deep trenches and causing slides where a trench couldn't be dug. He had had his men prepare every form of trap and ruse they could think of in an effort to slow the advance of the enemy. The situation was desperate, but it was Marshal Saphglite's hope that they might trade the Isthmus for enough time for winter to set in again. And Colonel Buckmaster did everything in his power to bring about that end. "Or did I?" he thought as his eyes traced the landscape again and again looking for anything which he might have overlooked.

His thoughts were interrupted by Major Sphinx who said, "Sir, I have that report on forces you asked for."

"Just read it to me, will you, Jerry?"

"Yes, Sir. General Soarn with the newly created First Corps along the Northern Sector has five divisions and two independent brigades, totalling roughly fifteen thousand souls. Lieutenant General Vollengin on the North Central Sector with Twelveth Corps has six divisions, totalling roughly eleven thousand and four hundred souls. Our own Twenty First Corps has four divisions, four independent brigades, and one independent divisional artillery unit, totalling roughly thirteen thousand souls. Brigadier General Hollinburg in the South Sector has the Second Corps with seven divisions, totalling roughly fourteen thousand souls. Marshal Saphglite holds twelve divisions in

reserve with several independent brigades and assorted other units, totalling roughly thirty thousand souls. The Home Guard under Major General Brendt has about eight divisions scattered around western Unicorn, totalling roughly nine thousand souls," Major Sphinx's mind wandered to those left to defend the majority of Unicorn and continued, "mostly old men and boys barely able to carry a sword much less use one." He then remembered himself and added, "Begging the Colonel's pardon."

Colonel Buckmaster didn't respond. What the Major said was true enough: he certainly didn't deserve to be reprimanded for the truth.

"So what's the total, Jerry?"

"Ninety-three thousand four hundred, Sir."

"And the estimated enemy strength?"

"With the arrival of fresh troops from the Eastern Marches, over four and a half million, Sir."

"Doesn't look too good, does it, Jerry?"

"NO, SIR."

"Do you pray, Jerry?"

"Yes, Sir. Why, Sir?"

"I never asked you before; I'd like you to remember me and Marshal Saphglite next time you pray, if you don't mind?"

"I always pray for the Colonel and the Marshal, Sir."

"Thank you, Jerry." Colonel Buckmaster continued to watch the dust mount the sky.

* * *

The waters were calm as the small island of Hessiod appeared upon the horizon. Hessiod was at the end of an island chain due west of the island continent of Unicorn. Its were the only harbors not restricted by the Spice Kings' blockade of Unicorn. The little island appeared a purple rise above the sea's reach. The nearer the Silver Spinner drew wake, the more peaceful the island seemed.

Elif and Vashlee had been standing next to the rigging of the quarterdeck, watching as the island came into view. Their journey had been remarkably without violent incident. They had passed through the Straits of Felton unnoticed by the pirates which normally raid those waters. There was not even the usual delay encountered when passing the rim near Stone's Bastion. Even the Spice Kings had given their small galleon no notice. Now as they neared the island, Vashlee couldn't even draw a breath of relief. His thoughts were on a granddaughter he had never seen--and her safety.

"It looks very serene," said Elif. "It won't be long and we'll be going back home, I guess."

Vashlee hadn't been watching and looked only after Elif had spoken. "I pray you're right, Elif. All the same, I've a feeling in my bones our worries have only begun." There he left it. They continued to watch as the ship drew nearer to their destination.

The letter, if it could be called that, had come from here. It was traced as having come from a Mr. Colbert Sprye, a resident of this island. If he knew where Cindrith was, Vashlee intended to know what he knew. No sooner had the gangplank been put out than the pair of searchers set off for the local constabulary. They felt that the most direct means of finding Mr. Sprye.

The Sheriff cautiously viewed the two of them. Then judging them harmless enough told them to look on the far side of the island for a secluded cove. As they left through the front door the Sheriff added, "I hope ye better luck in dealing with that old coot than any of us have had." They thanked him for the advice and hurried on their way.

The short trip across the island was pleasant. It wasn't a large island, and much of it was under cultivation; also, the locals were friendly. They arrived at length on the far side of the island and proceeded to venture northward to a spur. They noted that this portion of the island seemed fairer than did the rest of the island. They wondered that it was so unpopulated. After traversing about a league and a half of white beach, they spotted their destination. They could see paol trees [Similar to palm. Ed.] and tall shrubbery lining the cove. As they came closer, they saw a tiny island in the center of the small cove with a frame house built upon it. They rounded the last sandbar and could plainly see the full of the cove save what was hidden by the small house.

The hill which rose abruptly from the thin beach was terraced and planted with herbs and had a stone walk and stair path leading to its crest. The base of the cove was lined with exotic flowers and date trees. There was a handsome footbridge leading from shore connecting the house with the main island. The house was a simple affair, neatly whitewashed and in good repair. The strangest thing seemed to be the dryness of the air in the cove. The whole of the ambiance was alive with a thousand scents that enlivened the senses and invigorated the soul. For a scant instant Vashlee forgot what had brought him so far.

On the far side of the house was a small pier connected to the house. They crossed the footbridge and knocked at the door. There was no answer.

Vashlee instructed Elif to remain on shore next to the footbridge while he ascended the hill above the cove. When he arrived at the top of the hill, he saw that it was possible to see most of the island and even the distant line of Unicorn. The top of the hill itself had been set out with a stonework fashioning a patio with strange designs set within the stonework itself. He was doubtful of seeing anyone from where he was since he hadn't already. He felt it best to rejoin Elif and wait for the owner on the beach. As he began to descend the hill, he noticed a ketch headed for the cove under half sail. When he rejoined Elif, the man who had been piloting the craft was tying it up to the pier.

He was a very old man if his age could be judged by his exceeding long white beard and mane. His motions were of one possessed of great vitality. His expression seemed to be at once accepting and commanding. He surveyed them then spoke quickly in a tone unthreatening.

"Welcome, strangers, to my humble home. Now why would you be coming to visit?" He asked the question but allowed absolutely no time for any form of response. "If you've come to press that vile tax, I'd as soon sit in jail. No, that isn't what you are here for at all. You are not even from the island. You've come a long way, that is obvious. Yes, you must be tired. Come along then, you may refresh yourselves inside." He opened the door and bade them enter.

They looked at each other than back at the open door as the old man, who was out of sight said, "Come ahead then." Vashlee led off and Elif followed. The room inside was nothing like the outside. There it was simple; here, opulent. There it was modest; here, inspiring. The walls were of rich verlintine [A deep white wood possessing a similar density to our teak. Ed.] with delicate marquetry. The floor was overlaid with soft woven rugs of

(persian) blue. The appointments were exquisite in every detail. The furnishings where of masterfully carved cherry. The curtains were white cashmere lace bordered with woolen material of the same color as the rugs.

The old man waited for them a moment then ushered them down a columned stairwell. Beneath the surface room was a magnificent library with a massive fireplace opposite the stairs and large mahogany double doors set to either side of the main room. The walls were lined with bookshelves filled to overflowing. Before the fireplace were two sofas and three chairs situated around a large table.

The elderly gentleman excused himself and exited through a normal-sized door to the right of the fireplace. Vashlee and Elif stood at the base of the stairs, having not been given permission to sit or do anything. Elif had noticed that there were no windows and that there also were no sources of light. No oil pots, no candles, not even a lantern could be seen. He was about to draw Vashlee's attention to the strangeness that the room should appear fully lit without any means of lighting when their host re-entered the room with a silver tea service.

"Oh, my," he said as he saw them still standing next to the stairs, "please forgive my bad manners! I so seldom have guests! Please be seated. If you would like to look at the titles, you're welcome to."

They thanked him and sat where he had indicated.

He continued, "I hope the tea will be to your liking. It's herbal, a recipe of my own. I'm sure it will relax you after your long voyage." He handed Elif a cup and said, "Captain." Elif's mouth dropped. Next he handed one to Vashlee, who had been scrutinizing him. After a moment their host made the overt gesture at drinking first. They drank cautiously. The warm brew was soothing to the throat as it went down, presenting at once a

general feeling of calm and ease. It tasted like blueberries and cinnamon.

"My name? Of course! How inconsiderate of me."

Elif was wondering, with some alarm, how the fellow was able to read his thoughts.

"Yes, I am Colbert Sprye." He looked at Elif, "You are Captain Elif Tinselman." He turned to Vashlee, "And you--oh, my--I have put my foot in it this time, haven't I?"

Neither Vashlee nor Elif had the slightest idea what he was talking about, so they independently decided to sit and wait for any questions Colbert may give them even a slight chance of answering.

"Again, I am sorry for my meager greeting. You of course are Vashlee La Flandours. And you've come to ask me, no doubt, about the letter I sent you." He paused and fretted for a moment before continuing. "I was unsure of sending the letter in the first place. And now that you are here I feel sure I shouldn't have."

Vashlee was becoming somewhat anxious with each sentence the disturbed Mr. Sprye offered.

"That's just it." He scratched the side of his beard as he continued. "I knew you would come--I mean, how could you stay away?" He excused himself and left through the door next to the fireplace.

Elif looked at the door through which Colbert had exited as he said, "Now that's a strange fellow." Vashlee didn't say anything; he sat pondering the unexpected behavior of a man who had taken the time to write him a letter about the kidnapping of his granddaughter. Elif was more curious about his surroundings and began to look around.

Most of the books were unbelievably old. One that he happened to pick up had a title in a foreign tongue which he couldn't read. He could, however,

read the date of publication as being 6329tc!* Under a special glass cover was one which bore an inscription of 100tc. Elif may have not understood the importance of the notation "tc," however, he did understand the difference between 100 and 6329.

Colbert re-entered the room and returned to where he had been seated before he had left. He picked back up with the one-sided conversation. "Three fortnights past I received word from a friend of mine about the whereabouts of your granddaughter. Please, as a kindness to an old man, sleep this night here, then you may do as you think best tomorrow."

Vashlee was willing to be patient for an additional night. He had traveled too far for too long for one more night to make a difference either way. He accepted the elder man's offer.

*[tc: Terrestrial Calendar, the dating system previous to the first launchings of the "Old Order" away from Omega in the face of the predicted nova of Beta. Ed.]

* * *

The escarpment was rugged and covered with loose lava rock. Redmond had slipped and cut his leg as they covered the last few steps before the entrance of the natural cave leading into the heart of Sin's End. The wind which blew with a fierceness across the barren face of the volcano left the small company with a chill in their bones.

The cave was dark and damp. It, too, was littered with loose lava rock. They walked in darkness till they were far enough from the mouth of the cave to light a torch so they could more easily make their way. After several

tries the torch was lit. The cavern wall seemed to come alive as the flames danced with the breeze which forced its way into the cavity. Haunting shadows lept seemingly from nowhere then vanished again.

They had covered about four leagues' distance from where they entered when Cindrith said she needed to rest and nurse the young child. Colin sat down her pack which he had been carrying for her and took off his own to retrieve a blanket to cushion the floor where she would sit. Redmond sat wearily on the cold floor and leaned against his pack, resting his head on the bedroll strapped to its top. Raphael sat next to him and rested his head on Redmond's shoulder.

The cave was quiet save for the sounds of Cindrith's suckling child and the distant moaning howl of the wind. The sound was almost imperceptible. It could have been just one rock falling or being blown against another, but Colin's nerves were raw from ceaseless worry; he reacted with such sudden swiftness the creatures which had crept up on them didn't have a chance to respond to the lightning thrust of Colin's Bastard-Sword. His motion surprised Redmond, Cindrith, and Raphael alike. As he removed the head of the first cavemere*, he continued the motion over his head bringing a deathly stroke through the chest of the second. So fluid were his moves, so strong his slashes, the third was cut in half as it lunged for him. Then all was again quiet as Colin stood with his arms limp at his sides. The baby began

*[Cavemere: a beast which inhabits caves. It receives its name from its stealth. It has been said one could hear a pin drop easier than one could hear its movements. There is much speculation regarding this beast in the various writings. The record kept by Raphael, from which this account has been taken, only says what the beast was without further description. I am

to cry softly, and Cindrith returned him to her breast.

Redmond, Raphael, and Colin pulled the carcasses down a narrow passage which led off the main tunnel. As Colin looked down the artery he said, "I am somewhat curious about this. Redmond, please tell Cindrith I'll be back shortly."

"Yes, Sire," said Redmond as he started back.

"Monsieur, theez eez not right," protested Raphael.

"What isn't right?"

"That yoo should go off down theez way! Zee volcano he eez filled with passages and narrows, most lead nowhere, some lead to no good, all are dangerous!"

[not inclined to completely trust the one concise report recorded as being truly representative of the creature. If it is accurate, then Colin must have been formidable indeed. In any instance, I include if for the reader's edification. "It was a black night as I was standing watch afore the cave's mouth. Jeb was about to relieve me as I saw the beast. It stood upon its hind legs and with its open mouth took off his head in one bite! It was all black and about half again as tall as a man with the appearance of a wild wolf. I hid in a cleft of the cave and prayed the beast wouldn't still be hungry after eating Jeb. I waited a while after it left before coming out of hiding. It was with a queer feeling in the pit of my stomach that I went back into the cave to see what happened to the party. The campfire was still blazing, and as I approached it I could see the bodies of my comrades: twenty-seven men, all savagely torn and ripped. Then I saw it again, tearing at a severed leg with its fangs. I left and decided I didn't need anything I would be leaving." Ed.]

"If you are afraid, you may return with Redmond."

"Non, Monsieur. I speak not out of zee fear. My Papa sent me to guide yoo and your family safely to zee great lava lake. If yoo go down theez way, yoo know not but that yoo invite trouble!"

Colin took the young man lightly about the shoulders and said, "Tell me. If there are more of these beasts and their lair is down this fault, would you prefer they come upon us as we sleep or while we are travelling?"

Raphael looked down. Colin was right, but he didn't like it. They proceeded down the natural corridor which wound around to the left then back to the right. The grade averaged out to be about ten percent. The further along they travelled, the more cold and damp the walls they encountered became. Colin felt they had covered about a league and decided to turn back. Raphael breathed a sigh of relief. Before Raphael had moved a step back, however, Colin put his hand over Raphael's mouth and turned the youth's head so he could see what Colin was looking at. There was a faint blue light striking the left wall ahead of them. They moved cautiously along the right wall listening for any sounds. Up to this point Colin had assumed that the tunnel was a natural occurrence. They had traversed the distance in darkness, having left the torch with Cindrith and Redmond. Now, looking at the wall in the dim light he could see that, though rough hewn, it was not natural in the least. He could hear no sounds and steeled himself to look around the corner.

It was a door with light streaming through the cracks of its old wood. Colin looked through one of the larger openings in the wood and saw that it was a room with something on a table giving forth a soft blue light. From his position he could see nothing more without going inside--which he did. The walls of the room were as rough as were the sides of the tunnel. It was

about two rods square as near as he could estimate. The object which was giving forth the light was an egg-shaped star sapphire. It was twice the size of his fist.

"Sacrebleu!" exclaimed Raphael as he saw the stone. He further exclaimed as he saw the two cots with skeletons on them. "Mon Dieu, sur la vie de mon pere, c'est une tombe!"

Colin searched the walls for any kind of concealed doors and found nothing. "Just as well," he thought. The cold began to get to both of them.

He turned to leave the frigid room just as the door slammed, separating him and Raphael. Raphael was startled, but said nothing. When Colin took hold of the handle to open the door, it fell off in his hand. He asked Raphael to try it from his side; the same thing happened. He tried kicking it, as well as pushing with Raphael pulling from the outside. Nothing worked. Colin didn't like disturbing the possessions of the dead, but felt he had little choice under the circumstances. He checked the sacks and packs which were in the room. Aside from the usual gear, he found nothing which could be used as a pry to open the door.

Raphael, with his eye pressed firmly against the door, said, "Monsieur Colin, would zee table leg not work for yoo?"

Colin sized up the table and said, "Excellent idea, my friend."

"Sometimes--I get lucky."

Colin was cautious not to damage the blue stone which sat in the center of the table. He picked up the sapphire to set it to one side. An electric charge coursed through his hand and spread immediately to his head and feet. His pulse jumped as his heart seemed to wish to leave his chest. The chill had left his bones, and he now felt comfortable. He presently let go of the rock, stood back, and studied it.

"Are yoo allright?" asked Raphael as he changed his eye to the door.

"Only mildly surprised."

"Why did eet go dark when yoo touched eet, Monsieur?"

"I hadn't noticed that it did."

"Perhaps eet would be better eef yoo did not touch eet?"

Colin cast a doleful eye at Raphael. He pushed the table next to a cot then tipped the table to allow the gem to roll off. Leaving the table on its side he used all of his strength and considerable leverage to break the old wooden leg off of the table top. As it came loose it disintegrated from--age?

The whole of the experience was becoming very frustrating. Colin drew his sword and tried to knock the stone off the cot and closer to the door so that he might be able to study it with a little better light. The instant his sword came in contact he again experienced the same phenomena. Only this time there was a difference: the whole room seemed to be as bright as noon day.

He withdrew his sword from the stone as he asked Raphael, "What did you see that time?"

"Eet became dark again, Monsieur. Why?"

"We seem to have a very interesting object here, that's why." Colin's decision was definite. He certainly would prefer to be warm as cold, and as he also gained the added benefit of good light he would brave the consequences of contact with the stone and then look at the door. As soon as he had the stone firmly in hand, the discomfort of the shock departed leaving all the advantages. He saw that there were an additional four stones which couldn't be seen without the one he held. These he put into his pouch.

In the darkness Raphael was becoming concerned more about being separated

from Colin's sword than from Colin and said, "Are yoo still all right?"

"Yes." Said Colin as he continued to examine the surroundings in the new found light. "Do you notice anything else?"

"Zee air, eet has warmed up since eet became dark."

Colin examined the door and found that some words had been carved into the facing of the wall over it. It read, "Those who would depart from thence must bid farewell to friends here met." Colin was amused. No wonder he hadn't been able to open the door--it was magic! He said, "Farewell, friends," and the door swung open, slamming Raphael against the wall.

Raphael screamed, "Mon Dieu, je suis trop jeune pour mourir!"

Colin gently put his hand on Raphael's which were protecting his head. He then explained the stone to Raphael and allowed him to hold it. Colin told Raphael he disliked taking things from where they may be missed but didn't think the skeletons would mind.

When they returned to the others, they related their doings. After a short rest they again took up their journey. There were still many days before they would see daylight again, not before they came to the lava sea in front of Blue Island.

* * *

It was an extraordinary session called for the SOSL. Every attempt made to remove Renald from the throne had been thwarted. At the latest attempt they saw the dagger thrown at Renald end up in the back of one of their own members! Such a thing was unprecedented. No one seemed able to explain how the dagger meant for Renald found its way into the back of Jochiem Von Kerist.

This time there would be no mistakes! The assignment was taken on

personally by His Highness Ithkarstan, Crown Prince of Thyme. He knew Renald would be especially watchful now that one of their own was dead. He elected to send his "favorite" assassin on a mission which "should see the undoing of the great king from Quintin!"

Sir Guiles had misgivings from the outset but felt them better kept to himself as things stood. Finding Mandroark wasn't the kind of mission to which anybody looks forward. There were only a handful of men remaining from the last time one of the Western Kings had sent an expedition of five thousand men to bring him in for trial. One doesn't tell Ithkarstan "no" and live, so he went.

[At this point a little history would go a long way. Mandroark seems to be one of the nearly three hundred people who stayed behind when the rest of the population left Omega for a distant star system to escape the predicted nova of Beta. The nova never happened, so those who were left made a life as best they could under trying conditions. A man by the name of Homer took firm control of the political life and ruled with a firm hand. He released the prisoners which had been left behind with him. The prisoners numbered one hundred and ninety-seven; Homer and his fellows numbered at eighty-four. Homer's group decided that as the nova never happened, it would be cruel to leave the prisoners in their cells any longer. They declared a general amnesty and released them. The terms were that they behave themselves. Mandroark and a few others broke into the records center and proceeded to burn the building down around the ears of the twenty workers there. They took flight in a small craft from Homer's Island. The seas were still so rough from the commotion caused by the solar disturbances that it was believed that all of them had been drown in the violent waters.

As Sir Guiles rode the last day's journey through the eastern regions of the Western Kings, the land changed before his eyes. The pleasant pastures and rolling slopes gave away more and more to broken terrain. The rivers which teemed with life began to stink and instead of being clear became first muddy then an inky black. The grass of the steppe gave way to barren rocky

[The following is an excerpt from the exhaustive journals kept by the prolific Homer.

July 2, 790

...Grief only shall be the wreath about my head! Word now has arrived declaring the death of my remaining son at the hands of one Mandroark. By my ancient whiskers I swear he is the same Mandrigal who burned alive the twenty in the records house. He shall have a time to do his deeds of evil then, no more!...

After this incident Mandroark hired on with various kings who didn't care about the method they employed to maintain their power. Eventually Mandroark's "method" became so debauched only the most vile of tyrants could stand him. The few which did employ him found their armies turning against them for having employed "such a Barbarian." It was reported on more than one occasion that Mandroark took babies from their cribs to bathe in their blood. That seems to be one of the lesser of his offenses. Now, for the last six hundred years no one had heard from him directly.

He could still be hired as a mercenary, it was said. But the only ones who approved of his methods were the members and subordinates of the Secret Order of the Silver Loon. As Mlle. De Bergier had said upon reading of his exploits, "What a delightful fellow. When may I meet him?" Ed.]

ground.

As far as he could see from the north to the south along the line which separated No Man's Land from the lands of the Western Kings there was an unnumbered host of bodies in various states of decay, impaled. Beyond the frontier was a land covered in perpetual shadow, its horizon mocking all beauty as it stretched toward the sky like fractured bones. No account which had been told him gave adequate description of the tormented land which lay before him.

After a day he had to blindfold his horse just to keep her from bolting at the sights they encountered. There was pestilence and vermin everywhere. He had to be very careful when choosing a spot to sleep that there weren't scorpions, deadly spiders, or poisonous snakes nearby, which was a task a great deal more difficult than he had ever imagined. As was usual in this tortured land one didn't find Mandroark; Mandroark found them.

Sir Guiles in this respect was no different from anyone else. He was riding nearly northeast out of a particularly treacherous valley as the earth regurgitated in front of him. His horse bucked violently and went running blindly off into a deep ravine, breaking its neck in the fall. From the rupture ahead issued a vile grey smoke which spit sparks everywhere. Inky black vapors rose up and twisted in the air. The smell was nearly more than the stout Sir Guiles could bear.

In the midst of this appeared a Scarplion*. Sir Guiles was at once caught in its spell. He offered no resistance when it picked him up with its

*[A creature from the elemental plane of fire. It ranges in size from two feet to fifteen feet, the taller being less common. The coloring varies. It looks like a jonquil. Ed.]

petal-like appendages and began to fly through the air in a northwesterly direction. He had no idea of how far it had brought him when it sat him down.

When it released him, a fissure opened up beneath him and he promptly fell in. He was still under the influence of the Scarplion, else he most assuredly would have screamed the whole of the distance he fell. As the bottom approached he began to be slowed by a violent updraft till he dropped through the ceiling of a low cave. The suddenness of the stop shook him out of the trance to which the creature had subjected him.

The cave was lit by two huge torches posted beside two massive pillars. He started to look about himself when there was a loud sound as of rock grating against rock. He looked back at the pillars just as they finished opening. They revealed a dark chamber with a throne at the far end and a small figure sitting atop it. He began to walk resolutely forward. His pace was considerably slowed as he passed through the entrance. On either side of him were more impaled decaying bodies; these, however, were yet living! The Cavern of the Undead! He had heard of it as a youth, but cast it off as a ghost story. Now he stood in it. Thousands of bodies stretched into the darkness of the yawning cavern. The farther he walked, the more he realized that the throne was immense and the person sitting atop it was not small but large.

The hall was filled with the sounds of the undying half-corpses. He stopped at the base of the now gigantic throne and looked up at the man sitting at its top. Sir Guiles spoke.

"I bring greetings from His Highness Ithkarstan, Crown Prince of Thyme."

The voice filled the chamber and caused the poor souls to wail the more as Mandroark boomed down at the bold knight, "What, worm!"

Sir Guiles was used to being called names; what cowed him was the whole

of the spectacle. His voice wavered as he said, "Sport, Dark Lord!"

The voice reverberated against the lofty ceiling and the distant walls, "Speak up, existential podling! Or do you prefer to join us permanently that you may whine to your miserable heart's content?"

Sir Guiles' knees shook as he braced himself to respond, "I have been sent with a proposition to sport, oh Master of an Infinite Domain."

"And what does that peasant want with me!"

Sir Guiles had never heard Ithkarstan called a peasant before; he rather enjoyed it.

"To provide you with some measure of delight he desires you dispatch the King of Quintin. If it please you, Dark Lord."

"Which one!?"

Sir Guiles was taken back. "Which one?" he thought to himself. He didn't understand the joke but felt it better to be plain. "King Edmond Del Harthallow the Fourth, Majesty."

The dark figure descended the steps of the throne. Sir Guiles was relieved. Mandroark would offer his hand as confirmation of the deal, and he could be on his way. He had knelt as Mandroark was coming down. When Mandroark was standing before him, he looked up just as Mandroark's Halbeard cleaved his mortal head in two.

Mandroark roared, "I AM BAALZEBUB!"

* * *

To His Most Royal Highness,

King Edmond Del Harthallow IV

Sire:

This is to herald the events of the field, that you may know concerning the trust you've placed in me.

We have traded blood for distance. The enemy is swept before our forces as so much dust before a mountain wind. We have in little more than a month taken half of the Isthmus. I am pleased to announce to my Sovereign that before the end of this most pleasant summer the Unicornian rebels will be vanquished upon the Plains of Gennaiodoros. We will make their blood run till they will sue to change the name of that place.

I know I speak for all of your glorious forces when I say we wish you were here. I for one know of the great hardship you must bear to be away from the smells of battle and the surge of the fight. Alas--the affairs of state are pressing, and so it is you must remain where you are. I know all of our sympathies go out to you in the solitude of your Throne.

Enclosed, may it please Your Highness, you will find the reports of our latest victories. I am

[I confident you will take joy and great solace in
[knowing that our men have died well in your service.
[This you will find along with my personal request
[for an addition to our forces of a million men at
[arms with attendant officers and NCO's. I feel
[confident that once you've reviewed our accounts,
[you'll find our need is grounded. With this addi-
[tional strength we shall be honored to present to
[our Great King the heads of those villianous
[rulers of Unicorn who refused to accept your most
[magnificent offer of joining our camp and trusting
[in your tender care for their needs.
[It is my earnest belief that with the timely
[arrival of the requested reinforcements we will
[finish this matter and go on to more important ones.

[Your Majesty's Most Humble Servant

[General Southall

Renald was triumphant! So what, casualties had been great? So what, he needed to press his already depleted country for more men? And if there were uprisings, "Let 'em come!" Renald screamed with delight at the prospect of being victorious over the indomitable Unicornian forces. Never had any armed force succeeded in penetrating the defenses of the island continent of Unicorn.

Renald strode resolutely to his window. He threw open the sash and

surveyed the lands below the castle. The peasantry were hard at work, and why shouldn't they be? The Draconian Guards had made example of those who had refused to labor. He looked up at the Rings of Omega, and in the pride of his heart thought, "I shall rule all of Quintin. I will even demand the heads of the Secret Order of the Silver Loon to pay homage to me!"

Dared he think--yes! Even that! "I could even make Homer bend the knee!
Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha, Ha!"

His sinister laugh trailed off as he sensed the dark presence in the room with him. He spun and viewed within the room as the Dark Lord entered from the shadows. Renald tried to pierce him with his stare, but the Dark Lord was unmoved.

Renald squeaked, "And where is the one you promised me, Dark Servant?"
"The World Emperor has only to call, and all bid by him shall be done," said the dark statuesque figure which stood before him.

Renald's eye glimmered, "Why hasn't he come sooner?"

"You had only to ask, Mighty Lord."

Renald's thoughts were entranced. He envisioned himself in the high domains of the great ones. He would rewrite history to suit himself. There would never be another like himself!

"Then I command it!"

The room filled with a sulphuric smoke, hissing and oozing an inky black wreath. Sparks began to flicker at the center of the room and a nebulous form took shape. It was the deamon prince--Greyhalthor!

The deamon prince stood thirty-two hands tall. His form was of a man covered with red slime. Attached to a particularly muscular neck was a head that had to be described more as a cancerous growth than an object that could be called a head. He had prehensile claws, and the slime dripped from his

naked form making hissing sounds as the drops collided with the floor. He spoke with a voice deep and resonant with a touch of the effeminate.

"Command me thrice, then be done."

"It is the head of La Flandours I require of you. Now, be about it!"

Greyhalthor bowed and in an instant the room was as though he had never been there.

* * *

Vashlee awoke as he felt a small tongue lap several times across his face.

