

One Way Ticket To Talenthar

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One Way Ticket To Talenthart



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Introduction to Talenthlar

Back in 1989 I took a sabbatical to sort some things happening in both my personal and business lives. During that period of reassessment I also sat down and wrote a fantasy novel that was called “One way ticket to Talenthlar“. Strangely it was mostly written by going to bed at night thinking of the plot of the story and my subconscious mind would fill in the plot line and character dialogs overnight and during the following day I would tediously write the story by hand as I was computerless during that period. The entire process repeated itself over a period of some months and then I borrowed my young cousin’s computer during his summer vacations while he was not using it for school, and I typed in the entire thing using my trusty old DOS WordPerfect floppies.

The original manuscript is still in storage somewhere in my uncle’s basement back in Canada and I have the original WordPerfect documents in my backups here at the office. I had some interest of publishing it at the time and I sent the story out. Through a friend some British editor showed some minor interest, but the story stood mainly untouched for all of those years as I lost interest of the endless cycle of sending proposals and waiting for refusals.

For many years I have wanted to edit the story again and flesh up the last third of it, as the plotline was rushing to its conclusion and was lacking details. I started a few times to do it, but never was in a situation where I could give it the time it needed. Most recently last summer I wrote a completely new version of the prologue based on a totally different point of view, to better give life to the world of the story. I really liked that new version, but time constraints yet again did not permit me to continue rewriting the story. The worse is that due to a combination of things totally outside my control (losing my writing computer’s hard drive and the network storage unit of the office on the same day) all of that work was lost. I found out this morning when I went looking for the new documents.

I still have an inkling of what I had written there, even if it is just a general idea, and I plan to start the rewrite yet another time. This time, to make sure I stick to my ideas I will first publish the original work followed by the rewritten one bit by bit or chapter by chapter, whatever fits my schedule best. I will start the project in the coming days and try to stick to a fairly regular schedule as best as I can humanly, or better sassquatchly!

Until then!

The Sass

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Prologue

It was a dark, cluttered, rectangular room, carved out of solid rock, in a keep that was itself carved out of a gigantic monolith, all blackened and cracked as if it had been exposed to tremendous heat and energy. In the middle of this room stood a gray flecked pedestal, hewn from a colossal block of granite. A large hemispherical bowl of black enameled metal, engraved with golden cabalistic signs, sat in a hollow on its polished top. An aura of intense energy surrounded this bowl, and in it a deep blue, shimmering and smoking substance, looking like shiny molten metal, cast eerie lights on to the faces of the small group of people assembled around its perimeter.

The bulkiest member of the assembled group, an imposing figure towering over the others, garbed in his Wizard's dark midnight blue silk robes embroidered in gold threads with similar symbols to the ones on the black bowl. His white beard and hair were standing on end as if they were charged with static electricity. He spoke in a deep melodious voice, "Eyegar, bring me the rosin, this incantation well needs clearing."

"Yes, Master Andrack," responded the tall, gaunt, elderly man, dressed in a gray morning suit, his short gray hair slicked impeccably on his head. He looked more like a well-groomed butler than a Wizard's assistant. He soundlessly left the group, marching solemnly toward a massive table of dark wood so shiny that the room reflected on it's polished surface. It was standing against the stone wall of the room and looked like it had grown out of the floor, which it probably did. Even though the table's legs were squared off tree trunks, they seemed barely strong enough to support the accumulated weight of the phials, beakers and leather bound tomes that lay in a total disarray on its top.

As if the clutter of the table made some sense to him, Eyegar chose, without hesitation, a small clay pot filled with an orange powder. He put it on a silver tray, and brought it back to Master Andrack. The old wizard curtly acknowledged his assistant and took the pot from the tray. He then turned his gaze to the other five.

His eyes first settled on the dark, chiseled features of Chargoff, the General of the Kingdom's armies. A grisly veteran of the Magic War, he stood ramrod straight in his lightweight, black chainmail. His strong chiseled features, were in contrast to a thick crop of black hair cut in a brush cut that covered his head like a helmet. His piercing gray eyes were holding Andrack's gaze without flinching. He was a long time friend and ally of Andrack. A look of deep concern was etched on his face.

Next to Chargoff was an eager, powerfully built young man, Prince Arexis. He was dressed in deep emerald green court doublets, in which he seem to be uncomfortable, as if he was more accustomed to be in less formal clothing. A thick mane of curly red hair covered his head and a cropped beard adorned his face. He was the only son of the late, King Bluthor, Andrack's best friend that had been lost in the Magic War. He was the unseasoned heir to the throne. He looked deeply worried and his eyes were darting from the incantation well to Andrack's face as if hoping for a quick solution to his worries.

At the thought of his old friend, a smile quickly passed on Andrack's wrinkled face. How Arexis

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reminded him of a young Bluthor, the same eagerness, the same open face and bright eyes, the same red tousled hair. Not so his sister, Princess Nathalia, who even barely out of her teens, was regally poised in her long black silk dress molded to her athletic body. Her head was crowned in dark, shoulder length, straight red hair. Where her brother was outgoing and eager, she was reserved and poised. Used to get her own way, she had been the terror of the castle's staff when growing up. She still had problems getting along with anybody but her best friend and Lady in waiting, Maria.

To her right was a strange looking creature dressed in dark green velvet shorts complete with bright red suspenders. It had long thin hairy limbs with long claws on his naked toes and fingers, a short snout with a grin full of sharp teeth, wide set intelligent eyes and large pointy ears. This picturesque character was Dregnar, an intellectual troll, a rare species of trolls with lightning quick intellect. He had been in the service of the royal family for as long as anyone could remember.

Looking straight back at Andrack was a stout, middle-aged man with graying straight shoulder length hair. Garbed in long dark cleric's robes with little adornments, he had been a torn in his side since they had met. Balnor, the court patriarch, did not trust magic. He was always quick to point it out. Andrack held out his stare for a moment, then cleared his throat. He said, "I will now show you the chosen one."

His practiced fingers looked like butterflies when they traced arcane symbols in the air over the shimmering surface of the incantation well. After a timeless period of mesmerizing flight, they took a pinch of the orange powder from the little clay pot, and sprinkled it onto the cloudy surface of the liquid. With a hissing sound, and short green flames, the liquid stopped shimmering and cleared itself into a dark, highly polished metallic surface. Pictures started flickering on it. At first stars moving by at a tremendous speed, then a blue ball on a black velvet background, then white puffy high clouds through which the perspective dove on its way to the ground, finally, a dark unpaved road through a coniferous forest. In the distance a red box-shaped contraption on wheels was following the road. The red thing had a toothless grin and fiery eyes spitting blinding light. It was bouncing down the rough road at a terrifying pace. On its back sat a powerfully built man in his early thirties. A short beard and curly brown hair framed his face. Next to him was a large salt and pepper dog, powerful muscles rippling under its coat as it fought to keep its balance.

Balnor said with a sneer, "So, this is your hero. He does not look like much to me."

Master Andrack replied, "My magic revealed that this is the only person left in the universe that can help us."

Dregnar's squeaky voice interrupted, "He his riding that strange beast, isn't he? Only a hero could be riding something so fierce. Look at it bounce and growl!"

Andrack looked at Balnor, and said, "He is our only hope. My magic is depleted and I cannot fight Magdar in the upcoming conflict."

"You could not fight Magdar, either, last time." Interrupted Balnor.

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"I was the only member of the Order of Wizards who survived the War."

Before the argument could degenerate further, Arexis cut in sharply, "Stop bickering. It is important to know if it is worth depleting Andrack's magic to bring an unknown warrior to our realm."

Nathalia added, "We are not even sure that he will help us."

In a quiet, controlled voiced, Chargoff said, "If we do not bring the chosen one, Magdar will surely be freed and chaos is assured. You, Nathalia, he has chosen as his bride. The rivers of Gods and Power have dried up, and there is a major drought and famine. The Kingdom cannot raise an army big enough to combat Magdar's hordes. Your brother, Arexis, is not King yet and cannot command the other states. Andrack's magic can only do one last thing, and it is to bring the chosen stranger. Do we have any other choice?"

After a long moment of silence, Arexis looked into everyone's eyes. He finally stopped at Andrack's trying to find an answer to the dilemma in the large Wizard's gaze.

With a sigh he said, "You are right, I do not think that we have any alternative. Let us bring the chosen one."

Andrack replied solemnly, "So be it."

He then started chanting a long incantation in a deep droning voice, as his eyes rolled back and his fingers resumed their aerial dance. A green glowing cloud started to collect at the surface of the liquid in the bowl, its Inner Light became brighter to the point that it was painful to look at. As they stood back in awe, a powerful beam of white light shot out of the iridescent cloud, through the solid stone of the roof, toward the starry sky.

From one of the faint stars lighting the night's sky, a bright beam of blue light emerged from it. Like a giant bolt of lightning it struck the middle of the burned desert, between the Gates of Doom and Andrack's keep. A terrifying tremor shook the Kingdom. A gigantic crater, covered in mist, was left by the impact.

Andrack raised his eyes, deep exhaustion and strain showing in them, and he looked at the others. He said in a tired voice, "The deed is done."

As soon as these words escaped his mouth, his huge form gently collapsed to the ground to the consternation of the others.

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Chapter 1

Ludger G. Morton, CEO of his own design and engineering firm, was lost in thoughts while driving back to his secluded retreat, north of the city. The day had been hectic, like most Fridays always were. It seemed that the business could never afford to let him go for the weekend, especially for a long one like this week.

He was a young man in his early thirties, broad shouldered, and of short stocky stature. He was in trim physical shape and his body was molded by countless hours training in the martial arts. He had a full head of short curly light brown hair, and a closed cropped beard that held a mixture of colors from blonde, to light reddish brown and a few hints of gray. His piercing eyes were ice blue that day, but depending on his moods they could change form that to gray or green. Hopefully they would reach the green of relaxation by the end of the long weekend.

He liked the feeling of the wind rustling past his head in his old, open, emerald green, Suzuki Samurai, as he bounced down the rough road at great speed, his powerful hands holding for dear life to the padded steering wheel. As usual he was driving way too fast, but this being his private road, with no traffic allowed, he was enjoying it to the fullest.

He shot a quick glance towards Bacchus, his giant schnauzer, who was struggling to stay seated beside him. He said loudly.

"Do you like this?"

He could almost see the grin in the dog's face. Bringing his attention back to the road, he thought about the empty log house awaiting him, at the top of a cliff overlooking that rugged lakeshore. He had mixed feelings about it, since the messy divorce he went through the year before. Under one hand it was the place where he felt the most comfortable. It was fulfilling his need for solitude and isolation. On the other hand, it reminded of some of the bad fights he had with his ex-wife during the last few months of their marriage. She liked to live in their penthouse in the city, he preferred the country retreat.

After a year of her trying to run every aspect of his life, he could not tolerate her refusal to let him go, even occasionally, to the retreat. He promptly moved out of the penthouse to his log home, which was outfitted with all the modern conveniences. What ensued was a bitter, one sided, fight for the settlement. He did not want to hurt her in any way. She wanted all he had and more. The memory was still painful, but when he was at home he always felt better.

As he neared his home, a feeling of serenity entered his soul. The last few bends of the road unraveled. He could finally see the large log structure standing on its rocky outcrop, with the expansive balcony hanging a few hundred feet over the blue waters. The lake was stretching to the horizon, with green hills all around. A few gray and green islands dotted its surface like mossy rocks fallen on a paved road. One side of the house and most of the outbuildings were under the canopy of towering pine trees,

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giving it a semi-permanent shade. The sun was still high on this beautiful, early fall, day. The air was fragrant and crisp.

A broad smile lighted Ludger's face as he spoke aloud to himself.

"Home..., finally..."

Bacchus, at his side, was wagging his stubby tail and whelping with joy. He never liked the city and was happy to be home, too.

He let the vehicle roll to a stop and enjoyed the view from higher grounds. He then drove slowly and parked by the main entrance. Bacchus jumped over the side of the truck and ran happily under the tall canopy of trees, barking wildly, and rolling in the thick carpet of pine needles. Ludger got out in a more conventional fashion, and he took his briefcase and the bags of groceries he had bought on his way over. He slowly walked to the massive front door.

Looking back he bellowed.

"Bacchus..., come on in. We'll go for a walk later, after I've changed."

He opened the door and walked in. He put his load down on a narrow table by the wall and disarmed the security system by keying his entrance code.

Bacchus came trotting in, at his heels.

"Good dog...." He said.

He picked up the bags of groceries and dropped them on the kitchen's counter. He then put his briefcase on his desk. He went up to his bedroom suite, walked straight into the dressing room, kicked off his shoes, put his tweed jacket on a hanger as he quickly undressed. He walked into the shower and turned on the cold water. He let the frigid blast stimulate his body. After a few minutes he walked out of the ceramic enclosure fully revitalized. He vigorously toweled himself dry.

He looked at the reflection of his muscular body in a full-length mirror. His wide shoulders and thick chest tapered to a flat stomach. He found, with disgust, the merest hint of flabbiness there. His massive leg showed no sign of weakness.

He would have to work harder around the house, this weekend, to compensate for a week without much physical exertion, except for his thrice-weekly workout with Master Yakumi, his martial arts teacher. Ludger put on a thick pair of woolen socks, a spongy cotton, sweat suit and his favorite leather moccasins. He went back down to the kitchen and unpacked and put away the groceries. Not sure yet of what he would like for supper he rummaged through the large built in refrigerator. He finally settled for a good size piece of beef tenderloin, a fresh tomato salad and some homemade béarnaise sauce.

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Bacchus sneaked in behind him, and jumped on his back playfully knocking him down and started to lick his face.

"OK...,OK...." He said. "It's time for a long walk, but before we leave, I have to go to the wine cellar."

He ran down into the finished basement and walked in the large, temperature controlled wine cellar. He chose a 1979 Saint-Julien from his favorite estate Chateau Gruaud-Larose, a velvety smooth, robust wine that suited his mood for the evening. After leaving the bottle in the kitchen he left the house for a long brisk walk.

*

After two hours of what now felt like forced march, Ludger had finally made peace with himself. His mind was at ease and he was totally in touch with the environment. It was a feeling that he only attained when he was at his retreat. He was aware of all that was around him, from the smallest blade of grass to the tallest tree. It felt as if energy was flowing between the earth and him.

He stopped in a shady area of the trail, where he could admire the scenery. He sat on a large rock to catch his breath. After a few moments of dazed contemplation, he noticed that he had worked out a ferocious appetite. He looked down to the spot where Bacchus was resting and said.

"Lets go have supper, I'm starving."

The dog, showing great excitement, started running toward the house. Ludger happily followed and reached the door on Bacchus's heels. He went in straight to the kitchen and prepared a big bowl of homemade lamb stew with rice for the dog and put a big bowl of fresh water on the floor next to the stew. He then went up to his dressing room and took another cold shower to wash of the sweat from the hard walk.

While he was under the cold stream, Ludger thought that he heard the telephone ring, but dismissed the idea. He quickly got dressed in a fresh sweat suit. He went back to the kitchen to get supper started. As he was at work preparing the tomato salad, he noticed that he had indeed received messages while he was away. The prompt light on the telephone answering machine was flashing urgently. Ludger grudgingly went to the infernal contraption to retrieve his messages.

He pressed the playback button and after a loud beep the deep voice of Tony Spisson, his partner in the design firm, came on.

"Ludger..., we need you immediately, at the office, to straighten the City Hall deal. There are problems with some of the suppliers. Call me as soon as you get in. Bye...."

After a short pause and another beep, his ex-wife Maggy started lecturing.

"Ludger..., the ceiling of the penthouse is cracked. Since your name is still on the lease papers, I think

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that you should pay for the repairs! My lawyer will be calling you next week."

In just a short minute Ludger's hopes for a nice relaxing weekend had just been shattered. In a daze he went to the counter, where the bottle of wine had been sitting. He opened it. Before pouring himself a glass he decided to let it breathe instead as he felt he needed something stronger. He went to the wet bar in the living room and poured himself a shot of Laphroig single malt in a heavy bottomed glass and quickly drank it. The powerful taste of the peaty draught sent shivers down his spine, but it brought him back to reality. He put a few ice cubes from the ice machine in his glass and splashed himself a healthier dose of his favorite poison.

"How dare they try to ruin my peace and quiet at home." He said aloud, under the quizzical stare of Bacchus. "I'll show them.... I'm going to a place where no one will ever find me for a few days. I will totally ignore those messages."

Looking down at Bacchus, he continued.

"Tomorrow morning we're going hunting."

Ludger was fuming. He could not believe the nerve of these people. They knew better than to bother him at home. He was pacing back and forth in the kitchen and suddenly decided to sit down and have another sip before supper.

He took his glass to the living room, then sat down in his favorite leather easy chair. He had a sip from his second glassful and turned on the giant projection TV. The latest James Bond movie was scheduled to start in a few minutes, on one of the pay-TV channels that his satellite dish was programmed to receive. Dazzling promos of future attractions were being showed. Ludger lowered the sound volume.

He twirled his glass between his fingers listening to the tinkling of the ice cubes, and he concentrated on the patterns that the pungent deep amber liquid was creating. He absent-mindedly took in the bouquet and finally had another sip. The familiar sound of the movie theme filled the background. He had finally decided which hunting spot he would drive to in the morning. The world was old enough to go on without him for a few days, without collapsing.