"Fluffy!" said Colbert, quietly, to the lasha apso licking Vashlee's face. "Don't wake our guest. Let him sleep."

"Sleep?" said Vashlee as the small dog scurried out of the room.

"Forgive me. I didn't realize he had followed me in. Please, if you like, go back to sleep."

"That's allright," he said as he stretched the sleep from his muscles.
"Is there something I can do for you?"

"No," said Colbert as he laid down some towels. "I just brought you and the young elf some fresh water and towels with which to freshen when you awoke."

"Thank you. What hour is it?"

"A little after nine of the morning."

Vashlee lept from bed and began to dress hurriedly as he said, "I've slept too long!"

"No. It was good that you rested. As you're now awake breakfast will be

waiting for you in the library."

With that he left to allow Vashlee to dress in privacy. Vashlee woke Elif, and the two of them prepared for breakfast. Elif was especially eager to ask Colbert some questions about his old books and his remarkable home. They walked back through the large hallway which connected their rooms with the library. The walls had magnificent paintings hung at exact intervals along them. The paintings were every bit as striking as everything else about the house.

They were greeted at their entrance into the library with the most excellent smell of a well prepared meal. Their eyes confirmed what their nostrils relayed; before them was a table with such variety a plantation owner would have been hard put to do better. Colbert invited them to join him. They all sat. Elif and Vashlee both wondered to themselves about the fourth place set at the table.

"No, no one is expected," said Colbert. "I set it should an unexpected guest arrive."

Elif reached for a platter of food to begin eating.

Colbert intercepted his arm and said, "Please, young friend, it is my custom to ask a blessing before eating."

"Fine with me," said Elif as he tried again to put food on his plate.

"I would be honored for you to join me," Colbert said with quiet firmness.

Elif's bewildered eyes turned to Vashlee for direction. Vashlee nodded. Colbert bowed his head and folded his arms in front of him. Elif and Vashlee followed his lead.

"Oh, Great Creator," Colbert began. "We thank Thee for these Thy blessings. We thank Thee that Thou hast allowed that we might be possessed

of the strength and vitality which we have. We thank Thee also that the war has not spread to this humble home as yet, that we might enjoy this Thy bounty in peace. Please bless these my quests that they may attain that which they have travelled so far to gain. Oh, Merciful El, please grant that I may have the wisdom and courage to deal justly with these my fellow sojourners, and, if it be in keeping with Thy infinite knowledge and goodness, allow that they may find their way in peace. For these favors and blessings we humbly ask in the name of He That Is*, whom our forefathers declared at Thy bidding should come. Amen."

* [There are a good many writings concerning He That Is. The most illuminating was put down by a Veazephahlia circa 1412tc. "...it is He to which our first parents said we should look to restore that which was before the dissolution of the fraternity which existed before the (transmutatio) of body and spirit...." He That Is was supposed to come and restore the relationship between Omegains and El. I have not found any text setting forth that He ever showed up. The whole affair is rather interesting and relates very nicely to the Hebrew Experience. Volumes have been written concerning the interaction between a "Head God and His Eternal Son" with various people which descended from Yeamth. Interesting also, to me as the translator, is that Homer of Homer's Half is a direct descendant of Yeamth. There appears also to be at least the reference that Colbert Sprye and Homer are cousins.

According to the writings of Lord North of Unicorn, Colbert was touring the countryside just previous to the declaration of war by Quintin. He was "warning" the people to return to a good relationship with their Savior (?) before He came out and laid waste to an idolatrous nation. Two weeks before

They had eaten well. Elif expressed his astonishment that anyone could be so gifted in the finer art of cooking. Vashlee added his own voice to praise. Colbert removed the dishes and invited his guests to partake of the leisure provided by his library. He showed them a table which he folded out from the wall and pulled two chairs up to it. It was made of opaque glass and had a series of knobs and buttons with two upright handles on either side. Colbert turned a knob to one side and images began to appear above the table. They were miniature of real life, and by manipulating the assorted controls he could make the image change or move. While they amused themselves Colbert took care of the dishes.

The "Ithosseads Crivateac Lueoc" [Triphased Image-ographic Data-viewer. Ed.], as Colbert had called it, was quite a marvel. Vashlee immediately appreciated its many potential uses. He had grasped its operation readily and sat at once to making as best use as he could of the information it contained. The library accessible through it was exhaustive. On a lark he tried to find reference to his own land and was both amazed and suspicious to find the information it contained accurate and current to the time he had left on his journey. He was about to pursue information relative to his granddaughter's disappearance when Colbert came back into the room.

"You'll not find what your looking for," Colbert said as he sat down on one of the two sofas.

Vashlee stopped and said, "Why not?"

Elif sat down the piece of sculpture he had been looking at as Colbert

[it was known, through spies, that Quintin was indeed going to declare war
Colbert disappeared from public squares and retired to his home on Hessiod.
Ed.]

said, "Try then."

Elif walked over to stand behind Vashlee as Vashlee began to operate the device to retrieve the information he desired. After several moments of useless effort Vashlee said, "Why?"

"Try to find information on yourself or your young friend."

Vashlee did so. This also proved abortive. Again he said, "Why?"

"How detailed is the information on what you've already reviewed?"

"Highly."

"Would you like just anyone to know any given set of 'highly detailed' facts about you?"

"Does it contain the information?"

"No."

Vashlee turned his attention to the elderly Colbert as Elif sat down at the controls and tried to figure out how to work them.

Vashlee sat on a sofa across from Colbert as he said, "But you do know what I want to know."

Colbert looked up as though there were no ceiling and said, "Some."

"Do I need to ask questions, or will you volunteer?"

Colbert looked back at Vashlee then looked away as he felt tears start to form in his eyes. He pressed his hands together and began to tap his foot nervously.

Vashlee tried to maintain and not lose patience. He said, "If you want money, I will pay. Though I don't know what you would do with it."

Colbert shot a hurt glance at Vashlee then said, "I beg your pardon. I've told the truth when to do so meant taking my life into my own hands. I've dared to speak of the sins our chiefs of government practiced behind closed doors that they might forsake their wickedness. I have never found it

easy to tell someone who is innocent, of how wickedness in high places has conspired and grieved them in ways they don't even know."

Elif left off from what he was doing as Vashlee said, "What high places?"

Colbert rubbed his brow and said nothing.

Several tense moments passed. Vashlee's concern and fear for the welfare of his granddaughter broke through as he nearly shouted, "You will speak and not delay!" He regained his demeanor somewhat and continued. "I'm sorry. I haven't come this far to play guessing games. I am prepared to attempt to use force to gain the information I seek. You obviously know something. I don't know your connection with the kidnappers, and at this point I am not overly concerned. I will know what you know, or I will turn you over to the civil authorities for conspiracy in a kidnapping!"

Colbert's words were biting to the concerned Vashlee. "There may come a time when you may indeed try that, but your primary concern at this moment is not your granddaughter so much as your great-grandson."

Elif's jaw dropped.

Vashlee said slowly, "Great-grandson?"

Colbert shook his head as he said, "Cindrith was brought to me by her betrothed. I wed them then sent them to make preparations for the road which lay before them."

"Whom did she marry?" asked Vashlee.

"A young man named Colin. You have heard of his grandfather, Michael the Just, King of Quintin."

"He had a son named Michael who died without offspring," Vashlee protested.

"That is what the publicists wanted the world to think. The people that know the truth are only a handful."

"That's ludicrous! What journal would befriend the imposter which sits on the throne of Quintin and masquerades with the name of Harthallow?"

"Most."

"You're about to try my patience! I suggest you confine yourself to telling me where my granddaughter is!"

"She should be arriving at Blue Island about now."

This time Vashlee's jaw dropped as well, as he said, "W--Where?"

"First I will make a point of impressing upon your mind the importance of what I am trying to tell you." Without a moment's hesitation he drove point on, "Why didn't the publishers give any space in their various papers to the incidents surrounding the death of your wife?"

Vashlee was stunned, "They respected my grief!"

"Who respected the grief of John Rartal's wife and children when he was hung for a crime he would have had to have been no less than four different places at the same time to commit?"

"The witnesses purjured themselves to make that assertion!"

"The only one who put forward that story was the chief prosecutor and the Press. What possible motive could a man with a young family have for assassinating your wife?"

Vashlee was silent at the revival of so tender a memory.

Colbert pressed, "What motive? None! What is worse, you know it. He was at home with his family when your wife died. Every witness brought forward to testify against him was paid off by an organization which declared its hate for you in the various threats against your life before she died. Why? Because you were a champion of a cause! When your wife died, you ceased being any kind of threat because you curtailed your activities and became a general instead of a leader! My heart was rent when I heard the

news. Now is your chance to be of some use to your fellow man and make up at least a little for your silence."

Vashlee's voice mocked him as he sat moving his mouth with no sound ushering forth. Elif didn't understand and thought Vashlee had been wronged. Elif drew his sword and started for Colbert. Colbert glanced at the sword then toward the heavens; the sword blade melted onto the floor as Elif stood in awe.

Colbert's tone was soft as he said, "Your great-grandson will be the ensign around which armies will rally. It must be your task to spend your last ounce of strength to find him and bring him safely to that place. I can see a thousand questions in your mind. I will try and answer a few of them. Then you must take your journey. Your great-grandson was foreordained to the role he will play. In a Great Counsel before any of us were born, we all sat, and there many of us were given assignments to make the world a better place than we were to find it. You received such a call. Why do you think you felt driven to accomplish what you did in such a short time?"

"Because I loved my fellow man," said Vashlee in his own defense.

"And well you did. But the gifts you have called upon in order to accomplish your desires--where did you get them? You got them by what the name implies, by being given them. That you developed them yourself is true. If you hadn't, they would have been of no use to you at those critical times when no other voice could be heard save your own. Jamiel-Michael, your great-grandson, has such gifts as you. If you will work with him, he will grow in stature to unite all of Omegaians under one banner. Then maybe we will be fit that our Lord will come."

"What do I do?"

Colbert's lip quivered an instant, and tears formed in his eyes to hear

just such as Vashlee had said.

"My friend, I grieve with you when I say that you will not find either Cindrith or Colin alive. It will take all of your wit and strength to save Jamiel-Michael. I have written down what I'm about to tell you. I will give it to you as you leave that you may commit it to memory. Now I give you your instructions. If you've any questions, you may ask. I don't know everything but shall attempt to provide you with all that I possess.

You will take my ketch to Unicorn. It is not good for you to continue incognito. You make an easy target of yourself that way. Those who would have you dead would recognize you anyway. To that end I have assembled proper ecoutrements for you and your companion. When you arrive a friend of mine to whom I will send a message via carrier pigeon will have a carriage waiting for you. He will take you to the capitol where you will be royally greeted by the heads of state. They will declare to one and all that you've come to make common cause. You will not offer anything of the sort, but they will declare it just the same. After conferring, you will then take your journey to the consulate of the Spice Kings. There you will deliver an ultimatum to the Ambassador to have the navies of the Spice Kings to quit the waters of Unicorn and thus end their blockade in alliance with Quintin, or they have a fortnight to quit the country of Unicorn. After that they will be held as prisoners of war. The Ambassador will tell you that he hasn't the authority to make such decisions. He will offer to give you passage to Thyme where you may present your case before Ithkarstan. You will under no circumstances make it known that you know he has authority. Instead you will accept his offer and board the next available ship to make your journey. You will disembark at Reliegh, a small port on the south of Quintin east of Eribador. If you fail to leave the ship, you will die before you can arrive

at Thyme. In Reliegh you will proceed to an outfitter's shop called The Black Dragon. You will tell the owner privately that his son Raphael is in grave danger and you must join up with his party as quickly as possible. If he questions your information, tell him I sent you. You will then go to Sin's End and there join up with your great-grandson. If you make it that far, you will receive further instructions then.

"I enjoin you to secrecy. Many lives and the future of nations depend greatly upon your successfully finding Jamiel-Michael. El will bless you that you not be taken unawares so long as you remain ever vigilant and do all that you can to assure your own security.

"If your friend desires to go, he can be of great aide to you--that is, if he can curb his impulses to use his sword."

Elif felt to complain; however, the bladeless sword in his hand didn't make a very strong case in his defense.

* * *

The mid-summer blossoms colored the landscape with rich vibrancy. The Plain of Gennaiodoros seemed a giant tapestry to Major Falk as he surveyed it from the back of his Pegasus. He had flown directly from Marshal Saphglite's headquarters. His mission was to determine the main approach of the Quintinian armies. He took his flight straight toward the Isthmus and didn't have to travel long to see the riverlike armies flowing to the south with a stream running parallel to the northern coast.

In their wake were the towns of Starlight and Penelope, both gushing flame as turgid smoke mounted the sky. His mission was only to survey, but he had to know what the train of people crossing Mount Falstaff onto the

plain was about. He guided his Pegasus closer to better reconnoiter the event. In the train was a very large coach with a substantial mounted troop both before and after it, all marvelously outfitted and attended by footmen.

He heard the sound of a screech before he actually saw the Griffin Riders descending from their vantage in line from Gamma-7 diving upon him. His time was spent. The information he had already gathered would have to do. The only way a Pegasus had of out-maneuvering a Griffin was to begin a dive, then as they closed the gap, to slip to one side and let their heavier bodies carry them further down before they could turn around and climb back to do battle, then to flee as quickly as possible putting as much distance between it and them.

Falk was well skilled with his mount and proceeded to do exactly that. It was to his advantage that his enemy hadn't confronted this tactic before, else they surely would have devised means to overcome it. As it was it was too close for the Major's liking. He outdistanced his pursuers and didn't draw rein till he arrived at Mount Helicon.*

Mount Helicon stood astride the vast Plain, the only landform which broke the natural flatness from the bays northward to the gulf southward; from the Isthmus to the east and the Kyrie Range, west. No foothills surrounded its approaches. There was no ruggedness to its features as it rose gently from base to summit. From its lofty height one could survey most of the surrounding plain. Some even claimed that on a particularly clear day it was even possible to see the Bay of Castor over a hundred leagues to the north.

*[Its summit of 80,000 feet above sea level places it in the category of an immense mountain indeed, yet only a distant cousin to Epic's Summit in Craineomeatus which rises to over 123,000 feet above sea level. Ed.]

Major Falk was directly escorted to Major Saphglite's operations deck when he returned. His report included having seen a large formation of Elephant troops to the south. Marshal Saphglite listened intently as the Major delivered his report, concluding with his narrow brush with the Griffin Riders. Saphglite thanked and dismissed him. He called a counsel to convene as soon as his commanding officers could assemble. No expression of worry did his features bear, no hint or glimmer of the trouble that threatened the extinction of the freedoms of the people of Unicorn--only quiet resolve.

As the meeting convened, Marshal Saphglite stood before a map of the tactical region over which they would be fighting. The commanding staff consisted of only twenty generals, their combined commands totalling under fifty thousand. The armies which opposed them had been reduced to just over two million in the hard fighting across the Isthmus of Unicorn. Each of the men present knew from the beginning that it was only a matter of time and they would breathe their last, but as General Rudolph Grossland had said when he knew the war was imminent, "Better to die having made my own decisions than to live with someone else making them for me."

"Friends," began the Marshal, "under any normal circumstances we should be rejoicing. In the course of the various battles we have fought with our enemy, retreating from the Isthmus we lost only eighty-four thousand souls while they made the hills run red in their own blood, taking here a ravine, there a mountain and so on. You may be justly proud that according to the latest information they lost over three million of their own taking the Isthmus from us.

"Any sane opponent would have gone home to lick their wounds and sue for peace. It seems that in General Southall and King Harthallow we are not to expect sanity." There were some muffled snickers. Saphglite continued,

"They are in the process of surrounding us. I've decided to spare the remainder of our beloved country the wrack of war and meet our opponent here. They will have to do battle with us as to leave us in their rear still possessed of a small navy would cut them off from their supplies. We can expect no assistance from our countrymen in this. Our Government has gone into exile on the island of Hessiod. We can expect to receive an addition to our number as the remaining patriots join us for a final battle.

"Those who remain apart from us have either already cut a deal to be part of the new ruling class, or else have had their heads so full of (drugs) they don't care. What remains of our countrymen have been seduced by backwardness and corruption. Let there be no question of the rightness of our cause. Our men have passed the highest test of loyalty and courage. Their pluck and metal are without blemish. We've had no act of desertion since following our first contact with the enemy. Providence has blessed us that we've had no traitors. The murmuring which has come to my attention of late is not without cause. Let it be understood now that with our blood spilt and our last breath drawn what we here do is not vain and without cause!

"I tell you now that we have a friend which our enemy knows not of, and we may take our last breath of life knowing that the time we have bought with our lives will be recompensed more than can now be told. I have foregone the telling until now, but I will relent and reveal that The Just King Michael did not leave this world without offspring as we were led to believe by those who should not have kept the truth from us. I have met this man, and in the brief time I had to get to know him he proved to be in every detail equal to his father and in some respects, judging from the adversity which he has had to endure, a little superior.

"His name is Colin; tell your men! Let them know that they die not in

vain. This Colin has set off to rouse an army, the likes of which has never been seen on all the face of Omega! Tell your men that their lives will be avenged and that, though they won't live to see it, the land will not be tread long by foreign armies, and it will be restored to what our forefathers envisioned it to be, a land where all men may raise their hand in support of truth and receive just measure for their toils!

"I have had Colonel Bendol make up copies of the orders of battle I have been working on since the campaign across the Isthmus began. Please review them, and if you have any suggestions, I will be pleased to review them with you and any others who would be appropriate.

"El be with us in this our final stand. Dismissed." After the room was empty, Marshal Saphglite knelt in prayer.

The morning came with a dense fog carpeting all of the north and most of the southern portion of the Plain of Gennaiodoros. Marshal Saphglite had spent the night looking out from his observation deck three-quarters of the way up the east side of Mount Helicon. Earlier he had sent for Lt. Colonel Hastings of the Fourteenth. He and Hastings reviewed the information which Major Falk had relayed, then he called the Major in to reconfirm part of his verbal report. After Falk was gone and they were alone, Marshal Saphglite told Colonel Bendol that they were not to be disturbed. The object of their discussion was General Southall's column which was proceeding across Mount Falstaff. The Marshal asked Hastings if he felt he could make good an infiltration with a small company, and if not could he capture the General then kill him. The Lt. Colonel's response was without reservation and simple, "It would be impossible to sneak even ten men across the Plain and into the enemy's headquarters. It would be highly likely for one or two men to do so without being caught. Capture is out of the question. If you send

someone to do this, it will be to kill the General. With the Marshal's kind permission, may I volunteer?" After some discussion of the consequences of leaving his second in command of his regiment, it was decided: Hastings would make the attempt alone.

Marshal Saphglite's orders of battle were accepted without change by all of his Generals with the exception of Brigadier General Evaiseoria who had taken over command of Major General Buckmaster's Twenty-first after the latter died of a fever and complications from a nasty wound received in the dangerous retreat across the Plain from the Isthmus. The Brigadier wanted to know if the Marshal had ever lived in the area of which the Brigadier was to be in charge. Marshal Saphglite said he never had, but had given special attention to each area. He Told Evaiseoria that if he had a suggestion, he was welcome to make it.

"Your Excellency," Evaiseoria began, "with all due respect, the maps with which you've been supplied are inaccurate with regard to this area. I grew up just southwest of there and went often to the broad place shown on your map. Sir, I assure you it is swamp!"

The Marshal didn't look at Bendol who was responsible for acquiring the maps. Instead he asked the Brigadier why someone would omit such an obstacle when it is their job to be accurate.

The Brigadier said, "The land is firm in the winter and fall; from spring to summer it is one big swamp!" They reworked the strategy for defense of the southern sectors.

The enemy didn't move from the advanced positions they had taken the week following the counsel of war called by the Marshal. Two more weeks had passed and still they sat behind the pickets they had thrown up. Colonel Bendol came into the Marshal's study late in the evening of the first day of

the third week to announce the arrival of a messenger who would deliver his report to none other than the Marshal. He had the woman searched for any concealed weapons then reported to the Marshal for his decision. He told him to allow her to pass.

She smelled of the road and looked a sight. Her leather garments were dusty and in several places torn. Her left arm was in a sling and her right leg was heavily bandaged and blood-stained. Her breath was heavy from exhaustion. She didn't recognize the Marshal and asked him to please identify himself so that there would be no doubt. As Saphglite was going to get his baton of office, the girl fainted.

He called for Bendol to get a physician immediately, then carried her to a lounge where he laid her. The physician brought her around but said, "She's so much blood lost she needs to be in an infirmary." Marshal Saphglite thanked him then showed the mysterious young woman his baton of office.

She spoke weakly, "My name is Valeri Raritan--I met an--cough! cough!--officer of yours named--cough!--Hastings. He was dying and pleaded with me to bring you--this pouch."

"You've done well and will be rewarded for your service. Our physician will take you to our infirmary to clean and dress your wounds."

They took the girl out and left the Marshal alone. He opened the pouch and found a few personal effects along with secret papers concerning the disposition of the Quintinian armies and a scroll. He studied the secret papers and compared them to his own intelligence reports. He decided to have portions verified and again called Bendol to come in. When he had finished dealing with pressing military concerns, he then allowed himself the luxury of reading what he supposed to be a personal communication. He opened the

scroll and read what must have been nearly the dying words of the brave officer...

()
(My dear Marshal Saphglite,)
()
(Your Excellency may be assured of the deed)
(having been accomplished. I fear I have been)
(mortally wounded in making my escape from the)
(compound. I trust the girl and ask you to)
(thank her for me.)
()
(Your humble servant)
(Hastings)
()

* * *

The air was filled with the stench of burning sulfur and pitch. The closer they went toward the lava lake of Sin's End, the more ash they saw drifting in the air. The heat was unrelenting and came in constant waves of increasing intensity. Thanks to the fortunate find of the sapphires the small party were relieved of the heat as they pressed steadily onward. Also, due to their aid, many a pitfall which would have been potentially lethal and certainly time consuming they were able to see clearly and avoided such dangers as the tunnel presented.

They arrived at the firey lake after sunset, its swirling and bubbling lava giving the sides of the crater a deep red hue. Blue flames appeared here and there as the molten rock expelled various flammable gasses. The walls of the crater and cavern were alive with lion-scorpions and assorted varieties of salamanders. The air bred copious quantities of pestilence of enormous size. Strange fungi and mold clung to the rugged escarpment oozing various colored liquids which hissed as the sludge dripped into the lake of fire and brimstone. Spindly spider-like creatures scurried across the surface of the lava, unaffected by fire and heat. Red and black snake-like creatures slithered above and below the surface of the aernal lake.

Cindrith shivered from the sight as she said, "Someone could have told me what to expect--it wouldn't have prepared me for this!"

The others inwardly felt what she had said; the whole ambience was such to cause the stoutest individual to have more than a few misgivings about pressing on with a mission which would involve crossing such a place.

The party retreated back into the tunnel about a third of a league to avoid being overrun by the "livestock" which lived near the lava's edge. They were careful to clear a spot of all debris then made camp for the remainder of the night. They ate and slept.

The next morning they rose early and set out to find the stone boat which would be their transportation to Blue Island. They traveled along a shear cliff with a narrow ledge along the side of the crater. This led them to a treacherous defile down to the lava's edge. They were unmolested by the flying pestilence and avoided contact with the other forms of life they encountered. However, the way was immensely arduous, having rocks covered over with strange molds and fungi which were both excessively slippery as well as possessing the most foul of stenches. They took their course

southwest from there to a stone promontory where they found the strange blue boat* they were looking for.

When they had finished putting their supplies into the boat, Redmond embraced Colin and Cindrith, then kissed the child and said, "Grow up to make your parents proud of you."

Cindrith said, "Are you sure you don't want to come the rest of the way with us? You've come this far."

Redmond's eyes moistened as he said, "My Lady and My Lord, your quest lies before you, mine is back at the entrance of our tunnel. May I say that it has been my extreme pleasure to have spent the time I have in your gracious and honorable company."

*[The journal of Grimphe Laonsalvie has the following entry recorded: "The guide began shouting in an excited fashion and pointed to a gigantic blue stone jutting out from the wall of the crater. None of us had the slightest idea about what he was so excited. Hughes had the presence of mind to ask the distraught chap what the problem was with the boulder. The guide exclaimed in his usual broken fashion, 'Stone good! Stone take men to island!' I quite had not the slightest clue how a rock in the side of the crater would take anyone anywhere. The fellow then took out his knife and began to carve at the stone. He then took a piece he had cut away and threw it into the lava--it floated! After considerable effort we managed to remove the rock from the wall and started to carve out a boat. It carved readily enough, but we lost three good blades in the process of completing the job. When we were finished, it looked like a pentagon with sides and a bottom more than a boat, but it served the purpose. We even managed to fashion two oars...." Ed.]

"You may," said Colin, "if you will allow us the same." Redmond nodded.
"Still, we will all be together soon enough. Farewell, my good friend."

Raphael pushed the craft away from the bank as they all waved at their final parting.

As the mists and vapors obscured vision the further out they went, Redmond picked up his pack and began the journey back. Colin watched his friend till he could see him no more. They rowed slowly toward the towering Blue Island and their fate.

PART VII

(The Loss of a Friend)

They hacked their way through the thicket and came upon a long narrow valley beyond the river's edge. They had progressed unopposed through the corps and made good time. They considered themselves fortunate that they surprised nothing more than a few peccaries as they exited the thicket. Each and all were worn out from the hard passage pressed.

Erick went up the hill across the river while the ladies bathed. Cleat went to sleep in the wagon. The sky was bright without a cloud. The air was warm, and it was good just to relax. The women played in the water and generally had a good time. They washed their clothes and took care of the horses.

They called for Erick to rejoin them. When he didn't respond to their calls, Almetra started off in the direction she had seen him take when they had started to bathe. At the top of the hill was a stand of linden. She passed through them, then stopped as she saw the vast green belt which lay before her in the extensive valley beyond. The growth was lush and vibrant with its many shades of green. She followed it with her eyes till at last the sight which greeted her caused her to shiver with awe. The Summit of Sin's End loomed above the clouds across the broad expanse. It was purple in the distance, and the top was covered by untold ages of snowfall. Above it could be seen contrails rising to the upper reaches of the sky where no bird could fly. Above that the faint glimmer of the inner Rings sparkled and gleamed.

She started as she felt the hand which set lightly upon her shoulder.

"It's only pretty from here," said Erick matter-of-factly.

"I've never seen anything like it."

"Yeah, it got to me, too, the first time I saw it."

"How close did you get the last time you were here?"

Erick sat down on the short cool grass which covered the northern face of the hill and leaned back on his elbows. He looked up at the Rings as he said, "To the lake of lava."

"Could you see Blue Island?"

"No," he said, shaking off the thought which overtook him.

"May I ask what happened?"

"There isn't much to tell," he said as the memory still fresh returned. "We got there and a argument broke out between Jake and Stewart. Those were the guide's and leader's names. Anyway, I, Keth, and Andy ran back into the tunnel and waited for the outcome. Their arguments were always violent and Keth got a black eye the last time they had one, so we kids decided the best thing we could do was to stay out of their way when they had differences. Funny, it didn't last too long. We went back to the company, and they were all dead. They had had a fight, and not one of them remained standing. My father was gasping through his blood. Before he died he told us boys to hightail it away form there before something happened to us. We ran and slept till we were out of the tunnel. Then we ran down the hill."

"But you made it out okay," she said, trying to brighten the prospect as she sat next to him.

"If you want to call it that. Andy fell and broke his neck on the way down the side of the volcano. Keth was eaten by something in the swamp, and I ran like the devil was chasing me till I chanced upon an old houseboat. I

broke my leg tripping over the shoreline as I ran inside. I didn't figure it mattered, the swamp wasn't going anywhere. Anyway, that night a heavy rain came and flooded the swamp. When I woke up the houseboat was racing down a river to the sea. I was apparently running a high fever as I immediately lapsed back into unconsciousness. When I regained my senses, I was in a caravan headed to the Eastern Marches and was told that I was found by a Spice Kings ship which was headed to check out the damage the flood had caused to a coastal town. They just happened to see the houseboat and found me, nearly starved. I guess you could say I made it out okay."

"I see," said Almetra as she hung her chin over her knees.

Erick looked at her long flowing hair of chestnut and her well shaped back. If circumstances were different and he were a different man, he'd ask her to marry him. But he had already decided they wouldn't make it out of Sin's End alive, so future plans were pointless. Besides, Cathrine Dunnybrook and Sean McEan were probably dead already if they had gone into that swamp below them.

* * *

I told Almetra that we had best be headed back before we were missed, and she agreed. While the ladies moved to the hilltop to make camp, I took a bath in the clear stream then rejoined them. I thought about trying one last time to dissuade them from continuing on any farther. I decided against it though; they had their minds made up, and there was nothing I could say to make them change their resolve.