As the theatrical story evolved before his eyes he finally paid more attention to it. He started to relax a little. As he finished sipping his glass of frog, Ludger went to the kitchen. He finished preparing his meal. He brought his supper to the living room, on a rolling table, poured himself some Gruaud-Larose in a tall crystal glass, and started eating with enthusiasm.

After the last morsel of food was devoured, he reclined in his comfortable easy chair to enjoy the remainder of the movie. Later in the evening, as he noticed that his bottle was empty, Ludger was drowsy and could no concentrate on the picture. He was feeling the effects of the alcohol. He finally fell asleep in his comfortable chair.

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Consciousness came back to Ludger's foggy mind around 2 am. He could only see electronic snow on his giant TV screen. He turned off the set. Bacchus was pacing restlessly the living room, as if something dreadful was about to happen.

As Ludger was trying to calm the dog, the lights went off suddenly. In the dark he fumbled toward his desk and found it with his left knee. Cursing, he took a large electric torch from a drawer, then went to the electrical panel. He found out that it was a power failure, not an overload as he had first thought. After a few minutes, automatically his powerful diesel generator rumbled to life and the lights came back on.

He climbed the stairs to his bedroom, his left knee still smarting from the impact with the desk. He rolled into bed without first undressing. He fell asleep almost immediately.

Ludger had not been sleeping for more than an hour, when some tremors, affecting the entire house, awoke him with a start. It felt like an underground rumbling similar to blasting in a mine. He got up, his head throbbing, his knee sore. He looked outside to find out the cause of the commotion. He was surprised to see the sky lit by some beautiful aurora borealis. The northern lights were dancing in the air making never-ending patterns. He was too tired to admire the spectacle. Promptly returning to his bed, he fell back in a restless sleep.

*

Ludger was a disembodied entity floating in the mist over his home. He could feel the sweet nectar of the mist in his mouth. He was suddenly travelling at a terrifying speed through darkness, as a gigantic blue ball was receding from him, quickly disappearing. Like expensive special effects in a sci-fi movie he was now flying at warp speed through a starscape. Another giant globe was now on a collision course with him. Before he had time to think about the imminent impact, he was again floating over his home. Blackness slowly engulfed him...

He was now floating over a parched desert landscape. Two suns were baking blackened rocks and sand mercifully. He could not feel their heat. On the horizon he could see a dark ominous mountain range, but his view was partially hidden by a localized accumulation of fog. His vision started to blur as he felt a certain lapse of consciousness. He was now over a lush cultivated field by a majestic river. Some farmers were picking their crops and loading wagons, which were pulled by large muscular oxen. In the distance stood a large city of low wooden buildings, surrounded by a large wall of sturdy tree trunks. A procession of oxen powered wagons were entering the city through a large gate, complete with massive wooden doors. Some were going to an open-air market that was stretching as far as he could see. Others went to tall circular buildings that looked like grain silos.

Ludger tried to talk to some of the farmers, but they did not seem to notice his presence. The scenery again started to shift before him. He was now over a large trade city by the sea with a busy port full of large square-rigged sailboats. Before Ludger realized it, he was again in another location. This time it was a large city, sprawling on both sides of the mouth of a river. It was surrounding a large egg-shaped

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island whose broader end was facing the open sea. At the center of this island stood a magnificent stone palace with graciously slim towers right out of fairy tales.

Surrounding the elegant palace were elaborate gardens that were themselves surrounded by a massive wall and a wide moat. Another thick wall was around the perimeter of the island, which was linked to the mainland by seven stone bridges. From there the city had grown in concentric rings around the island on both sides of the river.

The scene slowly started to dissolve and again darkness was upon him...

Ludger was now a passive witness to events unraveling in front of his eyes at an accelerated pace.

Everything had an unfocussed look about them.

First, a tall dark haired man in a jet-black cloak was standing in the middle of a battlefield littered with bodies. At his feet lay unconscious a gray haired robust man in a intricately ornate suit of armor. In his hands he held a large convoluted key and a small intricately carve golden wand with a large stone at its tip. The tall man took an abandoned sword from the field. Holding it point down with both hands, he plunged it in the chest of the old man. To his dismay, as the old man expired, the golden wand's contours shimmered and suddenly disappeared. With a murderous look in his eyes he pried the large key from the hand of the dead man and walked away.

A powerful young man, with tousled red hair sits with a group of men. They are discussing the chances of resisting another attack from the northwest. Back to the tall man lecturing in an alien tongue to hordes of strange creatures, in a valley between dark mountains.

He was now over the farmland that he had seen earlier. It was devastated by severe drought. The river itself had narrowed to a creek. At the city with the palace, the gardens are now parched and unkempt. In a garrison-city the soldiers are weak and tired after a long battle. In the trade city, a fat man dressed in painfully colorful robes, was talking to envoys from a distant land. Around the city the citizen are growing restless in these times of famine.

In a distant land a distinguished older gentleman is pondering the possibility of attacking the Kingdom to protect his own empire from eventual attacks.

All of these scenes were making Ludger's mind hurt in an attempt to understand their vague meanings. As they sped up he could not discern their contents any more. His numb brain registered only vague concepts. Suddenly the images froze and he was looking into the violet eyes of a sensuous young woman, who was brushing her long dark red hair in front of a mirror. He tried to talk to her, but she was not aware of his presence. Again blackness engulfed him...

Ludger was in front of the tall, dark haired man, who was pointing a thin sword at his head. This time it felt as it was real as he could smell some exotic perfume emanating from the man. With a voice that sent chills through Ludger's bones, the man said.

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"You do not belong here, and I will make sure that you will not meddle with my affairs."

With that said, the man thrust the sword at Ludger's head. When the gleaming tip was about to pierce him, he woke up, startled, in his own bed, his body covered in cold sweat. A hint of exotic perfume clung to his clothes.

Ludger put his head back on his pillow. He felt somewhat hungover. He promised himself, as one usually do, to never drink again, for fear of having to relive such vivid nightmares. When his heartbeat slowed down to a reasonable rate, he wondered if his dreams had any hidden meanings. He finally decided that the psychological implications were too dreadful to even consider. He turned to his left side in his favorite sleeping position and promptly went back to a deep slumber.

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Chapter 2

Ludger finally got out of bed. He felt disoriented as if he was suffering from jet lag. He could feel a faint rumbling sensation in the floor. The electrical service was not back yet, thus the generator was still on. He undressed and walked into the shower stall, letting the cold water beat some sense back into him.

After dressing in a rumpled sweat suit, he went downstairs. From the living room he noticed, through the window, that dense fog was engulfing the house. He opened a sliding glass door and took in a deep breath of fresh, cool, morning air.

At the sound of the opening door, Bacchus came running in from the kitchen. She rushed outside to the deck where she started to run in circles, growling at the fog. Intrigued, Ludger followed his dog outside. The coldness of the deck's planking against his bare feet startled him. Strangely enough there was no moisture in the air and on the deck, as was to be expected of a foggy morning.

The dog was barking at shapeless forms that were moving through the fog. You could barely discern shapes by looking straight at them, but could catch their movements out of the corner of your eyes. Ludger decided that it was probably a freak meteorological incident brought on by the updraughts from the cliff's face. He had trouble getting Bacchus back into the house. When she finally relented, she paced the floor of the living-room restlessly.

He decided to check the morning news and turned on the radio. He only managed to get some loud static and howling noises. He turned on the TV and only snow and moving shadows appeared on the screen. He could not get a signal from any of the satellite channels.

Ludger went to his office and tried to get a data link on the computer, but the lines were down. He tried the phone. Both his lines were dead. He was getting more puzzled by the minute. He only got static from the short wave radio. He ran out through the front door, to his truck. On his way he caught his big toe on a sharp rock, plunging head first to the ground. He sat on the gravel driveway massaging his smarting toe. While he was sitting, he noticed that the fog was sharply defined, like a wall around the main compound of the property. It left the area between the building and the edge of the forest free of any vapours. He finally got up and limped to the Suzuki. He reached inside to take the radiotelephone handset. Static, again, was the result.

Possibly, Ludger thought, it was the northern lights from last night that were disturbing radio reception. It did not explain why the telephones were dead, but it was a start.

He went back inside to put on a pair of shoes. As he was tying his shoelaces his stomach started to grumble loudly. It was time for breakfast. He went to the kitchen and fed the dog first. He then fixed himself a hearty breakfast. As he was eating, he was thinking about the events of the previous few hours. He could not find a plausible explanation beside solar flares or the aurora. He decided to forget it for now and to plan his day. First and foremost he would finish his breakfast. Then he would go and

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walk the dog. After his return he would pack his off-road truck and go hunting, deep in the bush, for a few days. He would be ready to face the world again, Monday morning, after a few days of relaxation.

Ludger got up from the table and put his empty plate in the sink. He went to the refrigerator and poured himself a tall glass of orange juice. He turned toward the living room and called loudly.

"Bacchus.... Its time for your walk."

The dog slowly came trotting into the kitchen.

"What's the matter." Said Ludger. "You don't look like you want to go out."

He quickly drank his juice and left the house. As the dog was not following he said.

"Come on, lets get going."

With hesitation and her head held low, Bacchus grudgingly walked out of the house. Ludger locked the door behind her and quickly followed the main path out of the compound. The dog was still sitting on the porch when he reached the fog. He turned around and sharply said.

"Bacchus, come over here and lets get this under way."

When the dog reached him, she started to growl at the fog. Ludger said.

"There his nothing wrong, it's only fog. See...."

As he said that, he walked into the thick mist. The first sensation was that of a sweet, slightly sickening smell. Suddenly a feeling of sheer terror came over him without any warning. He felt like he had a ball in his throat that was choking him.

There they were in front of him. a group of slimy green creatures that looked like large circular mouths full off teeth with spindly legs under them. He instantly recognized them. These creatures had haunted his nightmares when he was a kid. He started to run and they followed him. He ran as fast as he could. Every time that he stopped to catch his breath, they were upon him. His fear was palpable. He felt as if he was running in circles and could not escape the fog.

He noticed, in front of him, a circle of large rocks. He ran toward it, and collapsed totally exhausted amongst them. With his face against the cool rocks, he struggled to catch his breath. The coolness of the rock against his temple made him regain part of his composure. If he could only stop the pounding of his heart, who was trying to escape through his chest wall, Ludger would feel a little better.

He finally noticed that the noise from the pursuit had subsided. He wondered why the creatures that had haunted his childhood's nightmares were trying to attack him. Maybe he was still in his own nightmare and had not awoken yet. He remembered the fears that had left him paralysed after he had nightmares,

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when he was a child.

Suddenly a small noise startled him and he ran for his life.

The gaping maws could run surprisingly fast on their spindly legs. They were catching up to him. He could feel their breath on his back. The stench was revolting. If this was a nightmare, it was in technicolour, senssurround, and smellorama.

Rounding up a boulder, Ludger came face to face with a large, ugly, bare-chested man wearing a leather apron. He was swinging an impressive looking battle axe at him.

He instinctively jumped sideways. He slipped. His head hit a protruding rock. Darkness engulfed him.

*

Ludger came back to consciousness a few minutes later. He was lying on the ground amidst the foggy rocks. His neck was stiff, his head was pounding. He had a nasty bump on the back of his skull. There was no trace of his attackers.

The first thought that came to his mind was; that dreams should not be painful. He palpated the back of his head and found a wet sticky lump. He looked at his fingers. they were covered with blood. He wiped his hand on his sweat pants, while he slowly stood up. Ludger wondered where his attackers were and why he was still alive. Fear slowly crept back into him. With the fear came the creatures. He started running again.

Shortly after, he collapsed, exhausted. Ludger noticed that as the fear left him, because he was resigned to die, the noises of his pursuers became less. Maybe there was a connection there.

The pounding in his head was making his eyes water. he decided to stay where he was and accept his fate. Everything was still and quiet around him.

An eerie feeling of serenity came over Ludger. He suddenly got the urge to meditate. This was something that he had not done since his last session with Master Yakumi, earlier in the week.

He sat cross-legged on a flat rock. He slowly let the tension flow out of his body. As he started to relax, the pain in his head abated. He focused his mind on complete relaxation.

After an uncertain amount of time, Ludger felt at one with himself. At this moment, a consciousness that was not his, intruded into his mind.

It asked in a shy tone. "Humph..., I hope you did not scare yourself too much?"

Ludger responded aloud. "Who are you and where am I? And what is going on? And..."

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"Hold it, hold it...." The disembodied voice in his head said. "One question at a time."

After a short pause it continued, without letting Ludger object.

"First, I am the guardian.

Second, you are in the Mist of Dreams.

Third, I am not exactly sure what is going on, because I am new at this job and I have been sleeping for an eternity, or two."

"Where are you?" Shouted Ludger.

"I am everywhere around you, and nowhere in particular."

"You're not very helpful."

"I answer with as much clarity as I can. Its not easy being the Guardian." Said the voice in a hurt tone. Ludger annoyingly replied. "OK. OK. Lets start all over again. What are you?"

The voice answered in the same tone. "I'm the Guardian, of course."

Ludger noticing that the conversation was quickly going nowhere, closed his eyes and sighed. His head was hurting from the obtuse dialogue. Also it was difficult to walk away from a conversation with a being that his everywhere.

After a few minutes of silence he murmured in a soft voice.

"Are you still there?"

The answer was quick to return. "Of course, I am always here."

Ludger slowly stood up while massaging his stiff neck, cautiously avoiding the lump at the back of his head. He said matter-of-factly.

"Where is here?"

"Well..." The Guardian answered in a doctoral tone. "...Technically you are at the interdimensional boundary between the fragment of the dimensional reality that was removed from your former world and the reality of the new world you have been brought to."

Flabbergasted, Ludger asked in an angry voice.

"Why have you brought me here?"

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"Tsk..., tsk...." Replied the Guardian. "Don't be bitchy with me. I had nothing to do about bringing you here. I am only a fragment of the interdimensional consciousness. I am here to prevent anybody but you, or the persons you wish, from crossing the boundary between the realities. Also I preserve and maintain the continuity of your reality, in the way that it was when it was imported."

Ludger sat himself hard on a rock. With a shaky voice he said.

"What you are telling me, is that you are the doorman, janitor, and security guard, between a chunk of my world and another world."

"Yea...."

"What is the other world and why have I been brought here?"

"I do not know." Replied the Guardian. "You will have to find out for yourself."

"Why did you attack me when I came in?"

"I was still organizing myself after awakening. What you experienced were part of my automatic defence mechanisms. If somebody not belonging to the boundary walks in, his worst fears become realities and will pursue him with no possible escape."

To himself Ludger mumbled.

"That's why the creatures from my childhood's nightmares attacked me."

The voice said in an apologetic tone.

"I'm sorry that you had to go through this. But, as you can see, it is very effective."

"Yes, very."

"Do you wish to go see this new world?" Asked the Guardian.

"Yes, please. I might as well see it since I will have to be here for a while." Answered Ludger.

"You just have to walk straight ahead and... good luck."

"Thanks..., I think."

Ludger stood up and started walking. After a few steps the mist shimmered in front of him. As it dissolved, he was standing at the edge of an enormous meteor crater full of mist. He was in the middle of a large desert plain on which shone two suns, that were in the process of rising.

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Chapter 3

Ludger stood there, mouth agape, looking at the scorched landscape surrounding him. It quickly dawned on him that he was no longer on earth. He recognized the countryside from the previous night's dreams.

Over the horizon, in the east, two suns were rising. One was about normal sized and yellow, like it should. Down a way to its left was a small reddish one. It reminded Ludger of the hour hand on a clock. According to it, it was slightly past 09:00. The temperature was fairly cool.

Behind him was a large crater about a mile in diameter. It was filled with thick fog. In there, supposedly rested his house in an alternate reality. He was standing on the upturned rim of the crater. From this higher vantage point he could see, to the west, in the distance, an ominous looking chain of massive black mountains. To the north more mountains seemed to shift in a haze, as if a large body of water was present in its midst.

To the northeast stood tall snowy mountain peaks. Due south of him, on the horizon, he could discern hints of a dense forest on rolling hills. East of those hills he could occasionally catch the glimmer of the suns reflected on a large body of water.

Around the crater, stretching as far as the eye could see, was a desert. Escarpments of cracked blackened rocks protruded from its dark sandy surface. It was as if a mighty war had been waged and forces of cosmic proportions had devastated the area. It reminded Ludger of pictures he had seen of nuclear test sites, after an explosion.

For some reason he was strangely attracted to the area, in the southeast, where he had glimpsed the suns' reflection in the water. Something was beckoning him.

Ludger decided that before exploring this new world, he should equip himself properly. As he was giving a last look at the panorama spread around him, he heard a sudden noise coming from above.

He looked up and saw four, greenish, winged, lizard-like flying creatures, circling high above him. They were making chuckling noises. One was looking straight at him.

Suddenly, that creature folded its wings and dove, mouth wide open, straight for Ludger. It let out an ear splitting unearthly scream.

Ludger had his eyes riveted to the toothed gap of the mouth. He finally realized that he had to do something to escape the creature's attack. He shook up his stupor and dove back into the mist.

Instantly the screams of the creature were silenced, as Ludger rolled back in the sand.

"Glad to see you back." Said the Guardian.

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Startled, Ludger said. "Oh..., it's you!!!"

"Who else did you think it could be?"

"Well..., a green, screaming, flying lizard."

"Humph..., sorry to disappoint you. Are you well, Sir? You seem somewhat disturbed."

Getting back to his feet Ludger replied.

"It's ok. I have to get used to this new world. I'm going back home to equip myself properly to explore this fun place."

"As you wish." Responded the voice.

"Which way?"

"Any way you wish. Ahead as usual, Sir?"

Ludger walked out of the mist, back into his own reality. As soon as he appeared, Bacchus ran toward him shaking her stubby tail and yelping. She jumped and put her front paws on his shoulders. She licked him all over the face. He hugged her and said.

"Am I glad to see you. You won't believe where I have been. You won't believe, either, where we are going hunting. They have strange lizards that you are going to love."

He realized that his sweat suit and his hands were covered in sand and dried blood. He continued.

"But first I've got to clean myself up and pack for the trip. Come...."

Ludger walked back to the house. He went in, with Bacchus following him. He went straight upstairs, to his suite, and quickly undressed. In the washroom, he put his head over the sink. He poured on his cuts and bumps some hydrogen peroxide that he had taken from the medicine cabinet. It immediately started foaming.

He took a quick shower, washing the blood caked in his hair. After he dried himself, he put on a rugged set of kaki battle fatigues and a sturdy pair of hiking boots. He packed a duffel bag with some spare clothes and took his hiking vest from the closet.

In the kitchen he put his bag on the counter. He packed a large, sturdy, cooler full of food for himself and the dog. He also filled two large collapsible jugs, full of water. He carried his supplies to the garage.

Ludger walked into his office. He finally notice that the generator was silent. Somehow, the Guardian

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was providing his house with water and electricity. He went to the workshop, by his office, and took a few leather-cased instruments from the bench.

In his other workshop, behind the garage, he opened his supply room. He rummaged around and chose some lightweight camping and survival equipment. He also took a large pair of rubber armoured binoculars. He laid everything out on a large table. He went to a thick steel door, set in the back wall. He punched in the security code on the keypad, in its frame.

Ludger unlocked the heavy door and slowly walked in his armoury. He let his eyes roam over the firearms lining the walls, while he was making his mind about what he needed.

A smile crept on his face. He was thinking that if he was here, his partner -Tony- who did not like guns, would have been glad that Ludger was a competitive shooter, a licensed gunsmith and an avid collector of firearms and military paraphernalia.

He went to one of the racks and chose a Heckler und Koch G3 rifle in 7.62 NATO calibre. It was equipped with a small, low power, telescopic sight with an illuminated reticle. He opened a wide drawer and took out an Ingram MAC 10 in 45 calibre, fitted with a Sionic sound suppressor. This compact submachine gun could come in handy.

Ludger put both guns on the storage unit in the middle of the room. He then opened its doors. He chose a UM-84 holster and buckled it around his waist, and tied it around his leg. He then clipped an inside-the-pants holster to his belt, in the small of his back. He walked back to the wall and took a Glock 21 in 45 ACP. This fairly compact, resin framed, high powered handgun with its 12 rounds capacity, would make a nice backup. He then looked for his favourite competition handgun. A compensated Combat Commander built on a Para-Ordnance 14 round frame. He found it on the cleaning table.

As he was carrying his small arsenal out of the room, he remembered the flying lizards. He grabbed his old Winchester 1200, 12 gauge shotgun. It was outfitted with a pistol grip stock and an eleven shells magazine extension. He put his guns with the rest of his supplies. He went back into the armoury.

Ludger selected, from a shelf, different metal ammunition boxes full of loaded magazines for his chosen firearms. He carried the heavy cans to the other room. He then loaded all of the guns. He put his comp gun, loaded in condition one, in his hip holster. The Glock was placed in the holster at the small of his back. He locked the door to the armoury and went into the garage to prepare his off-road truck.

It was another Suzuki Samurai. This one was a long body version outfitted for off-road work. It was equipped with special tires, electric winches back and front, search lights, and numerous other modifications. He first removed the soft top, folded it and stored it in a protective bag, that he stowed in the back.

Ludger made sure that the main and auxiliary gas tanks were full. He checked the other fluid levels and the air pressure in the tires. He then loaded his supplies in the back. He put the MAC 10 between the front seats. The G3 and the shotgun were held vertically, by a bracket, beside the driver's seat, near the

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dashboard.

Finally, Ludger put on his hiking vest. He called.

"Come on, Bacchus. I'm ready to go."

The tall, grey dog came running from the kitchen. She swiftly jumped in the back of the truck. Ludger made sure that the doors were closed properly. He climbed in the driver's seat and keyed in the remote garage door opener. He started the engine and backed out. He fetched the other truck, that was parked in front of the house, and drove it into the garage. On his way out he keyed the security system, closed the garage door, and slowly walked to the idling truck.

He sat beside Bacchus, sighed and said.

"Here we go. Hang on."

He started toward the mist.

As he approached the wall of fog, Bacchus started to yelp nervously. He looked at her and said.

"I know..., I feel exactly the same."

When the truck touched the wall of fog, it started to shimmer. Ludger was back in the plain.

*

As soon as they exited the mist, Ludger stopped the vehicle. He stood on the front seat and had a good look all around. There were no signs of the flying lizards. He noticed that the suns were higher in the sky. The small red sun was now up and to the left of the larger yellow one. He mumbled to himself.

"I'll be damned, a world where one does not need a clock during the day."

He wondered if at night he would find a moon orbited by a smaller one to complete the celestial clock of the suns.

He grabbed one of the instruments that he had taken from his bench. He opened the leather case and took a reading. He let out a sigh of relief.

"Good, no radioactivity."

Since he still felt drawn toward the southeast, he decided that it was as good an area to start exploring as any. He sat down and started driving.

*

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After no more than 15 minutes, Bacchus started to growl and bark, in the back. Ludger turned and saw two of the flying lizards diving for him. He jumped on the brakes, stopping the truck. He grabbed the shotgun.

He had time to fire two shots. The first creature took a centre hit and plummeted to the ground, lifeless. The second one got winged. It fell in the back of the truck, knocking Ludger down.

His shotgun had become entangled with the lizard. He could not operate the pump. The creature suddenly lunged at him. Ludger grabbed the 45 at his hip, drew it out of the holster and thumbed the safety. Before he could bring the gun aligned with his intended target, he heard a powerful growl as Bacchus jumped on the back of the creature. Her powerful jaws were wide open. She sank her sharp teeth in the lizard's neck.

The creature roared in agony and reared on its hind legs. Both the lizard and the dog rolled out of the back of the truck. Bacchus never let go of her grip of the creature's neck. She struggled back to her feet. With one mighty jerk of her head, she snapped the hideous creature's neck.

She let go of her spoil and sniffed at the dead creature. After a few snorts, she trotted toward Ludger as if pleased with herself.

Ludger was stunned. He was sitting with his handgun hanging limp in his right hand. He finally came back to reality. He slowly holstered his gun. He patted Bacchus on the head and said.

"Thanks pal. Without you I would be missing a good chunk of me shoulder."

Ludger got out of the vehicle. He closely examined the grisly remains of his attackers. They looked like large, dog sized, greyish-green lizards, with thin membranous wings. At the front of the wings three long digits terminated by 6 inches claws hung limply. Their wide set small eyes were lidless and were black as coals. A wide mouth with an impressive armament of sharp looking triangular teeth finished that picture of an efficient killer.

Ludger wanted to examine the creatures in more details, later, at his own leisure. He threw the smelly carcasses on the metal rack, perched on the bonnet of the small truck. He grabbed a canteen of water and poured some on his hands to clean them. He then took a long swallow from it. He took a shallow bowl from his supplies and poured some water in it. He put the bowl on the ground for Bacchus. She happily lapped it up.

He reloaded his shotgun with fresh shells and put it back in its rack. He called his dog.

"Come on, drink up. We're getting under way again."

The dog effortlessly jumped in the back, holding her bowl in her jaws. Ludger put the truck in gear and eased forward into the unknown.

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After many hours of driving through an unchanging, dreary desert plain, the landscape slowly changed. Wide based, rolling hillocks, just as scarred as the plain, were now appearing in front of the truck.

Ludger drove to the top of the highest of the rounded hills to take in the layout of the region. He parked the Samurai and decided to take a lunch break, first. He rummaged through the cooler. He put some ground meat on a plate for Bacchus. He made himself a sandwich with some assorted cold cuts. He poured himself some coffee from a tall thermal bottle and sat back trying to relax.

He wondered what was happening to him. Why was he lost in a strange world? Hopefully he would find some answers when he reached wherever he was being drawn to. Strangely he had adapted fairly well to the idea that he was on another world. He thought that subconsciously he had wished to escaped his daily drudgery, since the divorce, and this was the perfect opportunity. He laughed aloud and said to himself.

"An analyst would have a field day on me, now. I am glad that I don't believe in all that B.S.."

He put away the food and gave some water to the dog. He climbed to the padded rollbar. He grabbed the binoculars and put them up to his eyes.

Through the magnifying instrument Ludger could see, on the horizon toward the southeast, the outline of a large city. A large fissure in the ground started a few miles northeast of where he stood. It widened and deepened toward the south with its end lost in some swampland that laid between him and the city. The fissure laid in his path to the city.

On the other side of the fissure, toward the east, was a muddy trickle of a river. On the far shore laid some dried farmland covered with a sprinkling of snow.

In the south, there was a large body of water. West of there, was the edge of a forest of gigantic trees. Ludger decided to drive north to bypass the fissure. He would then follow the river south toward the city.

*

As Ludger neared the edge of the fissure, the temperature sharply rose. He stopped by the outcrop of rocks where the crevice started. He got out of the truck. He looked at the mouth of an underground pit. A reddish glow was seen deep inside. Strange moaning sounds emanated from the pit. Ludger thought that the sounds were probably due to some sort of volcanic activity. Yellow sulphurous smoke confirmed that thought. Bacchus was nervous and pacing back and forth beside him.

They went back to the truck. Ludger drove to the bank of the river. At one point it must have been a mighty river at least half a mile wide. Now it was a weak muddy stream only a few yards wide. It lazily flowed south in the dried up river bed.

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Ludger could feel some kind of strange power emanating from the river. He could not describe the sensation and soon forgot about it. It was probably only the anxiety of being in a strange land with no explanation for it, that was coming to the surface.

He followed the dry river bed toward the south. As he was travelling further away from the fissure, who was angling west, the temperature was dropping rapidly. After driving all afternoon over the bumpy ground, he decided to take a break, as he crested a small hill.

He put on a heavy woollen sweater, under his vest, to ward off the chill that was slowly creeping through his bones. The temperature was getting downright cold as the suns were nearing the horizon in the west.

Through his binoculars, Ludger observed, a few miles away, a gigantic rectangular block of blackened rock. It looked like a monolithic bunker, in a marshy area by the river, surrounded by burned down distorted trees. Ludger was fascinated by the structure. It was as if the strange force compelling him to travel south, was emanating from it.

Ludger quickly drove to the edge of the marshy area. He soon found a muddy path leading to the rock. He carefully proceeded forward, making sure he did not get bogged down in the quagmire. A large portal was cut into one of the narrow ends of the monumental rectangular rock. Ludger parked the Suzuki near it, on firmer, drier grounds. He turned toward Bacchus and said.

"You stay, while I go have a look over there."

He grabbed the MAC 10 from the floor, between the seats, and exited the Samurai. He carefully walked to the monolith, making sure that nobody was around. He felt like he had found what he was looking for. But he was not sure of what to do with it. The suns were setting over the horizon in a symphony of colours.

Ludger relaxed slightly. He studied the towering doorway. It was simply carved out of the rock. A massive stone door blocked the opening. As he approached it, the door silently swung open on its hinges.

A tall, gaunt, elderly man, dressed like a butler, stood in the opening ramrod straight. He said in a mellow elegant voice.

"Good evening Mr. Morton, Sir. We were expecting you. Would you please come in."

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Chapter 4

Ludger was stunned. He looked at the tall man. He did not know what to think. This person knew his identity and was asking him to enter the strange building. He just stood there, transfixed.

Making a slight coughing noise the tall man said.

"Sir, you are an honoured guest here. His Royal Highness and my Master are awaiting you. Please do come in."

Finally Ludger recovered from the shock. He walked in through the thick portal. He stopped while the tall man silently closed the thick stone door. In front of Ludger stretched a long corridor, smoothly carved from the solid rock. It gently sloped downward. The butler, pointing to the far end, said.

"Shall we go, Sir."

Pushing back a feeling of dread, and realizing that he did not have much of a choice, Ludger agreed to follow. As they started down the corridor, Ludger queried.

"Who are you? Where are we? And who are we going to meet?"

The tall man answered in hushed tones.

"My name is Eyegar, Sir. I am the assistant of the great magician, Master Andrack. We are now in his keep near the kingdom's capital of Talenthar. We are going to meet His Royal Highness Prince Arexis and, my master, Andrack."

This did not provide Ludger with any new understanding of the situation. But now, at least, he knew the names of the people involved. He followed Eyegar in silence, down the sloping corridor. Their way was lit by smoky torches set in convoluted ornamental iron sconces.

After a few interminable minutes, they ended up in a high ceiling rotunda. A half dozen openings lined the circular wall. Eyegar, without hesitation, went straight into a low set tunnel, opening on the right. This corridor was darker and of lower ceiling. It changed directions every thirty, or so, feet. They soon arrived in front of a strange, massive door. It was made of solid wood of an unknown species and clad in bands of intricately engraved iron. All kinds of cabalistic signs made a complicated pattern on the door. Ludger could feel a pulsing force emanating from it. He did not know what to make of it. He instinctively tightened his grip around the MAC 10, his knuckles turning white in the process. He had entirely forgotten that he was carrying the weapon.

Eyegar knocked at the door and ceremoniously opened it. It revealed a dark, cluttered, rectangular room carved out of the solid rock. The walls were covered with open shelves, loaded with arcane paraphernalia and dusty tomes. A massive, dark, wooden table was loaded with an impressive

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collection of phials, beakers, and more leather bound volumes. They were arranged in total disarray. In the middle of the room stood a large stone pedestal. On its top rested a large, shallow, black enamelled bowl. It was inlaid with gold cabalistic signs. A smoky haze filled the room. The temperature felt warm, after the cold dampness of the corridors.

At the far end of the room a roaring fire consisting of small tree trunks, was ablaze in a massive fireplace. Three people were seated in front of the blaze, apparently lost in deep conversation. When the door had opened the largest of the huddled figures daintily jumped to his feet, which was an exploit considering his bulk. He came toward Ludger with his arms outstretched.

The man was big. He was well over six foot six and must have weighed at least three hundred and fifty pounds. He was wearing a shiny, midnight blue, silk gown that covered him to his feet. It contrasted deeply with the long mane of white hair that crowned his head. A long tapering white beard adorned his face. The man had a ruddy complexion and his deep blue eyes twinkled like a child's. His mobile pink mouth was pursed into a smile, that accentuated the twinkle and displayed a row of perfectly formed white teeth.

Ludger looked, awestricken, as the man -who looked like an overgrown Santa Claus- approached him. He did not know if he should fight or flee. He decided to stand his ground, since everybody seemed calm and composed, except for the large man who was bubbling with joy.

The large man finally reached Ludger. He grabbed him by the shoulders, lifting him off the ground in a show of colossal strength. He put him back on the ground and gave Ludger a crushing, affectionate, hug. Ludger felt somewhat battered and dizzy from the man's exuberance.

The man, still holding Ludger's shoulders, looked deep into his eyes. He said, in a resounding voice filled with excitement.

"Dear Mister Morton, I am so glad to see you. I hope you had a pleasant trip. Welcome to my humble abode. My name is Andrack and I am the reason you are here."

Ludger's thoughts reeled at this last sentence. Finally he would have some answers. But before he could formulate his questions, Andrack was continuing in an apologetic tone.

"But were are my manners? Let me introduce you around. You have already met my assistant, Eyegar."

He was casually pointing to the tall man that stood silently by the door. He turned toward the far end of the room and pulled Ludger by his arm, as the walked toward it. Andrack pointed to a powerfully built man about Ludger's age. The first thing that caught the eye was his full head of tousled red hair. The second one was an honest open face lit by serious violet eyes. He looked somewhat regal, dressed in soft leather pants, tucked into short, shiny, boots and an embroidered, royal purple, velvet smoking jacket over a ruffled white shirt. He was seated on the edge of an elaborately carved chair, shifting nervously as if uncomfortable with the whole situation.

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Andrack said, bowing to the young man.

"This is His Royal Highness Prince Arexis, heir to the throne of the Kingdom. Your Majesty, may I introduce to you Mister Ludger P. Morton, our chosen Saviour."

Ludger, not knowing what to do, bowed and coughed nervously. As he straightened himself up, his eyes caught sight of the fourth person in the room. The creature looked about four feet tall. It was seated on a square stone in front of the fireplace. It had long wiry limbs that ended in three fingers and toes, tipped by sharp, curved, black claws. Its wide-set, intelligent, brown eyes seemed to gleam wildly in the firelight. Its short snout was cut by a wide, lipless, mouth full of sharp pointy teeth. The creature was covered by sparse silky fur. Its head was bordered by large pointed ears. It was dressed in emerald green velvet shorts with bright red suspenders.

Ludger nervously glanced at the strange creature. He half expected it to jump for his throat. He nervously toyed with the safety catch of the MAC 10.

Andrack, pointing to the creature, finally said.

"This is Dregnar, an intellectual Troll at the service of His Majesty's family. He his Prince Arexis faithful servant."

After the introductions were completed, everybody stared at each other nervously. Ludger was confused by the situation. He did not know how to start getting answers to the flood of questions coming to his mind.