All that night after I turned in I kept tossing and turning as the words "blood bounty" kept rattling around in my mind. I was grateful when Shannon

woke me for my watch. The watch was peaceful and uneventful. In the morning I convinced the company to rest another day where we were. I figured that if we were going to go through with the plan, we would need every ounce of strength we could gain. The animals could do with some time off as well. I did manage to sleep soundly the second night.

We struck out early. Shannon and I took the point, Almetra rode next to the wagon which Cleat drove, and Hawk brought up the rear. At the end of the day we were still an hour's ride from the edge of the jungle. We camped there for the night and set traps around the perimeter to warn of any unwelcome visitors. The idea was a sound one, but beavers and other rodents kept setting them off till we had to dismantle them just to get some rest.

After a night of little rest, Shannon and I rode ahead to the edge of the jungle to find a trail. After about two leagues, we found a well cut trail wide enough to take the wagon leading down into the dense growth. We decided to take a look down the trail before telling the others about it. We scarce had ridden a rod's length when our horses were spooked and up from the ground popped about thirty Mudlings who began to pelt us and our mounts with mud balls and rocks. We turned our mounts to leave, but the soft ground became so slippery that they lost their footing and we both found ourselves on the ground. We got up and began to swing at the monsters with our weapons. We would hit one and it would dissolve then reappear from the mud. We fought a retreat out of the jungle and onto some rocks where they couldn't reform.

A short time after that Almetra and Hawk came riding up with our horses in tow. They took one look at us and began to laugh. It hurt till we looked at each other; we really did look funny.

Shannon stood up and said, "Look, I'm a b-i-g Mudling!"

Hawk brought us our mounts while Almetra went over to the trail and cast

some kind of spell. When she finished the ground was as hard as baked brick. We changed clothes and washed off using the water we stored in one of three barrels. After we brushed the dried mud from the horses' hair, we took back up our journey and headed down the trail. We travelled about five leagues before Almetra's dry ground ran out and we were again travelling on soft dirt. If anyone had passed along this way even two days before, there were no tracks left to indicate it. There seemed to be no reason for that road to be there, but it led in the direction we needed to follow, so we stayed on it.

Aside from the usual critters found in a jungle we saw nothing which would give pause. We made good time, and the trail was relatively straight that first day in the jungle. The next day passed without any excitement. We came to a clearing that evening and made our camp in the middle of it. As we took the trail the next morning, we discovered the air getting much heavier. There was a sense of danger which crawled up my spine. The horses were becoming skittish the further along we went. Then I remembered!

"Spiders!" I called out. But it was even then too late. I could see the mass of webs before us. It was a bad dream come true! I must have blocked it out of my mind because I was so young the last time I had passed through here. To turn around would be futile. When I was young I didn't know what kind of spiders we had encountered, but I knew now they were Phase Spiders! They knew where we were and would have already built massive webs behind us. They liked human flesh, and had no objection to horse meat, either. I was about ready to cry. I remembered all too well how they had devoured half our party of two hundred. It was only by chance, my father told me, that we managed to make it out with what we did.

Hawk rode up next to me and said, "Where?"

"There," I pointed to the webbing among the vines and covering the trail. She seemed to sense from me what the danger was and said, "Now we'll see how your battle axe works."

She drew her own sword; she with her sword and I with my axe in hand, we approached the webs cautiously. They were old and hadn't been kept up. The spiders only appeared when they were attacking, so we weren't taking any chances. We crept along for the space of about three leagues when the increasingly dense webbing gave way and revealed the trail ahead under the bright suns.

Hawk spoke all our fears when she said, "What came through here that we should not see even one spider amidst all these webs?"

I thought about it. It wasn't just the spiders; there were hardly any of the beasts I now remembered encountering the first time I came through. I was puzzled and couldn't help remembering what Hawk had said about the spiders. I began to think that my youthful mind had made it all up. I was about to apologize to them for having been so concerned about the jungle when it became unnecessary.

I was awakened from a sound sleep that night by the sound of one of Shannon's alarms going off. When I looked around, I saw why: thousands of briarbettles were charging through the camp eating all that wasn't metal in their path. Cleat was trying to shake off several which were eating his left hand. There was little that could be done except to stomp on them and bludgeon them with maces. Everywhere was confusion: Shannon and Almetra were hollering, Cleat was crying and screaming from the pain, the horses screaming and running in circles out of blind fear. When it was over, we only had three horses left, Cleat's left hand needed to be amputated, Shannon's legs were bleeding profusely as were Almetra's. Fortunately I

slept with my boots on or my legs would have been the same. Hawk was unscathed. I marveled at how she did it. I thought she was stomping right along with the rest of us, but--she escaped untouched!

We treated the wounds with pure grain alcohol then bandaged them. The last thing I wanted to do was to take off the young boy's bloodied hand, but by morning the poison would travel up his exposed bones and kill him. I knew of no alternative.

We finished what the beetles had started with the horses and put them out of their misery. Three hadn't been damaged to the point they couldn't be nursed back to health, but we would be walking for at least a week before they could be ridden again. The wagon team had been on the far side of the camp from the beetles and aside from one or two bites were in good shape. The next morning we pressed on. Hawk and I, having received the least damage, walked before the wagon. Cleat lay with a high fever in the wagon while Almetra and Shannon took turns driving it. Almetra had made a poultice and wrapped it over the nub of Cleat's left wrist to help relieve the pain. I told Hawk that I could handle the point if she wanted to sit with her son. She declined and said I needed her more.

We were more fortunate than we had a right to expect. The week passed without further incident. Cleat's fever broke the third day, and on the sixth he was well enough to again drive the wagon. Almetra and Shannon worked with some sturdy wood they gathered and fashioned a handsome hand for him. With a little mechanical know-how they made it possible for him to move the fingers. It wasn't perfect, but it was a hand.

At length we came to the Snarled River which wound more or less through the jungle. We had to chop some vines which had overgrown the trail but came safely to the river about midday of the twenty-first day we were in the

jungle. We had encountered other creatures and given battle to a few, but they were minor incidents. At the river the ladies wanted to go for a swim.

"Oh, I thought I'd die before I saw clear water running again," said Shannon.

"And how," said Almetra.

"Erick?" said Hawk. "You wouldn't mind terribly being a look-out while we swim, would you?"

I looked at the water then at them and said, "If you don't mind leeches and the like, I guess I can watch for you."

"No problem!" said Almetra as she took out some powder and began to cast a spell.

I hollered, "No!"

It was too late; I wasn't thinking about their magic! Oh, how damnable is my mind sometimes. There wasn't a moment to lose. I screamed out orders as quickly as my mouth would allow.

"Cleat, back up the wagon then get in it! Ladies, get away from the water!" They didn't move! "NOW!"

I must have surprised them with the forcefulness of my scream; they bolted back to the wagon. I jumped from my saddle and slapped my horse's rump, and she ran back to join the others. I waited. One minute--two--then it appeared.

A Water Spright! They eat spell-users for breakfast! It loomed over me and looked in the direction of the wagon. With all my might I swung at a tree which was next to me. The Spright ignored me at the first sound then looked at me with my second swing, amused. The sureness of the steel and the power of my arms felled it on the fourth swing just as the Water Spright was reaching for me. The mighty tree fell directly on top of it, and it returned

to the river, its form dissipated.

I apologized for not telling them about the river. They assured me it was alright. Using lesser sciences we boiled the water to purify it and replenish our water supply. Then we took turns taking a bath in the canvas tub we brought along.

We followed the bank of the river for two days before we found a suitable ford for the wagon. We crossed then had to return back down the opposite bank till we found the trail again. It was for nothing. We followed the trail scarcely two leagues when it ran out and we had to blaze our own.

Against my advice Almetra tried to use her druidic skills to talk to the trees; it took us a day to fight our way past the one she tried it on. Next came the swamp. Cleat being the lightest of us climbed a tree to see where we were. He reported seeing the base of Sin's End and reckoned us to be about a day's journey from the foothills. But that day was to be much longer--we had to make it through the swamp first. I never wanted to see another snake as long as I lived, and now I was to go back into the swamp where Keth had been eaten. I felt someone didn't like me at best; at worst, the Fates had determined to taunt and torment me.

We found some old trees and felled them to fashion a raft to transport the wagon. When we started out with the rig, I thought they were crazy to want to bring it. But time and time again it proved to be worth the effort necessary to bring it along, so we built the raft. We had to blindfold the horses to get them to go into the water. I would have liked a blindfold myself except I had to see where I was going.

We travelled from mound to bog to water and back again. Each time we had to pick the leeches from the horses and ourselves. The stench of decaying plants and rotten carcasses we passed were so extreme we had to tie moist

rags over the horses' nostrils to keep them from going mad. We covered our noses and mouths likewise. We rode bareback and left the tack and harnesses in the wagon to preserve them from the damage the water would cause. The movement was slow.

As we crossed the fen, we saw a number of snakes swim in and out of view. The mosquitoes were fierce and merciless. Almetra had mixed up a concoction which she made us drink. It didn't stop their biting, but kept infection away. The going was slow.

Midway through the first day it was Hawk's turn to take the point. As her horse stepped off the mound we had rested on, they disappeared into the muck. An instant later her horse bobbed up, but--she didn't. I dove in after her. Below the surface slime the water was clear, but the small amount of light made it hard to see. As I swam down, I saw her! She was being drug further down by what looked like a luminous bluish jelly fish. If she hadn't been struggling to get loose, I wouldn't have been able to catch up. I drove my dagger deep into its side which immediately began to ooze blood! With Hawk's help we succeeded in cutting her free.

We came back above water gasping for air. The others helped fish us out. Hawk had received the worst of it. The razor-like tentacles had cut much of her clothing up and lacerated her right arm and waist and buttocks. We treated her wounds with (sulfa drug), then I used what I had left of our catgut to sew up her wounds. Her chills and fever began almost instantly. We placed her in the wagon and covered her with several blankets and a hide. Cleat stayed in the wagon to keep a cool rag on her forehead. It wasn't easy for him to see his mother like that, but he was a strong lad.

The horse had not been hurt. When it had first surfaced, Shannon had quickly removed the rag about its nose so it wouldn't drown . Then when it

had calmed down she replaced it.

We finally made it through the swamp, much the worse for wear. We decided to travel across the first of the foothills to put space between us and the swamp. There we stopped to keep Hawk's wounds from continually bleeding.

The foothills were deceptive in their calmness. The nights were filled with all sorts of sounds, from the whistling of the wind to the chirp of the crickets and the occasional moan of a distant beast. The only thing we could be grateful for was that it wasn't cold. The first night we fought off wolves and a flock of particularly voracious vultures. The day brought no relief as the wolves tried again and again to catch us off-guard. Hawk was no better.

I decided we would be better off on top of a hill rather than in a draw. Even if we would be more easily seen, at least we would have less difficulty defending ourselves. The move was dangerous; the wolves seemed to realize what we were trying to do and blindly charged us to keep us from moving. We were fortunate, and the only loss of life was on the part of the wolves who finally retired to lick their wounds and presumably eat each other.

I knew the sound griffins made, and I didn't like it. It was that sound which stirred me from a restless sleep the first night on top of the hill. As I crawled out from under the wagon, I saw its dark form as it blackened the stars behind itself. It was circling high up as though it wasn't sure where the smell of horse was coming from.

Almetra came around the wagon; it was her watch.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I think it's a griffin."

"Will it attack?" The question only scratched the surface of her

concern.

"If it can figure out where we are, it will."

"I'll wake the others."

I grabbed her hand before she could get away and said, "No. The less movement, the better. It's a good thing Shannon didn't wash the wagon cover when she wanted to or it would have spotted us already. With so many hills it isn't sure where we are yet. It may find prey elsewhere."

We stood looking up at it. After about an hour it flew off to the east.

Almetra turned to me afterward and said, "Do you think it will return?"

"Who knows? It's gone now. Listen, your watch is almost up, anyway; why don't you turn in? I'm not tired anymore."

She said good night then stopped after she had started off, looked straight at me and said, "It really bothers you that we're here, doesn't it?"

I hadn't been thinking about it at that moment, but she was very right.

"I wasn't aware I had said otherwise," I protested mildly.

"Just the same, you would rather be practically anywhere on Omega than here, wouldn't you?"

I had learned over the months that she was somehow immune to the abilities Hawk had taught me how to use, so there was no hope of being able to read her thoughts and know just what it was she was getting at. I played along, hoping not to be sucked in by her considerable intellect.

"Almost."

"Why 'almost'?"

"Well, as bad as it is, it could be worse. Why do you ask?"

"I heard you talking in your sleep a little bit ago. You kept muttering over and over, 'blood bounty.' Does it mean anything?"

I was embarrassed to learn that I now talked in my sleep, in addition to

having the nightmares.

"Where I come from, what we're doing is called 'Blood Bounty.'

She thought a moment. "It's highly descriptive, short and concise. Yes, I suppose that's exactly what it is."

"Look," I didn't like rehearsing the thought, "I'm here because I believe in the things your people said you believed in. It just seems that this is a very poor way of starting off the beginning of your new society."

She grinned, "If I recall accurately, I said the same thing the first time I saw you."

"So why are you here?"

"I've, of late, often asked myself that same question. Curiosity, I suppose, could be the only label--if pressed presently."

I fought to keep my voice low so I wouldn't wake the others.

"Curiosity!?"

I didn't succeed.

"Erick! You'll wake the others."

I was flabbergasted.

"What kind of curiosity makes someone go through what we've endured to get just this far?"

"A quest for truth," she said plainly.

"What kind of truth are you going to find in that god-forsaken place?" I exclaimed as I pointed to Sin's End.

"The truth that love demands."

My heart skipped. I'd never said anything to intimate my feeling for her to her! Always I had kept my distance. Love for who? and for what? battered at my brain. At length the only word that came out of my mouth was, "Why?"

"Because the question that I have is just. Because I deserve to know the

answer even if my life should be required to gain it. Because I have to live with me and to live a lie is no life, only perpetual death. Because reputation demands vigilance. Because--how much more would you like?"

My mouth was open.

"How much more is there?"

"Enough you wouldn't like to wait for me to go through them."

"I might."

She half smiled, "You might at that."

"Can I help?"

"You already have in a number of ways."

"Do you have any of your answer?"

"Only the framework of the question, I'm afraid."

She sighed and sat down where the hill curved downward and looked at the stars.

Shannon came around the wagon.

"You two would wake the dead."

"Sorry," said Almetra. "How's Hawk?"

"Resting. Cleat's with her." Shannon stretched as she folded down the back of the wagon and reached for a jar of black tea. "Anybody care for some?"

Almetra and I both shook our heads to indicate, "No."

"Suit yourselves." She poured herself a cup then returned the jar and closed the board. "Mind if I join you?"

"Suit yourself," I said.

"Yes."

She sat down next to Almetra.

Almetra looked at Shannon and said, "Why are you here?"

"You guys woke me with all your blathering."

"No, I mean why did you come along on this mission?"

Shannon looked at the sky, then to her cup, then to me, and finally to Almetra. "Must be something in the air here."

"No, Shannon, I know what you said in the counsel chambers, but you only told a half-truth. What's the other half?" Asked Almetra.

This, I thought, could get interesting.

Shannon took a swallow of the lukewarm tea and said, "The other half was a combination of different concerns and questions I have had for a considerable time."

They just sat there. Shannon purposefully didn't answer Almetra's question, and Almetra didn't try to get her to. Frustration is the only word for what I felt then. I tried to find out what Shannon was thinking and probed her mind. The only thing I came up with was "Erick, not now." I walked to the other side of the hill to watch from that direction. I could hear them talking but couldn't make out their words.

Dawn came up with the smell of dew on the ground, the only pleasantness which greeted us besides the light of day. Not a bird could be heard, no bees buzzed; only, the distant cry of a wolf and the shriek of a griffin. I would have thought they were fighting each other, but the sounds came from different directions.

Cleat had been looking to the sky above Sin's End while the rest of us were making breakfast. He called out, "Erick!"

We all stopped to look at him. "What?" I said.

"Look!" he was pointing where he was looking.

We searched the sky to see what he was talking about; I for one saw nothing. I got a spyglass from my saddlebag and looked again. It looked

like a--"Dragon! It has to be the biggest worm I've ever seen in my entire life! And it's red?!" The glass was immediately passed from hand to hand so all could view. I had seen a black dragon as a youth passing through the swamps we had just passed, and counted it the hand of providence that we didn't see one this time. But, a red one? And of such size? They handed the glass back to me to look again. Five! "It must be a family." I decided it best not to waste any time.

"Ladies, Cleat, I don't want to move Hawk anywhere in her condition, but I'd rather take a chance on her surviving a move than to risk the hope that we won't be spotted out here in the open like this. Unless there is argument I suggest we make all haste to move. Don't put the fire out; the smoke might attract their attention."

We saddled the horses and cinched up the harnesses of the wagon team, trying to be as quiet a possible, not knowing how the breeze might carry the sound. We went down the reverse slope of the hill and followed a path which we hoped would provide the greatest degree of concealment. Movement wasn't especially slow, just nerve wracking. It was apparent to me that we were following a trail created by wolves. The further we went, the more dense the tracks before us became.

Almetra had been in the drag position, but she rode up next to me.
"Erick," she started, "is it..." She noticed the tracks we were riding over. "Erick, why are we going this way?"

I drew rein and handed the spyglass to her and pointed toward the volcano. She saw what I saw. The dragons were looking at the smoke of our fire into which, as luck would have it (if you can call it luck), some green leaves had blown. I next directed her attention to the face of Sin's End, ahead a little to our right. She could then see the entrance to the tunnel

McEan and Dunnybrook would have used--that is, if the owner of the Black Dragon told Shannon the truth.

After she had seen what I wanted her to observe, I asked her what she needed.

"I was going to ask if it was still necessary to move--Hawk is moaning something fierce--though under the circumstances I don't think it wise to press the issue."

The hills had been giving way to rougher terrain. There looked to be an overhang ahead beyond the next flat. I pointed it out to Almetra and told her that if it was possible to find any form of refuge ahead, we would stop.

I halted our small company before we crossed the flat. I asked Shannon if she had any more of the powder she had back in Releigh. She said she did and gave me some. I sprinkled it over myself and Jill (my horse) then proceeded slowly onto the flat.

The flat was a veritable tapestry of tracks, none were any newer than two days old. As I drew rein in front of the overhang, I found myself looking into the opening of a cave. I couldn't tell how far it was to the back of it from where I was so I threw a rock into the darkness. I heard it hit something then skitter along the floor. From the way it rolled I determined that it went back and down a considerable ways from the mouth. I took the torch from my saddle and went in.

To get the wagon inside would require us to take down the top. Given the roughness of the floor it would be difficult to roll the wheels over it. It looked like rapids, but it was rock. There was an area a little way back that was relatively flat on which we could make camp. There was a slight breeze coming from further back in the cavern. This didn't make any sense, so I proceeded slowly down the throat of the darkness. It went back about

five hundred rods then narrowed to a thin fissure too small for me to navigate but maybe not for Cleat. Otherwise the cave appeared harmless enough. I went back for the others.

When I got back, Shannon alerted me that one of the dragons was at the site of our campfire and another had just started in our direction. There was no time to lose! We sped in the direction of the cave. So rough was the ride I could hear Hawk scream in pain. I turned back to look just as one of the giant red worms was slipping its massive maw over the top of the wagon. All I could do was watch in horror!

We were fortunate; it flew by too quickly to get a good bite and only ripped off the canvas cover. The horses didn't want to go into the cave, but we spurred them till they relented. Cleat couldn't navigate the entrance and was trying with all the strength his little form could muster to get his mother out of the wagon before the dragon returned. I fairly flew as I dismounted and rushed back to the mouth of the cave to give him a hand. Shannon and Almetra were with us not long after that. We succeeded in getting Hawk into the cave, and I left Cleat and Almetra to see to her while Shannon and myself returned to retrieve what we could from the wagon.

Too late! We dodged the stream of fire by jumping behind some rocks. The wagon--that is, what little that didn't just evaporate under the intense heat--was in flame. The cave became filled with hot vapors as a small stream of molten slag appeared where the dragon's breath was most intense. I now knew why the floor looked like it did.

My newly found knowledge was little comforting. All we had left were our three mounts and what we carried in our packs and saddlebags. The wagon and all of our supplies were gone; the wagon team were at that moment being eaten by the worm outside the entrance of the cave. The air became filled with the

sickly sweet smell of roasting horse flesh. I was grateful that the flat area I had found was off to the side behind some large boulders, or we would have been missing everything except Shannon and myself.

Shannon motioned for me to follow the side of the cave toward its back then whispered, "Try to make your crossing back there."

The flaming remains of the wagon provided enough light that I didn't break my neck climbing over large rocks toward the back of the cave. The dragon made short work of the four horses that made up the wagon team and was back to poking its proboscis into the cavern's mouth, sniffing for what it could smell.

It didn't have to smell to know we were there; Hawk was screaming from pain so much it hurt my ears. Almetra slugged her and knocked her unconscious. We all stared at her. When she noticed our attention, she shrugged and said, "What else could I do?"

"Ahh, I see you are still here, then," the deep voice startled us all. We looked around, and when we saw nothing, Cleat called our attention to the mouth of the cave. It was the dragon!

"You know, we could make this very easy, if you would be willing."

What could we have said? Not one of us was prepared for a dragon which could talk! We stood watching its lips move.

"Do you have a spokesman for your party?" It waited for us to say something, and when we didn't it continued. "Well, no matter. I'll do the talking for both of us. It would be good for you to come out one at a time and surrender. I will see to it that whatever it is that pains you will be taken away. I like humans."

Cleat couldn't take any more. He knocked an arrow--the kind that had an exploding tip--in his short bow. [This is one of those high-technology items

they found back at home in their own cave city. It appears to resemble nitroglycerin in reaction. Ed.] I, Shannon, and Almetra just stood there, immobile. Cleat let his arrow fly. We were blown off our feet by the concussion of the explosion. When the dust cleared, we saw a stream of volcanic ooze bubbling out of what remained of the worm's head. I'd never seen anything like it! Cleat had said he had them, but I thought it was just the imagination of a young boy when he told me how much power the small tips possessed.

Shannon dashed for her pack. She ignored the many small cuts and bruises she had just acquired and took out several small empty vials and a couple of blotters, then hurried toward the remains of the red dragon.

As we watched, Cleat muttered, "Spell-users." He shook his head and went back to his mother's side.

His mother--what could be done? I was truly at a loss. I had learned a lot about poisons from the company medic when I was in the army. I could do most field dressing as well as anyone else. I had had enough experience at it to make me want to retire from anything which dealt with blood. But what could I do for Hawk? I felt her pulse; she was fading and I knew it. I had no words for her brave young son. He sat next to her holding her hand, all the while his tears made steady plops on the ground as they dropped from his cheek and his nose. I never felt so impotent in my life.

Cleat looked up at me, his tears forming a new stream down his narrow chin. I shook my head slowly. He dried his tears and unrolled his bedroll then covered her body and tucked the blanket under her sides and around her neck. He took an extra shirt from his pack and put it under her head very gently then retook her hand and sat quietly, waiting.

Almetra had been leaning against the boulder rubbing her bruised arm, watching, waiting. Shannon was busy gathering samples of the dead worm. I

didn't know why and at that moment I didn't care. Hawk had taught me things that I really don't believe I would have ever discovered on my own. I had learned to trust her and, I guess, even to love her like I imagined I would a sister if I had ever had one. And now the end had come. I felt as weak as a newborn.

We ate iron rations that night. We didn't eat much. No one really felt like there was any point to continue on. The discussion turned to how we would effect our return.

"How much longer do you think those dragons will be?" asked Cleat.

He asked because the other dragons had been eating off the one Cleat had killed since sundown. It was now three hours later.

"Till they're full," I said, in spite of the lameness of the answer.

"Do you still have the map, Shannon?" asked Almetra.

"It went up with the wagon, I'm afraid."

I felt her words to the marrow of my bones when Almetra said, "I think it would be very easy to go insane if I have to listen to the sound of their (the dragons) slobbering over that carcass much longer!"

She was right. It was very unnerving to have to sit and listen to the four dragons rip and tear the flesh of their fellow dragon, then chew and swallow monotonously. It was like (fingernails on a blackboard), made all the more intolerable by the knowledge that they were intelligent enough to speak the common tongue of men! Or, at least the one that was dead did. The others just shrieked and grunted. We were careful to not let them hear us, just the same.

We were blessed by the fresh air which was coming in through the fissure at the back of the cave. It kept the vile smell away. I don't know where the idea came from--desperation, fear, exhaustion, hope--it didn't matter,

but it was worth a try. Hawk had said some time ago that vysionpas knew only the bounds of first the gift, and--more often--second, the gifted. If I might stretch to that untapped portion of my gift, I might be able to do the unthought of.

I folded my legs and cleared my mind then concentrated on my breathing to relax. I started going over the rudiments of my training and analyzed them separately. I regrouped them to see what patterns or forms could be created out of my basic understanding. I pursued first one then another set of possibilities. It was invigorating to be so deeply involved in logic and reason. I felt that the long months had served to awaken a thirst and even a longing to excell in disciplining my mind and actions to a universal law. The process became easier with practice, though not without frustration. I could see that Hawk had taught me in much the same fashion that one would learn music. The geometry was pleasing and inspiring. One principal built upon another developing and enlarging on the previous lessons. A new respect and almost awe came over me as I worked my way through the progressions, each developing into images which comprehended all that proceeded it, each forming the basis for the next progression. An unbroken procession of principles building into eternity! Forever forward! That was the essence!

Hawk never told me this. She insisted that the discipline was finite, but that flew in the face of everything else she taught me. The discipline was not finite but a continuum comprehending all other disciplines to make up all the laws of the universe. The very power which made God what He is!

The scope was infinite, but I couldn't get past a number of obstacles where my education was deficient. Now I had to decide how to make use of the understanding so as to make it practical.

The others had gone to sleep. Cleat nodded next to his mother. I had

never been able to detect Hawk before--I had decided that it was because she was somewhat like Almetra--but now I had no problem. There were only two differences; first, she had had on a medallion which had its chain broken when the fish had her; second, she was sick and unconscious. Either could be a plausible reason. However, if it was the former, I expected no resistance. If, on the other hand, the latter was the case, if I was successful, I could expect Hawk's displeasure when she regained consciousness to be displayed in a fashion for which I was sure I wouldn't be prepared.

I had learned from an old Sage when I was twelve that all living creatures were made up of the elements which could be found on Omega. And as he said, "Else they would not be from Omega, but from other worlds." He also told me that if I could comprehend the smallest of living organisms, I would be near to understanding the most complex. The difficulty, as he described it, was that, "Most doctors become so confused with the diversity of function that they forget all was created by the same mind and therefore must of necessity follow the same rules." At the time I was impressed but had no idea in the least what he was talking about. He proceeded to explain to me the workings of a sponge. He said, "This is not the simplest of life forms; this is just as complex as humans. The only difference is function." He next took out a blank scroll and drew a diagram and said, "This is Sphyrai. It is the beginning of the building blocks of life." He paused then said, "Do you understand?"

I nodded.

"This is equal to Patrix, the beginning of the building blocks of all that is matter." He again looked at me.

I nodded.

"You will not be able to see these things with your eyes, but you may

comprehend them with your mind. Sphyrai and Patrix are identical to the universe in its expanding and growing condition."

My expression was puzzled.

His eyes glistened as he said, "You won't understand all that I tell you, but you will remember and ponder. These are the same as Alpha and Omega. They constitute that which has an end. After this life there is no end."

We continued our discussions for about a week. Most of what he told me I don't remember. That which he said I would remember, strangely enough, I do. I looked upon Hawk as though she were just so much Patrix, since that would be where the damage was. I concentrated upon her body and the portions where the damage was the greatest and pictured in my mind the parts becoming whole. I spent thirty minutes with my eyes closed. I opened my eyes to see if I was repairing the tissue properly. Aside from starting crooked it was working. I placed my fingers lightly on her wounds to keep from going crooked again and disconnected the area I had botched and started over again. It was about an hour before dawn. The dragons had flown off leaving the mangled carcass behind. I went to each member of the party and repaired their wounds in the time I had left. I then fell asleep, exhausted and drained, but happy.

* * *

Redmond woke up and shaved. He ate some of the cake he had left and washed it down with water. He had been working on building a trap just inside of the mouth of the cave where they had entered on their way to the lava lake. It was an intricate and ingenious trap. He took advantage of the fact that in that particular spot the wind was so great whoever came in wouldn't be able to use a torch to see by, and therefore would not see the

trap. The only way to avoid it was to follow a complicated path through it. With the aid of his sapphire he could easily manage it, as a lack of light was no problem.

He had made it his habit of stepping out to the edge of the escarpment each morning and night to look for signs of anyone who may have followed them.