Andrack, seeming to sense Ludger's growing confusion, said.

"Excuse me for the strange circumstance of our meeting. You must understand that, what was done was agreed to in last resort, after all other possibilities were exhausted. We need you to save our world, and possibly yours, from utter destruction by the forces of evil."

Ludger, looking intensely in the magician's eyes, pointed the MAC 10 to the man's large abdomen. He said in a low menacing voice.

"You may have agreed, but I was not consulted in this matter. I want you to return me to my world, right now...."

A pained expression came over Andrack's normally cheerful face. He sighed, then said in a surprisingly low voice.

"Dear Mister Morton, it pains me to inform you, that it is impossible for me to grant you your wish. Even if I wanted to. I used all of what remained of my magical powers to bring you here."

When he heard this, Ludger's arms went limp. He sat heavily in a chair, in front of the Prince. He put

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his MAC 10 on the floor at his side. He put his elbows on his knees, grabbed his head with both hands, and while looking down at the bare stone floors sighed deeply.

Deep inside him, Ludger had believed, that when he would have found the people responsible for his presence in this world, he would be sent back to his own world in time to be at work on Monday morning. He had never believed that this could be a permanent situation. Andrack's last words had taken all the resolve out of him.

Dregnar, looking at the Prince, said in a high-pitched gravelly voice.

"Your Highness, I always thought that it was a bad idea to bring a stranger to help us."

The young Prince looked at his servant and said in a deep voice.

"Poor Dregnar, this is no time for regrets. We must find another way to fight this evil."

He then looked at Ludger and continued.

"Dear Sir, I wish that you would join our quest. But if you decide against it, we will offer you all the hospitality possible in these trying times. You are welcome to stay as long as you wish at the castle in Talenthar."

Ludger, forcing a drawn smile to his lips, answered in a tired voice.

"Your Highness, I appreciated your kind offer of hospitality. But I know nothing of your quest, thus it is difficult for me to make up my mind about the future."

Prince Arexis answered with a smile.

"Of course, Sir, I will let Master Andrack explain to you the significance of our situation, and the importance of your help."

Andrack replied in a booming voice.

"Your Highness, I will be glad to tell this long story. But, first, I am sure that our guest would appreciate some good Arthuran brandy." Turning toward the other end of the room he said. "Eyegar, please bring us a bottle of our best brandy and three glasses."

"Yes Master Andrack." Replied the tall man.

He quickly brought to the fireside a silver tray on which rested a large crystal decanter filled with a dark, amber liquid. Three large snifters were also present. He offered one to the Prince, one to Ludger and one to Andrack.

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Ludger looked at the generously filled snifter, twirled it expertly and took in the strong pungent aroma. It compared favourably with the best Cognacs and Armagnacs that he was accustomed to. He placed the snifter on the low table beside him, after taking a long sip. He rummaged through the many pockets of his hiking vest. He produced, from one of them, a long silver box that he opened. In it rested six of his favourite cigars (H. Upmann's Lonsdales). He offered the box around and only Andrack took one of the long cigars.

With a beatific smile on his cherubic face, he expertly rolled it between his fingers and sniffed it with glee. He said to Ludger.

"This cigar has the most beautiful aroma that I have ever experienced. Where are they from?"

"They are from an island, in the warm south seas of my world, called Cuba. They grow, on this island, the best cigar tobacco in the world."

Ludger felt a twang of homesickness, thinking about his world, but he nonetheless prepared his cigar and lit it with his small disposable lighter. He took a long satisfying draught out of the cigar. After he exhaled deeply, he grabbed the brandy snifter and installed himself comfortably to listen to Andrack's story.

The large magician, looking at him, said.

"That was a neat little fire spell that you use to light your cigar."

"It was not a spell. It was a mechanical device from my world, called a lighter."

As he said that, Ludger tossed the small, disposable, plastic cylinder to the man.

Andrack caught it and suspiciously inspected it. He tentatively flicked the sparking wheel, as he had seen Ludger do. He laughed heartily when a little flame danced from his huge closed fist. He looked at Ludger and said.

"This is a very useful device."

"Keep it. I have another on me."

The little cylinder quickly disappeared in Andrack's silk robes, after he had lit his cigar. He thanked Ludger for the gift, then eased his great bulk down in a chair, that complained creakily in protest. He let out a long stream of smoke toward the ceiling, as if searching where to begin. He finally launched himself in his long story.

"This world is a world of magic. Where you use technology, like the lighter you gave me, we use magical spells. Everybody can become adept at the household spells, but you need a certain affinity with the magical realm to aspire to the higher arts.

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The source of our powers comes from the land itself. There are magic fields coursing through the land distributing the power everywhere. But, alas, these fields, by themselves, are very weak. They still permit us the use of the most basic household spells. They are inadequate for most other uses.

These fields used to be amplified by the mighty river of Power, after it mixed its waters with the river of Gods. The actual mechanism of this phenomena still eludes us. But since the rivers are dried up, the point is moot.

There are two kind of magic. The magic coming from the land is called white magic. It is good and used for constructive purposes, for the betterment of mankind. The other, more insidious kind, comes from the forces between the universes, from between reality and non-reality. It is called black magic. It ensnares its adept in doing evil things. It cannot be controlled. Lust for power control its minions."

Andrack took a sip from his snifter and a draught from his cigar, then continued.

"This was once a strong Kingdom ruled by my good friend, the late King Bluthor, father of young Arexis here present. Prosperity was everywhere and magic flowed freely through the land.

Troubles started around twenty years ago, when a young bright student of the Magical Institute of Talenthar, MIT for short, became tempted by the dark forces of black magic. His name was Magdar. As it is traditionally done to magicians found guilty of this most heinous crime against society, the Board of Regents of MIT decided to banish Magdar. He would be sentenced to perpetual exile behind the magical doors of the Gates of Doom, in the distant Howling Mountains. Since his magical soul could not be brought back to the side of Good this harsh punishment was executed.

I was very disappointed of Magdar. He had been a brilliant student with great potential. But as chairman of the Board of Regents, my duty was to strongly support the banishment."

Andrack took a long pull from his cigar and exhaled deeply.

"A few years back, Magdar escaped from beyond the Gates of Doom, with the help of a trusted advisor to the King. This traitor had organized a rebellion that led to Magdar's escape.

Magdar's powers had increased tremendously during his long exile. He was bent on revenge. He wanted to totally dominate the world with the help of black magic.

The Great Magical War ensued. It brought destruction to the thriving heart of our land. This area is now called the Desert of Death. You have crossed it on your way over here. The small fragment of your world that was brought with you, lays in its centre. It resides in a tear in the fabric of space and time, that was opened during the War. The Creature of the Mist, or Guardian, as you might know him, stabilizes that area, to prevent direct communication between our universes."

The large man stopped his narrative. He leaned forward to grab the large decanter from the table. He

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generously refilled his snifter and passed the decanter around.

Ludger asked him, with a hint of hope in his voice.

"Do you mean that the Guardian can communicate between the universes and bring me back."

Andrack replied.

"No, he can only prevent flow between the universes. He cannot directly communicate with any of them. He has no powers to get you back. Only I, might be able to do so if we restore the source of the river of Power."

Ludger felt his last bit of hope crumble in front of him. He said.

"You mean, I'm really stuck here?"

"I am afraid you are. Unless we win and reestablish white magic's powers for good."

"How were they lost in the first place."

Andrack, raising his hand and holding the cigar in front of him, replied.

"I was just coming to that point in my story. Here go.

This first assault in the War, ended in somewhat of a stalemate. Tremendous casualties and destruction had been suffered by both sides. Magdar's extraordinary powers were no match for the combined might of the Magician's Guild. While both sides had retreated to nurse their wounds and restore their powers, magicians in outlying area mysteriously began to disappear.

Magdar's hordes of evil creatures launched a surprise attack against the forces of King Bluthor, who were guarding the magic dam that regulate the flow of water, and magic, from the Lake of Power.

The King's forces were led into a trap. They were cut from behind by a band of rogue dwarves, who had been lured by the appeal of power. Enormous casualties were suffered by both sides. Unfortunately, my good friend, Bluthor was wounded during this attack. When Magdar got to him, he gave him his coup de grâce. He was able to grab the key to the water lock from the King, but fortunately, not the sceptre of power. This sceptre, when the King dies in battle, automatically returns to the source of the river of Gods. It rests in a magical cave where the new King will take his oath of loyalty to the land and claims the sceptre that will give him his powers.

The side effect of this, is that if the sceptre remains unclaimed, after a certain amount of time, the river will dry up. This has already happened. Because of the constant fighting, Prince Arexis has not yet been able to make the pilgrimage to the source of the river of Gods.

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Shortly after King Bluthor's demise, Magdar locked the majestic portal of the Magic Dam with the stolen key. A powerful containment spell was cast so no magic would flow through, it also restricts the access to the lock.

So here we are, with no magic at our disposal. Magdar is raising a colossal army composed of all the evil races. Be there goblins, trolls, mermen, black dwarves and elves, graks or other evil creatures, they will now fight united under Magdar's banner to inflict us our final blow. As I am speaking these forces are amassing in the west."

When Andrack stopped, Prince Arexis cleared his throat and said.

"Please hear me, Mister Morton, our troops are sparse and exhausted. We have no supplies. Since the death of my father I have not been able to claim the sceptre of Power. Thus I have not received the pledge of allegiance to the Kingdom from the city-states of Baldour, Baldycree and Leventhar. There is even rumours that Leventhar might be searching to form an alliance with the Empire across the sea, with which it has been trading for centuries.

The elves, protected by their enchanted forest, will not get involved in a fight not their own. The dwarves in the northern mountains will not help unless I am King. Also, to make matters worse, Magdar has claimed my sister, Princess Nathalia, as his bride to be.

We had exhausted every avenue of action. In despair we summoned the Great Oracle Trallen, Keeper of the Source of Power. With all his wisdom and clairvoyance, he told us that the only way to fight back the forces of evil, was with a different form of magic, brought by someone not of this world.

Andrack searched the universe for such a person, and you, Mister Morton, is that Saviour chosen by the Gods to help us."

Ludger tried to protest but Prince Arexis continued.

"I implore you to help us in our quest, for the sake of our worlds."

There was a long silence where both men held their stares. Ludger was annoyed that he was trapped against his will. He could only see two avenues, opened in front of him. First, he could return to his home and live like a hermit. This would not be too bad, since it was the reason he had built his retreat in the first place. Second, he could do as they wished and help them.

Ludger looked at Andrack and asked.

"What are the odds of me, returning to my world, if we are victorious? Also, how would I explain my disappearance?"

Andrack answered shrugging his shoulders.

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"The return spell has never been attempted and could be very risky. Also all traces of your existence, in your world, would have been erased when you breached the space-time continuum."

"Are you trying to say that it is improbable that I could return? And if I do return, nobody would know me. I would have to start a new life all over again."

"I am afraid so." Replied Andrack.

"This does not leave me much of a choice. I can start a new life here and now. Or hope that I can later return, if you win, and start a new life back home."

Looking at the Prince, Ludger said.

"Your Highness, I will help you in your quest. But I do not have any special magic. You may find that I am not much help in your endeavour."

The young Prince gave him a firm handshake and exclaimed.

"By the grace of all the Gods, I finally see some hope coming to raise the flagging spirit of our quest. Mister Morton, I heartily welcome you into our midst and, by the way, please call me Arexis."

"Thank you, Arexis, you can call me Ludger. I am glad to bring whatever help I can provide."

Andrack gave Ludger a powerful bear hug. He said.

"I knew you would help us. Welcome aboard."

He then raised his glass and said.

"And now a toast.... To victory!"

Every body replied in unison.

"To victory!"

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Chapter 5

Ludger thought about his predicament. He always had wanted adventure and a change of scenery. He now had both, plus a lot more he had not bargained for.

Everybody sat down after the elation of the toast. Andrack looked around the room and gravely said. "It is now time to plan what we will do in the coming weeks, if not months.

First, we must lead an expedition to the source of the river of Gods, so that Arexis can claim the throne and the sceptre of Power. This should help us get the support of the outlying city-states. With them we could raise an army large enough to mount a full scale attack at the Magic Dam. We could regain the source of our magic and defeat Magdar. If it is not already too late.

This expedition to the north will be difficult due to the foul weather in the mountains, during the winter. We will also face marauding bands of goblins and trolls.

We should travel north to the underground city of Thorland, ruled by my good friend, the great dwarf leader Kurden McNish. He should be able to provide us with guides and an escort to the source of the river."

Looking at Ludger he continued.

"When we meet him, you should provide him with different metals from your world. Kurden is the greatest swordsmith alive. He will be able to forge you a magic sword that will be impervious to this world's magic.

Tonight you will sleep here, in my keep. Tomorrow morning you will go back to the Mist of Dreams, to get whatever supplies you will need for our winter expedition. Dregnar will guide you back to the palace in Talenthar. We will start toward the north, on horseback, three days from now."

Ludger was not sure about travelling with the troll, but agreed grudgingly to it. He suddenly remembered Bacchus, who had been left outside. He asked Andrack.

"I left my dog outside, would it be possible to bring her in for the night. I cringe at the thought of what might be lurking in the dark, in these parts."

Andrack replied.

"Do not be worried, it has already been taken care of. Eyegar fetched your dog. She has been fed and lays waiting in your sleeping quarters."

"I am surprised that she followed him. She is normally shy with strangers."

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"It is one of Eyegar's many talents. He can communicate with animals and make them at ease. He is also a great cook. I am sure that you are famished, after your long journey. I will have him bring you something to eat, once you are installed in your quarters."

Arexis cut in.

"Gentlemen, I am sorry to leave early, but I must return to the palace and continue planning the quest with General Chargoff. With this, I bid you good night. I am looking forward to see you again in two days time."

The Prince quickly left the room, followed by Dregnar. Eyegar came in, a few seconds later. He said in a reverend tone.

"Master, our quest's sleeping quarters are ready. Do you want me to show Mr. Morton to them."

Andrack replied.

"Yes, as much as I would like to spend a long evening talking with Mr. Morton, I am sure that some food and a good night's rest are the best for both of us."

Turning to Ludger he said.

"Please have a pleasant night. We will talk early in the morning, before you leave."

He shook Ludger's hand, crushing it in the process and left the room. Eyegar, standing by the door, pointed to the opening and said.

"Sir..."

Ludger went to his chair and took his MAC 10. He followed the tall man down a series of corridors, that finally led to a thick wooden door. Eyegar opened it and led him inside. The room was fairly large. It was carved out of the solid rock, like everything else in this place. Against one of the walls was a massive, wood framed, bed with a canopy made of heavily embroidered, burgundy coloured, velvet. A comfortable looking eiderdown duvet and thick plush pillows covered it. Facing the bed was a sturdily built armoire, made of dark polished wood. A door stood beside it. The room was lit by wall fixtures emitting a moving orange glow.

At the other end of the room, a few comfortable easy chairs were tastefully arranged in front of a fireplace ablaze with flames. A bookcase was against the wall. By its side was a table on which stood some decanters filled with wines and brandies, a large plate of assorted cooked meats, cheeses and fresh fruits. The floors were covered with an assortment of ornate wool carpets of vaguely oriental design.

Ludger spotted Bacchus laying down on a large velvet cushion in front of the fireplace. The dog did not

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stir when he entered the room. Ludger stood there, taking in the aura of comfort emanating from the room.

Eyegar gently coughed and said.

"Sir..., behind that door, over there, lies the washroom facilities. The fire will last for the night. Your clothes are in the armoire, I fetched them from your wagon, myself. There is plenty of food and wine on the table. If you need me for anything, at anytime, please pull the red cord by the bed, the green one controls the lights. I hope that the accommodations are satisfactory and I wish you a pleasant night."

The tall man bowed and silently left the room.

Ludger went to the door and bolted it from the inside. Hearing the noise, Bacchus sleepily stretched and turned her head toward him. Recognition lit her eyes and her short tail started wagging. He sat on the carpet beside her. He petted his dog with affection for a long time. He needed this touch of normality to prevent his mind from unravelling before him. He still could not fully accept his situation. He expected to wake up any minute from a bad dream.

After spending ten minutes lost in his thoughts, Ludger said.

"Its time to check out this room and to slip, as the say, into something more comfortable. All this equipment I've been carrying all day is starting to feel like a ton of lead."

He went to the door, the MAC 10 at the ready. He checked the corridor. Everything was quiet. He closed the door and pushed back the bolt. He went to the washroom door and opened it. An enormous brass tub filled the middle of the room. A complicated looking set of gleaming copper pipes lead to it. In a corner stood a brass toilet. Against the wall, in front of a large mirror, was a brass sink set into an ornate commode.

Ludger said to himself.

"They really know how to accommodate their guests."

He turned on the taps and slowly started to fill up the bathtub. He went back to the bedroom and opened the armoire. In it, laid, neatly arranged on shelves, the spare clothes he had brought with him. A thick dressing gown and fur lined slippers were also present. He put his MAC 10 on an empty shelf. He removed his heavy hiking vest. He put his cigar case on a low table by the fireplace. He unholstered his handguns. He put the Glock under a pillow, on the bed. His comp gun was laid on the bedside table. He quickly undressed, put his dirty clothes on a shelf, took the dressing gown and slippers and went to the bath.

His feet felt cold on the tile floor of the washroom. He threw the dressing gown on the commode and the slippers on the floor. He rummaged through the commode and found some bath salts that he poured into the steamy water.