He wasn't worried about food. They had stashed all of their excess food where Redmond now made his camp. He could easily survive on what he had for two months. Snow water served for his needs; it formed a small waterfall on the cavern wall. Where a fissure opened up to let it pass it caused a small pool on the floor of the tunnel then passed back through the rock. As long as there was melting snow, there was water.

Right after he arrived he retrieved wood from below the escarpment and built a lean-to as a windbreak next to his camp in the cave. Now his days were spent waiting for the expected assassins to show up. Colin didn't know who would be coming or when, but Raphael's indiscretion back in Raleigh made Colin sure it was just a matter of time before someone came looking for what they may expect to be easy money at his and Cindrith's expense.

Redmond today would finish his preparations on his trap. He busied himself setting the four heavy-crossbows into the walls of the tunnel. When he finished, he cocked and armed them. It was his lunchtime when he finished, so he sat to make something to eat and write in his journal:

Finished the trap. A month has passed since their Majesties and I parted company. My mind is constantly drawn to them--where they are, if they are alright, if the child is well. I pray the young Raphael get not into trouble the way youth is wont to...

* * *

Almetra was the first to wake. She felt so refreshed she thought the whole episode of her wounds to be a dream. As she looked about her, she knew it wasn't. At first she was stunned. She looked to the entrance and saw the looming carcass of the dragon still mostly blocking it. The others were still asleep. Her clothing still had holes in it from the damage she had received the day before. Yet in her flesh wasn't the least sign of even a scratch! She hurried over to Hawk to see if the miraculous effect had helped her. There wasn't a mark on her! It was as though she had never been harmed.

In her excitement Almetra fairly shouted, "Wake up, everyone!"

At once everyone except Erick were on their feet with swords drawn, even Hawk. As they looked one to another, all eyes were drawn to Hawk.

Hawk, feeling a little self conscious said, "What is it? Why are you staring at me?"

Shannon said, "You were practically dead!"

"Dead?" she objected. She realized her surroundings had changed and asked, "How did we come to be here?"

Almetra said, "Shannon, our wounds are healed! I don't know how, but while we slept they disappeared!"

Shannon and Cleat inspected themselves. Cleat then threw his arms around his mother, so grateful was he that she was well.

Hawk remained skeptical. "Where's Erick?" she asked.

"He was sitting next to you when we went to sleep," said Shannon.

As they started to search for Erick, Cleat said, "There he is, next to the fissure!" He walked over to him and kicked his boot, "Erick, wake up."

Erick opened one eye, then closed it as he said, "Hello, Cleat. I'd like to sleep a little longer, if you don't mind."

Shannon said, "Erick, it's important! Wake up!"

Erick took a couple of short breaths followed by a long one and said, "I'm sorry. I'm tired. You take care of it."

"No, Erick. You don't understand! We're all well," said Almetra.

Hawk scratched the side of her head trying to get her bearings.

Erick said, "I know you all are. I am not. Please let me sleep." He folded his arms in front of him and tried to get comfortable.

Cleat turned to the others, "He's right! He's still cut across his chest and arm."

The others came over to look. Erick wasn't better. Now the question was, why not? They let Erick sleep. He could tell what he knew after he rested.

* * *

It was afternoon when I awoke. I was still very tired and it seemed as though every muscle ached. I was pleased to see Hawk standing next to the entrance when I opened my eyes. Cleat wiggled his fingers at me and said, "Good afternoon, sleepy-head."

I gave him a wry grin and saw Almetra and Shannon move toward me. Hawk, too, turned around and came to the back of the cave.

Shannon said, "How do you feel?"

"Like I've been stomped on by a horse. Why?"

"How did you know we were healed?"

"I saw it."

"Why weren't you?"

I looked at them. Could I tell them the truth? I guess I was just too tired to weigh the question and said, "Look, I don't know about you, but I think it pretty great that you folks are healed. I'll make do."

Shannon clearly wasn't satisfied. For that matter neither were any of the others.

Shannon sat on a rounded rock next to me and said, "Erick, if there is some property about this cave which has the ability to heal the sick, it could prove of immeasurable worth. I realize that you're tired, and I'm terribly disappointed that a cure wasn't effected for you as it was for the rest of us, but I am sure you can understand our wanting to know what you saw last night. Please share your observations with us."

"You won't believe me."

Almetra spoke up, "I don't believe I'm healed, but I am. What could be more incredible than that?"

"Oh, it's more incredible."

Shannon tried again, "We accept that we don't understand it, but would it hurt for you to tell us about it?"

I relented, "I did it."

Cleat looked like he had just been thunderstruck, Almetra's eyes looked like they would pop from their sockets, Shannon was unmoved, and Hawk shouted.

"Liar!"

The others looked at her. She was pale and shook visibly. She continued in a shrill tone that I'd never heard from her before.

"He doesn't possess that kind of ability! I know; I trained him myself!" She pulled her sword and said, "Tell the truth, Erick of Kempdon!"

Almetra came to my aid, "He did, Hawk. I don't know how he did it, but I know that he didn't lie."

Hawk turned her invective on Almetra for defending me.

"Are you in on this with him, then!?!?"

Almetra didn't back up.

"If you wish to call me a liar, Hawk, I suggest you think again." There was nothing menacing in her tone, just calm determination.

Hawk regained herself. She looked at her sword then put it away. "Where did you get the ability to do this--thing?"

"From what you taught me." I said.

"I never taught you how to heal. The power doesn't exist!"

"But it does. Last night I went over all that you had taught me and put that together with some other things I learned as a youth. It works, Hawk. I think I can even show you how to do it."

"No," she said, then turned her back and stormed away.

I felt sorry for Cleat. He sat next to me so visibly confused. He had to make up his own mind, so I didn't say anything to him. I found myself wishing Hawk hadn't been so final. When Almetra and Shannon got up without further word, I was afraid that I'd lost all credibility simply because I had told the truth.

Shannon helped me rebandage my wounds. She didn't say anything beyond that which was necessary. We spent the remainder of that night in the cave and resolved to strike out before suns up to make it to the escarpment without being seen.

The horses were fed what little fodder we had left, then we set out. The carcass of the dragon was vile. We resorted to wet rags over the horses' nostrils to get them out of the cave. Within twenty minuets we were on our

way.

We made it to the base of the escarpment just as the sky began to lighten. About halfway up the side of the facing we came to a spot where the remains of horses had been left. They weren't any of ours. Hawk and I estimated them to have been there about a month and a fortnight. The tack was a little weathered, but it was still obvious that whoever owned it was not poor. The fittings were all of gold. From what could be seen of some bleached hide there were two sterling white horses, a sorrel, and a paint. Four horses meant four riders.

They made it this far. All of us felt a little flush knowing that we were so close to them. If the owner of the Black Dragon told the truth, and we now had no cause to doubt him, the cave above us was the only known way in or out of Sin's End without risking the peril of going over the top.

The higher up we went, the more loose lava rock we encountered till it became obvious that it would be impossible to take the horses up any farther. Somehow I had the idea that leaving the horses behind was the way the other horses had met their end. I had no relish for the alternatives, but our quarry was beyond where we could take the horses. We decided the best thing to do was to let the horses run free. At least they stood a chance at survival that way. Shannon had raised Shelia and Jill from colts and put forward the idea herself, adding, "Who knows but that they may still be alive when we come back out?"

It was a pleasant thought, but a highly dubious one. We hefted our packs and supplies and assented the escarpment. We came to a ledge about four hands below the cave. Cleat volunteered to go up and find a place to tie off a rope for the rest of us to climb up. As I gave him a leg up, he whispered in my ear, "I believe you, Erick." He climbed over the edge and was gone

from my sight.

* * *

Redmond had seen them as they started to mount the the face of the volcano. He had never shed innocent blood in his life. It had never fallen to him to have to kill women either. The party approaching was composed of a boy and three women with one man. "What will I do?" he thought. He was frantic that any save the man would die because of him. He'd never heard of female assassins.

At last the cloud of doubt dissipated a little. It really didn't matter if they made it to the lava lake; they wouldn't be able to cross it. He began to dismantle the trap as quickly as caution would allow. If the man came ahead first, he would dispatch him. If one of the women or the boy were first, he would have to warn them if he hadn't finished dismantling the trap by the time they arrived.

The last of the blade traps had been reduced to where they would be harmless. All that remained was the two javelins and the four crossbows. He heard the sound of grunting. The boy would be first! The little fellow started into the tunnel. Redmond remained quiet. Sweat pulsated from his aged flesh, and he had to wipe his brow just to see. The boy tied off a rope around a stalagmite then tossed the rope back over the edge of the entrance. Redmond moved to release a trip wire but had to recede when the youth started in his direction.

Redmond determined that if the boy made two more steps, he would reveal himself and stop the lad before he was afoul of the trip wires. One, he counted in his mind--the boy tripped!

"NO!" cried Redmond as he leapt to shield the young man's body with his own. Redmond caught three of the bolts and a javelin and died instantly. The boy took one of the bolts through his neck, and the other javelin drove through his kidneys.

PART VIII

(A Power Play)

[On Omega there seems to be no end to the propensity displayed by those who've derived their power through ill-conceived means to flaunt their achievements before the public in a written form. What follows are a few examples of the literature being circulated during this period of Omegian History. Ed.]

From Hellios Vergennidos (patronized by His Highness Clarvignon) we have a publication entitled "ZOE EX ESOU THANATOS." What follows is an excerpt from pages 329-340 and is the summation of his pseudo-philosophical work:

"It therefore is the quest of man to be the image of perfection.

This perfection, which we earlier examined, is the sole source of the higher object of man....Let us all remember that though we seem to be possessed of a higher reasoning than the beast...,we are in reality only beasts ourselves....

"It has been said, 'Eat drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.' ...having seen the finiteness of the heavens and becoming aware of our great mission in life..., our objective then is clear.

"There is no life after death. There is no longer a god. We know that he used to be but has sadly died and left us to grow for ourselves.... The only good is to reach for the inner-workings of our being....

"Growth finally is that ability to accept with complete finality that there truly is an invisible hand which guides and directs our

lives....

We have no control over our emotions or our intellect.... Pleasure is the only good! After all, Life is the same as Death, anyway."

From Kunthur Brommin (patronized by Erick Von Kerist) we have a publication entitled "DIE KUNFTIGE NEUE ZEIT." Brommin published a number of articles in the world Press under various pseudonyms. The manner in which they were written provided a ground work for greater and greater declarations against the sovereignty of the human spirit. This, his latest work of the period we are viewing, is by far the most vitriolic invective he had delivered on the subject. Brommin's normal profession was as an ambassador at large, dedicated to the "progress" of the human condition.

Here follows an excerpt from the beginning of his work which provides us an idea of the sort of mind that "has the love of God for his fellow man ever before him":

"If we would solve the enveloping problems of our world community, we must see how we interrelate to that community. We arrive at the junction where it is each man's duty to relinquish his childish designs on independence of thought to those whose superior intellect and abilities are better suited to the tasks at hand.

"Ultimately it will always be the design of inferior men to hold the reins of those who are better able to manage the world. If we would maintain the rule of the fittest, we must be the more aggressive in the prosecution of those surviving Nation States.

"Ruthlessness should not be shirked. The globe is limited in both its resources as well as its Lebensraum. [Living space. Ed.]

We must take with both hands that which is held by the lower strata of society. Subjugation is the only answer for those who test the sufferance of their benefactors. Where they will not acquiesce to just demands, they deserve to be killed for abusing that sufferance. In the coming New Age, it will be the duty of all to serve the greater good."

Amazing as it may seem, there was never any general public outcry over such statements being vented in the public Press. Nor was there any concern over the fact that the author was involved in the direct peace negotiation processes between Unicorn and Quintin.

From Vasilenin Dovistyanansky (patronized by His Highness Ithkarstan) we have two works of almost singular importance for their ability to sweep the population under the influence of "Blood and Soil." The first of these works, "PROYEKTIROVANIYE APOKALIPSA," dealt almost exclusively with the undermining of the social systems which made up the "World Order." It was this book which paved the way for the infinitely more radical and diabolical work "VSTROYENNAYA BEDNOST." The later publication could be found on every newsstand and in almost every quarter of Unicorn just prior to the declaration of war. It set forth the plan adopted by the Secret Order of the Silver Loon for the complete subjugation of what were still nominally citizens of a republic.

None of the foregoing works were to be found within the confines of either the areas dominated by the Spice Kings (the name was a euphemism for the narcotics trade), or the considerably enlarged areas held by the Coastal States of Quintin, which was once part of the same Republic as Unicorn.

The overall thrust of these and other works was the establishment in the

minds of the masses the idea that euhemerism was not only valid but essential to a working knowledge of science. The incessant insistence upon the idea of God being dead was of the utmost importance. To this end the rank and file of the various churches were infiltrated by moles. It would be their job to subvert the doctrines and seduce the minds of their followers into a daze where it was acceptable to do anything that the carnal nature might contrive. These and all other evils/vices were to be viewed as personal choice in one's mode of worship, thus not subject to public censure. This was made all the easier as there were few left who placed any importance upon religious principal. The only evidence of religion remaining in many instances were the rites practiced with zombie like repetition.

From the imminent scholar Piere Du Lac (patronized by Velvet Du Tanners) comes a work on education entitled "LA CRISE D'IDENTITÉ ENTRE LA PETITE BOURGEOISIE SUR DEVENIR LES NOUVEAUX RICHES." This text took on gigantic proportions instantly as being the "final word" on the effects of progress. [Similar to the work of "Future Shock." Ed.] It transformed the school systems around Quintin. [A steam locomotive, the first that had been constructed during the dating of "sc," was blown up as being the work of evil when the above-mentioned book showed up on campus of Ubretch College in southeast Quintin. Ed.] There could be a case made that though Du Lac wasn't the first to proclaim progress bad, he was the first to make a case for the irrational doctrines of Mandroark. The amazing thing is that the public accepted it without so much as a whimper! The reason for its popularity wasn't that it detracted from the population's inventiveness; it was more that Du Lac painted a picture of a bedraggled factory worker and the drudging wife never fully benefiting from the progress which would be taken out of their hides in the form of sweat and toil. Its conclusion was intentionally

the wrong one.

The publication of Du Lac's propaganda had been banned previous to the overthrow of Quintin's throne. King Edmond Del Harthallow I has the distinction of being the vehicle whereby Du Lac could present his "views" to an unsuspecting public. The natural course was from that point fixed. Du Lac had bred unrest, and those who followed him would heap coals onto the fires of distrust of the values of the Republics. Ultimately laying the foundation of the nonsense that somehow the Republics were supposed to be Democracies and that the mob rule thereby engendered was strangely good, seemed to prevail amongst all these authors.

From Riska Cannia (reigning member of the SOSL) we have an interesting pamphlet taken from a series of editorials published in his papers then circulated to the lesser Presses styled simply "THE NEW CONSPIRACY." It's a strange fact, but by the time this came out there were open signs of men working to the destruction of Unicorn and thus the last Republic. Each of these men and women would as a matter of course deny any knowledge of conspiracy. The obviousness of the lie caused not one of them to blush. Of course, Cannia felt duty bound to publish a constant barrage of attacks against those few who were desperately trying to save the Republican idea of government before it was too late through various organizations created to cause brush fires that would keep Cannia and his cronies off balance as much as possible.

Here we pick back up with the question which bothered the heads of SOSL at almost every session since the fall of Unicorn: "Who leaked the news that Colin was still alive? And (what was eternally worse) who convinced so many that he is the real heir to the throne of Quintin?"

Late in the evening of the twelfth day of August a rider came up to the

old Historical Bank with a message for Mr. Erick Von Kerist. The usual security precautions had to be taken before they would even tell Von Kerist that a messenger had arrived. The delay wasn't important; the news was. It revealed that Colin and Sean McEan were one in the same person. Records, which the staff of Marshal Saphglite didn't have time to destroy, as well as prisoners placed Colin and Dunnybrook in front of Renald's lines as the assault on Unicorn was opened. Then the worst news: Colin and Dunnybrook had a son!

The only question Von Kerist had of the messenger was, "Who besides you knows this?"

"Brigadier Dunbar, some of his staff, and a few of the prisoners."

Von Kerist pressed a small lever on the side of his desk. The messenger was dead before he hit the floor from a poison dart which came from behind him.

"Rankin!" called Von Kerist.

"Yah, Von Kerist," came the voice from the hall followed by the door opening and the appearance of a burly man.

"Take the men Ithkarstan sent and put an end to Brigadier Dunbar, his family, staff, and all prisoners from the headquarters of Saphglite."

"It shall be done!" Rankin turned to leave.

"Rankin, before you leave, reset the dart gun and remove this rubbish." He pointed to the messenger prostrate on the floor.

These events, of course, meant that it would be necessary to assemble those members Von Kerist could find and hold a counsel. Von Kerist found that only four members were within practical distance to hold a meeting within the week. He sent out the necessary letters and requested a meeting of the "Board," as they styled themselves.

Three days latter Von Kerist met with Riska Cannia, Jeremy Bender, and Darryl and Thorndyke Phykeré. They discussed the knowledge Von Kerist had concerning the birth of a son to Colin.

Cannia banged his fist on the table as he said, "Yes, but do we know where they are now?!"

Bender had been sitting silently throughout the discussions. Now he raised his hand slightly; the others fell silent.

"La Flandours is at this moment on his way to Sin's End. My auguries tell me that the volcano is likely to be where we will find them."

The avenues opened as options were explored with intricate care. Thorndyke Phykeré set the final decision to voice vote.

"Okay, we can't get to them before the month is out, so we wait until he has acquired a visible presence. Then we move to make an example of him. Are we all agreed?"

The vote was unanimous.

* * *

Vashlee's fame had spread far and wide over the course of his life, so it was no great surprise to have his journey slowed by pageantry at every village and hamlet that knew of his pending arrival along the coasts of Quintin. The local authorities were loathe to see such a display of affection for a foreign dignitary, especially one of such military prowess. But, with the bulk of the armies in Unicorn, they were in no position to deal with the strife forbidding the displays would incur. They suffered the population's demands.

The journey was relatively without incident till they arrived in port at

Geolessi on the eastern coast of Eribador, the last stop before sailing for Raleigh. Geolessi had the distinction of having been the last hold-out when General Southall was putting down the resistance to Renald's autocratic rule. As a result the port and town were constantly patrolled by the Draconian Guard.

Renald felt the time had arrived to show his feelings for the great military strategist and statesman Vashlee La Flandours. The populace were ordered to stay in their homes. If a civilian was seen on the street, they would be summarily executed. The town filled with mercenaries who had been paid ten silver sovereigns each. [Quite a figure in an economy where the average yearly income was twenty silver sovereign. Ed.]

A cobbler named Isno Louni had overheard the careless conversation of a couple of the mercenaries who had came in to have their shoes resoled two days before Vashlee was to put into port. Renald's plan was to have the mercenaries to turn out as though they were the townsmen and women. They would follow exactly the same tactics to coax the retiring General La Flandours off of the ship for the celebrations they had prepared to honor him, as had been used in all the previous towns.

Isno's half-brother by his father's second marriage had fought in the armies of La Flandours and returned home much as many others did with high praise for the greatness of the man under whom they served. Isno loved his half-brother and believed what he was told. He looked forward to being able to see so great a man and felt proud to say it would be the crowning point of a "humble cobbler's life" to be part of such an event.

Isno's heart sank as he pondered the words he overheard. He finished the boots and asked for his three coppers from each of the men. The mercenaries left without paying. A friend of Isno's, a man named Perpi Frond, visited

Isno late that same afternoon. Perpi's wife later recorded the men's conversation after her husband told her about it.

"Isno, how are you, my friend?" said Perpi.

"I could be much better, my friend."

"We all could do with these mercenaries leaving, no?"

"Yes, Perpi, that is true. But come let me tell you of worse tidings that should make your blood run cold!"

"What news is it that could make a man's blood run cold, Isno?"

"I repaired the boots of two terrorists today," Isno spat. "They didn't pay!" Perpi nodded understandingly. "I heard them talking between each other--they are here by the King's order to kill the General when he arrives! That's why they declared this new martial law."

Perpi flushed. "No!" he said.

With his most earnest tone Isno said, "It's true. Sad day, sad day!"

"Isno, my friend," said Perpi as he recovered from his shock. "Are you afraid of water?"

"Afraid of water! I tell you the saddest news of your life and you ask if I'm afraid of water? Of course I'm afraid of water!"

"Yes, my friend, so am I. But maybe I think more of the General than I do my fear of water?"

"What is this you're saying, Perpi?"

"I know where there's a boat with oars. Maybe we could forget our fear and row out to the ship before it comes into port?"

Isno was always slow. "And what would we do after we rowed to the ship? What would we do when the Captain says, 'Go away'? Huh, what would we do then?"

"We tell them that we are a special envoy sent ahead to speak to the

General." Perpi leaned back, pleased with himself.

"Right, mister smarty pants. You in your tattered coat and me with my leather apron. Some dignitaries we'd make."

"Okay, so we don't look the part! Would you like, maybe, God forbid, that the General be killed and we do nothing like we've done all our lives?"

"Okay, okay. If we drown, though, I spit in your eye."

They made it to the ship and warned Vashlee. He gave each of the men a gold sovereign for their efforts and suggested they take a different route home. Vashlee knew they could never spend the money without being accused of stealing it, but they could keep it as a memorial of his gratitude.

* * *

"...the ship didn't put in to Geolessi. They said they were having trouble with the tiller and needed more complete port facilities, Your Majesty."

Renald sat staring at the Chamberlain. He tapped his fingertips together, slowly, rhythmically, in front of his lips as he considered his next move. The Chamberlain, long abused when his King became pensive, began to sweat visibly.

Renald said, "Should I have you roasted on a spit or in an oven?"

The Chamberlain swallowed, "As it please Your Majesty."

"No, neither today. Be off, dog!"

The Chamberlain backed up, slowly bowing each time, till he was out of the counsel hall.

Renald continued to muse over the temporary escape of La Flandours; however, the high seas would do just as well. The ship could be lost in a

freak storm, or its powder magazine could mysteriously blow, or--any number of things. Greyhalthor was free to choose his own time for La Flandours' demise. Renald was becoming more anxious and didn't want to wait.

Renald made it a habit to maintain his intelligence as to the whereabouts of the members of SOSL. He had lost quite a few men in doing so, but it paid for itself in keeping him alive. Thanks to the network of spies he finally established, free from those not loyal to himself, he now knew where Cindrith and Colin were. He also knew of the child.

The thing which bothered him most that afternoon was the amount of time that had passed since hearing from his favorite spy: Hawk. The perridonys [A bird which was something of a cross between a homing pigeon and a falcon. Ed.] which was used to keep him informed of her progress was overly late. If she was unsuccessful in destroying parents and child, a popular revolt could form in the ranks of the military.

Even though there were few still living who remembered life before the Harthallow line ascended to the throne of Quintin, stories were told and retold around many a dinner table about the battles which saw the Harthallow line come into power, not stories of open battle in the military sense, but stories of intrigue and treason!

Renald had been careful to quickly dispatch all who opposed him when he took the throne. The task was made all the easier with the aid of SOSL. Things now stood differently: He was archregent of Quintin, had broken off relations with the powerful "Trust" apparatus (as he called it), was making treaties with those he wasn't strong enough to conquer, established complete autocratic rule, and was about to see the end of the only persons who had a following of sufficient size to threaten him--or was he? The question ate at him.

"Perhaps the bird died in flight?" he thought to himself. "Beckall!" he shrieked. A thin wisp of a man came running in to the hall. He bowed at the base of the throne and groveled there kissing the cold stone. Renald found him revolting and often entertained ideas of a "pleasant" way of disposing of him. Still, he did grovel better than any of his other servants, so he "allowed" him to continue.

"Beckall, how far from the palace to Sin's End?"

The man stopped kissing the stone to calculate. "Twenty-two hundred leagues as fowl fly, Sire." He returned to kissing the marble steps.

"Hum. Much too far for a horseman. What's the likelihood of a Griffin Rider getting through the dragons of that place?"

"Poor, Sire," he barely missed a stroke.

"Get out!"

The much-groveling Beckall retired from the hall.

It didn't so much matter that he wouldn't be able to get to them. In the overall scheme of things it was just one more frustration to be added to his daily mounting frustrations. As he saw it, he knew La Flandours would jump ship at Releigh and head straight for Sin's End to find his granddaughter.

Renald discovered the relationship by accident while searching Cindrith's room after she fled. What did matter was the possibility of the heads of SOSL getting together with them and making common cause. Even if it were only a temporary arrangement of the most frivolous kind, it could easily mean the undoing of everything he'd worked so hard to build: his power.

Stabbing the organization in the back the way he did made his next step a very dangerous one. He didn't know where Hawk was, but he was sure about Cindrith. The only thing to do would be to contact a man who lived in the shadow of Sin's End, have him gain the confidence of La Flandours, then lead

him the wrong way. If the chance came to waylay the General, so much the better. It would relieve him of wondering when Grayhalthor would get around to doing it.

* * *

The Congress of the Eastern Marches had gathered into a small church on the outskirts of Winnifredton to listen to the communication from the late Marshal Saphglite. The Speaker opened the meeting then read the text of the letter in full.

"My dear Comrades in Peace;

"I send you greetings from those of us who haven't forgotten that liberty rings a demanding call. I won't burden you with our sufferings as there is nothing which can be done. If you receive this, thank the young lady who brought it for her daring and love for the cause.

"For myself, though I know my bones will lay moldering long before you receive this, I bid your careful attention to its content.

"Word has no doubt reached you concerning the existence of an heir to the throne of Quintin who claims to be of the Royal Blood. I entreat you to believe it! For I saw him with my own eyes and listened to him with my own ears, and am persuaded by his bearing, his demeanor, and the Device of Office about his neck. He is no imposter.

"He will need an army to regain his crown. My life and that of my fellow countrymen have been spent to gain time for him to complete the preparations he said he must before taking on the armies of the Quintinians.

"Our land is now overrun and trodden down under the yoke of the imposter Harthallow. In his avarice and greed he will shortly be looking both north to the lands of the Aveanthians and east to your own lands. It is my belief, as a strategist, that rather than risk a repeat of the debacle of the Isthmus of Unicorn by having to traverse the Isthmus of Aedomus, and thereby gain the northern states, he will direct his armies at you. It would be of immeasurable benefit to the citizens of your lands to form an alliance with the man called Sean McEan.

"I remain humbly yours in my passing.&c..."

The chapel was still as the men pondered the text. A representative from the Northern Parish of Rentworth stood and asked to speak. The speaker gave him his nod.

"Fellow Electors, as my district lies in the direct path of our potential enemy, I thought you would allow me this opportunity to be heard, and I thank you for your ears. Each of us are painfully aware of the treatment we received at the hands of General Southall after we protested the illegal invasion of Unicorn." There was a rumble around the pews. "What little we had in the way of a military establishment was thoroughly wiped out at that time. However, if it meet with the approval of this august assembly..."

"Get on with it, man!" said one of the Electors followed by some of the others.

"Ahem--As I was saying, I have a letter which was intercepted this morning and relayed to me. It is addressed to Count Verdun."

The chapel came alive with curiosity. "Read it, man!" said one voice.

"It's from King Edmond Del Harthallow the Fourth."

The room became deathly silent.

"My dear Count, it would please me very much and I could think to grant you a particular favor should you do something for me. I would like you to proceed across your lands and intercept General La Flandours. It would please us if you could gain his confidences and lead the good General on a deviant path. If occasion should present itself for you to grant the General mortality, that would be appropriate as well. Yours &c."

Several of the Electors were immediately on their feet asking the chair to recognize them. Each made a plea that the letter not be sent along as had other dispatches they had intercepted. In addition they called for a vote to send their newly organized detachment of light horse to intercept the General if he was indeed headed to Sin's End and provide him whatever help he might require.

* * *

Night was full upon the town of Releigh when the CSKS Daffodil [CSKS; Confederated Spice Kings Ship. Ed.] dropped anchor in the bay. Vashlee stood at his cabin window, watching the Lamplighter go from post to post lighting the last of the lamps of the piers. Releigh sat on the slow rise of the hill overlooking the bay. The lights in the shop windows were intermittently extinguished as the shopkeepers closed up for the night. The windows of the houses to either side of the main street sparked to life as people returned

to their homes for the evening. The sky was brilliantly lit with stars not darkened by any of Omega's three moons which hadn't yet risen above the horizon.

Vashlee hadn't expected any kind of welcome from the traders of Releigh. It was well known that most of the men who lived there had escaped the laws of their homelands and found refuge amongst the others of their kind in this out-of-the-way port. Were it not for the fact that he was on a Spice Kings' ship, he would never make this port. With the contracts that had been signed (all to the Spice Kings' advantage) it wasn't worth the trouble for any other ships to put in. The occasional ship would have to put in for repairs when the winds and sea gave cause, but it was the rare Captain who wasn't loathe to do so.

Vashlee had expected Elif to knock on his door. Still he was so lost in thought the firm RAP, RAP caught him off-guard.