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Ludger had always preferred a shower, from a bath. But there were special occasions when it was especially helpful to slip into a hot bath to ease the day's tensions. This was definitively one of these occasions. He stepped into the scented water. As he sat down, his body instantly relaxed. Whatever was in those bath salts, he could make a fortune selling them back home.

He heard the clicking of Bacchus's claws on the tile floor. He looked as the dog approached him. She quietly nuzzled him and went back to the bedroom. Ludger felt good and relaxed for the first time in weeks. He would show these people how he could quest with the best of them.

He stayed in the water until it became uncomfortably cool. He drained the tub and dried himself with some luxurious towels, he had found in the commode. He slipped into the dressing gown and slippers and went to the bedroom. He filled a plate with an assortment of food, and a large goblet with a brilliantly red wine.

He sat in one of the overstuffed chairs. He stretched his legs as he revelled in the texture and finesse of the food. The wine compared favourably with the best of his world. He ate until he was full. He put down the plate with the remnants of his meal, on the floor, for Bacchus to finish. She greedily gulped it down, then returned to her cushion. Ludger carried the empty plate and goblet back to the table. He poured himself a snifter of brandy. He lit a cigar, from his own case, took a long pull and went to the bookcase.

The leather bound spines of many volumes, revealed a variety of technical subjects revolving around magic. Others dealt with philosophy or history. One of the former caught Ludger's eyes. A treatise named: THE FUNDAMENTAL PHILOSOPHICAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN MAGIC AND TECHNOLOGY by Master Andrack of Talenthar Ph.D.(MIT), F.R.C.M., F.R.C.P.. He took the slim volume from the bookcase and ensconced himself, again, in the comfortable chair. He read until he could barely keep his eyes open. Feeling totally drained he closed the book. It had stimulated a lot of thoughts, but he was too tired to make any sense out of any of them. He needed sleep.

Ludger shakily stood up. He threw the dressing gown on the bed and slid, naked, between the icy cold sheets. He pulled on the green cord. The lights slowly dimmed and finally winked out, leaving the room aglow with the dancing flames of the fire. Ludger quickly fell asleep.

*

Ludger was raised from a deep, dreamless sleep by a sharp knock at the door. His mind was groggy and he had no idea where he was. Slowly reality sunk in when he remembered the events of the previous day.

He heard Eyegar's voice, muffled by the thickness of the door.

"Sir..., we are breaking our fast in the kitchen, in half an hour. I will come and fetch you, then."

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Ludger finally stirred under the comfortable eiderdown duvet. Bacchus leapt on the bed and nuzzled him. He said.

"OK! OK! I'm getting up."

He rose to his feet, felt dizzy, then sat back on the edge of the bed. He shook his head trying to clear the cobwebs that had accumulated in it, overnight. He slowly looked around. He noticed that the room had been cleaned during his sleep. After a few minutes he rose, again, and walked to the bathroom. It had also been cleaned, fresh towels were waiting. He took a long shower, which seemed somewhat effective in clearing his mind. After brushing his teeth and his hair with the appropriate brushes, he went to the armoire, in the bedroom, to fetch his spare clothes.

Upon opening the doors he noticed that the clothes he had worn the previous day, had been cleaned. They were hanging neatly in the armoire. He thought.

"They have very efficient room service. Andrack would make a fortune in the hotel business, back on earth. Talk about unobtrusive service!"

Ludger quickly dressed and armed himself. He fetched his duffle bag. He packed it with his clothes and supplies. As he was closing the bag, the door opened. Eyegar walked in. Ludger picked up the book he had been reading the night before from the low coffee table. He turned toward Eyegar, showing him the book, and said.

"Can I borrow this, I did not have the a chance to finish reading it, last night. I would greatly appreciate to do so."

Eyegar replied.

"You can certainly keep this volume, compliment of Master Andrack. Are you ready for breakfast..., Sir."

"Thank you, for the book. And, yes I am ready."

Ludger slipped the leather-bound volume in a side pocket of his duffle bag. When he was about to lift the bag from the table, Eyegar took it. He said.

"Let me do this..., Sir. Please follow me."

Ludger shrugged his shoulder. He followed the tall man out of the room, with Bacchus on his heels. They followed a series of carved tunnels lit by smoky torches. Eyegar stopped in a featureless section of tunnel and turned toward the smooth wall. He put his hand on an area of the wall that was undistinguishable from any other. An opening suddenly appeared in front of them. Eyegar turned toward Ludger with a twinkle in his eyes. He said.

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"Service entrance."

They walked into the newly opened, dark corridor. After the first bend, they saw a dim glow at the far end of the corridor. They could hear some voices. Ludger heard a low growl coming from Bacchus. He hushed the dog to no avail. When they reached the end of the corridor, they turned right. They walked into a cosy country kitchen with a large stove-cum-fireplace, taking an entire wall. Andrack and Dregnar were seated at a massive table, talking. At the sight of the troll, Bacchus bared her teeth. Accompanied by a mighty growl she lunged at him.

The mystical creature was quicker than the dog. He rolled from his seat and quickly climbed to the top of the massive storage hutch that stood behind his chair. Bacchus got up on her hind legs against the hutch. She barked at the troll. She snapped at any part of Dregnar's anatomy that he dangled by mistake in front of her sharp teeth.

The troll was cowering on top of the hutch. He was letting out loud mewling sounds. Ludger grabbed his dog. He tried to quiet her. She struggled to escape his grip, still growling loudly at the troll.

Eyegar walked toward them. He put his hand on Bacchus's head. Instantly the dog stopped struggling. She turned her head toward the tall man, looking deep in his eyes. Ludger sat heavily on the floor. He watched, amazed, at what was going on. There seemed to be a bond between man and animal. Suddenly Bacchus shook herself and stretched. With her short tail wagging she went to lay down in front of the fireplace.

Ludger looked up, wide eyed, at Eyegar. He asked with bewilderment in his voice.

"What in the world just happened, here?"

The tall man nervously coughed, looked at Andrack, then back at Ludger. He answered.

"Well..., I just told your dog; that Dregnar was a good friend of yours and that she should not bother him again."

Ludger closed his eyes. He thought.

"Here we go again, now I've got to deal with Dr. Doolittle. As if I didn't have enough problems."

He opened his eyes, shook his head, and said.

"Thank you."

Ludger struggled back to his feet. He looked up to the top of the hutch, where the troll was still hiding. He said.

"Dregnar..., I guess you can come down now. I am truly sorry for what happened."

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The troll stopped making his mewling sounds. He peeked over the moulding, crowning the hutch. He looked around suspiciously, especially at the resting dog, then climbed down to the floor. Bacchus lifted her head from her paws, where it had been resting, looked at Dregnar quizzically, then returned to her sleep with a sigh.

The troll sat heavily on his chair, took a long draught from his mug of ale, then looked at Andrack. He hesitated for a moment, then said, while pointing to Bacchus.

"Master Andrack, I do not mind going to fight the evil forces of Magdar. But I will not travel with that beast."

Andrack replied in a voice filled with mirth.

"Calm down, calm down. I assure you that our friend, Bacchus, will not bother you again."

Turning toward Ludger, he added.

"Tell me, young man, how did you kill the two drakens that we found on your horseless wagon."

Ludger, surprised by the change of subject, replied.

"Well..., I shot, and killed, the first one with my shotgun. I only wounded the second one. Bacchus jumped and killed it. She saved my life in the process."

Dregnar looked with admiration at the dog, then turned his gaze to Ludger. He said in a quivering voice.

"Maybe, since this dreadful beast is able to slay a creature of evil, like a draken, I might have been too hasty in making my decision. I think I will be able to travel with our guests. But I will not trust that dog."

Ludger was thinking that he did not look forward to travel with the troll. He also did not trust him. Meanwhile, everybody sat back at the table. Eyegar served Ludger a sturdy breakfast consisting of eggs, bread, and assorted cold cuts. It was accompanied by an herbal infusion that was the local equivalent of coffee. While Ludger started his meal, Andrack said.

"We might have lost the advantage of surprise, because Magdar can normally see through the eyes of his creatures, like the drakens. Lets hope that he was not watching at the time."

Between bite Ludger asked.

"Are you telling me that with magic, you can see through the eyes of another creature."

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"It only works if you create the creature, outright, or if you remove the living essence of an existing one and replace it by some of your own."

"Well, I will have to be careful, if there is a chance of our enemy knowing of my presence in these world. By the way, is there a quicker way to return to the Mist of Dreams. On my way over here, I had to travel to the north of that large crevice."

Andrack looked at Ludger with a startled gaze. He said.

"You travelled to the mouth of the Dragon's Lair. You have taken an incredible risk in doing so. The Gods only knows what could have happened to you."

Unimpressed, Ludger remarked.

"I did not see any dragons when I stopped there. It looked more like the chimney of an old volcano."

"Even though no one has seen the great dragon Malvenia in centuries, its prowess should be respected and no chances taken. Anyway, Dregnar will show you a more direct route that passes a little south of here."

Ludger thought.

"Now they are afraid of an old legend, while a very real enemy is waiting to vanquish us."

He looked at Andrack and changed the subject.

"What do I need to bring with me, on our expedition?"

"Clothes to survive the cold winter, weapons to combat giant creatures, material to help in the mountains, different metals from your world, and anything else you might find useful for a winter expedition to the unknown."

"How will we be travelling?"

"The Prince will equip you with a battle stallion and a pack horse trained to follow it, under any circumstances. These pairs are bonded at birth and cannot be separated."

The conversation died down. Ludger finished his breakfast lost in his thoughts. Eyegar cleared the table silently. He put a bag of supplies in front of Ludger. It contained some fresh bread, cured meats, fresh fruits and a gourd of strong ale. Ludger raised from his seat. He turned toward Andrack, and said.

"Thank you for your hospitality. I think that we should get going on our trip. I guess we will see you again tomorrow."

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"You definitively will. Let me escort you to your wagon."

Dregnar took the supply bag and slung it over his shoulder. He then took Ludger's duffle. Andrack lead the way, out of the kitchen. They followed him through the maze of corridors.

When Andrack opened the massive stone portal, Ludger noticed that the suns were very low in the sky. The weather was crisp and clear. A sprinkling of freshly fallen snow covered the ground. Strangely no snow was present on the massive keep and in a ten yard wide band circling it.

His truck was still parked where he had left it the night before. The little group walked toward it. Andrack walked around and examined it with excitement. Dregnar looked at it suspiciously.

Andrack inquired about the working of the truck. Ludger showed him the engine. He gave him a quick course in auto mechanics. He took his spare gasoline canisters and refilled the tanks.

Ludger bid the wizard goodbye. He called Bacchus to jump in. Dregnar climbed aboard with apprehension. He seated himself beside Ludger. When Ludger started the truck, the sound startled the troll so much, that he jumped out and cowered behind Andrack's massive bulk. It took all of the magician's considerable powers of persuasion to convince the troll to take his place beside the driver.

Ludger waved to the magician, put the little truck in gear and pulled onto the muddy path that led off from the keep.

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Chapter 6

After they reached firmer grounds on the other side of the marshy area surrounding the keep, Ludger let the vehicle roll to a stop. He turned toward Dregnar and said.

"Now, where to?"

The troll pointed tentatively to the south and said in a quivering voice.

"That way. To the edge of the forest, then west."

After half an hour of bouncing on a rough trail, they reached a forest of tall hardwood trees. They were denuded of their leaves for the winter. To the southwest stood a large city dominated by a tall castle sitting on an island at the edge of the sea.

Dregnar pointed to the city. He said.

"This is Talenthlar, where we are going to meet the Prince, tomorrow. You should follow that path skirting the forest."

Ludger drove the truck across the mouth of the ravine. During the crossing the troll fidgeted as if he expected something horrible to happen at any moment. When they reached the other side, Ludger found a wider path leading northwest into the Desert of Death.

After a few hours of uneventful travel, Ludger turned toward the troll. He tried to make conversation.

"What do you think about this entire situation?"

Startled by the sudden question, Dregnar answered.

"Master Ludger, as a faithful servant of the royal family, it is not my prerogative to criticize our endeavour."

"Humour me, I'm not of this world. I want your own opinion."

"Well..., if I must." Dregnar paused, cleared his throat, then continued. "I am afraid for the well being of our world. You were brought here as a last resort. You are not a magician, or a great warlord. Even though you have decided to help us, I do not see how we can win in the coming war. Our forces are weak. Even if we win against Magdar, there is a possibility of an attack from the Empire, in the south. In our weakened state we could not possibly defend against it."

"You honestly think we are doomed?"

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"No, there is always hope, but these days it is difficult to believe in chance, with what I know of Magdar."

"What do you know of him? He seems to be a mystical being, not a man."

"He is human, alright, in the darkest, cruellest sense. Over twenty years ago, when he was still a student at MIT, Magdar was suffering from megalomania. He thought he could change the world and make it a better place by using black magic. He became addicted to the powers of the dark side and started to recruit people around the King to help him in his plans. He tried to recruit me. As a troll my ties to the dark forces should be strong. My loyalty to the royal family was greater. He captured me. He tried to break me with torture and vile magical experiments. I was almost dead when Andrack rescued me. This incident led to Magdar's banishment.

The one thing I know for certain, about his character, is that when he makes up his mind about accomplishing something, nothing will stop him. It took him close to twenty years of non-stop work, to escape his prison, but he did it. In the ensuing war, all the magicians, except for Andrack, disappeared. Andrack was left a shell of his former self. Do not be fooled by his jollity, inside him are massive emotional scars left by the battle and the loss of his powers. So, as you can see, Magdar always get what he wants..., eventually."

There was a long silence, in which Ludger digested the information he had just received. The canvas that Dregnar had painted was not pretty. But surely something could be done. People like Magdar had flaws brought upon by their megalomania. They would lay out the rules by which the contest would be played and expect everybody to follow these rules. Ludger would have to find a way of bypassing these rules or of making his own.

He was also interested in knowing why Dregnar had not joined Magdar. He turned slightly toward the troll and said.

"You say that trolls are normally aligned with the dark forces. Is it too bold of me to ask why you did not side with Magdar?"

Dregnar looked down at his hand and meticulously cleaned the dirt from under one of his claws. He then sighed and looked into Ludger's eyes. He said.

"Since you are not of this world I guess I can explain to you.

Trolls are creatures of low intellect that lives in hunting-gathering bands marauding throughout this land. They are just as likely to attack innocent travellers than to capture stray cattle. They are aligned with the dark forces that, as legend has, had spawned them. Once in a while a troll is born with high intellect and less bulky features. As you might guess, such a troll is the laughingstock of his band. His parents are ridiculed and he is beaten up by his peers and siblings. After many years of menial work you are lucky to die of exhaustion.

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I was not so lucky. I was left for dead, in the woods, after a particularly gruesome beating. I was found by young King Bluthor, during a hunting expedition. He put aside any prejudice that he might have had and nursed me back to health. When I was strong enough, I pledged my allegiance to the throne. I have served the royal family faithfully since that time, over 40 years ago. As you can see I was lucky to have found somebody that was compassionate. Without him, even if I had survived, I would have been rejected by, both, humankind and my own people."

Ludger considered the troll's sad story. His respect for the poor creature increased tremendously. He felt sorry for the doubts he had, in travelling with the ungainly creature.

As they crested a rise, Ludger could see, less than an hour's drive ahead, the cottony crater of the Mist of Dreams.

They drove the rest of the way in silence. As they approached the edge of the mist, Dregnar started to fidget nervously. Ludger told him not to be nervous. The crossing of the boundary should be uneventful.

They finally entered the mist. Instantly they were on the path leading to Ludger's front door. Dregnar let go of a short cry of astonishment. He was thoroughly amazed by the new universe. He could not believe the lushness of the vegetation and the marvellous sight of the large log buildings.

Ludger pulled over to the front door, stopped the Samurai and said.

"Welcome home."

The troll looked at him, wonder showing in his large eyes. He said.

"This place is so beautiful. I could stay here forever."

"We could but it would not be fair to our friends, who are waiting for us in the real world."

Ludger put his hand on the troll's shoulder. He gently pushed him toward the front door. He said.

"Lets go in, I'll show you around."

He keyed in the alarm code and unlocked the thick door. He pushed it open and showed the troll in.

He gave the troll a quick tour of the house. The short creature marvelled at all the conveniences that modern earth technology had created. He was particularly impressed by the television set. Ludger showed him a few videotapes of his world. Dregnar could not believe how crowded, noisy and restless this society was.

Ludger decided to round up the supplies. He left Dregnar, by the TV, with a large collection of tapes and clear instruction on the operation of the machine. He left for the garage-storeroom.

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He unlocked the armoury and opened the thick, steel clad, door. He fetched a custom made, high-powered, long distance sniping rifle in .50 calibre. As he was taking it apart for storage in a custom-made case, he thought.

"This should take care of any giant creatures we find..., I hope."

He selected some specialized ammunition and closed the case. He locked the armoury. He put the heavy case on the table separating the garage, from the workshop.

Ludger went to a large walk-in closet. He took out some insulated clothes, thick polypropylene underclothing, ECWCS all weather parka and trousers and assorted foul weather gear. He filled a bag with survival equipment, powerful electric torches and spare batteries.

From his electrical workbench he dug out half a dozen powerful, hand-held, 2-way radios with spare power-packs. he also took a compact portable base station, complete with a collapsible antenna, a repeater, a self-contained solar panel and a small generator. Completing the electronics, he threw in a directional sound amplifier and a pair of night vision goggles.

Some light camping gear was added to the rapidly growing pile of equipment laying in disarray on the table. Ludger added some climbing and rappelling tackle and a few hundred-and-fifty feet hanks of 11mm braided nylon rappelling line. He, next, went to the metalworking shop to find the greatest variety of different metals. Pieces of different steel and aluminium alloys, nickel, tungsten carbide, brass, copper, tin, even lead solder and a long piece of titanium he found on a rack, by the lathe. He put everything in a sturdy leather pouch, added a small piece of cast iron, a few nails, an old zinc cup, some bronze weights and a few magnesium fire starters. He rummaged through the scrap bin and found small pieces of Monel and Inconel, copper-silicon and beryllium copper alloys and two small castings of phosphor bronze and manganese bronze, respectively. Ludger went to his office safe and added some small ingots of precious metals, silver, gold, palladium and platinum. He finally thought that this should do it.

Ludger was looking at the large pile of equipment, wondering how to, most effectively, carry it. He remembered that he had a sturdy pack saddle with large cordura-nylon bags, left over from the days, when he used to go hunting on horseback. That reminded him of the more carefree days, before marriage and the growth of his business prevented, him to keep horses and go on week long hunting trips. But, with regrets, those days are over. He must deal with the new realities of this new world. Ludger opened the door leading to the kitchen. He noticed that Dregnar was still watching TV in the living room. He said loudly.

"Dregnar..., I'm going to the stables to get some saddles. Can you help me?"

After a few seconds, the troll answered with excitement in his voice.

"Come quick, Master Ludger, I have found the hero we were searching for."

Ludger ran to the living room wondering about the discovery. He found Dregnar watching a Superman

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movie. The troll pointed to the screen. He said.

"See how this man of steel can fight the forces of evil. He should be able to help us. Can you ask him? You are the one with the machine that made him."

Dumbfounded, Ludger looked at the troll, hesitated then finally replied.

"This is not real, it's only a movie. It is a form of entertainment that represent fiction. It is made with regular humans with no special powers. All the feats of strength and power are made with special effects, a form of visual trickery."

The troll's enthusiasm was not abated, when he replied.

"But I have seen Master Andrack summon you from a similar looking glass with magic and you are here in front of me."

Ludger did not like quenching the troll's hopes, but he did not have any choice.

"Listen, I am not a magician. There is no magic in my world. What you see is only an image with no substance. I'm sorry, Dregnar, but an image cannot help us."

The troll's excitement suddenly subsided. He sheepishly looked at Ludger. He said an apologetic voice.

"I am sorry, but deep down, a part of me wanted to believe in the impossible. It could have been something we had overlooked. I am deeply sorry..., Master."

Ludger patted him on the back. He said.

"Don't be sorry, I also wish there was something overlooked that could help us. But I cannot remember anything that would be of any help. So lets not worry for nothing. Come, help me with the packing."

Ludger closed the TV set and they both walked back into the kitchen. Ludger opened the garage door. When the troll saw the jumble of equipment that laid on the large table, he exclaimed.

"How do you think you will bring all of that with you? You are allowed only one pack horse."

Ludger replied, laughing.

"Don't worry, once packed it will take a lot less space."

The troll shook his head, unbelieving. Ludger opened the garage door. They walked outside toward the stable. They went in, directly into the tack room. Ludger took his trail saddle, completed with gun scabbards and packs. He gave the troll, the lightweight pack saddle with the sturdy nylon bags that could be attached to it.

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They returned to the garage after closing up the stables. They proceeded to organize the equipment and supplies. After a few hours work, everything was amazingly stowed in the bags. Ludger walked to the truck, parked outside, and drove it to the gasoline pump. He filled the reservoirs, both internal and portable. He then backed the truck into the garage. With the aid of Dregnar he stowed all the equipment in the back of the Samurai. He closed the garage door and said to the troll.

"Finally we are done. We will be ready to leave early in the morning. Lets go to the kitchen, I'll make us dinner. I'm famished. Would a rib steak, baked potato and green salad be alright with you."

"This would be perfect, Master Ludger."

"Please cut this, Master Ludger, crap. Just call me Ludger."

"Yes, Master Ludger." Replied the troll.

Ludger shook his head in disbelief and proceeded to the kitchen, where he made the basic preparations for dinner. He also fed the dog.

They sat and ate dinner silently, in the kitchen, over a bottle of wine. Ludger felt totally exhausted after the last few day's events. His body did not need a rest, but his mind needed some time to catch back with reality.

After dinner he decided to call it an early night. He showed Dregnar to the guest bedroom and bid him goodnight. He went up to his own quarters, showered and promptly fell asleep in his bed.

*

Ludger awoke early, the next morning. He prepared himself to leave. When he exited his room, he heard the sound of the TV set coming from the living room. He went to investigate and found Dregnar peering intensely at the screen. He cleared his throat and said.

"Good morning, Dregnar. How long have you been up, watching TV?"

Startled, the troll turned toward him and said.

"Oh..., Master Ludger. I only have been up for a few hours. I wanted to learn more about your world by watching your magic mirror."

"You will get a biassed view by watching TV. But I guess a biassed view is better than no view at all. We should have breakfast and be on our way to Talenthar. I don't want them to wait too long for us."

Ludger went into the kitchen and fed the dog. He then prepared a hearty breakfast that both Dregnar and himself ate with enthusiasm. They gathered the last of the supplies and stowed them in the Samurai. Bacchus jumped in the back. She installed herself amongst the equipment. She promptly went

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back to sleep. Ludger and Dregnar installed themselves in their respective seats. Ludger fired up the engine. He used the remote control to open the garage door. He drove out and closed the door behind them. Without looking back he proceeded toward the mist.

*

High above our heroes, silently circling in the crisp, still morning air, a draken was looking at them when they emerged from the Mist of Dreams. At the same instant, far away, in a richly decorated room, deep inside a mountain, a tall, dark, imposing man, attired entirely of black, sat on a chair lost in a trance. He sees through the eyes of the draken. He watches as Ludger and Dregnar leave for the capital. He vows to destroy that man who has the potential to disrupt his plans.

*

After an uneventful, rapid drive through the barren desert, they reached the edge of the snowy marshes. This slowed their progress dramatically. They followed a bumpy, muddy path that meandered through the sparsely wooded, low lying hills, much to the discomfort of the passengers of the vehicle.

Under Dregnar's directions and after many hours of uncomfortable pummelling, they finally reached the top of a hill overlooking the large city. The city was laid in concentric circles, on both edges of a long narrow bay, widening toward the sea. The outer circles (all four of them) consisted of two to three stories masonry houses with red, tiled roofs. Delineating the circles were fortified walls, pierced by large portals with movable iron grates. On the inner side of the walls were wide boulevards that circled the city. The avenues leading from the walls to the inner city, were staggered to prevent direct access.

Bridging the river, on one side, and the mouth of the bay, on the other, were massive stone structures with movable gates, build to defend the maritime access to the city. A massive citadel linked both structures, on the edge of the bay, thus forming the inner circle.

In the middle of the bay was an egg shaped island. On it stood the royal palace and the administrative buildings. They were surrounded by elaborate gardens which were themselves surrounded by their own fortifications. The island was linked to the mainland citadel by gracefully arched bridges. The palace itself consisted of a pink hue outer building, cornered by tall slender towers. It surrounded a massive inner keep whose peaked roof was tiled by a multicolored mosaic representing the royal coat of arms.

After admiring the city, resplendent in the early afternoon suns, for long minutes, Ludger asked for directions. Dregnar pointed to a narrow path leading to a wide roadway paved with cobblestones. Very happy to be finally on a smooth road, Ludger accelerated and started to hum to himself.

He soon had to slow down, as they started to encounter some traffic. The horse drawn carriages and assorted pedestrians scattered at their approach. They did their best to hide themselves. Ludger soon had a deserted road in front of him.

They reached one of the gates of the outer wall. Word of their arrival must have travelled ahead of

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them. The gate, that should have been opened at this time of the day, was now closed. Not a soul was there to be seen. Ludger stopped the Samurai in front of the gate. Dregnar climbed out and went to the guardhouse. He loudly banged at the door. After a few long minutes, a small peephole opened. A long argument, with much gesticulating on the troll's part, ensued. Finally the massive gates crept open. Dregnar came back, grumbling to himself.

He said to Ludger.

"They finally believed that we were not envoys of Magdar. They have agreed to escort us to the palace, so we do not cause panic in the population. We are to follow amidst a group of cavalry officers."

Four heavily armed horsemen suddenly appeared in front of them. They signalled to follow. Ludger proceeded slowly. Two more horsemen joined the group on either side, and four more followed in the back.

Thus escorted, they followed a maze of avenues on their way, toward the centre of the city. Ludger noticed that the city, and its citizens, had a grim look to them. It was as if once proud and happy, they now could only survive day to day, without hope for the future. As the group approached, people hid in side streets or doorways. They eyed them suspiciously. Ludger had never seen so much despair in peoples eyes. He vowed to do his best to help these poor souls.

The convoy slowly snaked its way through the city. After an hour they arrived at the inner gate of the citadel. The leader of the horsemen called for a halt. He advanced, alone, to the guardhouse. He bent down toward the attendant. He talked briefly with the soldier. He came back and dismissed his troops. He curtly said to Dregnar.

"You are expected. Please follow a member of the King's private guards, that will come and fetch you in a minute."

He saluted, gathered his troops, then promptly disappeared the way they had come. Ludger turned toward Dregnar. He said.

"Not a very sympathetic lad, isn't he?"

The troll shrugged his shoulders and sighed. A few minutes later, a horseman decked out in ceremonial uniform, greeted them and asked them to follow. Ludger put the truck in gear. He drove through the massive portal of the citadel. He was awed by the size of the construction. The wall were at least sixty feet thick. A multitude of soldiers populated the garrison between the towering walls.

These soldiers were a different breed of men than the ones they had encountered when they first reached the city. They seemed well trained and had the demeanour of veterans of countless battles. They did not seem surprised at the sight of the truck in their midst. They even showed some curiosity.

After a ten minutes walk their escort lead them through a gate in the inner battlement and onto a bridge leading to the island. The sight of the beautiful palace lost in a sea of fortifications, seemed somewhat

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incongruous to Ludger. It reminded him of a beautiful woman, going down the street wearing hockey equipment. It might be effective in protecting her from bumps, but it is not a pretty sight to see (unless you are into that sort of things).

When they reached the inner courtyard of the castle, they were greeted by a stout, dark skinned, grey haired man wearing a lightweight, black chainmail. The man first dismissed their escort, then walked toward Ludger with his hand extended in a greeting gesture. He introduced himself.

"Greetings, Mister Morton, welcome to Talenthar. I am General Chargoff, head of the King's armies. I am pleased to meet you."

Ludger took the extended hand and suffered a crushing handshake that left his hand numb. He then replied.

"The feeling is mutual. I am glad to be here."

The general pointed to a covered stall, by the wall. He said.

"You can leave your carriage, there, it will be safe and guarded day and night."

Ludger parked the truck. He jumped out of it and briefly stretched his legs. The troll and the dog did likewise. He took a small day-pack from the back of the truck. He followed the General into the palace with Bacchus at his heels.

As they walked down an ornate corridor of grandiose proportions, the General said.

"We are going to the council room right away. The others are waiting. There are rumours of a secret pact between the Empire and the city of Leventhar. We are to leave in the morning to get the sceptre."

The General stopped momentarily to talk to a soldier, standing guard by an opened door. Through the doorway Ludger caught a glimpse of a stunning red haired woman, pacing the floor of a sitting room. He thought he recognized her from his dreams.

The small group reached a set of massive oak doors, by which two guards stood at attention. A third man, dressed in a brown cloak, opened the door for them. He announced.

"Your majesty, and members of the war council, here are General Chargoff and Mister Morton."

They entered a large, high ceiling, room. A long solid table, with sturdy chairs, was its only furniture. A fireplace was inset in the far wall. A large map of the realm covered one of the side walls. Prince Arexis sat at the head of the table. To his right was seated Andrack, with his assistant, Eyegar, at his side. To the Prince's left sat a small, grey haired man of indefinite age. He was introduced to Ludger as Balnor, the court scribe and historian.

The small group joined the Prince at the table, while Bacchus laid down in front of the fire. Arexis

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stopped studying the papers that were laid out in front of him. He welcomed the newcomers. One chair was still vacant. Before Ludger could inquire, a commanding feminine voice said, sharply.

"Why have I not been introduced to our new guest and how come no one his standing up to greet me?"

All the occupants of the room turned toward the door, where the red haired woman stood, dressed in a dark green velvet gown. Her right foot was stamping the ground impatiently, while all the men stood up reluctantly. Arexis cleared his throat and said.

"Princess Nathalia, may I introduce to you Mister Ludger G. Morton, who will be helping us. Ludger, may I introduce to you my sister, Princess Nathalia."

Ludger bowed stiffly from the waist. The Princess, not even acknowledging his presence, sat at the end of the table facing her brother. Everybody reseated themselves. Ludger thought, that even though she was one of the most beautiful woman he had the pleasure to lay eyes upon, her haughty demeanour reminded him too much of his ex-wife to truly appreciate her beauty.

He was still lost in his thoughts when Arexis opened the proceedings.

"I am glad you are all here. Many new things have been discovered since we last met. First there are rumours of bands of goblins and trolls rampaging through the lowlands between Arnor and Setcryck. Second, there are massive troops already amassing in the Howling Mountains, with reinforcements coming on a daily basis. Third, Leventhar might be siding with the Empire if I do not become King rapidly.

As you can see, time is of the utmost importance. We will have to risk an attack no later than midwinter, or else our antagonist will become too powerful. Our first priority is to get the sceptre. Once it is in my possession and the flow of the river of Gods is restored, I have been told that Baldycree, Baldour and even possibly Leventhar will send us troops to help in the war.

While we will be away, General Chargoff will take charge of the troops. He will establish base camp in the plains north of Arnor. From there we will launch an attack to open the gates of the Magic Dam."

Arexis paused and looked deep into everybody's eyes. He continued.

"Our party will leave at dawn. It will consist of Chargoff, Andrack, Ludger, Balnor, Eyegar, Dregnar, a squad of Royal Guardsmen and myself. The bulk of the troops will follow us to establish a base. Already Colonel Dimitri, Chargoff's aide-de-camp, has some troops already massed there...."

Arexis was interrupted by his sister's voice.

"How come am I not included in your plans. I am just as capable as any man." She pointed toward Ludger. "You bring strangers in our midst, but do not want your own kin."

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Before Arexis could reply she stormed out of the room. The prince dismissed the group and excused himself. He ran out after her.

Ludger felt ill at ease, standing with the others in the council room. He did not know how to react to the embarrassing situation. He did not deserve the outburst. The Princess sunk another notch, in his already low esteem.

Eventually, Andrack said in a booming voice.

"We should go and freshen up. We will meet in the dining room for supper."

Ludger called his dog. He started for the door, where a palace servant was waiting to show him to his room. On the way there, Andrack caught up to him. He patted him on the shoulder and said.

"Do not take it personally. She did not meant what she said. She has been under a lot of stress lately, with Magdar threatening to capture her to make her his bride. She will understand that she will be safer, here in the palace. I know her well and deep down she is good and strong. Go and get ready for supper. I will meet you in the dining room."

The footman opened the door to a suite. He told Ludger that he will be back for him in an hour. In the meantime someone would bring some food for his dog. Ludger freshened up. He changed into clean clothes, then laid on the bed waiting.

He silently dined in the company of the Prince and Andrack. After dinner Arexis bid goodnight to Andrack. He then went to Ludger's side. He said.

"I must apologize for my sister's behaviour. She had no right to insult you."

"I understand what she must be going through. I have taken no offence. I hope that the situation will soon improve."

"I wish you goodnight. I will see you in the morning."

"Goodnight, Arexis."

Ludger followed the footman back to his room. Bacchus greeted him with affection. After petting his dog for a long time, he undressed and went to bed. He feel asleep almost instantly.

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Chapter 7

Ludger awoke with a start at around 04:00. It was still dark outside and he could hear sobbing in the room next to his own. He got up and dressed to investigate.

All was quiet in the stately corridor, except from the muffled weeping coming from a neighbouring door, that stood slightly ajar. Ludger noiselessly walked to the door. He was witness to a compassionate scene. Nathalia, with all traces of her regal, commanding ways gone, was crying on her brother's shoulder. Arexis was doing his best to soothe his sister's sorrows. She looked so young and vulnerable in her brother's arms, that Ludger thought that her earlier conduct might have been the veneer of court rearing, put on to maintain her composure.

He silently retreated to his own room. He quickly found out that he could not sleep. He decided to take a bit of fresh air and go walk his dog at the same time. He walked to the other end of the corridor, escorted by Bacchus. After ten minutes of unsure progression and numerous backtracking in the silent palace, he finally found a corridor exiting in the courtyard. Ludger crossed the empty space to the main gate, where two guardsmen stood at attention. They saluted him. When he inquired, they pointed the way to the palace's gardens. Since he was not dressed to comfortably jog, Ludger took a long brisk walk in the crisp, cold, morning air. The gardens were quiet and desolate in this early winter morning. The scenery fitted Ludger's mood perfectly.

It was slightly past five when Ludger returned to the palace. In the courtyard he found Chargoff examining his truck and equipment with a look of confusion mixed with curiosity, on his face. He joined the man and explained to him the workings of the truck and of some of the equipment. Dregnar soon joined them, accompanied by a stableboy who was leading a pair of magnificent grey horses.