"Come in," said Vashlee.

Elif opened the door and entered. "Little bit of a nip in the air tonight, General." Elif had gained a new respect for the older man as he accompanied him on the trip. He also gained a new name for him.

"Yes."

Elif closed the door behind him, walked over to Vashlee, and handed him a sheaf of paper. "How much longer do you think it will be till we make Thyme?"

Vashlee looked at the paper as he said, "Another sixty days or so." The paper had instructions for which longboat would be ready for their speedy departure after midnight. It also contained the schedule for the watch on that side of the ship.

"I guess most of the rest of our trip will be in open sea?"

"Most. There is an island chain about a third of the way out. The Captain said we would put in there for fresh water."

Vashlee burned the message over a lamp.

The two men sat down to play a game of fulcrum [Like chess. Ed.] to pass the late evening hours before turning in. A shadow would pass over the cabin door at odd intervals; they knew they were being watched. It had taken the better part of the journey for Vashlee to discover a member of the crew he could trust. One evening in the Captain's Mess he met a young Ensign who struck him as being potentially useful and had sought him out.

It was discovered, through quiet conversation, that the Ensign had been taken from a Unicornian ship and pressed into service. Determined to make the best of his circumstances the young man acquired rank and position on the ship which he now served.

He didn't find life to be so grand as he had imagined, however, aboard a Spice Kings' ship. He grew weary of the endless tantrums of the Captain and the Kings' cruel laws. The parade of slaves, which were brought on board healthy and taken off in a condition of emaciated emasculation, drove a deep wedge in his ambitions and loyalty to his captors turned comrades. The deepest hurt was evidenced in his growing understanding that the spice trade was ultimately designed to make the whole world slaves, if not of the flesh then of the mind!

Vashlee found an instant ally in Ensign Radagas whose only request was to be allowed to undertake the danger of the road with them. Vashlee had a natural dislike for having others share in his misfortune. It was a few days before he decided to accept the additional help from the disaffected Radagas. When he did they found it mutually satisfying.

The late hour had come and found Vashlee and Elif wide awake. They

discontinued their game and bade each other good night. Vashlee turned off his lamp and made the usual sounds of preparing for bed. When he was sure he heard the spy (which had been posted next to his door from the beginning of the trip) begin to snore, he got back out of bed and started to pack silently.

The moments passed quickly. He tied off a rope Radagas had provided and dropped it out of his cabin window. The two carpet bags tied to its end encouraged it to fall straighter. He opened his door and looked at the spy who was shifting his weight against the wall against which he had leaned his chair. Vashlee walked quietly down the corridor to the main deck then around to port where, if all was going well, he would find Elif and Radagas.

All of the men arrived within a few moments of fretful waiting. Radagas had been working on all of the pulleys and turnbuckles of the ship to make them as silent as possible; the Captain was much pleased. Now they would need all the quiet his diligent work afforded.

All went well. They were untying the Ensign's carpet bag from its rope as they heard an alarm sound from the fo'c's'le. The men began to row with all their collective might away from the ship. The crew on deck broke out several bullseye lanterns and cast the lights back and forth upon the water. At length they spotted them and launched a series of powered harpoons and arrows after them. Radagas being in the bow caught a harpoon through the heart as they rowed out of range.

* * *

He had taken every step to insure success. Every cause which posed a threat to the goals of the SOSL had been thoroughly and constantly vilified

by every stratagem his numerous staff could employ. Now Riska Cannia burned the midnight oil trying to devise a plan to deal with the advent of the two possibilities he had considered impossible: General La Flandours had come out of retirement, and the expectation of the masses that the rightful heir to the throne would claim his birthright.

He decided the best way to deal with the situation created by La Flandours was to noise abroad the rumor that La Flandours was actually touring the country at the request of the current government. His mission would be undisclosed. Cannia felt that by insinuating a direct relationship between the General and the Government he could accomplish three things. First, the government couldn't be hurt by associating itself with the fame of the General. Second, if the General made common cause with the more rebellious portions of the populace, he could be readily depicted as having dealt treacherously with the trust the government had given him in his unnamed mission. And third, merely associating the General with the present administration would weaken his support amongst those who desired him to help them in their "need." [There is little in written form concerning the rebellions from the side of the rebels. Most of the literature available on the subject has come from those who were interested in putting such rebellions down. The little which does come from the "Rebels'" point of view are a series of articles published by secreted presses and disseminated from one individual to another. The chief reasons for the revolts were the constant demands of the government of Quintin for more of everything and giving less to an already depleted working class. A couple of the papers which were circulated at this time called upon all patriotic Quintinians to join in an effort to bring the true King Colin to the throne. The two surviving papers are blood-stained and were maintained in strictest secrecy

in the vaults of Chancellory. Ed.]

The other problem would be more difficult. For a series of unnamed reasons, Cannia felt it unwise to claim that the government was engaged in secret negotiations with the rightful heir to work out a suitable solution without resorting to a civil war. The one reason he ever gave for this stand was written sometime later in his memoirs: he felt that the suggestion that it was possible for the real King to find enough support to make any kind of war would be inviting the same. Whatever ultimately motivated the course upon which Cannia decided is equally unclear; his decision, however, was not.

A series of town meetings were proposed in the Press to hear the justification for the rumor that there was another heir to the throne other than he who possessed the throne already (Renald). These meetings were then to be used to discover who the ringleaders were and to arrange secretly for them to have undiscovered accidents. That it would be incredibly coincidental that these "leaders" should all suddenly have accidents would be dealt with by the assertion that the majority of the population felt threatened by the false claims of a few radicals, and apparently some misguided "slobs" took the law into their own hands--in any instance, "Good riddance to bad rubbish."(!)

These measures were to be complimented by the extensive intelligence networks involved in trying to locate Colin and grant him mortality before he would be able to create the kind of associations necessary to the overthrow of Renald.

As uncooperative as Renald was, he couldn't do without the aid of SOSL in maintaining power. It seems they truly needed each other.

* * *

The many vapors which rose from the bubbling magma thinned as they approached the Blue Island.

"Sacrebleu! C'est un diamant vraiment!" exclaimed Raphael.

Cindrith's eyes were fixed upon the massive stone jutting out of the molten lava. Almost without thought she said, "I never really believed it."

They slowly brought the pentagonal boat to a small jetty which was a natural extension of the island. They could see from there a stairway which had been chipped out of the stone leading up to a small orifice. Colin felt greatly concerned as he viewed the sweat upon the island of glass. Their footing would be unreliable. It would require the greatest degree of caution to mount the steps leading to the cave above them.

Their journey across the Sea of Blood had been without event owing to their possession of the blue sapphires which had kept the air around them sufficiently cool that the multitude of insects found it uncomfortable to be near them. Blue Island reflected the molten fire in deep purple hues blending into its resplendent blue as it rose above the churning surface. Small blue streaks of light would sweep across the face of the diamond island as trapped gas bubbles burst upon the surface of the lava.*

*[The only account available as to the authenticity of this record of Blue Island comes from an ancient hero named Epic. He was somewhat of a vagabond and had many adventures. Tales were told to children concerning his vast exploits, much the stuff of which fantasies are composed. However, in a record preserved in the Archives of the Western Kings, the following account can be found: "Twas there that I first espied my dream. Long had I believed the monumental diamond island to be real, and now to see it with my own eyes humbled me. I sat at once to build within a fortress in which to retire."

The small party ascended the jewelled steps toward the fabled residence of the now deceased Epic. The way was truly treacherous. They scarcely mounted more than two steps at a time without slipping. At length they made it to the entrance. They stood with feelings of awe as they viewed the majesty of the chamber before them.

Out of solid diamond had been hewn furnishings of every sort. Upon its crystal walls hung ornate sculptings in diamond of mythical beasts and fey monsters. As the party entered into the first chamber, they felt as though they were somewhat in a (house of mirrors). Their reflections teemed and beamed back to them from all sides. The floor of the chamber had been left sufficiently rough that their shoes found firm footing, that they could walk without fear of falling. They sat their packs and weaponry upon a massive table that dominated the center of the room and began to investigate the corridors which led off from the entry chamber.

Their investigations revealed that the many luxuries which Epic had incorporated that were not made of the substance of the island had decayed in the course of time till all that were found were shards of fine silk and a few crusted remnants of down from a mattress. Beyond this they found nothing of materials foreign to the island. Colin took his and Cindrith's bedroll and made up the fine bed. Cindrith laid down to nurse the child. Colin then rejoined Raphael in the entry-chamber.

Raphael watched with considerable disquiet as the seemingly innumerable host of red dragons waffed the air above the island. Colin announced his

[The foregoing was attributed to Epic who came out of retirement, related this and various other accounts, then strode to the heights of Mount Bestillin which became known as Epic's Demise. Ed.]

presence so as not to startle the youth, then joined Raphael at the entrance to view the spectacle of flying worms.

"How eez eet possible that there eez enough food for all these?" asked the amazed Raphael.

"Perhaps they are the reason we encountered so few beasts in the jungles through which we passed."

"Oui," Raphael sighed.

Colin placed his hand on the youth's shoulder and bade him join him within the chamber. They sat in sculpted chairs that were surprisingly comfortable for they were not flat in the seat but rather scalloped to the contour of human thighs.

"Raphael, I would like to take this moment to thank you for your diligence and your courage in aiding me and my wife and our good friend in this journey. Now it would be well for you to return to your father and the safety of your home," said Colin.

"But, monsieur, I cannot leave you 'ere! For there eez no food! You would starve, non?"

"We've brought supplies sufficient to last us a month."

"Oui, and then at the end of the month you starve, non!?" said the excited Raphael.

"No."

"Non? You maybe eat the diamonds?"

Colin smiled. "No, we don't maybe eat the diamonds."

"Then you starve," confirmed Raphael, crossing his arms before his chest.

"Raphael, we didn't come here to stay. That is, we didn't come here to live."

Raphael's expression soured. His pulse quickened as he said, "You've

come 'ere to die?"

"We'd like it to work out otherwise, but we have been chased here."

"Non, monsieur! We 'ave not been chased! I viewed the trail behind us and no one followed, not even at great distance. We left no tracks. I was very careful."

Colin tried to comfort the young man.

"You did very well, and it is not your fault that we were followed. We have been followed from a great distance, and those who followed us started at a very different place than we. They knew we would be coming here. That's how I know that we were followed. So you see, you didn't do anything wrong--"

"Non, monsieur, if you knew you were being followed, then why woed you 'ave me bring you to this forsaken place? This eez not right!"

"No. This is right. I can't explain it all to you right now. Perhaps your father will know enough to explain it all to you when you return home."

"Then you expect them to come 'ere?"

"I do."

"Then I will stay! My arm eez as mighty as any foe!" cried Raphael as he held up his short sword.

Colin would have laughed were not the situation so grave. "My good friend, your arm has been proven and your heart no less so, but the tempests that rage are mightier than we both."

With a tear in his eye Raphael said, "Non, monsieur, I will not betray my trust. Le Devoir, Le Dieu, et L'Honneur. Theez things my father has told me to hold sacred. I volunteered to be with you, even if eet should mean my last breath."

Colin's heart swelled within his breast with deep respect and love for

the young Raphael and humble gratitude toward the man who reared him. He knew he could easily send Raphael home, but he knew equally well that he would be breaking the heart and spirit of an ally. After all, is it not better to die in the service of love than to live in the shadow of infamy?

PART IX

(The Crucible of Courage)

The wind blew shrill against the escarpment, but even the high pitch of whining wind couldn't conceal the scream of a child greeting death! Erick was holding the rope for Shannon to climb onto the ledge overhead. When he heard the scream, he scaled the short distance himself, nearly flying over the lip of the cliff. The others were fast on his heels, hurrying into the darkness with the wind adding to their natural speed.

Erick couldn't see in the dark; he heard Cleat moan in the darkness. Finding the lad, he rested Cleat's head on his bag. Cleat sputtered amid the blood gathering in his throat, "H-e t-tried t-o s-a-v-e me."

"Who? Who tried to save you?" said Erick as he tried to choke down his emotion.

Hawk had arrived after Erick, followed quickly by Shannon, then Almetra. Hearing her sputtering child she hurried to his side and caressed his soft youthful brow. She felt along his side till her hand found the lance where it pierced his side. Erick had removed the crossbow bolt before she arrived and had placed a rag over the wound to somewhat staunch the flow of escaping life.

They were too late even before they heard his scream. With a light cough Cleat's life faded and left the shell he had occupied for so few years. The fierce wind mocked the weary foursome; it allowed not the least light for the departure of the courageous and lighthearted Cleat. Erick felt the tears Hawk was shedding for her only child as they rolled off the boy's cheek onto his hand cradling Cleat's head.

Shannon removed a stone she carried in her pouch which when held up to her eye made it possible for her to see in the dark. She saw the old man sprawled on the floor; the three bolts and the javelin embedded in him assured him to be dead. She saw the elaborate network of traps and the intricate interlacing of control wires, all of which were disarmed. She saw the lean-to a little farther into the cavern and upon investigating it discovered all the stores the old man had accumulated.

As Shannon walked toward the lean-to, Almetra turned over the body of the dead old man. A pale blue light lit the inside of his jerkin and startled Almetra when she saw it. The corridor was suddenly becoming cooler. Almetra called Erick's attention to the light.

"Erick, have you ever seen anything like this?"

Erick was more concerned with Cleat than any phenomenon. He slowly raised his head to look at the only source of light in the darkened tunnel. He took his blanket and unrolled it to place over the cold body of the youth. Solemnly he said, "Cut open the material and see if anything is under it."

Almetra cut open the jerkin and discovered a beautiful blue sapphire radiating the soft blue light. Erick, surprised to see such a thing, went over to see for himself.

* * *

I was torn: I didn't want to leave Cleat, but I wanted to see what the stone was all about. The air of the cave was becoming increasingly colder as I walked over to Almetra. I'd never seen anything like it--a shining gem! I wasn't sure what to make of it, so I used the blade of my knife to turn it over to see the other side. When my knife blade touched the gleaming gem, I

thought I was going to die. It was though every member of my body were crawling with ants!

Almetra looked at me and said, "Why do you suppose it did that?"

"I don't know, but I don't think I want to touch it again!"

"Why?" was her innocent response.

I looked at her, "What did you feel when I touched it?"

"Nothing. Should I have felt something?"

"Then what did you mean when you asked, 'Why did it do that?'"

"Because I don't know why it darkened when you touched it!"

"What do you mean 'darkened'?"

Shannon said, "The term is explicit. The stone darkened when you touched it." Shannon then knelt next to us and looked at the gem.

I didn't want to touch it again, but I never saw it darken when I touched it the first time. This time I tried touching it with my hand. It felt horrible! But the feeling soon subsided and I could see as at noonday. The cold was gone and--I liked it. I didn't want to let go and again experience the cold, but I had to see what happened next.

"That's funny," said Shannon. "Why would the air become warmer when its light fades as you hold it?"

"Did you see how bright the cave was?" I asked.

The stone wasn't putting off a great deal of light, but it didn't need to shed anymore to know that they were both frowning at me. Then Almetra's expression changed as she said, "When you held it you could see easily?"

"Yes."

Almetra picked up the stone and I saw that it did indeed darken when someone held it. I heard her shiver then she sat it down again and motioned for Shannon to try it.

"That's amazing!" said Shannon.

Hawk said, "If the three of you can manage to stop playing with that thing, I would like some help burying my son."

I felt like a complete (heel). I looked at the two ladies and said, "I am going to use this to get Cleat so we can bury him." I got up and picked up the lifeless body and carried it to the entrance of the cave. It seemed that the best place to bury his remains would be on a nearby hill. That way we could retrieve his body when we came back out and take him home for a better burial.

It's hard to imagine a more personal business than the death of a loved one. I've fought in a hundred campaigns and lost buddies and kin. Not a single death ever prepared me for the next one to come along. I remember a lieutenant with whom I once served; he always said, "You get used to it." I never did. I'm not even sure I ever wanted to. It would have been nice, though, if I had been at least a little "used to it" when it came time to place Cleat's body into the cold ground.

My arms seemed to suddenly lose their strength as I knelt next to my friend. I would have preferred to go down to the grave myself than to place one so young in the bowels of Omega. I groaned within myself as I at last hefted his vacated form, already grown a little stiff. I lowered him into the deep grave as Hawk stood watching without a sound. Almetra and Shannon stood watch. I marveled how Hawk could watch as I laid linen over his body and covered him over with earth. The only tears she dropped had been in the darkness of the cavern. I couldn't stem the flow of my own. Almetra and Shannon were more visibly shaken than Hawk over Cleat.

We had gathered large rocks and covered the top of the ground with them to discourage animals from trying to uproot him. I wasn't sure how to deal

with the body of the old man who Cleat said had tried to save him. It didn't seem right to just leave him to carrion-crawlers or such beasts as should happen by, so I buried him next to Cleat, taking the same care as we had for the boy.

We started back for the cave. It was agreed that I should lead the way with the strange blue sapphire to detect any more traps and such that we might encounter as we traveled through the tunnel. The ladies would follow with torches.

The only beasts we encountered were long dead. I didn't like it. Some of them were fey and appeared to have been dispatched with relative ease. All it meant to me was rough times ahead. Whoever had made short work of the cavemeres wasn't someone I wanted to trade blows with. With each new carcass Hawk seemed more determined than ever to pursue McEan and Dunnybrook. As we journeyed, Hawk's expression became darker and more tortured. At length I mentioned my feelings to Almetra.

"Do you not think it to be grief?" she said.

"What grief would screw up the face so?"

"Let it go, Erick. It isn't time yet," was all she said.

I didn't understand her reference to time, but how could I let it go? The situation in which I found myself was not one I would seek out for myself! I never would have tried to do anything beyond retiring from the army with the small pension promised and start a cobbler shop like my grandfather. I didn't want to be there. I felt as though I were conspired against and manipulated almost beyond tolerance. But deep inside of me it seemed as though I belonged where I was more than any of the others. I couldn't shake it! Hawk's grief, if that was what it really was, weighed upon my mind to such an extent I found sleep elusive and waking near unbearable. Shannon had become more reclusive

than ever she had been on all of the trip. And Almetra became abrasive, snapping at almost the least instance.

The lake of lava, or the Sea of Blood as some called it, was every bit as repulsive as I remembered and in some respects worse. The masses of insects swarmed the ladies, but strangely left me alone. We retreated into the cave till the insects were only a minor nuisance. Almetra again mixed up something for us to use as a repellent against the pestilence. We ventured the opening again. The mix worked reasonably well. We still had to be careful of the many lion-scorpions and the like.

"Look!" said Shannon who had been scanning the sky.

There were a flight of giant red worms headed straight for us. It would be several moments before they arrived, and we watched for a moment.

A shadow covered the mouth of the cave. Out of the corner of my eye I saw the massive Red Dragon diving on us. I pushed Hawk back in to the cave as well as Shannon with such force the latter lost her staff. There was no time to save Almetra! I'm to this day not overly sure why I didn't dive for the cave myself. I leapt in front of Almetra and shielded her with my body.

Immediately the dragon's fiery breath engulfed us with such intensity the surface of the rocks melted in the heat. As it passed we were still standing! Shannon's staff didn't exist anymore. The facing of the cave was smoothed over and dripping molten slag. Many of the insects ceased to be, and the burned shells of lion-scorpions littered the rocks. We were unhurt! Its breath felt a cool breeze. We retreated back into the cave again, and I pulled out the blue stone and sat it on the floor. We all stared at it.

I told them I figured the stone was the only answer possible for why we weren't burned to a crisp. What I didn't know was how or why someone in possession of an item like that would try to save the life of a boy he had

never met! Among the effects of the old man we had also found a journal. I felt this was a good time to start reading it. The only trouble was I couldn't read the language in which it was written. I gave it to Shannon, thinking she would be the most likely to be able to translate it, but it wasn't a language with which she was familiar either. What she did do was to begin a process of reducing the foreign tongue to a numerical equivalent; she said she would have better hope of translating it in that fashion. [Most of the Omegan languages can be reduced to numerics and directly transferred to another tongue. Ed.]

Whatever might happen, the stone was a decisive defense against the dragons. It worked pretty well against insects, too. The problem we hadn't overcome was the fact we had no way of crossing the lava to get to Blue Island. That's when the worst of our troubles began.

Shannon had been considering an effective means of using the stone for crossing the lava when she said, "I wish Brenthia were here." The comment was made under her breath. It was only heard because we were all sitting next to her. I didn't think anything of it. I don't think Almetra felt the statement peculiar either. Hawk flew into a screaming tantrum!

"Brenthia!" she began, "I told you what happened! She and Cassandra were plotting--plotting! I've lost my son on this vile trail, and all you can do is wish a traitor in our midst!"

I didn't look at Shannon; my eyes were fixed on Hawk. I heard Shannon try to defend her slip.

"I'm sorry for offending you, Hawk. Is it not natural to wish for a solution, and to think of those whom one feels may be better equipped to supply it?"

I had discovered that it was indeed the amulet which Hawk had that kept

me from reading her thoughts. Hawk felt it immediately and closed my access by sheer will and misdirection. I hadn't tried to pry and felt that Hawk knew that to be the case, else I should have expected a reprimand. I was glad I couldn't read her thoughts at that moment, however. I watched her face as it turned deeply foreboding when she said, "Could it be that you and another were in on their plottings?"

Hawk retreated into the darkness, leaving us to deal with the gravity of her words.

I didn't want to see Shannon's expression. I didn't want to talk about what Hawk said. All I wanted to do was finish what we came for and go home. That is, if there was still a home to go to. Wars have a funny way of getting out of hand, and I hadn't heard word of the outside world since Hawk waylaid me.

Almetra saved me from my frettings as she said, "I am going to try something."

She picked up the sapphire, and in the dim red light that remained I saw her tie a silver wire around it to form a cage. She tied off the cage to the spool she continued to hold. She got up and walked toward the lava holding the silver wire. I could see the heat melting the wire before she even got it near the lava. Shannon and I dutifully followed her outside.

Almetra walked through the area of molten slag while Shannon and I passed along the side of the exit to watch the event. She lowered the stone the several rods' distance to the surface of the bubbling lava. As it came within a third of a rod, the lava began to hiss and cease its glowing. As the stone made contact with the now cooled lava, the melted rock solidified in a three rod arc from the side. Almetra retrieved the stone, and the edges of the lava again began to melt into burning slag.

Almetra looked at us with a neat smile and said, "It will be a long walk, but I think we've found our passage."

Hawk rejoined us presently without a word said. Her expression had remained unchanged. We followed a course down the jagged face of the concave wall of the volcano. Almetra led the way. Strange snakes I didn't remember slithered both on the surface and beneath the bubbling magma. Occasionally one of the snakes would get caught in the cooling rock; we knew this by the ear-splitting whine they would give out as they died. It became fairly apparent that we would be unable to surprise our quarry.

Sleeping amid the flaming lava was an experience all of its own. We discovered that the Sea of Blood was not altogether unlike any large body of water. Though they were hard to see, waves and currents moved constantly in the lava. By the morning of the third day on the lava, we found ourselves being carried along swiftly toward our objective on the cooled plate on which we had spent the night. The current didn't slow till we were in sight of the island called Blue Island.

I'm not sure words can express what each of us felt as its eminence came into our view where the mists parted. It was at once glorious and overpowering as it towered majestically above the violent sea that surrounded it. Upon its lofty peaks were unknown numbers of Red Dragons! The diamond of which it was composed sparkled and beamed an almost blinding light as it refracted and magnified the light of Omega's two suns. Its base waxed to a deep purple from the azure of its height. Small breakers of molten lava slowly broke against its outcroppings of lesser peaks which disappeared below the surface of the lava.

At last we saw what looked to be a natural pier with a strange blue boat floating next to it. From there we could see an opening about a hundred rods

up the side of the mountainous island, with stairs leading from the level of the pier to it. We carefully got off of the stone raft and stood upon the flat surface looking up at the opening.

Hawk spoke first. She was almost giddy with excitement.

"Can you feel it, Erick?"

I was taken aback by her sudden change, "Feel what?"

Almetra and Shannon joined me in quizzically looking at Hawk as she said, "We've found them! I can feel her power--its like nothing I've ever felt before." Her hand grabbed my left arm and squeezed it hard as she spoke.

She wasn't weak and it hurt for her to apply such pressure; if she was feeling some power that caused in her such a change, I didn't think it something I cared to confront! Then I felt a tremor run throughout my body and burn into my brain. My knees grew suddenly weak as my heart leapt into my throat--I knew what she was talking about! "What I'm feeling is the woman Dunnybrook!?" I asked, hoping without reason she would say otherwise.

"YES!"

Almetra and Shannon began to be a little uneasy with the situation.

Almetra said, "Power or no power, let's get it over with and leave."

Shannon nodded her complete agreement.

The thought shot through me, and I had difficulty relaying it.

"Hawk, if we can feel her, would she not be able to know of our presence as easily?"

They didn't look at me. They were looking instead at the young man carrying a (white flag) standing in the entrance above us. The boy was dressed with sword and armor. He spoke with the voice of authority.

"You are welcome; your plans are not! Eef you woold enter 'ere, put off your plans of blood and come up unarmed--you will be greeted warmly. Eet eez

your decision. Eef you woold do battle, then make zee proper preparations to meet your mortal end!"

Without waiting for a response he disappeared through the entrance.

Almetra looked at Hawk, "Is this McEan a boy, then?"

"I don't know this boy," she said, shrugging off the question as she prepared for battle.

Shannon said, "From the accent I think he's the son of the owner of the Black Dragon."

Almetra and Shannon stood watching the entrance. From the images running through Shannon's mind I knew she was trying to make up her mind as to whether it was worth fighting when we were so clearly disadvantaged. Hawk continued her preparations undisturbed. Whatever was to happen, I knew the danger of being divided in purpose.

"Look, maybe one of us should at least talk to them before we rush headlong into battle where we don't know the enemy's strength." I had gained their attention, so I continued, "If they are willing to just give themselves up for a guarantee of safe conduct, we could save ourselves a lot of trouble."

It was clear Hawk wasn't convinced, so I added, "At the very least I will come back knowing their strength and the area over which we will be fighting."

That seemed to make up Hawk's mind. She sat down on her pack and palm up motioned me toward the stairs. Almetra wished me luck. Shannon stood twirling several strands of her hair with her right hand.

I mounted the steps. I wasn't really afraid. I left my weapons behind, but felt confident with my grasp on vysionpas.

The stairs were slick; it would be very bad news to try fighting up them. The entrance was large enough for two abreast, standing. For fighting there was insufficient room to do much more than jab. The situation was ideally

suited to the boy for he had plenty of room for maneuver with his short sword. The short corridor leading into the main chamber would assure the boy's advantage. The many carved furnishings would make fighting especially hazardous should one find it necessary to fall back, roll, or any number of activities. An ingenious blade trap had been rigged where the corridor came into the main room. I couldn't see the mechanism which operated it. The trap consisted of a series of five blades long enough to meet in the center of the vertical plane of the exit.

I was impressed with the countenance of the gentleman who greeted me and introduced himself as Sean McEan.

"You'll please excuse my wife," he said. "She is feeding our child."

I didn't bargain on a baby being part of the deal. I asked, "How old is your child?"

"A little over a year. Is it important?"

I couldn't get over the air of confidence which he exuded. His tone was as pleasant as though we were fellow sojourners, not enemies about to be locked in pitched battle.

"No," I said, "I didn't know you had a child."

I was awed by the dignity of the man when, without the least degree of irritation, he said, "You've come a long way to do a job. Would you allow a child to stand in the way of its completion?"

I composed myself and settled down to the business of negotiating his and his wife's surrender.

"Since you know why we're here, I'll come straight to the point: We are prepared to guarantee your safe conduct to the court of King Harthallow where you will receive a just hearing for the crimes of which you've been accused."

He sat, his expression unchanged from the one of benign compassion he

wore when I came in. At length he cocked his head a little to the right and said, "And by what means would you guarantee our safe passage?"

I really hadn't given it a single thought! There I was, asking a man with a price on his head to surrender to my care without any idea of how to carry it out. In all honesty I never believed I'd live to be sitting face to face with this McEan, then being distracted by Hawk's strange behavior--I never considered his question! I had to be honest, so I said, "I'm open to any suggestions."

He smiled. I felt like a schoolboy who'd just been awakened in the middle of a daydream to answer a question he'd never heard.

"How old are you?" he asked in his disarming way.

The question caught me off-guard, but I saw no reason to not answer, so I said, "Thirty-four."

"Thirty-four," he mused on it then said, "You've endured well."

What? I said to myself. It was almost like trying to carry on a conversation with Shannon. I set my jaw and said boldly, "Look, you're wanted for number of crimes, some of which I've never even heard of before. I and the ladies I am with will make certain no one else gets close enough to you or your wife to collect on our reward. That's our offer, take it or leave it!" I was embarrassed as I heard my voice echo around the room when I finished.