Both horses had their chest, shoulders and hindquarters covered in flexible, lightweight chainmail. The leading horse was tall and solidly built, while the other was shorter and more massive. They both seemed even tempered.

Chargoff explained that the lead horse was a trained battle horse that would follow its rider's commands implicitly. He would not retreat under attack. The second was a sturdy pack horse that was trained with the battle horse as a team. It would follow its leader without any attention from the rider. It could carry a heavy load, day in day out.

Ludger looked over the horses with an expert eye. He was satisfied with his inspection. He proceeded to saddle the horses with the help of the stableboy. This last was fascinated with the modern saddles. With the help of Dregnar he loaded up the pack horse with his equipment. He put his G3 and shotgun in the long scabbards hanging from his riding saddle. He stored some extra ammunition and personal effects in a couple of saddle bags, that he fastened on the horse's rump.

Other teams of horses were already assembling in the vast courtyard, under the watchful eye of General Chargoff. Ludger cornered the General and showed him the use of a 2-way radio. The General was

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very impressed by this technology. Ludger gave Chargoff two of the handheld units, with some spare battery packs. One was for himself, the other for Princess Nathalia, so that she could keep track of her brother's progress. Ludger urged the General to establish a daily schedule of short calls at fixed hours, to preserve the batteries' power as long as possible.

After the preparations were completed, Ludger followed Chargoff to the officer's mess. They would eat breakfast with the troops. He felt comfortable with this no-nonsense man. Over breakfast they talked about their respective world's differences and similarities.

They were interrupted by Andrack. The portly magician was looking for them. He informed the General that the Prince was ready to go. Their presence was needed in the courtyard. Chargoff ordered his officers to assemble their men. The small group left for the courtyard.

Ludger left the General to his job. He quickly found and mounted his horse. He told Bacchus to follow him. As the Prince lead his troops out of the castle's yard, he fell in line behind Andrack, who was riding a massive black stallion.

As they slowly emerged from the courtyard, Ludger caught sight of Nathalia. She was overseeing the departure from one of the tower's balconies, with barely suppressed tears in her eyes. Masses of troops were waiting in the outer enclosures. After they crossed the bridge to the citadel, Arexis motioned Ludger to ride at his side. More troops joined them in the citadel. Every soldier not critically needed for the protection of the city, would follow to the base camp.

As the main gates of the citadel opened, Ludger noticed that crowds of citizens were lining the streets, even at this early hour. They silently watched, with gloom in their eyes, as their leader left for his quest while a strangely dressed man, mounted on an alien saddle, rode at his side.

They slowly crossed the town on their way to the north-east gate. Once there, the small party, with their armed escort, parted company with the main body of troops. They picked up their pace as they crossed desolated snow covered farmlands.

They rode all day under the cold winter suns. Ludger's only distraction was to listen to the constant bickering between Balnor and Andrack. They were discussing the proper method of reclaiming the sceptre. They seemed to never tire of their endless arguments, like young siblings on the back seat of a car, during a long trip.

Late in the afternoon, Chargoff called a halt. They set up camp about half a days ride south of the town of Arnor. Soldiers kept themselves busy by setting up tents for the night. A few large fires were lit. The men sat around them to eat their meagre trail rations. Ludger, after taking care of his horses and dog, unrolled an insulated sleeping pad and laid down comfortably in front of the crackling fire. Dregnar brought him a piece of dried meat and a steaming bowl of thick stew. The troll uneasily sat down between Ludger and his dog, who was sleeping by the fire. The troll still did not trust Bacchus.

At the end of the meal, Andrack came to join them, carrying a leather covered flask. The large man sat

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on a boulder next to Ludger. He passed him the flask. Ludger was delighted to find out that it contained a fortified wine similar to Vintage Port. He took a sip and passed the flask back to its owner. With a long sigh Andrack passed the flask back, after taking a long pull from it. He said.

"I am glad that you decided to come with us. I am sure that without your help, it would be impossible to finish our quest."

"You seem to have more faith in me, than I have in myself. I do not really have any special magical abilities and I am not familiar with the customs of your world. The only thing I can offer is a little bit of technology."

Ludger took a long sip of the strong wine and before Andrack could reply, he continued.

"I have read your treatise on technology and magic. I agree with you that in some cases, unfamiliar technology can be called by the uninitiated, magic. But I do disagree, though, with your position that they are fundamentally similar."

"Well, they are similar in that they both accomplish good and help man in his daily life."

"They both can also do bad. Like your black magic and our military technology that makes killing more easy every year. But in my world the technology, or machines, are not in themselves evil. Only the man using them for this purpose, is. In your world it seems that black magic is the embodiment of evil that corrupts its user."

"This might be due to the fact that the people using this form of magic are predestined to be creatures of evil and that black magic only amplifies this trait in its users."

While Ludger was listening he pulled, from his vest, his cigar case. He offered one of the long cylinders of tobacco to the large magician. They both lit up and continued their argument.

Ludger pulled on his cigar and let out a long stream of pungent smoke. He then said.

"Another difference, that I found, between our worlds, is that here magic brings you close to your environment. It is part of the essence of your world. In my own world, it seems that technology separates you from the earth. It removes you to an artificial man-made cocoon. The more technology, the further away you are removed from the earth."

"But your technology comes from elements harvested from your earth and...." So the argument went on, late into the night.

When the discussion was finally wound up, due to lack of ammunition, Andrack retired to one of the tents. Ludger was left alone, thinking, by the fire. He felt refreshed, like he used to feel after similar argument when he was still a student. Stimulation of the mind is something that is very important and it is needed on a regular basis. It felt so good, under the cold stare of the stars, that Ludger decided to

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sleep al fresco.

He fetched his down-filled mummy bag from his pack and made himself comfortable by the fire. He noticed that Dregnar had also decided to sleep under the stars, as he quickly lapsed into unconsciousness.

*

Ludger awoke with a start. It was still dark. His body was stiff from the long day's ride. He heard muffled noises coming from the direction of the river. Dregnar was not around, so he decided to investigate. He pulled on his boots, laced them quickly and took his G3 rifle. He attached a powerful multi-cell electric torch under the barrel of the firearm. He turned on the light and the illuminated reticle of his scope.

He slowly walked in the general direction of the sound. Bacchus followed sleepily. They soon reached the edge of the dried up bed of the river, where they followed the sound of the scuffle to a series of large boulders that stood ominously in the stark moonlight. As they approached the first rock, Bacchus's ears started to twitch. She emitted a low menacing growl.

They soon found the source of the commotion. Dregnar was cornered, amongst the rocks, by a large animal with a long, well-toothed muzzle. It looked like a cross between a black bear and a rat, because of its pointed snout and its long tail. The animal was about ready to pounce on the poor troll. Ludger could do nothing, because the troll was in his line of fire. Sensing his indecision, Bacchus let out a lone bark and ran, head down, toward the bear. She bunted the animal in the chest, making it lose its balance. Before it could regain its equilibrium, she jumped, open jawed, at the animal's throat. She could not get a good grip on the loose folds of fur. The creature effortlessly brushed her off. This had been enough to remove Dregnar from Ludger's line of fire. The man surgically placed two bullets, in rapid succession, in the creature's shoulder. The beast was killed instantly. The deafening roar of the shots, awoke the sleeping camp. Soon Ludger, Bacchus and the dazed troll were amongst friends.

Chargoff was surprised that a feisty water bandybear could be so easily defeated by Ludger's firearm. They were all in awe of the power of the gun. They left a group of soldiers to expertly skin and quarter the carcass, for meat. As they walked back to the camp, Chargoff explained that the bandybear's meat was a delicacy. It would nicely supplement their daily rations. He then chided Dregnar for leaving the camp, alone in the night.

As they sat by the fire, merrily passing around a wineskin, Dregnar pledged servitude to Ludger and Bacchus, with Arexis' blessing. While things quieted down and people started retiring to their tents, Arexis took Ludger aside. He said.

"I want to thank you for leaving one of those communicating devices to my sister Nathalia. With it she will be able to keep in touch. I know she might seem haughty, but she is under a lot of pressure. She is at the verge of a breakdown. I had hoped that you two could have met under better circumstances. She is really a great girl."

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Ludger silently acknowledge the Prince's words. He went to his packs to retrieve one of the small radios. He gave it to the Prince for personal use. Both men exchanged a warm handshake and retired for the rest of the night.

*

They were under way at dawn. After an hour's ride, Army of Elkvar - the Prince's Trackmaster - joined them with his squad of trackers. They had news from the north. The way was free to Arnor, though there was trouble between Arnor and Setcryck. Bands of goblins or trolls had attacked small villages. They would have to be very cautious on their way up north.

By mid-afternoon, they arrived at Arnor. The farming town seemed desolated in the middle of the snow. Led by Army, they bypassed the town. They went directly to the military camp. There, they found a few thousand soldiers looking worn. They were milling around the tents in an enclosure defined by high log walls. They met Colonel Dimitri at the gate. The solid man, in the prime of his life, was wearing a field armour. He enthusiastically greeted them.

Dimitri led Arexis and Chargoff to a tent, so they could finish planning their campaign. Army and his trackers proceeded toward Setcryck to reconnoitre ahead of the small party.

After a night's rest in the camp, they prepared to leave. They met with Chargoff, who was staying behind. They quickly went over their plan. They would first travel to Setcryck. There, they would find a guide to escort them to the underground city of Thorland. In that city they would request help from the dwarf's leader, to proceed to the source of the river of Gods.

They had an emotional farewell. They rode all day without any signs of trouble. Early in the evening they set camp by the river. After they finished their evening meal, Army of Elkvar came back from the field. He reported on his findings.

The tall thin man, dressed in the traditional green felt uniform of the Royal Trackers, said in a low clear voice.

"My men and I, have found traces of a marauding band of trolls patrolling this area. Guards should be doubled for the night. I would advise that Dregnar stays out of sights. I fear that if his presence is revealed it could provoke an attack by his inferior cousins."

"Thank you..." Said Arexis. "...we will act upon this information. We should meet again at midday, tomorrow to evaluate the situation."

With this, Army soundlessly disappeared into the night, to rejoin his men. Arexis instructed Dregnar to stay out of sight. The men nervously settled down for the night.

All through the night Ludger kept being awoken by yells and cries emanating from the sparse woods

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surrounding the camp. He was uncomfortable at the thought of a band of trolls roaming in the darkness. Bacchus seemed to be of the same opinion, she kept growling faintly all through the night.

After a restless night, they raised camp early in the morning. Around them, the snow was slowly getting deeper. The air grew colder. They were lucky, it was still more invigorating than uncomfortable to ride in the cold air.

By midday they caught up with Arny. The willowy tracker was sitting on a rock while pensively cleaning the soles of his soft leather boots. When they reached him, Arexis called a halt.

Arny gave them a grim look. He said, pointing to the low foothills ahead of them.

"To reach Setcryck we must take a pass, in the hills, about three miles ahead. In a narrow portion of this pass, a group of goblins and trolls, together, have set an ambush. This is a very bad sign."

Andrack quickly said.

"This is true, only Magdar could force trolls and goblins to work together. They normally cannot stop fighting each other long enough to cooperate."

Balnor nodded in agreement. Things must have been really serious, it was unusual for the scribe to agree with matters uttered by the magician. The situation was discussed and a plan of action was decided. Arny's men had found a small gulley that lead from the pass. It was unoccupied and could provide good cover for hiding. The bulk of their small group would hide in the gulley. A small party, lead by Arexis, would ride ahead to the site of the ambush. There, they would draw the attack and retreat past the gulley. From there, Ludger would launch an attack on the rear guard of the ambushers, who would effectively become the ambushes.

On foot, quietly leading their mounts, Ludger and his men were led into the gulley by one of Arny's trackers. At the mouth of the narrow trench, another tracker signalled that all was well. They went in a single file and hid themselves as best as they could, amongst the low vegetation that clung to the walls and behind large boulders that had rolled from the top of the hills. After they were settled, the two trackers covered their tracks in the snow. Soon it was as if no one had entered the gulley. Nothing would reveal their presence, except the occasional muted neigh of a horse, that was quickly lost in the sound deadening bushes.

After waiting about half an hour the small party, lead by Arexis, passed in front of them. The Prince was lost in deep conversation with Arny, who was riding a borrowed horse. Silence quickly fell back amidst the waiting men.

Their wait was of short duration. Suddenly, amongst loud hooting and hollering, they heard the rhythmic drumming of horseshoes. The Prince's party burst into the open space in front of them, with a ragged band of trolls and goblins at their heels. The formers ran like overgrown apes while carrying large knives. The later looked like small deformed caricatures of human beings, with permanent toothy

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grins set on their distorted faces. They kept cackling, laughing and hitting each others with a mind boggling panoply of sticks, knives and rusted swords.

When the unlikely group finished defiling in front of them, Ludger launched his own attack. MAC 10 at his fist, he spurred his horse after the evil creatures. His men jumped into the foray with their swords drawn. Ludger let go of a few short bursts of fire, but soon found out that he was just as likely to hit a friend than an enemy. He put away his submachine gun and drew his long kukri knife. He quickly hacked at a troll, who was trying to bite him through his boot while hanging by his stirrup. The heavy blade thudded in the troll's neck. It fell, lifeless, to the ground.

When Ludger was bent forward, in the follow-through of his blow, a goblin jumped on his back. He could smell the stench that reeked from its open mouth. Fighting nausea, he elbowed the creature to his side. As it was about to bite him, Bacchus jumped on it. She clamped her teeth in the goblin's leg. They both rolled to the ground. Dregnar swiftly disposed of the creature with one swift blow of his walking stick. He wildly grinned at Ludger, nodded to the dog and they both went after their next victim. Andrack was calmly sitting on his horse. With a flourish of hand gestures, he was setting the greasy hides of goblins and trolls ablaze with simple firespells.

They quickly decimated their attackers. After they had regrouped, they discovered that the only casualty, on their side, was Balnor who laid on the bloody ground, with a deep cut in his shoulder. He was hysteric. It was well known that being wounded by a goblin's weapon led to massive infection and soon after, painful death.

They quickly established a makeshift camp in a clearing. Balnor was carried to it. They laid the scribe on a rough blanket, by a fire that Andrack had hastily lit with a spell. Ludger grabbed his first-aid kit from his pack horse. He attended to the wounded man. Andrack was pacing back and forth and muttering to himself.

"I do not have enough power for a healing spell. It is all a question of entropy."

Balnor, through clenched teeth, said.

"I am glad that I will not be touched by Andrack's magic. I do not know what I would be turned into."

Ludger hushed the man and looked at his wound. It was messy but superficial. He cleaned the area, then anaesthetized it. He disinfected the gaping wound with providone-iodine. He stitched the deep gash using silk on a mounted cutting needle. He dressed the, now closed, wound with an antibiotic ointment, then applied an adhesive bandage.

Andrack, looked with great interest. Ludger said to no one in particular.

"And now to combat the potential infection." As he drew a syringe full of antibiotics. He expertly injected Balnor in the biceps and followed it with a tetanus booster.

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As he swabbed the injection site he said to the man.

"Your shoulder will be stiff for a few days, but you should not be afraid of any infection. You should rest for an hour, then we will ride."

Ludger helped Balnor to arrange himself comfortably by the fire. He went to the Prince, who was talking with Arny. Ludger said.

"Balnor will be alright we should be ready to ride within the hour. I would suggest that Balnor return to Arnor."

Arexis replied.

"Thank you for your help. We will have to force our pace toward Setcryck. Arny does not think we should chance sleeping out tonight. He fears another attack."

After a short rest, the men gathered their horses. Balnor was helped to his mount. Some of the soldiers carried Arny's trackers behind them. After an uneventful crossing of the snowy pass, they reached a long valley. Setcryck occupied the far end, with its back to the tall mountains.

By nightfall they had reached the banks of the river of Gods. They forded the narrow muddy creek without any difficulties. From there it was only a short ride to the village.

Setcryck was nested on an incline at the base of tall mountains. Two deep canyons led from either side of the village. They once contained the raging flow of the river of Power and of the river of Gods.

The village was gaily lit by lamps hanging in the windows of alpine style chalets. A large stone wall, made from a hodge-podge mixture of darkly polished river stones, blocked the access to the valley.

Men, standing guard by fires near a narrow tortuous gap in the wall, recognized Prince Arexis, as he was leading the party. They ceremoniously bowed and saluted the Prince and his entourage. They were led through the narrow opening. As they crossed the gap in the wall, Ludger noticed that it would be very easy to dislodge stones from the sheer sides and effectively seal that gap.

When they reached the snow covered path, leading to the heart of the village, a mob of children were waiting for them.

Obviously, news of the Prince's visit had travelled quickly to the villagers. Escorted by the irreverent horde of cheering kids, they quickly reached the main square of the village. A large Inn stood ablaze with lights. A painted sign representing a ruddy complexioned, cheerful faced, dwarf holding a large blacksmith's hammer, hung over the front porch. On this porch stood the owner of the Dwarf's Hammer, the town's mayor and a few other dignitaries.

They officially greeted the Prince and his friends. They were led to a large common room while young

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stable boys took care of the horses.

The high ceiling, brightly lit, room was lined with tables. A high mezzanine circled it. A massive staircase led to it and the sleeping quarters.

They were ushered to take seat at the tables where the mayor made a long speech. The portly man, with a faded suit where the sash of his office left a bold stroke of colour, finally terminated his oration to the applause of the bored crowd.