His expression became clouded as he said, "How is it possible for you to guarantee the conduct of your fellows, when one of them is a traitor to your cause?"

I didn't like it, but I had to reconcile myself that the guy was going to keep catching me off-guard by asking questions I wasn't ready to answer. The question which begged answer was larger than his spoken one, namely, How would he know about any of the members of our party? If he was working in concert

with one of them, wouldn't he be willing to surrender, and then when his secret ally was on watch and the rest of us asleep, they could slit our throats and be away clean. I reasoned he wouldn't reveal any accomplice. I wondered if he might just be trying to instill mistrust to use to his advantage later. I decided that was it.

"My offer stands, take it or leave it," I said.

He looked at the boy who was standing next to the entrance then back to me as he said, "I fear, to the detriment of nearly all concerned, I must decline."

I could have been hit with a sledgehammer and it would have made me feel less numb. McEan reeked of sincerity. It oozed from everything about him. How could a man like that turn to crime!

As I rose to leave, he gave me a firm handshake and said, "Fear not. All will work to the best in spite of us."

I took my time returning the short distance to the bottom of the stairs. What I had to relay wasn't something which would be well received, and I knew it.

Hawk exploded, "If he must be killed to be taken, we'll do it!"

Shannon spoke up, "I want to know more of what he claims to know of a traitor to our cause."

Almetra said, "Perhaps we should just go home and find a better way to raise the necessary funds."

I sat on my pack and covered my ears. I had gone to talk with him to unify our resolve, but we were more divided than ever. I wasn't even clear in my own mind what the proper course was.

Hawk launched an emotional appeal I shall never forget.

"Have we come so far unified in our purpose to be now turned back by the

words of the most infamous criminal on all of Omega? Are we to take Cleat's little body back to the city and say his life was meaningless!? Are we to forget the great cause in the favor of which the Counsel voted mearly because the object of a part of that cause has a charming and winning manner? The Omegan stars would cry out for our very blood should we allow so great an opportunity to go without at least the attempt to fulfill it! I say we fight for the freedom of our little ones, for futurity, for the blessings of life out from under the tyrannical yoke of King Edmond Del Harthallow the Fourth!"

We armed ourselves and mounted the steps. On the way up Shannon received a crossbow bolt through her neck and fell into the angry lava. The young boy dealt my armor several sturdy blows while I narry touched him with my weapon. Fate intervened as at the end of the entrance we both slipped and the boy was cruelly sliced by the blade trap and died.

McEan stood to the rear of the room. His chest was bare, and he was holding a bastard sword in his right hand with a small hook device in his left. He looked like a prince.

Around his neck was a beautiful medallion. Its device was of a sea gull flying above a ship at sea! I couldn't strike him! I cried out for the fighting to stop, but Almetra had already fallen, and Hawk was fighting so ferociously she couldn't hear my plea.

Something inside of me snapped as I saw Almetra lying there, her life leaving her body. I lunged into the mortal fray as Hawk was knock to the side. I could feel the steel of his hook as it sliced into the flesh of my right arm, and I screamed like a maniac! His moves were all controlled. It was like watching a superbly choreographed dancer. Again I felt of his steel as the blade of his bastard sword placed a glancing blow to the side of my head.

Then came the faint cry of a child from somewhere behind him--for an infinitesimally brief instant he was distracted; the gleam in his eye was for the life of his child! I didn't hesitate within the instant and thrust him through mightily! My screams of anguish for the fallen foe filled the volume of the room and reverberated as the man slid slowly to the floor with my blade sliding out from under his heart. Red steadily covered his medallion as my vision blurred in my eternal pain!

Hawk leapt past us and tore down the hall McEan had defended. I heard several screams come back to me from where she had gone. I pulled my sword from the chest of McEan and hurried down the hall.

The woman Dunnybrook was holding her child as she stood in a corner. She had wrapped herself in a sheet, which was wrapped around the child as well. Hawk's eyes were bulging. I could see small flames lick from Hawk's pupils as sweat began to turn to blood around her eye sockets. Dunnybrook was besting her! I joined the combat of vysionpas and felt the power of the woman! It was nearly like venturing beyond the reaches of reality and there having all your entrails, all of your essence torn through by a ravaging wolf. Hawk had never exhibited this kind of force which tore at my flesh to pull my very heart from its rightful place!

Suddenly, Hawk convulsed and flew against the wall, her nostrils breathing fumes of blood, her face vacant as her life was held in the balance. Now the full fury of the woman was turned on me! As we tugged at each others' sanity, I began to receive much information about the woman against whom I fought! I wanted to stop! I wanted to end the fight! I COULDN'T!!! I didn't know how--Hawk never told me how to quit once the full force was turned on.

I don't remember any more of the battle. When I came to, I was greeted

at once by the knowledge of whom I had killed! I lifted my sword and placed it under my chest. With my hands trembling and a voice which I couldn't keep from cracking I pleaded with the just El to accept the sacrifice of my life as partial recompense for the great evil I had done, but my arms gave out and I again fell unconscious.

I didn't know at the time how very near I was to death. As it was I had used most of my physical strength in the fight with Queen Cindrith. My state of unconsciousness slowly gave way to sleep and with it tortured dreams which haunted me--glimpses of the life of Queen Cindrith intermingled with her own fracturing fears. I had somehow gained a piece of her experience as she expired. The awareness only served to increase my desire to forfeit my life. As the lifelong dream dragged on, I became aware that the vision I had had in my room the morning Brenthia and Cassandra were declared traitors by Hawk was Brenthia using all her mental strength to relay the events to me. Hawk was the traitor!

The realization broke over my mind with such clarity and energy I found myself standing before I was aware of being awake. I looked about the bedroom. Queen Cindrith had fallen against the wall during the fight, and there she stayed. The babe in her arms was crying softly.

I have no explanation for why I picked up the child, or why I didn't go ahead and kill myself then and there. It just seemed the only appropriate thing to do after killing his parents was to rear him to adulthood then allow him the opportunity to kill the man who killed his parents. If he wouldn't, I would then do the deed myself.

I didn't want to look at Hawk, I just accepted that her spent body was lying next to the wall. Colin--even now writing his name provides me a feeling of comfort--Colin lay in the hallway breathing slightly. I don't know

how he managed to stay alive with his wound. I knelt next to him.

"Please forgive me," my voice continued to break, "I don't know how to fix the damage I've done, but I swear I'll keep your child safe."

I don't know where he acquired the strength to speak. My heart broke, and through shameful sobs I listened to his dying words.

"My friend," he began, "nations come into existence then vanish again--only love endures." He gasped for a small breath then continued, "My son will be safe with you. I know that." He struggled for a little more air, then said, "I forgive you. Stay--a-l-i-v-e." He faded quickly and died.

I held the child to my breast weeping great tears.

There was no way to bury them. I took a few articles for Jamiel-Michael to have by which to remember his mother and father then boarded the strange blue boat. Four days later we arrived back at the crater's edge. I placed the child in a sling I made to hang around my shoulders. The journey was slow and lonely. Feeding Michael (that's what I finally decided to call him) was made easier by his already having small teeth. Every step was laden with grief...

* * *

"Sir, I spotted four riders coming from the southwest. They were fording Ravenwood's River."

"How far would you say we are from them, Sergeant?"

"About a four hour gallop, Sir."

"Good work."

"Begging the Colonel's pardon, Sir, my men could do with some grub."

"Very well, Sergeant. Fall out with your party and rejoin the troop

after you've eaten."

"Thank you, Sir!" The Sergeant spurred his steed to rejoin his men.

"Master Sergeant!" called Colonel Bright.

"Sir!" said the experienced Master Sergeant.

"At a gallop!"

"Yes, Sir. Troooop, at-a-gallop!--Forward--Hooo!"

The Light Horse of the Eastern Marches rode beyond the crest of the hill as Sergeant Little and his scouts prepared to eat.

The day was young, and the fields, sweet with the smell of fresh dew sparkling in the light of the suns. A light breeze whispered through the multi-colored leaves of the widely separated trees in the mid-autumn day. The air was brisk. Altogether an excellent day for a ride.

* * *

Their horses took long strides as Vashlee pressed on toward Sin's End. Time was the most important commodity he needed, and he knew it to be in shortest supply. He wouldn't allow himself the luxury of speculation on what he might find when he got there. He felt whatever happened, he didn't need any preconceived notions in confronting any situation he might greet.

He had taken great pains to insure no delays. The horses he had selected himself from the finest stock to be found in Releigh. They bore their riders well. Their long sinuous strides pleased Vashlee. The ground was firm, and the ride, swift through the tall prairie grass.

After fording the Ravenwood they took their course due north. It was not the most direct route, but to venture the swamps at that time of year would add time rather than reduce it. (The horses wouldn't make it through.) They

expected to follow the foothills and skirt the swamp. If their ride was swift, they would add at most a week to their journey.

As they mounted the crest of one hill after another, Vashlee suddenly drew rein. He took out a spyglass he had in his saddlebag and scanned an area about north by northwest of their position.

"What is it?" asked Elif.

Vashlee handed the glass to his companion.

Jacques (Jock) St. Ives (Raphael's father) strained to see what Vashlee saw.

"What is that gleaming on the far hill, Jock?" asked his friend Kurt.

"I do not know. What did you see, Monsieur La Flandours?"

"A troop of cavalry--light, I think."

Elif handed the glass back as he said, "Jacques, are there any armies that patrol this area?"

"The traders have never mentioned such to me."

"Well," said Vashlee, "they're there. And whether it's purposed or not, they are headed in a line that will bring them across our path in about thirty minutes." Vashlee handed the spyglass to Jacques, "Can you recognize their uniforms?"

Jacques looked with the glass while Vashlee held the horses' reins for him.

"Eet cannot be!" he said. "Kurt, look behind the lead horses at the flag they bear. What do you think?"

"Eastern Marchers!?!?" Kurt exclaimed as he watched through the glass.

"Oui!"

"What would Eastern Marchers be doing out here, Vashlee?" asked a very concerned Elif.

"Whatever it is, it must be important for them to send an entire troop of Light Horse."

"Should we wait for them to pass?" asked Kurt.

"No," said Vashlee "We are at peace with them. If our paths cross, we will greet them."

As they continued their ride, it became increasingly clear to Vashlee the mounted troop intended to intersect them. At length they drew rein and sat on top of a hill waiting for the troop to arrive. Within five minuets the Commander of the Light Horse brought his horse to a stop as he raised his hand and his Master Sergeant hollered out, "C-o-l-u-m-n H-a-l-o-o!"

A Colonel and two Majors rode slowly up to Vashlee and his party. Vashlee nodded from the back of his dappled grey charger.

"Good Morrow," said the Colonel courteously.

"Health to you as well, Sir," replied Vashlee.

The Colonel looked a little unsure how to say what he had on his mind.

Vashlee, trying to save the dashing Colonel from embarrassment before his officers, said, "We are taking our ride north, Colonel. How's the lay?"

"Peaceful, Sir. It's unusual to see riders in these parts. You must have come from afar."

"As the day grows; too far I think. I am Vashlee La Flandours, and these are my companions for this ride."

The Colonel's expression lightened.

Vashlee continued, "But you, Sir, are very far from home."

"Sir," said the Colonel straightening in his saddle, "I have the pleasure. My name is James Bright, Commander of the First Division of Light Horse of the Eastern Marches. This is Major George Hall of the First Regiment," he motioned to his right. "And this is Major William Boatwright of

the Second Regiment," he motioned to his left. "By commission of our new Government I have the honor of meeting you." He reached inside of his tunic and produced a folded piece of parchment which he directly handed to Vashlee.

Vashlee didn't recognize the seal. He broke it and read the document.

[]
[Most Noble General La Flandours;]
[]
[We the members of the newly formed Congress of the]
[people of the Eastern Marches in convention assembled]
[heard of your taking your journey northward and voted]
[to send these men to safely escort you in your]
[journey.]
[We wish you to feel no obligation concerning them.]
[Please accept it as a token of the esteem for which]
[you are held in the hearts of our people that we do]
[this.]
[If your journey should bring you this far north, the]
[honor would be ours for you to address us. Should]
[your business preclude such a venture, our prayers]
[for your safe conduct go with you, as well as our]
[gratitude for allowing us to be of this small service]
[to you.]
[]
[With Deepest Regards,]
[]

[Uriah Falsworth]

[Chairman of the Congress of the Eastern Marches &c&cc]

Vashlee's apprehension had grown as the leagues stretched out behind him. He never felt at ease with the honors various peoples had paid him. The bearing his father had taught him was in many instances the only thing between that which was tenderest in him and the face he wore in public. This new honor was quite unexpected both to its timing as well as its substance.

He tightened his stomach muscles and said, "Thank You."

"We are yours to command, General," Colonel Bright smiled broadly.

"Our journey is to Sin's End, Colonel. There is neither shame nor dishonor for you to take your journey home instead of going on with us."

Colonel Bright flushed slightly as his eyes batted under the intense sunlight, "Though it be to the rim of Hell, General, it is our honor to escort you--unless you would not have us."

"Your pluck is great, young Colonel, and I perceive you speak for your men. If it be my road you wish to share, then fall in."

The Colonel's eyes brightened again as he saluted the General and signaled the Sergeant Major to have the men fall in. He steadied his mount and offered, "Sir, your orders?"

Vashlee raised his hand to signal the column to move out, and the Sergeant Major called out, "Troooop, at-a-gallop!--Forward--Hooo!"

* * *

The steady sound of dripping water echoed my footsteps as I plodded slowly on. Michael was asleep in the bag I had strapped to my chest. His

legs gently swung on either side of my waist. The strange blue stone continued to make it possible for me to see in the deep darkness. I had been walking for nearly three days without rest when my legs wouldn't move any more. I slowly collapsed onto the cool damp floor.

I unslung the oversized pack I had been carrying. After I propped it against the wall, I removed some iron rations and the water bag from it. Michael was still sleeping, but I could feel that he was wet. As I was removing one of the few remaining pieces of broadcloth to change the child, Colin's journal caught on the material and fell out of the pack. After changing and feeding Michael, I gave him a clean leather dagger's scabbard to chew on. It amused him, and I settled back to read the journal.

I hadn't read more than a sentence or two when I fell asleep. I didn't know how long I had been asleep. I opened my eyes and remembered Michael! As I started to get up, I saw him sleeping on a blanket next to me. I cried. I gently picked him up and coddled him as tears flowed from my eyes. My fears had been unwarranted but could have just as easily been real! I determined not to push myself so far that I could fall asleep with him unprotected again.

Colin's journal read more like a history text than a record of his life. With each page my love and remorse grew. I knew I had destroyed the rightful heir to the throne of Quintin after the battle with his sweet wife. Now, I knew I had put an end to the life of a man who had pursued excellence his whole life--not arbitrary excellence, but excellence of spirit and understanding. The entries in which he dealt with himself were few, yet each showed the dedication he held as paramount: duty to family, God, and country.

His life was more lonely than any I'd ever encountered. The rewards he received for his faithfulness were to have his beloved to wife five years before their death (at my hands), his child, and the few friends he allowed

himself along the way. The last year of his life was spent trying to secure the life of his son. They had gone to Sin's End to buy time so that we couldn't catch up with them too soon.

The final entry ripped at my soul! He had addressed it to me! It was written right after I had left to rejoin Almetra, Shannon, and the traitor Hawk. I here quote it in full:

"My friend Erick of Kempdon;

The road we have traveled has been different in many respects, yet I perceive in you the spark of greatness. I trust that you will have brought this record with you for our son. As the moments are few and you will return to do battle, I must be brief. I did not know that you would kill me; the only reason you are reading this now is that you have. So I will restrict my remarks accordingly. The weight upon your shoulders is great; would that I could take some of the burden for you, but you must bear this alone. My father-in-law, General Vashlee La Flandours, will be heading for Sin's End by now. Please wait for him at the entrance outside the volcano. Since you have this, you also have the note for him which I placed inside the back cover. It is important that he receive it. It is my hope that you've read at least a portion of my record here. If you have, then please pray about it that you may know that it is true and the accounts are accurate as far as my understanding made accuracy possible. I hear your shouts outside now; you'll be here in a moment. God preserve you and our precious son. Thank you for having a tender heart. Your Friend, Colin Quintin."

The living hell he had pronounced upon me wasn't what he wanted to do. His desire was plain: to see to it that their son grew in stature and

character. He had pronounced the duty upon his executioner. Again, I cried.

After resting a little more, I bundled up Michael and proceeded toward the entrance. My heart was heavier than ever in my life, but there grew a strange reasoning that all my life had been spent for myself. Now I had the opportunity to live for others. The thought pleased me.

At the entrance the rope we had used to gain access was still hanging where we had left it. The wind was stiff, but we made it down in good shape. I decided the best place to wait for General La Flandours was in the cave where Cleat had killed the great worm.

The flesh of the worm had been eaten, so all that remained were its bones. I made the cave as comfortable for Michael as I knew how. To do this I used the materials Redmond had used with his lean-to. Then we waited.

* * *

The suns were low on the horizon as Vashlee raised his hand to halt the column's advance.

The Sergeant Major called out, "Sentries to picket! All else--fall out!"

Within a short time camp had been made, and the cook was preparing mess. Elif went over to Vashlee as the later was unhitching the saddle of his horse.

Vashlee noted him and said, "Ask Colonel Bright how many we lost, will you, Elif?"

"Yes. How is your arm?"

"Just a scratch. I'll bandage it momentarily."

Vashlee finished unsaddling his horse. He wrapped a bandage about his forearm where the sword of one of the Griffin Riders had cut him. As he was brushing the charger, Major Hall came over.

"Sir, the Colonel sends his compliments."

Vashlee stopped brushing and looked at the troubled Major. "Yes, Major Hall?"

"Sir, he caught a lance through the lung, and the Doc' said he doesn't think he'll make it through the night."

"Thank you, Major. Would you show me to him?"

"Yes, Sir."

The Major led Vashlee to the Hospital tent. They met Elif coming out as they entered. Vashlee picked up a stool and sat next to the stricken Colonel.

The Colonel looked up at the General as he said, "Who were they, Sir?"

"Sclaisians."

The Colonel was shocked, "Sclaisians!? Why would they attack you, Sir?"

"King Clarvignon hires out mercenaries. But how do you feel?"

"Doctor White has me pretty full of driliden, so it doesn't hurt, Sir."

"Do you know what he thinks?"

"Yes, Sir. I sent Major Hall for you."

"Is there anything I can do for you?"

"Yes, Sir."

Colonel James Bright lifted his hand feebly to shake the General's.

Vashlee shook the brave young officer's hand with both of his own.

Colonel Bright smiled, "I want you to know, Sir, the high point of my life was when you accepted us on this journey."

Vashlee's jaw stiffened as he struggled to say, "The honor is all mine, son."

Major Boatwright entered the tent and joined the grouping.

"Sirs," he said, "I have the casualty and ordinance reports."

The Colonel nodded, and Vashlee said, "You may read it, Major."

"Sir. We lost a hundred and sixty-four men and seventy-one mounts. Two ordinance wagons and one mortar with their teams. Wounded stands at two hundred and three. We've assigned details to handle the graves." He paused to wipe a tear from his eye then continued, "Enemy dead: ninety-three, and a hundred and twelve of their accursed mounts. We rounded up thirty-one of their wounded which they left behind. Sergeant Forstal is seeing to them as well as the seventy-one prisoners captured unwounded."

"You've done well, Major Boatwright," said Colonel Bright. "You too, Major Hall."

Both men found it hard to stay in the tent, but they hadn't been dismissed.

Colonel Bright continued, "Gentlemen. As your commander, I want to congratulate you on a magnificent job preformed magnificently." He coughed hard. "Major Hall, as you are the senior officer, the baton of command of our force is yours. I," he coughed several times, "I know you will provide the same quality of leadership as you have exhibited in the past." He looked at Vashlee, "Sir, I was allowed to hand-pick these men, and I know they will deliver the necessary courage and talent needed to see you safely to your journey's end. It has been a pleasure--to--serve you." He started to cough again, then his head rolled to one side as Vashlee felt the warmth leave the Colonel's hand.

* * *

As morning came up I was awakened by what I thought was the sound of a distant trumpet! I quickly checked Michael to make sure he was alright then hurried for the mouth of the cave to see whatever it might have been that had

made the sound. I couldn't see anything flying, so I glanced back inside at Michael then climbed on top of the mound which covered the cave. I could see several pennons a little above a hill about two leagues' distance. I couldn't imagine what an army would be doing there unless it was the General. I hurried back down to the cave and began hastily preparing the pack leaving the nonessentials. I slipped the message Colin had asked me to give the General inside of my jerkin and strapped Michael to my front. I hefted the pack onto my shoulders and struck out for where I had seen the pennons.

I had gained a strange feeling as I hurried along. I couldn't explain it to myself, and as it grew stronger I finally had to stop. I couldn't tell where its source was, which disturbed me greatly for as the moments passed I knew that it came from some great unseen evil! What disturbed most was that I sensed that it had a target--La Flandours! As the seconds passed the presence increased in force till I began to fear for the life of Michael just to be near enough to feel it!

Michael began to cry as I ran along toward the pennons. The suns hadn't crested into view yet as the shadow of Sin's End lay fully across the land. I stopped short of the pennons by only fifty yards when breaking over my mind came the realization that whatever the evil was, it had arrived! It had arrived and was beyond the small rise in front of me, the rise which separated me from the final hill and the camp. I could hear talking and the sounds of horses neighing in the morning air. I could smell the food they were cooking. And I knew of the danger they didn't!

What to do? I knew that whatever I sensed knew of my presence. Such power couldn't exist and not be able to easily detect what I still presumed to be my small gift. Michael had stopped crying. I felt like a child torn between two equally dreadful choices. The anxiety rippled throughout my

having to hold on for propriety's sake. The awful decision loomed before me--I couldn't run away!

I prayed to the merciful El on the child's behalf to keep him from harm as I sat him carefully upon the ground. It was like pulling my own heart out to even attempt to leave him there with no protection, but to fight with him strapped to my chest would assure both of our deaths. Alone only did I stand a chance and even that a slim one.

I took only my battle axe. As I started around the base of the hill, I heard a deep voice rumble, "Stand, General!"

Then the reply, "What? Who are you!"

"I am here to grant you mortality!"

Just the sound of the voice made me feel to wretch. I realized I would be coming around the hill in front of the fiend which announced itself as, "I am Greyhalthor!"

I next heard the clash of steel! Michael had started crying as I hurried back by him. I had forgotten to feed him in my haste! I stopped and picked him up and plead to his non-understanding ears for his forgiveness and sat him back down as I fully ran around the base of the hill. The sounds of screaming men assaulted my ears, and all the ugly scenes of battle rushed forward in my head. I came into view of the thing--it was huge--over thirty hands tall!

In the instant I took to size up the situation I saw men flying everywhere as the beast drove through the men who tried to aid a tall elf to their rear who was fending off the blows of the monstrous sword being wielded against him!

Instantly I realized that the elf was a half-elf and his name was General Vashlee La Flandours! I hefted my battle axe and charged the fiend. I brought the full weight of my stroke against the leg of the thing. It let out

a mighty roar filled with pain! Again, before it recovered, I let loose the blade against its leg. Again, it screamed out in eternal pain!

Recognizing my weapon as a major threat the beast turned on me and proceeded to use its own vysionpas against me. I felt it try to rip the weapon from my grip. I didn't let go and was thrown with it against the hill. I struggled to my feet as soldiers surrounded it and hacked with little effect against its legs. I only barely dodged its heavy swing at me with its massive sword.

Another attempt to dislodge the weapon from my hands flung me further up the side of the hill! My arms felt like they were being wrenched from their sockets. I again struggled to my feet bringing the blade of my axe against the blade of its hideous sword. My stroke saved my neck, but the force of its blow sent me reeling over the top of the hill. It pursued me and once more tried to dislodge my weapon.

My clothing was torn and my flesh ripped from the many impacts upon the hard ground. I recovered my footing upon some rocks on top of the hill. Then I heard Michael cry! The beast's sword was headed straight for me--I was paralyzed! I couldn't move for thinking of the look in Colin's eyes as he had heard Michael cry! Then, at once, I heard a loud exploding sound as the beast fell forward, hard against the side of the hill.

Soldiers swarmed the massive form. I saw the source of the explosion; a mortar on the far hill had been drug up and pointed point blank at the beast. As they were reloading, the thing struggled to its feet flinging soldiers everywhere. The ground was littered with their broken and bleeding bodies. This time the beast was bleeding as well. Its movements were slower, and it had lost hold of its own sword.

It renewed its pursuit of me up the side of the hill. I concentrated on

a boulder and rose it from its position to throw upon the fiend, just as it caught me with a boulder it threw with its own power of vysionpas. I fell headlong down the backside of the hill.

I could feel the blood as it streamed down the side of my face. My left arm was fractured in two places and looked like it was on backward. The pain wracked through me as I lay there, watching Michael cry!

"NO!" I screamed, seeing the shadow of another boulder as it loomed over Michael's head. I closed my eyes and with my mind deflected the rock only an instant before it landed on the defenseless child. Forgetting my own pain I gamely staggered to my feet and faced the giant fiend as it came down the backside of the hill. I had dropped my axe as I plummeted from the top of the hill. It stood with its blade stuck into the ground. I held my left arm next to my side with my right hand, and with renewed strength my mind latched hold of my axe and hurtled it for the beast's grotesque head. At the same time I felt its power as it tried to rip my brain from my skull!

Another explosion and the beast rocked as my battle axe ripped into its frightful head! It tumbled down the side of the hill toward me. I ran for Michael and grabbing the bag he sat in rolled out of the way of the fiend's fall. I fell unconscious from the pain.

When I came to my senses, I found myself heavily bandaged and lying on a cot with several other men in a similar state. A man was seated at the foot of the cot, and when he saw my eyes open, he called for a Doctor White.

I found it difficult to speak as I said, "Where's the boy?"

The man looked astonished that I should say anything and replied, "Your baby's with the General. You just lie still. They'll be here presently."

A grey-haired man stepped into view and said, "Well, I don't know who you are, but there isn't a man Jack here who isn't grateful that you came along

when you did."

I couldn't think of anything to say, so I said nothing. Another moment passed, and I saw the man I presumed earlier to be the General step into my limited line of sight.

He said, "Is your name Erick of Kempdon?"

I swallowed and giving myself up to my rightful reward said, "Yes, Sir. And you are General--Vashlee--La Flandours?"

He drew a long solemn breath and his eyes moistened. I think someone brought him a stool because he then sat next to me.

He said, "Yes, that is who I am. The papers you were carrying were given to me by Doctor White. I didn't think you'd mind my reading the one addressed to me."

I started to explain that I deserved to die, and as I was forcing my voice to work, he said, "Please don't try to talk. The doctor tells me you have several broken ribs and need complete rest. I'll talk; you listen. If that's acceptable, nod your head a little."

I nodded.

"That's fine. Now I've sent some men to retrieve the bodies from Blue Island. They should be back in another two or three days."

My expression changed with such suddenness he stopped talking. I concentrated and finally got to where I was in contact with his mind. Now his expression changed as he realized he could hear me in his mind.

I asked, "How long have I been unconscious?"

He said, "Five weeks."

I was stunned. I heard someone ask the General, "What, Sir?"

The General looked away from me and said, "Yes, Lieutenant?"

The voice said, "You said, 'five weeks,' Sir."

"It appears our friend here can speak without using his mouth." He looked back at me, "Can you say 'hi' to the Lieutenant?"

It took a moment to find him. I hadn't done any communicating where I couldn't see the subject before, then projected, "Hi."

I saw a puzzled face of a young officer lean into view and sheepishly say, "Hi," then quickly recede.

The General said, "Before you say anything else, you need to listen to me first."

I nodded.

"I know what you've been through. I think my son-in-law was very right about you."

I couldn't keep my eyes from tearing.

"It's all right, son," he said with infinite kindness, "We'll have to get to know each other very well when you're better. After all, you're my great-grandson's foster father."

The sobs I found myself ushering fourth hurt deep within my heart more than in my wounds.

He placed his hands firmly against my shoulders as he said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to hurt you."

I relaxed a little.

He continued, "You rest now, but please let me thank you for my life."

With that he left me alone to stare at the roof of the tent.

It was difficult taking solid food after having a tube feeding me liquids for five weeks. The two days passed slowly, but I got to see Michael and know that he was in fine shape. On the fourth day the General reappeared over me looking as white as a cloud. The cause became clear as I tuned into the images still vivid in his mind: the beheaded corpses of Cindrith and Colin! I convulsed at the thought! As I went unconscious again, I knew Hawk wasn't dead!

PART X

(The Tide of History)

She dropped the dirty and matted burlap bag onto the table in front of Renald. Renald was eating dinner. He looked up at the filthy Hawk as she stood before him with her hand out.

"First open it," he said.

She untied the bag then turned it upside down on the table allowing Colin's and Cindrith's heads to roll out coming to a stop just before Renald's dinner plate. Renald studied the blackened heads. He rolled them over with his knife to inspect the faces.

A sinister smile creased his thin lips as his brow unfurrowed. He reached for a bell next to his plate and rang it firmly twice.

"You did well," he said as he sat the bell back down.

"I did better than well, King."

"What did you do with the child?"

"What child?"

Renald's smile vanished as he said, "Don't play with me! Where's their son!"

Hawk realized her ruse wouldn't work; the King already knew they had had a son. She cocked her head to one side as she said, "That information will cost you."

"How much?"

"That depe..." Her words were cut off by the sound of the door opening behind her.

"We'll discuss it later?" asked Renald.

Hawk gave a short nod.

The door had been opened by the King's new chamberlain who now stood by the table in a slight bow.

"Take these and post them at the city gate with the names of Sean McEan and Cathrine Dunnybrook or'e."

"Yes, World Emperor."

The chamberlain gathered up the wretched bundle and carried it out of the dining hall, closing the door after himself.

"You've come up in the world considerably since last we spoke--World Emperor."

"I take it you approve?"

"It has a pleasing sound. What of the Spice Kings and the Order?"

[SOSL. Ed.]

"I've taken measures to prevent them from objecting."

Hawk was intrigued, but she could wait till a more suitable time to discuss it. First, she wanted to wash the road from her body and dress in finery and perfumes.

"Will you summon someone to prepare a bath for me, or are you having fun watching me stand here being uncomfortable?"

"At once."

He again rang his little bell.

Hawk hadn't arrived at the castle until after dusk. It was approaching midnight as she finished slipping into the sheer lace she chose to wear after her bath. She covered herself heavily with spiced oils and perfume. Her suite joined Renald's by a common door the previous King had placed there for his concubines. She sent her servant away and applied some light paint to her

face.

As she sat before her mirror by the light of several candles, she shuddered as the memories of her battle with Cindrith stirred her. Hawk had believed the Queen's power to be great. She knew it would require Erick to enable her to gain even a slight advantage over the Queen. As it worked out, were it not for Erick entering the battle when he did, she would be dead rather than sitting there. Her thoughts continued to torment her as the battle replayed over and over in her thoughts.

So lost in thought was she, she didn't notice the door of her chamber open. She jumped from her seat when Renald spoke.

"I worried when you didn't come back."

Her eyes were wild--like an animal caged and fearing the worst. She picked up a dagger to defend herself against her blind fear.

Renald held her fighting ability in great respect--even more so after allowing the interval of time and he taking his leisure. He'd become sloppy. He had even acquired a bit of a belly. He was only a shadow of his former self. In his younger days he'd have taken the dagger away from her and forced his will with her. His weakness grown in the passage of time was the only cause of any degree of feigned humanity.

He said, "My dear Hawk, what disturbs you so?"

The glaze slowly left her eyes. Being able to see again she saw Renald standing in front of her with his arms outstretched. Without thought she allowed the fear inside of her, yearning the carnal touch, to open herself to him as she fell into his waiting arms.

It was still dark as Hawk rose from the bed to stand on the balcony. The warm breeze brushed the trusses of her long hair. The stars twinkled through the atmosphere of Omega, each adding their own light to the specter of Omega's

rings. The three moons rode high overhead illuminating the countryside. The darkness of the distant horizon paled to a lighter hue as morning prepared to break forth on the land. Early Phieasus [Song birds. Ed.] began to sing from a nearby steeple where they had made their nest. The smell of dew covering cultivated fields filled the air. Hawk neither saw, heard, nor smelled. She had gone to the balcony for escape from herself.

She bowed her head and stiffened her arms upon the cold stone as she looked at the remorseless moat below. No tears came to her eyes. Her thoughts were of Erick--for fear. The more time passed, the more she knew Erick would seek her out. She had felt a presence stronger than that of Cindrith just before she blacked out on Blue Island. At first she had thought it was just the sensation of being thrown so violently by the Queen. In the calm before the rising suns the thought gave way to what she knew to be the truth. The strength she had felt was Erick's power awakened.

Hawk felt, keenly, the need for an ally--but whom? There wasn't time to try and find another with vysionpas. Besides, they were so rare it took seven months to find Erick. Renald was a fool and would be of little use to her. The Spice Kings would extract what she felt to be too dear a price for their help. She was (small change) in the eyes of the Order and couldn't hope for any aid from them.

She heard Renald cease snoring. He grumbled then rolled over. Discovering his bedmate missing he opened his eyes and saw Hawk standing on the balcony, the light laces she wore hovering in the breeze revealing her pregnable nakedness. He got up and walked out to join her.

"So," he began, "where is their boy?"

Hawk knew he would be asking and said, "Where's my money?"

"Hawk. Don't you trust me?"

"Of course I trust you. That's precisely why I want to be paid before I tell you anything."

Renald had been in his cups the evening before and was not in any mood to deal with any questioning of his authority. He snarled, "You'll be paid when I am ready to pay you, and you'll answer when I command it!"

With the ease of years of practice she held an image of Renald hanging in mid air in her mind. Renald was jerked off his feet and he yelped in surprise as his eyes bulged forth in their sockets.

Hawk spun on her adversary and fumed, "Listen, you poor excuse for humanity! I know what I am, and I know what you are as well. I despise you and your crown, you craning hypocrite! I am the way I am because I like evil, but you, you snivelling excuse for flesh, are what you are because you're weak, spineless, and a slave to caprice!" She paused as Renald squirmed where she held him. "You may treat the blind fools you call subjects with degraded contempt, but you will address me with proper tone, or you'll find yourself in the pit working for others before your time!" ["In the pit working for others" is a reference to dying. Ed.]

Renald sputtered, "Can we talk about this?"

"My money?"

"Okay, okay! Just let me down--please?"

Hawk shook her head and turned back to the moat as she threw Renald across his bedroom, adding, "I want my money--no tricks, or you'll discover what tricks are."

Renald picked himself up from the floor, threw on a robe, and pulled a cord hanging next to his bed. A moment later the chamberlain appeared outside his chamber door.

"Go fetch the reward for the heads I gave you last night."

"Yes, Sire."

"Did you post them?"

"Yes, Sire."

"Well, don't just stand there, go get the money!"

"Yes, Sire."

Renald closed the door and slowly walked back out to the balcony.

The sky was growing bright as first Beta then Gamma-7 appeared above the horizon. The sky filled with the usual morning shower of lights as the suns broke above the plane. The effect only lasted a moment or so, but Hawk and Renald were less than interested in such beauty when there were matters of money and power to be discussed.

"Hey, Hawk, listen, about earlier..."

She cut him off, "Right--we'll talk more when I have my money."

"Sure, that's just what I was going to suggest."

Hawk glanced at the cringing Renald in disgust.

Hawk dressed and armed herself then walked out into the King's courtyard. She plucked an apricot from a tree and sat on a bench next to a rose bush.

Renald was followed into the court by three others carrying bags.

"I've ordered a mount for your money," said Renald, with great courtesy. He immediately ordered the vassals out and sat on a bench opposite the female warrior.

"I'll use my own if it's all the same to you."

"As you wish."

Hawk continued to eat another apricot she had plucked from the tree.

Renald was impatient. He said, "Wouldn't you care to count it?"

"No."

"I'm relieved you decided to trust me."

"Not at all. If it isn't all there, I'll come back and take the rest out of you," she said flatly.

"I included the additional amount you requested for the information concerning the boy's whereabouts." Renald was having trouble with his new humility.

She smiled at her joke and said, "Yes, I suppose you would like to know where the boy--who even now is more of a man than you'll ever be--is."

Renald winced a smile.

Hawk decided to twist the dagger now that she had it firmly lodged in Renald's mind.

"Yes, where is the boy that will make you pay for the death of his parents?"

"You've been paid." Renald held his teeth firmly together trying to hold his temper.

Hawk pushed, "That's right, mouse, don't lose your temper with me, or you'll find the mine-ants exalted above your head."

"Are you going to tell me, or have I given you only an installment on your fee?"

"Dicey, I could learn to like it. No, unlike you I keep my bargains. As I was leaving Sin's End, I happened upon a scene that will no doubt interest you. There was some kind of fight going on to the south of the entrance which I decided to investigate. There was some sort of ugly humanoid fighting a troop of cavalry. I didn't want to get too close, but I saw the boy on the ground, under the shadow of a hill away from the fighting. I tried to get closer, but the fighting soon came to where the boy sat. The beast was defeated, and the boy, taken by the cavalrymen. I didn't like the odds, so I didn't try to 'rescue' the baby from them."

Renald's countenance grew pale as Hawk spoke. She didn't know what it was that Renald was bothered about because his thoughts were so erratic she couldn't follow them.

"What did the beast look like?" he said.

"More than three men tall, red, it had a very strangely shaped head."

At last out of the mess of Renald's thoughts she gained the name of the beast: Greyhalthor. As she discerned more she said, "You sent that ugly thing to kill." She became excited. "La Flandours was there?"

Renald became embarrassed and tried to shield his thoughts from her.

She continued speaking, "I was that close to him? No wonder Erick..." she caught herself.

Renald looked out from his worry and said, "What about Erick? Didn't he die with the others?"

She glared at him, "You want more, you'll pay for more. I told you about the boy."

"I don't need anything more from you."

Renald briskly left the garden and Hawk.

* * *

As the applause died away, the assemblage sat and Vashlee took out his prepared notes. He hadn't shaken fully the effects of a severe cold he had contracted on the final stage of the journey to the capitol city of the Eastern Marches. He also put on a pair of spectacles.

After clearing his throat he began.

"Gentlemen, thank you for this opportunity to address you. Since having arrived in your midst, I have received much heavy and grave news. The

heaviest has been that concerning the passing of our friends in the land of Unicorn. Amid these terrible reports I feel somewhat to give you an accounting of your brave men of the First Light Horse. You know that of the eight hundred which started their journey some nine months ago, only three hundred and twelve have returned to their families' bosoms. You have received the report of Major Hall, which detailed the many battles they fought to find, and the great carnage they experienced after joining me. It would be a great disservice and an unpardonable injustice for me to merely say I owe them my life for I owe them and the counsels of this body much more.

"You sent your brave and noble young men into a devil's maw and snatched out the seeds of global victory. I have refrained from allowing it to be generally known, fearing for the safety of the child, but, Gentlemen, your great act saved the true King of Quintin!"

The hall came alive as voices buzzed. Vashlee waited for quiet. One of the Representatives from the Hesritlsia district rose and, raising his hand, attained quiet.

He said, "Gentlemen, we have given the great General the floor. Do we now shame ourselves and take it from him because he brings news we hadn't imagined?" No one spoke. The Representative sat back down.

"I apologize for not better preparing you for the news, but it is true." He held up Colin's Medallion, and a few gasps came from his audience. "The father of the child was Colin Quintin; his mother was my granddaughter Princess Cindrith Harthallow." The silence was pervasive as Vashlee continued, "He who sits upon the throne of Quintin is an imposter.

"In my own home across the ocean I have felt the effects of a malevolent hand stretched forth, dispensing the sickly smell of carnage and disruption. It was this same evil which struck down my own wife. The same evil which

raised to unlawful rule the house of Harthallow the First and now the sinister house of Harthallow the Fourth. I do not know the names of the members of the secret organization, but I do know their number. And each of us can judge for ourselves the fruits of various highly placed men and women.

"I feel to speak boldly to you here gathered, knowing that you have assembled your counsels under fear for your own lives and families. You have assembled that you might break a yoke that has been placed about the necks of your youth. A yoke of: dishonor for parents; turning away from precepts which build moral fiber; villainy in the very music they hear from the wandering minstrelsy; vile lies in the public Press teaching that only carnal depravity is good!"

"Gentlemen, I know as great El is our witness that your resolve to throw off the usurpers' grip will be rewarded by blood. If we find sufficient friends remaining in the world, though the rivers run pomegranate red, we shall press the fight till we all lie in the dust of Omega or those vile forces are laid to rest!"

The Hall exploded with the thunder of the applause and cheers. They all caught the message loud and clear--General La Flandours had allied with their course and accepted it for his own, and the blood of Quintin still flowed, even if only in the veins of a babe.

* * *

[The following information was provided by the graphic entries to an incomplete journal kept at various times by Hawk (Sheila Umbrigale Thanamal). It provides information necessary to an understanding of the mechanizations which are an integral part of Erick's life (basically, the how's and why's of

certain arrangements which will be revealed later in this text). It isn't recommended by the author to be read and can be easily avoided by skipping to the next set of "* * *". Nevertheless it is background and does explain away some ambiguities; therefore, it is included and left to the reader to decide. It has been "cleaned up" from what was in her journal. Ed.]

Hawk felt the lump grow in her throat as the darkness took on new dimensions. She expected Renald to hire some mercenaries or at least send members of his guard to try to retrieve the bounty he had paid, so she had been especially careful in the selection of her campsites.

What she felt wasn't human! At least no human she'd ever encountered gave off such--such what? She couldn't find a word appropriate for the feeling of oppression and absolute evil which was slowly creeping over her. From her youth she had studied the black arts and gained her powers from understanding and practice. Evil was what she revelled in. Evil was the one path in which she believed. But what she felt under the thick layers of clouds on that night created such fear and loathing she broke out in an intense sweat.

Questions ran at a dizzying pace through her mind. Was what she felt real? Was it coming for her? Was she just in the proximity of whatever it was?... The questioning process was cut off by an image of carnage which gripped her! It seemed she was viewing all the gore ever committed upon Omega in one vast eternal view!

She had drunk the blood of babes and danced under the Coals of Threal! She had laid waste to innocents for the pleasure of the kill and eaten the living heart of her husband. Now her mind leapt to the resonance of this unknown fiend! She had made contact with what was for her the greatest Evil upon all of Omega!

She forgot about her money and any danger Renald may have devised. She prepared herself under the cover of darkness and laid prostrate upon the ground concentrating to gain the attention of the presence she sensed! Contact was immediate!

The force she revelled in now approached her with haste. She felt a flush rise within her. She writhed in her passion for debauchery.

Suddenly from the black night appeared an extremely attractive man with eyes that glowed red! As she studied the vile darkness of his flesh, every insatiable desire Hawk had ever devised rose within her! As animals they pounced in their mutual hatred for flesh! They filled the night with the sounds of the insane.

The dark clouds continued to hang thick as the morning broke upon a new day. Hawk and her Evil Lord lay prostrate beneath the tortured sky.

"Lady," said the Dark Lord.

"Umm?" moaned Hawk, as her relished pain from the night coursed her form.

"I've had me many a wench, but none were ever like thee."

"I am your slave, Dark Messiah, my lurid Lord."

He rose from the ground and picked up his great sword as he said, "It truly pains me to cleave thee."

Hawk looked up at the man towering over her prostate body and asked, "Can you make it slow so I may watch?"

Mandroark's arms went limp to his side as he roared, "One day, Renald, my sword shall imbibe thee!"

Hawk was shaken from her half trance by the mention of Renald's name.

"How could the likes of Renald ever control one such as you!?" she half-demanded.

He looked upon her as he spoke, "He holds a book!"

"A mere book can hold you to bondage!?"

"Not an ordinary book, THE book!"

"What book?"

"The Necro-Deamon-Codex."

Hawk's mind paced as she thought of Renald controlling her new-found idol. At length she struck upon an idea.

"I can help you retrieve your book."

His eyes narrowed as he turned his head to face her.

She stood as she said, "Do you know where he keeps it?"

"In a safe upon a wall."

She began to dress as she continued, "May I help you gain your freedom?"

"You wouldn't be plying a ruse to save your life?"

"Listen, when you want to kill me just say the word. I only ask that you do it slowly. I want to relish every moment of it. Agreed?"

"I like you."

She smiled, "Thank you. Now let's get that book."

* * *

Renald had had an exceptionally hard day. Many decisions had to be made as to the future of certain territories to the north and east of his vast land holdings. He had received a report of the Order's recent moves to gain the favor of those forces which were moving with increasing haste against Renald's throne. This was further complicated by the papers of Riska Cannia spreading the notion that a true heir to the throne still lived!

Renald had had enough of Cannia's "antics." He sat down with his chief

scribe and began to account for the doings of Cannia at the public's expense, not that he cared in the least about the public, but it would provide sauce in which Cannia could be basted while his body burned upon a stake.

As the evening stretched on, Renald excused his scribe and took himself to his bed chamber. He was tired from all the day's activities and looked forward to a peaceful night's rest. His bed had been turned down for him as he had commanded. He washed his face then retired to his bed, drawing the garni de rideaux.

* * *

"I really prefer a more subtle approach," said Hawk as she stiffened to jump the small retaining wall below the guard house.

"You know of a better way to get in?" asked Mandroark.

She didn't say anything. She pulled herself over the wall and tumbled to the guard stationed outside of the gate. In one fluid motion she broke the guard's neck with the heel of her boot. Mandroark was quick to her side and caught the guard before the lifeless body hit the ground. They dumped the man over the retaining wall.

They left a trail of dead and dying through the castle leading to the tower where Renald's suites were. They were careful to hide the bodies to prevent their easy discovery. At Renald's chamber they picked the lock on his door and let themselves in.

They heard Renald's snoring from behind his bed curtains. Mandroark pointed to where the wall safe was. Hawk swung out the picture which covered it and beheld a series of buttons and knobs. The whole was surrounded with Power Glyphs!

Hawk despaired, "I can't read these."

Mandroark looked over at her and whispered, "Just pull on the handle."

She gave him a curious look then shrugged as she pulled the handle. The safe opened easily.

"What an ingenious trap!" she said to herself. Then looking at Mandroark she said, "Now what?"

Mandroark looked at her in surprise, "Now you take out the book!"

"What book?"

He looked for himself--it was empty!

The voice came from the balcony. "Are you looking for something?"

They both started and looked toward the balcony.

"Makes you feel a little foolish," said Renald as he stepped into their view. "That is, for the both of you to be out-smarted by the likes of me."

Hawk started to lunge for Renald. He stopped her as he said, "Dark Lord, if she doesn't behave, you will surely breath your last!"

Mandroark collared Hawk.

"Sorry," Mandroark said, "but I like being alive."

Hawk didn't struggle.

"As for your disobedience in not killing her before, I'll let it pass for the moment, since you've brought her to me."

They said nothing.

Renald sat on the edge of his bed as he continued speaking, "Let's see, how shall we dispatch you, Hawk?"

While Renald amused himself at Hawk's expense, she probed the refuse of his mind to find where he had moved the book.

As Renald concluded his taunting of Hawk, she didn't respond as he had

hoped. Anyway, she found the book. It was under his pillow.

Finishing, Renald said, "...and the funniest thing is that you fell for my throwing my voice to the bed pretending to be asleep. I must admit you almost had me. If I hadn't awakened and walked out onto the balcony, I would never have seen Hawk flawlessly break the neck of the guard at the gate."

Hawk had projected to Mandroark what she was doing. As the pompous King was prattling, she tele-kinessed the book out from under the pillow to under the bed, then stood there smiling.

Renald was miffed to see her smiling as he spoke. He exploded, "What are you smiling about! You're about to die!"

As Hawk fairly flew toward him, Renald scampered backward for the book he placed beneath his pillow. She was on top of him at the same instant he realized she had moved his book. They struggled on the bed while Mandroark found amusement in their mortal struggle. She was attacking his mind as she tore at his flesh with her fingernails. He blindly ripped at her hair and tore at her clothes. At length they fell from the bed to the floor. As blood flowed from Renald's head, he saw the book and fought for position to latch onto it.

Had Hawk or Mandroark bothered to consider the degree to which Renald's power had come to depend upon the Dark Lord's service, they would have realized the substance upon which he drew for the effort it took to throw Hawk off of himself long enough for his hand to touch the book.

As Hawk quickly recovered, Renald placed his hand on the book and screamed out, "VERTONICK RUIENEAX INTWEE NUNK PISEAQUEZ!!"

The book burst into flames, and Mandraork was caught in a spasm of pain which instantly brought him to his knees as blood began to spurt forth from his bodily orifices. Hawk hadn't noticed Mandroark. She drove her fingers

under Renald's ribs and pulled out his heart!

She proudly held up the muscle and displayed it to Mandroark, then saw what was happening to the (as she supposed) alpha and omega of Evil. She threw the heart against the wall and ran to him. She held up his sputtering body and said, "You can't die! You're supposed to kill me!"

As the flow of Mandroark's blood became less, he spoke in a voice which sounded to her ears to already be beyond the grave as he said, "Take my bracelet and learn well. It will more than match your Erick."

His voice trailed off as his flesh began to pop and sizzle. When it finished, all that was left was fine dust which the breeze from the window blew across the floor.

* * *

Erick mounted his steed, and a second handed the three-year-old king up to him. He raised King Jamiel-Michael over his head and rising off of his saddle called out to the throng, "LONG LIVE KING JAMIEL-MICHAEL, MAY HE RULE LONG ON HIS THRONE, LONG LIVE THE KING!"

For the space of twenty minutes the assembled armies repeated the call. Then General La Flandours raised his hand and four million men moved forth across the vast countryside. They represented the free nations of the globe. Lovers of freedom had come from as far away as the declining Empire of the Western Kings, even some people from the Spice Kings had come to join in to restore the throne of Quintin to its rightful heir. The bulk of the armies came from Northern Vega, the Eastern Marches, the Domain of La Flandours, refugees from the iron rule of Harthallow, the people of the City of the Cave where Erick had began his road, and citizens from Northern Pasquel (the

territory north of Sin's End). Their ranks filled an area of some one hundred and forty-four square leagues. The valleys and hills trembled as they raised the banner of the King.

The armies swept aside the border posts and quickly liberated the depleted lands of Kennardia. They then swept southeastward and released the captive Eribador. As they moved upon the borders of the Coastal States, an emissary from the First General of Quintin came to General La Flandours' Head Quarters.

"The General will see you now, Colonel," said the aide-de-camp Elif Tinselman.

The Colonel stood in front of the table behind which the General La Flandours sat. The tent was crowded with assorted staff and General officers. The General nodded for the Colonel to deliver his message.

"Your Excellency, The First General of Quintin sends this message with his compliments." He produced a scroll and held it out for the General to take.

The General didn't reach for it. He said, "If you don't mind Colonel, you read it."

The Colonel swallowed hard as he unrolled the scroll. He read, "To his excellency General La Flandours, Commander in Chief of the forces at war with the just government of the throne of Quintin. It is my duty to inform you that as you are about to violate the sovereign border of the Coastal States of Quintin, such an act will bring into effect treaties signed by his most sovereign King Harthallow the First. You, Sir, will be held personally accountable for this act of barbaric lawlessness." The Colonel paused and looked up from the paper at the General.

The General sat expressionless, his jaw set in a most noble fashion, and

waited for the Colonel to finish.

The Colonel's eyes darted back to the page and, with his fingers slightly shaking the page, continued to read, "It occurs that part of your difficulty with understanding us stems from a belief that King Harthallow the Fourth is not a legal heir to the throne. We believe the following information sufficient to make you change your plans. One month previous to this writing our beloved King was most barbarously assassinated."

A degree of confusion broke out in the tent at the news of Harthallow's death. Some saying "Good riddance," other's gasping, one intrepid soul ventured, "Any assassination is unacceptable, even that of a butcher like him!" The General raised his hand and quiet was restored.

The Colonel visibly shook as he continued, "We do not know that your hand either was or was not involved in so heinous a deed."

Again the tent filled with confusion, this time demanding an end to the Emissary's visit by sending him back tied across his saddle. Once more the General raised his hand, this time his expression hinted the gravity that he gave to the message to which he was listening.

The Colonel coughed to clear his throat then said, "Thank you, Your Eminence."

The General nodded.

The Colonel read the remainder, "What is important at this moment is that your reason for war against our independent states is no longer necessary as the object of your hatred is no longer living. I have been empowered by the acting Regent Prince Von Metterrich to guarantee safe passage back to the lands from whence you came. Signed, Opiner Del Terouniste, First General of Quintin." The Colonel rolled up the scroll and said, "Your Excellency, I had

been ordered to transport this to you. I know you will understand when I say that I do not have the power to apologize for its content. I do, however, give myself up to your custody as a prisoner of war."

The hush of muttering surrounded the Colonel. The General sat quietly behind the table and folded his hands on top of his lap. He leaned his head back slightly and looked hard at the young Colonel standing before him. At last he spoke.

"What is your name, Colonel?"

The Colonel had expected and been prepared for almost anything other than the question he was just asked. His eyes displayed his confusion as he responded, "Sir, Colonel Bron Dyer."

"Well, Colonel Dyer, how did you manage to become a colonel with so little loyalty to your cause?"

The Colonel felt ashamed as he responded, "Your Excellency, from my youth I have been taught war. I am now thirty-one and have witnessed the rule of two Harthallows, the latter more brutal and vile than the former, and from what I've heard the former more brutal and vile than those who preceded him. I was awarded a victory cross for my part in the battles of the Isthmus of Unicorn and was promoted from line officer to general staff. Every day that I had spent in that position, Sir, created a greater and greater hatred for everything that I had every dreamed that I wanted to stand for. I have kept this from my superiors and now would prefer to be fed starvation's portion in your vilest prison as to serve for another moment in the company of those I loathe, Sir."

The Colonel's eyes watered as he finished, but he stood erect with his head full up, prepared for whatever punishment the General may pronounce upon him as being just for his part in the beastiality which had become Quintin.

Vashlee's heart softened as he viewed the Colonel. He quietly intoned the following words, "Colonel Bron Dyer, I do not accept your surrender, and I will not take you prisoner. I will prepare a message, and you will deliver its text to those who sent you to me. If after having delivered that text you wish to return to our ranks, I will then consider your surrender and not an instant before."

The Colonel's jaw trembled as he said, "I am at your command, Sir."

The General worked late into the night with his aides-de-camp and two of his best generals preparing a response. The final text read as follows:

[]
[To Prince Von Metterrich, Acting Regent for the]
[Coastal States of Quintin]
[]
[Your Highness:]
[I have received the message authorized by you]
[from your First General of Quintin. We grieve that]
[anyone should be assassinated and wish you the]
[best of fortune in finding the culprits. However,]
[authorizing your First General of Quintin to]
[conclude that we have come to war merely to remove]
[your former king shows both a contemptuous lack]
[of regard for the rights of your citizens and a]
[truly inexcusable ignorance of the political]
[situation.]
[As you have taken over the reins of your]
[government, we must conclude it has been with the]

[blessing of the generals appointed by your late]
[king. The epistle I received indicates no change]
[in the policies your government has determined to]
[carry out. I will therefore take a moment to]
[enlighten you that the curse of ignorance may be]
[lifted from your shoulders as to the true]
[political motivations of your neighbors and indeed]
[many of your own citizens' participation in this]
[war of liberation.]
[I will first enlighten you as to the proper]
[ordering of legal heirship. It has been the custom]
[amongst all potentates that their living flesh]
[should enjoy the reins of a sovereign. We examine]
[the late king's legal heirship to the throne.]
[According to the reports published in your own]
[papers, Edmond the Third's death came about by]
[extremely dubious circumstances. I have in my]
[possession a journal of the late Lady Cindrith, my]
[granddaughter. The widely publicized accounts of]
[her coronation, much less her marriage to Renald of]
[Trent, mysteriously do not stand up upon even the]
[most ardent perusal of her journal.]
[Edmond the First came to power through]
[assassination of the most inept kind for he failed]
[to kill the living heir to the throne, even]
[Michael. When his son got around to assassinating]
[Michael, Michael had sired a son whom he left in]

[the tender care of some friends. The legal docu-]
[ments surrounding these births are in my posses-]
[sion. Your late king placed no value upon the]
[sanctity of human life, and having not the least]
[shred of humanity, published widely, Wanted posters]
[for the true King known abroad as Sean McEan, his]
[christened name being Colin Quintin after his]
[great-great-grandfather. The effect of the Wanted]
[posters was sufficient to see the end of Colin and]
[also of my granddaughter Lady Cindrith. But again,]
[those bearing the name of Harthallow have proven]
[inept in their designs, for Colin lawfully wed to]
[Cindrith sired Jamiel-Michael Quintin who is yet]
[alive at the tender age of four and a half years.]
[So much for the just rule of the House of]
[Harthallow.]
[As for the fitness of the government of]
[Quintin as currently constituted, I have person-]
[ally entered in to the communal farms erected by]
[your government and seen with my own eyes the]
[the barbarism of your brand of justice. In brief,]
[in all of Kennardia and Eribador I have been]
[greeted with the tears of the survivors of your]
["just" reign.]
[In conclusion, by the powers vested in me by]
[the people whom I command, I call upon you, your]
[subordinates, your armies, and all who have dealt]

[treacherously with this people to lay down your]
[arms, your sceptres, and your badges of office and]
[surrender to the just judgements of the people.]
[Any further increase in the spilling of blood, Sir,]
[you may rightly suppose, that with the receipt of]
[this epistle such shall be laid to your charge.]
[]
[]
[Humbly,]
[]
[Vashlee La Flandours]
[]
[Commander-in-Chief]
[]
[&c &cc]

* * *

I had come to respect and love the General as much as I had imagined I could anyone. He had helped me through the darkest of my selfrecriminations, gently directing my energies to more productive tasks. It was with the greatest difficulty that I listened to the epistle sent from the enemy's camp to the General, so filled with venom and falsehood that it could only have come from those who truly love "the lie."

That night as the evening wore to early morning and then to morning's light while the General and his aides-de-camp worked and reworked the letter to be sent, I noticed, for the first time, the full caliber of the man.

The first draft was prepared by his aides; Elif Tensilman, adjutant David Foster, Quail Evestine, and myself. We leveled every indictment possible in a document filling twenty pages. The General read the whole over then turned to

us and said, "My friends, you have produced a document which possesses every right to be forwarded for its shear scope and comprehension. Yet, I am left to wonder as to whether this serves our purposes. For if I return so stinging an indictment filled with so many proofs, would not his reaction, being a natural man, be to march full to battle lest the great crimes here enumerated be brought to public light? Where can the cause of peace be served and the ultimate liberation be achieved with the least loss of life? Let us rather confine the intelligence we are to pass to bring about the peaceful transition of government, instead of stirring his feelings to heated and sorely pitched battle with its attendant carnage."

In my very brief life I had never felt shame for my participation in war. It had always been an honor to serve a cause. Within the General's words was embodied his ultimate conviction for peace to such an extent I truly felt ashamed for my eagerness to fight. The heart of the General was much the same as was Colin's and Cindrith's. They were nothing like the Harthallows or the local governors. There was something much refined and tender in their approach to life and death. I had always been under the impression that birthright didn't count for much other than worldly possessions. It certainly never displayed the kind of character evidenced by these three. It would be long years and then only after meeting the great Homer before I would understand these things fully. But at that time I met greatness and basked in its fervent, how-be-it calm, light.

For the longest time I waged a constant battle within myself. The cause for my turmoil was the degree of love I felt in his presence. I would feel that I had bridged a gap in my character, then I would hear the General speak and the bridge would prove to be vaporous to the point of lacking substance. Never once did the General express disappointment with me. He had always

asked me if I wanted to go a particular way when the choice could be made. The more I was around him, the more I wanted Jamiel-Michael to be just like him--and, the more I wanted to be like him, too. So keenly had I felt my failings that the morning we finished the dispatch to be sent to Prince Von Metterrich I asked the General for a moment of his time to explain my position.

I began, "Sir, I account the past years I've been privileged to spend in your company, to be the most rewarding and the most fruitful of my life. As the evening passed with our work on the draft to be sent, over and over a thought kept coming to me. I'm grateful for the--I don't even know a word to describe how humbled I am that you've never censored me for the deaths of your daughter and son-in-law. I've never heard you say you love me, but I've never been so convinced of true love from anyone. I realize that you don't expect me to say the things I'm saying, but I don't know how else to express how I feel."

He sat quietly looking at the opening of the tent. His lips were slightly pursed and his hands were before his face, his fingertips lightly touching opposed fingertips. At length his gaze moved slowly to me. His eyes were tired from too much war and too little sleep. His melodious voice broke the silence.

"Erick, I have known well that our roads would travel separate needs. I don't understand the woman Hawk, but I would think myself a fool should I not expect it's she who has troubled your mind so."

I wasn't surprised to learn his understanding of my mind. He wasn't possessed of powers which would enable him to read my mind, only of quiet patience and a studied mind trained to weigh an issue from all sides. Where I would leap to a conclusion because I had caught an unguarded thought, he would

refrain till he thoroughly understood the hues of those things which otherwise were vague. So often I would be right in a point only to learn that if I had but waited a moment for understanding to catch up with information, I would easily have come to the true solution and inherent virtue instead of a "point."

The General continued, "Knowing your devotion to the safety of the young King, I expect you to ask to leave him in my charge." (I had.) "I will not permit you to do so. Before you protest too loudly, hear my justification. You go into battle with this woman with lingering feelings of deserved death, and you won't survive the test. If, on the other hand, your ward is in direct proximity, you will not allow yourself the self-pity which will seal your doom, if for no other reason than for the sake of the child whose father's dying words were for you to stay alive."

His words hurt. I had forgotten as the months passed what Colin had said as he lie bleeding on Blue Island. Not so much because I didn't care, but there was so much that needed to be done that I hadn't had time to keep the wound alive. My thoughts were cut off by the General.

"Erick, would you take the last gift a father could give to a son?"

I thought long and hard on his words before speaking.

"No." I said.

"Then do right, lad. Do right."

"General, if I don't find her, she will seek me out. There is already a price on the young child's head from SOLE. Is it right to condemn him because of his father's last request?"

"If condemning him were the end of it, yes. His father was Colin Quintin and great was the stature of that man. Not because he was a King born of a noble lineage, not because the hardships imposed by his circumstances caused

him to be anything. Rather, because Colin was the boy's father, whether peasant pauper or King, his wish for his son is justifiable before God and men. It is the man and his conduct which merit respect, not position nor possession. However, I wonder if it would not be condemning the King more to have you dead rather than alive. If it is true that Hawk will seek you out eventually, then it is right for you to defeat her quickly lest she gain allies. If you meet her in battle feeling your life worthless, will you win?"

"I, I..." I, nothing--he was right! I lowered my head and said, "No."

"Take the child and raise him as your own flesh. When the time comes for him to take the throne and he have a desire for it, bring him to me. Now we both have duties to be about. There will be peace along the border for about a full month while we wait for word to come back in answer to our epistle. Use that month to find the woman and set your differences to right. You have my blessing--more importantly, you will have the blessing of El, for He foreordained Jamiel-Michael to be King."

He rose from his seat slowly and left the tent.

As he was about to drop the flap behind himself he turned and said, "Sleep. All will be ready for you when you wake."

* * *

I had never heard of Thumbriolet, a small hamlet on the southern tip of Eribador. The only reason for its existence was the bridge its people built and maintained across the deep gorge flowing to the southern ocean from inland. For eighty leagues this was the only way across. The toll for crossing was half a silver. The few businesses which existed were for maintenance of the indigenous population.

I had heard of the place in a conversation with a barmaid in Glirot, the capitol of Eribador. What interested me wasn't that there was a bridge. It was the story she told me of a stranger who had passed through the previous week. She said he looked like he was suffering from shock, and though he appeared physically healthy, he spoke with an unnatural rhythm. Had she stopped there I wouldn't have given it a second thought, but she went on...

"He looked at me sort-a queer like and shook 'is finger at me.

He said, 'Death walks the bridge of Thumbriolet!' Then the bloke started to shake so violently he fell to the floor, sputtering and spitting. A moment later he froze stiff and the boss sent for the Doc. When the Doc got through looking at 'im, he said the man's mind had exploded. Did you ever 'ere anything so queer?"

The road to Thumbriolet was barren. Only the occasional tree sprouted along the rocky landscape of the last thirty leagues to the hamlet. The only reason the bridge was used was that the major ports on the western coasts of Eribador were only a short journey from where it crossed the Crastina Gorge.

Jamiel-Michael was five at that time and could sit astride a pony by himself. We rode together till he would tire, then I would hitch his pony to the saddle of my horse and cradle him in my arms as he slept.

He was growing to be a bright child and quickly grasped new ideas that weren't overly complex. He looked almost identical to how I imagined his father to look at the same age. His mother had bestowed great longevity upon him from her mother and her's before her. He was one-eighth elf. [In contemporary terms that meant he would live to be between two hundred and two hundred and fifty years old. Ed.] More importantly he was growing in wisdom.

I made it a point to pray to El every morning and night. I'd never gone in for religion, and that other people worshipped their various idols never

phased me. Somehow, though, while being in the company of the General, it just made sense that if a man like he would go through the effort of praying, there had to be something in it. Besides, I discovered some practical applications of prayer in that it kept me from thinking too highly of my abilities. That came in handy more often than I'd like to admit.

Thumbriolet was a dirty little place, its windblown street vacant except for the occasional resident crossing from one building to another. As I drew rein on the outskirts of town, I felt her. Hawk was here at the edge of the continent waiting for me!

There was something different that I had trouble identifying. As I sat on the back of my horse with Michael asleep in my arms, I realized that the difference was in the quality of what I was feeling! I'd never felt Hawk before. Now that I could I was aware that the feeling I had had when fighting the beast which tried to kill the General was much the same as this!

We slowly rode to the only stable in the town, and I paid the man to put up our mounts. Michael and I crossed the street to the inn. I paid for a room.

The feeling I was picking up was Hawk, but as I moved it neither grew stronger nor lessened in any degree. I had at first thought to use it to locate her, but that proved a useless hope. When we put our belongings in the room I had rented, I told Michael to lock the door and to speak to no one who came to the door and to let no one in except myself.

I went over to the tavern and asked the barmaid if she had seen anyone of Hawk's description come through in the last month. She looked at me slowly then started to speak, her eyes glazed over and in a monotone.

"No, I haven't."

Presently her eyes returned to normal, and she left me at the counter.

It didn't take long for me to realize what had happened. If I wanted to find Hawk, I'd have to do it the hard way--look for her.

It didn't take long to look the town over as there were only a few buildings. Each person I asked about Hawk presented me with the same reaction as the barmaid. As I was walking back to the inn, I remembered the words of the barmaid in Glirot, "Death walks the bridge in Thumbriolet." I turned around and walked the short distance to the bridge. At the gate a man sat in a small hut to guard the way.

I knocked on his door, and he lazily looked up at me saying, "Money in the bucket an' I'll open the gate."

"Pardon me, I didn't want to cross yet. I was hoping I could ask you a few questions."

He was seated with his arms folded across his chest and his chair leaning against the wall behind him. He gave me a look and I caught his thought, "Crazy foreigner."

"What you want to know, young fella?" he said.

"Well, I was wondering what you might make of something a man said in Glirot."

His eyes narrowed, "Come a bit far to be asking a stranger about someone in the capitol, haven't ya?"

"Perhaps. May I tell you what he said?"

"Suit yourself."

"He said, 'Death walks the bridge at Thumbriolet.'"

The Tollman's eyes grew dark and his mind clouded. He didn't say anything to me. His mind seemed to freeze in place. Slowly the darkness passed. He continued to lean against the wall on his chair. I waited a moment then he said, "Well, you gonna tell me or not?"

I repeated myself to the same effect. When he again asked me if I was "gonna" tell him, I said, "He said there was something strange about your bridge here."

He half-smiled as he said, "Some folks claim all kinds of things after crossing the bridge. Height gets to them."

"Yes, I suppose you're right. How long does it take to cross the bridge?"

"A-foot or on horse?"

"Both."

He frowned, "A-foot about two hours. On horse--depends on the horse."

I said, "Thank you," and left. I walked to the edge of the bridge and looked out across it. The length of the bridge was two leagues. It was a marvel of construction. I mentally searched the bridge and found no trace of anyone. I thought it strange as I had been told the bridge was usually busy except in the dark. I went back to the inn, and on my way back up the stairs I asked the innkeeper's wife who was dusting the lobby about traffic.

She said, "Funny-thing-no-one's-crossed-it-for-about-a-month."

"Did something happen?"

"Well-as-I-remember-the-last-caravan-to-cross-came-over-half-crazed. The -people-kept-talking-of-some-strange-happening-about-midway-across." She thought to herself then repeated her thought out loud, "I-guess-they-passed-their-fears-along, and-people-being-like-people-are, nobody's-crossed-it-since."

On the way back up the stairs to the room the feeling I had had since arriving in town stopped, as though a knife had sliced it off. I knocked on the door and repeated a code I had taught Michael. He opened the door. I couldn't shake the oppression which was creeping up on me. I felt like

someone had grabbed my heart and proceeded to twist it. Michael was alright then, but a moment later he began to cry, complaining of a pain in his chest! I put my hand on his chest and could feel the convulsions within his small cavity. I laid him on the bed and concentrated to reverse the effects which were gripping him. My own heart began to convulse and continued with increasing violence. I finally stopped the writhing within Michael's chest, but so exhausted was the boy he immediately fell asleep.

I next turned my thoughts to my own pain. After much exertion I stopped the spasms. In doing so I heard within my brain, "Welcome to the game, ha ha haaa!" The fight was on!

I had learned a few things about vysionpas since parting the company of Hawk, and from what had just happened I knew she hadn't been idle. I created a bubble around Michael's body as a thought shield to prevent Hawk's mental attacks from damaging him. At least, if she wanted to get to him, she would have to do physical combat with me. I was more than confident she would lose such a match.

No sooner than I had finished the shield than I was struck by a blast which seemed to come straight form the nether regions! I reeled as a drunken man and fell next to Michael's bed. Hawk had acquired some kind of power I wasn't prepared for! I had walked into my death and brought the child with me! The General, for the first time, was WRONG!

With the meager strength I could muster I gamely fought back. I shielded my brain against the assault and sought out her presence. Wave after wave pummeled my resistance, each wave setting up the harmonic for the following one, condensing the energy to an ever more massive stroke against my weakening shield. The synergism of the blows and my own shield were working against me! I felt as though I had been caught inescapably in a spiraling vortex! My

palms were sweating profusely, my heart was beating with increasing violence. As the last moment of consciousness seemed to be upon me, the attack stopped! It had left me in a condition of wretched weakness, streaming sweat.

I felt truly helpless. Whatever power she was calling upon was beyond my understanding, and I knew it! Just the exhibition of my own shortcomings helped to overpower me. In my depleted condition I could do no better than to sit and try to breath. The throbbing in my head nearly covered up the sound of the door opening and Hawk entering!

She looked old and worn. Her muscles were in fine tone, but her eyes were nigh unto death. It seemed they glowed a deep crimson at their centers. Wearing a sickly purple robe she sat on the chair in front of the window. The pale blue sky silhouetted her and made her face appear morbid and drawn. I used the majority of my energy to breath, and the little left me afforded only enough to watch her. Every vestige of the comely woman I had known but a few years before was gone. She seemed almost a ghoul, a zombie.

She laughed a hollow laugh, then her mouth drew up into a sneer. She raised her hand and pointed to me. I had no strength to resist; I found myself being lifted off the floor and suspended in mid air. Her voice was different, almost as though caged animals were wailing in the distance when she spoke.

"Erick, how have you been?" She knew I didn't have energy to speak. She laughed again. "I see you've done well for yourself." She looked at Michael on the bed as she continued to speak. "It really is too bad that you used so much of your power to protect the King instead of defending yourself. I would have preferred a greater contest of will. Oh, well. I suppose I'll have to console myself with enjoying your death. Still, I think I will wait for a moment and try to figure out how to get around the shield you so foolishly put

around the King. I think it will be pleasant to watch your expression as I vivisect him. Besides, the flesh of children excites me--but I guess you wouldn't know about that."

My failings served her well! The more she taunted me over Michael, the more I realized my own sorrows were draining what little reserves I might have for an effort to defy her.

She knew I was weakening.

"Erick, our differences are petty. I've never done anything to hurt you. So why would you want to come and kill me? I have nothing to fear of the young King; Harthallow was the one that wanted him dead. For myself, I couldn't care less. General La Flandours to the north will defeat the weakened armies of Prince Von Metterrich and then peace will come to the land. Isn't that what we went to Sin's End to accomplish? So what if it came about differently than we first imagined? The important thing is the outcome. The Republic will shortly be re-established, and we can go about our lives. Don't you want that? Isn't it important to live our beliefs?"

Her expression conveyed a degree of sincerity I hadn't imagined in her since the death of her son. I had come to find her out of concern for the young King, and I believed that she would eventually seek me out for knowing about her. Now she seemed to be strangely desirous of being left alone to live out her life peaceably. I struggled a nod.

A thin smile creased her lips, "Good. I knew the first time I saw you that you were reasonable. I don't want to kill you; I like you. I poured a great deal of effort into your training, and I'd like to see it put to good use. I have a simple proposition. I will leave Quintin and never come back. I would have been gone sooner, but I thought it best to wait for you. I haven't hurt anyone here, and when I leave, the trade route will open back up.

All I want from you is a guarantee that you won't follow me."

A thousand thoughts crossed my mind and none of them appropriate to the occasion. I knew there was something wrong with what she was saying, but I was so depleted in mind and body I couldn't make the connection! I was so frustrated I wanted to scream. All I managed was a moan.

She looked upon me and said, "Poor Erick, I've made you too tired to talk. That's okay. Just nod if you think it's a bad deal."

I didn't have strength to nod, and I think she knew it! What could I do? With no nod she could say I agreed to her scheme. And how could I refute it? It was then that I realized she had a bracelet around her wrist. I wouldn't have noticed it at all were she not incessantly rubbing it around and around her arm. I don't think even that would have distracted me were it not for the fact that I found myself facing a situation I dreaded, and the major reason for the blind fear that I had to constantly fight against was emanating from that bracelet!

One of the things I had discovered about vysionpas was that it could be like mercury and new sources of it could be had if one were of the proper mind to find it. That proper mind was unachievable while experiencing fear--Hawk knew that! I do not know where I gained the presence of mind to detect the bracelet as a source of power, much less to block it, but all of a sudden the emissions from it ceased. Nothing about Hawk had changed; she continued to try and convince me of the good sense in letting her go. At the same instant that the fear abated I found new strength being funnelled into me. Realizing that any change in my behavior would be picked up by her, I continued to make the rasping sounds my forced breathing had been making. As I slowly looked about the room within my mind, I saw a small child sitting on the edge of my mind. As I focused I saw who it was--Michael! He, too, had vysionpas! Hawk

hadn't detected it in him! But the attack she had launched had awokened the primal forces of the youth. As he was still encased within the shield I had made, she couldn't detect the workings of his mind, and as I was only watching him and not betraying my thoughts, she couldn't see what was happening

Somehow Michael knew how to transfer his energy to me and used my knowledge to guide him. I looked sideways down at him lying on the bed. He was breathing peacefully and had all appearances of being asleep.

Hawk noticed my glance and said, "You haven't heard anything I've been saying for the last several moments! Now why is that I wonder?" She stood and drew her sword. "You're worried about the boy?"

I realized she couldn't read my thoughts! I didn't know why, but I was in no mood to question my good fortune.

She looked at me with a puzzled expression. It was obvious that she knew something was going on and equally obvious she had not the slightest idea as to what it was. She resheathed her sword and sat back down, rubbing her bracelet in the fashion of someone looking over their shoulder for support. The power she had came from it. I didn't know how, I just knew it. Knowing it didn't help me in the least because I had no idea of how to overcome the magnitude of the damage it had done to me. I was truly amazed that my mind was clear enough to think in anything other than single words. As Michael worked to restore my strength, I listened to Hawk as she continued to speak.

"What are you doing, Erick?" She leered at me. "Erick, I asked you what you are doing?!" Discouragement glimmered through her eyes. For an instant it seemed as though the glow in her eyes dimmed. She began to tap her foot nervously then stopped and said, "Erick, why don't you join me? We would make

a great team."

My head rolled to one side as I attempted to say no.

Her confidence seemed to reassert itself as she said, "Erick, with the power you possess and my own, we could easily take over any throne we wanted. If you're worried about the boy, you need not be. You can take him back to the General; I understand he's the boy's grandfather anyway. Or you can bring him with us. Think of it. With us working together people would worship us as gods!"

If she only hadn't invited me to go with her and then suggested being a god because of vysionpas, it would have been easy for me in that instant to just let her go. But in her greed she wanted a companion. In her lust she wanted a partner! And it wouldn't be me!

As the magnitude of her words rushed over me and my own innate revulsion for the emoluments of the kind she offered welled within me, the clouds which had gripped my mind broke open letting in the light of reason!

"NO!" I screamed out within my mind.

The force of my resistance caught Hawk totally off guard as it sent her careening through the window to the street below. Her hold on me was broken. I fell to the floor and found renewed strength as I hefted my long sword and hurried down into the street. Hawk was dusting herself off as I opened the door of the inn. She drew her own sword and released a bolt of energy which I barely dodged. It slammed into the side of the building, and wood exploded out into the street.

When I completed the roll, I stood in the street. I pressed the orange button on the sword and felt the familiar vibration of the weapon. She released a second bolt of energy from her mind. I again dodged it as it flew past me and erupted into the hut next to the bridge. The old man who had been

inside came out screaming like a banshee.

Hawk wasn't a fool, and I didn't believe she would continue to expend her strength sending such expensive bolts of her mental power toward me when there was so great a likelihood of my dodging them. She would wait for a more opportune moment.

Though I felt my life essence returning to me, I still wasn't strong enough to deal with her in mental combat. My second roll had brought me up to within four feet of her. I swung my sword overhead and brought it hard down against her own which she had interposed between her flesh and my blade. The resultant contact sent violent sparks flying in all directions. When the smoke cleared, I barely had time to parry a thrust of her own aimed for my midsection. Again sparks flew creating a haze.

I controlled my blade through the area where she had been and struck her a mighty affliction upon her left arm. As the smoke again cleared, her blade sliced the material of my jerkin. Her left arm had been cleaved, and from the elbow down the appendage lay upon the ground. She gave out no cry of pain. And though life flowed intensely from the wound, she fought on as though possessed!

She brought her weapon toward me in an arching slash. I released the shield within my ring and blocked her blow, bringing my own blade upward into her bosom! She reeled. Blood spurted forth from the gap in her flesh and began to trickle forth from her mouth and nose. But no sound of ache from her came! Not the least moan nor whimper of hurt did she release! Again she hurled a forceful stroke. Sparks and smoke filled the air, pierced through by the sound of an unholy laugh she gave out. Within the sound of her laughter seemed to be ten thousand horrors as yet unknown!

I guided the keen edge of my sword through smoke and haze and felt

contact with her again. As the air cleared I saw where her body lay upon the ground and her head at my feet where it had fallen.

I slumped to the ground and breathed heavily. After a moment I stood and turned toward the inn. I didn't look up; the loss of even an evil life brought pain. As I started to step up to the porch of the inn, I heard Michael call to me.

"ERICK, BEHIND YOU!" he screamed.

I turned quickly around and watched the wracked body of the woman convulse and hiss. Before my eyes I beheld the beasts within her rise from her dead flesh! I didn't recognize one of them, but there was no mistaking the image of the beast which tried to kill the General at Sin's End, nor that of Hawk with her flesh laying on the ground below as they hovered in the air.

I heard the sound of scraping followed by a thud! From the corner of my eye I could see my battle axe as it lay upon the ground beneath the window of our rented room. Michael had used every ounce of strength within his meager frame and pushed it out of the window for me. The wraiths knew exactly what the weapon was for, and the spirit of Hawk leapt for it. She was faster, but I was closer--I won the race.

I had never fought anything without a physical form and had no idea of their power. However, Hawk helped me immeasurably as I saw her pass through a post in front of the inn! I moved out into the street so that they would not be able to surprise me from the building by emerging from it after having passed through it.

They began a dance about me as I stood in the street. Soon my vision was blurred, and the scene of the town changed till all that was left was a world of vapor and no substance--it was the Etherial Plane!

As their dance stopped, they each revealed weapons of strange device. I

hefted my battle axe with my two hands and ran in the direction to the largest one.

Distances were strange! I had but taken two steps and the area of several rods was crossed--I found myself immediately before his looming form. I manipulated my axe and avoided his parry, bringing the weapon into his spectral form. The fine steel bit deep into the side of the fiend. I watched as it crumpled under the blow.

As I watched I was lifted in the void and thrown by Hawk mentally. The two remaining of the spirits came quickly for me. I concentrated and caught Hawk not quite on guard. The force I released against her sent her tumbling head over heels in the mists of the vaporous haze. The other that I had never confronted stood just beyond the reach of my axe, its black form moving with sinuous rhythm. I didn't know what it was trying to do, but as I would have leapt toward it and swung my blade, it mimicked my moves! Always just a little beyond my reach!

It was trying to frustrate me! I backed off and lowered my axe, holding the hilt loosely with my left hand. For a moment it stopped its rhythmic movements then backed off and started again. I felt a probe within my mind. It was an odious probe searching with feverish intensity.

I rejected the touch and cried out, "Never will I bend the knee to a lie!"

The probing stopped, and the thing lunged for me with its hands. I didn't understand what was happening, none of any of it made the least degree of sense! Its frigid fingers dug into my neck. I could feel my veins constrict. Breath no longer came to me as I stood there in his vise-like grip.

At once reason pierced the darkness that was slowly growing within my

eyes, and I swung the battle axe with my left hand into the fiend's back. As its icy fingers ever so slowly released their hold, the scene reverted back to the street of Thumbriolet.

I stood there pondering the strangeness of the experience--and the ground began to rumble. The buildings started to shake as the world began to heave. Then, just as suddenly, the vibrations deep below the surface of Omega ceased. Michael ran into the street and put his little arms around my neck. I felt his tears as they dropped down my neck.

The ground exploded! Michael and I went flying through the air. As I picked myself up and started looking around for Michael, out of the rent in the street came a beast the likes of which I never before had imagined to be! It stood six rods high and dripped red and green slime from a head that appeared as a raven; its body was in the form of a man! It was armed with a massive trident. I shook the sight and hurried in search of Michael.

I found him bent over a rock, blood slowly coming out of the back of his youthful head. The vision cleaved my heart and struck as a bolt of lightning through my brain! I jumped for my battle axe and screamed with all the strength of my lungs at the fiend standing there, its laughter rebounding from the dark clouds which were fast massing in the sky. I charged the beast with my eyes clouding from the pain of the loss of Michael.

* * *

After his hut exploded, it took a while for Himholst to return to normal. When he did he hurried back to the town. As he came up between the inn and the general store, he saw Erick charging down the street. He looked up the street and saw the fey thing which dominated the sky. Himholst fell white as

a sheet against the outer wall of the general store.

The fey thing (as he called it) raised its weapon and thrust it down at Erick as he continued his charge down the street. Himholst watched as Erick dodged the first lunge but was caught on the side of his head on the second pass. The force of the strike sent Erick rolling across the ground. The fey thing then raised its trident and proceeded to thrust it down toward the prostrate form of Erick.

Himholst glanced to his side as he caught sight of the small boy running up to the limp man in the street. Barely discernible within the din of lightning and wind he heard the boy call out "EL, PLEASE DON'T LET IT BE!"

The fey thing slowed his thrust as its eyes shot forth a beam of burning light which churned up the earthen street, leaving a burning trail in the dirt as it raised its gaze to the boy. The sky began to convulse, and the wind ripped down the street.

Himholst cringed and hugged the ground and the side of the building as the fierce wind threw sand into his naked eyes. The boy was blown flat and tumbled next to Erick.

The fey thing began to be affected in the gale force wind and struggled to keep its stance. Then at once the sky churned and exploded upon the fey thing and sent its pieces flying across the countryside.

When the last of the fey thing was out of sight, the sky cleared and the wind calmed as the little boy held the head of Erick and dabbed at his wound.

* * *

As I came to I was lying in a bed in the inn. The whole of the experience seemed an ugly nightmare. But it had happened. The whole scene

from the beginning seemed to wash over me and I felt relieved to have it finished. Since then I and Michael have crossed many a trail together but I always had these things ever present with me all the while. I have told the tale and leave it to posterity to judge.

Grand Marshal Erick of Kempdon

EPILOGUE

After a short rest Erick and Michael returned to Vashlee La Flandours and related their experiences to him.

The armies of the General were victorious against the small force Prince Von Metterrich had fielded against them, and took the man and his commanding Generals into custody.

About a year passed before the report which Renald had begun on Riska Cannia came to light. The indictments were sufficient for a warrant to be issued for his arrest. Unfortunately the mechanizations of the SOSL in the control of the affairs of the world were never brought to light. After Renald died, they sent their representatives to confiscate all of his records. The only reason for the survival of the report on Cannia was that it had been kept by one of Renald's ministers.

On the strength of that report Vashlee called a meeting of the Constitutional Congress which he had helped to set up, and advised them on the report. In general session the matter was referred to the Committee on Safety. The decision of the Committee was to send someone after Cannia and bring him to justice. As they had no idea as to where to look for the publisher, a provision was made for the fee necessary to enlist a bounty hunter to find him and bring him back--alive. Erick and Michael took the assignment.

In all--the people of Omega proved their desire to do well. The problems which rose were never created by the people directly. It seemed simply that as Omegans preferred to carry on their own affairs with little interest in the affairs of others, those disposed to take advantage of their tendency to

privacy kept the world pretty much in a turmoil.

Though the campaign waged by the General had secured the momentary peace of the land, it failed to eradicate the power apparatus which was used in destroying the Republics in the first place, and thus the seeds of destruction were woven into the fabric of the new Republic... But, that's another story.

Ed.

THE END?