Arexis gratefully thanked them for their hospitality. He requested rooms for the evening. The large innkeeper graciously offered his best rooms for the night. He ordered a meal brought to his guests. A hearty repast of meat and potatoes was devoured by the ravenous men. Entire kegs of ale were drunk in the revelry that followed the telling of the story of their heroic fight.

Andrack was sitting in a quiet corner, lost in a conversation with a thin man wearing a dark cloak. He finally shook the man's hand and gave him a small leather pouch. The man's long thin fingers expertly appraised the weight of the bag and deftly pocketed it.

Andrack went to fetch Arexis, Army and Ludger. He introduced the thin man to them.

"This his Arckvor, our guide. He will escort us to the gates of Thorland. Where we will meet with the dwarf's leader, my good friend Kurden McNish."

The thin man replied in a low reedy voice.

"I am pleased to meet you. We will leave by mid-morning. We should be in Thorland by mid-afternoon. We will have to keep close to each other. It is very easy to get lost in the snowy mountain passes. I will see you in the morning."

The thin man curtly bowed and retired to his room. The three men look at each other and shrugged. Ludger asked.

"Can he be trusted."

Andrack replied.

"Do not be put off by his gruff manners, he his one of the best mountain guides around. I have known him for many years. He can be trusted, I guarantee you."

Ludger took another pitcher of ale. After he finished drinking the potent brew, his head was spinning. He wearily climbed to his room. It was a comfortable, well appointed room. He fell asleep on the bed, without first undressing.

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Chapter 8

Ludger slept in late. When he woke up, he felt as if the entire weight of the world was resting on his shoulders. He slowly crawled out of bed. He looked at himself, bleary eyed, in the mirror overhanging the wash basin. He looked even worse than he felt. His hair was in a disarray and his eyes were red with sleep. His mouth felt as if someone had put little furry sweaters on his teeth and carpeted his tongue with felt.

He grimaced at the pitiful image reflected to him by the mirror. He was still dizzy with sleep. His head was filled with a kaleidoscope of dull aches and pains, that were amplified by his every movements. He poured some water in the wash basin. He splashed it on his face. It did not have the effect that he had wished. He now felt just as miserable, but he was also wet.

Ludger turned to his pack, who was on top of a closed chest, at the foot of the bed. He hesitantly walked to it with both hands holding his head. He was desperately preventing it from rolling to the solid oak floor. With a groan he extirpated from the nylon bag, some fresh clothes and his toiletry kit.

He opened the door of his room and stumbled to the washroom, at the other end of the corridor. Luckily it was unoccupied. The first thing he did was to hang his kit on a hook and unroll it. He filled a glass with water and took, in succession, a powerful analgesic, some megavitamins and an antacid. He quickly undressed, sat in the bottom of the shower holding his head and let the flow of the water slowly revive him.

Ludger stepped out of the washroom over half an hour later, looking well groomed and refreshed. His head had cleared and the pain had subsided to an almost comfortable level. He collected his bag from the room and headed for the dining hall. When he reached the top of the stairs he noticed that everybody was already up and having breakfast. Arexis, who was sitting at a table with Andrack, Arny and Dregnar, cheerfully greeted him and asked him to join them. Ludger threw his bag by an empty chair, sat down and ordered a light breakfast consisting of fruit juices, cold cereals and bread, from the jovial innkeeper.

Eyegar soon joined them, after having walked Ludger's dog. Ludger thanked the tall man and happily patted Bacchus on her head. He petted her until his breakfast arrived. The innkeeper soon came back with a shallow wicker basket containing a tall glass of reddish-pink fruit juice, a bowl of cereals with a pitcher of cold milk, assorted muffins and pastries with fresh butter and preserves. He placed the basket in front of Ludger.

Before he could be thanked, the man quickly returned to the kitchen. He came back, a few minutes later, with a pot of herbal tea and a cup that he placed in front of Ludger. He put a bowl of ground meat and gravy, on the floor, in front of Bacchus. Ludger profusely thanked him for feeding his dog. The portly man patted him on the back and winked. He said.

"Your friend, Dregnar, told me how much of a hero and a fighter your dog his. I will treat her as such. I am glad to be host to our future Saviour. By the way, the herbal tea will invigorate you for the journey

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ahead."

He winked at him again and returned to the kitchen. Ludger hungrily disposed of his breakfast. While he was sipping his aromatic tea he asked Andrack.

"Yesterday, when you said that you could not use a healing spell on Balnor and that it was a question of entropy, what did you mean by that?"

Andrack cracked a smile and replied in a scholarly tone.

"As you surely know, the universe is governed by entropy, In simple terms, if things are left by themselves, they will eventually go from an organized state to a disorganized state requiring less energy to maintain. All of our efforts are to slow down this natural trend.

It is the same with magic. It takes a lot less energy to cast a destructive spell, like a fire spell, that will increase entropy, than to cast a healing spell, that will locally decrease it. With the reduced energy available to me, it is impossible to cast any constructive spells. Only some minor destructive spells are still possible."

Balnor chuckled and said in a hushed tone.

"It his a good thing, because most of the time his constructive spells, more likely than not, ended in destruction anyway."

Andrack glared at the scribe. Before an argument could start their emaciated guide joined them and curtly said.

"We will leave within the hour. I assume you will be ready."

He stiffly bowed and left the inn. Ludger looked at the others and said.

"I guess we should take care of the bill, fetch our horses and get ready to leave."

The innkeeper vehemently refused any payment from Arexis. He stated that he was glad to have made this small contribution to the Prince's quest. As they left the inn the horses had already been brought out. They were being saddled by the stable boys. Ludger was able to contact Chargoff at the appointed time. They were rejoiced to hear that all was well in the capital. Nathalia had contacted him the night before. They told him of the ambush they had escaped from, the previous day and that Balnor would be coming back to recuperate, with a group of young lads from the village that would join the troops.

Since the communication had been very clear, Ludger decided to install a small repeater on the roof of the inn. With this, they would be able to communicate with Chargoff from further up in the mountains. With the help of Dregnar he collected the small radio unit, a long collapsible antenna and a solar powered battery charger, from his pack saddle. In the meantime some of the stableboys had erected a

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long ladder.

Ludger and the troll quickly climbed to the roof. They installed the small transceiver with thin pieces of metal strapping and some nails. By the time they were back on the ground, the party was ready to leave. They grudgingly parted company with their friend Balnor and the innkeeper. They walked toward the mountain pass, leading to higher elevations, amongst the cheers of the villagers.

They were unhesitatingly led through a maze of canyons and passages by their gloomy guide. Early in the afternoon the temperature suddenly grew colder as dark clouds rolled over the mountain tops. In a matter of minutes a violent blizzard had descended on them, reducing the visibility to zero.

Arckvor quickly called a halt, so the riders could don warmer clothing. He himself declined to do so, the cold did not seem to have any effect on his body. They decided that every rider should be led by the rider ahead of him. Their pack horses would follow by their side.

Soon a double file of horses was slowly led by a lone dark rider. They progressed for countless hours, having lost track of time and direction. Still Arckvor relentlessly led them through the rapidly deepening snow.

Ludger had long ago lost any hopes of ever seeing again a warm fireplace. He could not believe that anybody could orient himself in the white soup of the blizzard. The snow was getting so deep that the horses had slowed to a crawl. He could feel the cold in his bones and he had resigned himself to the worse.

Suddenly they entered a narrow gorge. The walls were so close that there was just enough room for two horses, abreast. There was less snow on the ground, but they could still see the blizzard raging high overhead. It was very cold and damp, but at least they did not have to contend with the high wind and the snow.

After a good hour of slow progress, they finally reached a cirque facing a gigantic metal clad door, set in the mountainside. Arckvor called a halt. He, alone, proceeded to the door. He leaned from his mount and grabbed a massive knocker, set in the middle of the door. He banged three times, paused, then two more times. He slowly pulled away from the door, as it ponderously opened out in silence.

A solidly built dwarf, wearing an intricately engraved suit of armour, approached the guide. Arckvor bent down toward him. He talked to the guard in a low voice, while pointing to the shivering group. The dwarf acknowledge with a nod. The guide turned his horse toward them, saluted, spurred his mount and quickly disappeared in a side passage leading back into the storm.

They were left alone with the dwarf. This last signalled them to follow him. They were led into the mountain. The large door closed behind them with a resounding thud. They were in a nondescript dark cave of large proportions. A few torches were smoking on the walls.

Arexis hesitantly ordered to dismount. The dwarf guard, without a word, grabbed a torch and headed

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into a dark tunnel. They were quick to follow him on foot, leading their horses. After the raging blizzard, the tunnels were very comfortable. They were led through a long series of tunnels that ended in a cathedral sized cave with a ceiling so high, that the light from the torch did not reach it. Their guide instructed them to wait while he fetched his leader. He disappeared in one of the multitudes of openings lining the walls.

The air in the cave was clean and warm. They uneasily talked with each other, as they stamped their feet to reestablish some warmth in their cold bodies. After half an hour had passed, Ludger wondered if their guide had forgotten them. He said so to Andrack. The large magician replied.

"You cannot rush a dwarf if he his otherwise occupied. We will be attended in time."

Just as Andrack was finishing his phrase, a deep booming voice, coming from one of the openings, said.

"Andrack, you old fool. I am glad to see you again. Have you learned any new tricks lately." The last he said with a wink.

Ludger could not believe his eyes at the sight of the dwarf who had joined them. He was over a foot shorter than him, still very tall for a dwarf. He looked almost as wide as he was tall. He was wearing a pair of heavy cloth pants. He was bare-chested under a long leather apron. A large hammer was stuck in his belt. His wide hairy torso and massive arms were bulging with heavy muscles. His callused hands looked like vices that could crush a tree trunk. He had a square set jaw and a wiry head of air and beard. Making this awesome physique secondary was the darkest pair of eyes that Ludger had ever seen. They looked like polished, black onyx set into a snow white surrounding. They made the man look like he could love or hate with the same endless passion. He was glad that these eyes showed happiness at seeing them. He did not want to be at the receiving end of their hatred.

The dwarf went straight to Andrack and easily lifted the bulky wizard as he hugged him. He looked at the other men and said.

"My name is Kurden McNish, I am the leader of this mountain's dwarves." He pointed to Arexis. "You are Bluthor's son. You have a lot of him in you. May he rest in peace.

Andrack, where have you hidden my friend Balnor, the one who knows better about you?"

"He was injured in an ambush. He returned to Arnor to recuperate."

"I am saddened to hear that. I will miss him, we have a lot in common."

He winked at the wizard then eyed Ludger up and down for a long time. He turned toward Andrack and said.

"This must be the one that you summoned. I can sense that he his not of this world." Turning to Ludger

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he continued. "Do not believe anything that this large bag of useless magic has to say about me. Welcome to Thorland. My city is now your city."

Kurden shook his hand. Ludger winced from the pain. He thought that he would never be able to use his hand again. The dwarf clapped his hands and dozens of attendants answered the signal. They relieved the party of their horses and heavy winter clothes.

Kurden led them through the tunnel he had come from. It was lit by crystals embedded in the rock. It ended in a large underground avenue that was bordered by shops and inns. Hundreds of dwarves were milling up and down the street, attending to their daily business.

The sight of the underground city was marvellous. Imagine a large city, carved elegantly out of the rocks, that stood in the middle of a cavern so vast that it seemed endless. The buildings were exquisitely engraved with countless volutes and statuaries. This hedonistic scenery was lit by a diffuse glow coming from no particular direction. It was as if the air was glowing faintly.

Kurden headed for an inn across the avenue. He entered the hall and said to Arexis.

"Your troops can have food and shelter here while you and I have a long talk."

They left the guards and the trackers at the inn, while they followed the dwarf to a large, elaborately carved, portal that stood at one end of the avenue. The other end was lost in the distance. They soon reached the large marble door, where attendants ceremoniously bowed their heads to their leader.

The doors opened on their own accord. Kurden showed them in. The walls of the entrance hall of the palace were covered in intricately carved murals inlaid with precious gems. Lush wool carpets covered the floors. With a laugh Kurden said.

"Welcome to my humble abode."

Willowy female attendants escorted them to private quarters, while Arexis left with Kurden. Ludger followed the perfectly proportioned short woman leading him. She was dressed in a gauzy long dress, that showed tantalizing glimpses of her exquisite body.

They soon reached an exotically decorated room, all silk tapestry and deep cushions. In a corner Ludger's bags and equipment were neatly stored. The attendant closed the door behind her. She silently took his hand and dragged him behind a curtain leading to the bathroom.

In the middle of the room stood a veined marble tub filled with steamy, scented water. Behind it another houri, the exact duplicate of the one escorting him, stood naked. She was pouring some aromatic liquid into the water. The heat and the humidity in the room was stifling. Perspiration was beading on her forehead, her luscious body was slick with moisture.

Ludger's mind was in turmoil. Only a few minutes ago he was lost in a blizzard, slowly freezing to

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death, with all hopes lost. Now he was trust in a tale right out of the 1001 nights, though it was populated by miniature creatures of dream.

Unsure of what to do, he turned toward the girl who had brought him. He looked into her jet black eyes and before he could mouth a question, she put a finger to his lips and hushed him. She turned him around and gently pushed him to the edge of the tub. Her deft fingers attacked the unfamiliar fasteners of his clothes. Within seconds he was standing naked in front of the other girl. She stepped down into the tub and helped him into the scented water. The shock of the heat sapped his last reserve of energy. He clumsily sat down in the middle of the water.

The original houri shrugged her wispy clothes off and joined him in the water. She took a jar, carved out of vivid green stone, from the edge of the tub. She dipped her fingers in the warm salve and handed the jar to her counterpart, seated in front of Ludger. She started to rub his shoulders with a surprisingly strong touch. Amidst the moist heat, the fragrances and the sensuous massage, Ludger felt so relaxed that he could not consciously move a muscle. But -incredibly- at the same time, he had never felt so aroused. His rigid tumescence stood at attention, underwater. As the girl rubbing his shoulders grew nearer, he could feel the engorged bud of her nipples tickle his back.

Noticing his turgid member, the girl holding the jar, put it aside after taking a great moist glob of the salve. She rubbed it between her fingers. She pinched her quickly enlarging nipples, leaving traces of the ointment on their brown tips. She looked into Ludger's eyes and cracked a smile revealing her perfectly formed teeth. While holding her gaze she gently pushed him back onto her willing sister-in-pleasure, as she started to slowly massage his chest. As she drew nearer, and lower, Ludger found himself to be the meat in a voluptuous sandwich. Four hands, populated by a multitude of wonderfully dextrous digits were exploring every contours and apertures of his body. Soon his arousal reached its paroxysm. His release built slowly from the base of his spine and escalated, quickly building momentum, until it seared his brain with an outburst of passion verging on agony. As he laid, limp and lifeless, between the two warm and receptive girls, darkness slowly engulfed him amid muted giggles, tickles and nibbles.

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Ludger slowly came back to consciousness, not knowing exactly where he was. He was floating on a warm cloud, feeling utterly relaxed and vibrant with energy. He did not feel any of the small aches and pains normally associated with the human body. His first thought was that he was in heaven, floating on a cloud. He even, halfheartedly, grasped around him to see if he could find his harp. He felt strangely lyrical, this morning.

He soon remembered that he did not believe in the traditional views of heaven, as reality slowly crept back in. He finally recalled who he was and where he was. At the thought of his encounter with the twin houris, a wide grin enlightened his face.

He slowly opened his eyes. He found himself in the bedroom that Kurden had graciously offered. He was laying in a deep feather bed covered by a soft airy comforter. He yawned and stretched

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languorously. All in all the first leg of the quest had concluded very nicely. He was ready to face anything that would be thrown at him. As he completed his thought a young woman, dressed in a revealing outfit of shimmering silk that bared her midriff and displayed her pert bosom, entered the room.

He smiled and noted that nothing better could be thrown at him. She smiled back and handed him a long silk gown and a pair of slippers. He grudgingly slipped into the gold silk and donned the fur lined slippers. She escorted him to a warm room where his friends were lounging on silk pillows around a low table, dressed as he was. Kurden and Arexis were at one end of the long table. Ludger was led to a vacant group of pillows at the other end. Bacchus was at her usual place, dozing in front of a roaring fire. His dog's affinity for finding a roaring fire to lay in front, was amazing.

Ludger laid down and made himself comfortable. Kurden said in his deep voice.

"I hope you feel, humph..., relaxed."

Ludger, slightly blushing, replied.

"I thank you, Sir, for your hospitality. It is second to none." With a smile he continued. "I never have experienced such good, argh..., service. You had left me in very capable hands...."

With a wink Kurden said.

"I am glad you approved. My eldest twin daughters wanted to be the first to welcome a bona fide hero from another world, into our mountain commonwealth."

Ludger choked at the thought that this man would offer his daughters to strangers, but he did not want to offend this powerful man and his strange customs. As he was lost in a fit of coughing, the young woman that had escorted him, brought him a silver tankard full of soothing herbal tea. He gulped it, between coughs, as she was softly rubbing his back. He soon recovered and excused himself. Kurden continued.

"As I was telling your friends, before you joined us, the situation in the outside world is so critical that I have decided to help Prince Arexis in his quest. I will guide you myself, to the source of the river of Gods. Even though our powers are not derived from it, we would like to see its powers restored. I will also send a battalion of my best soldiers to help you in the upcoming war."

In a hoarse voice, Ludger asked.

"When will we be leaving?"

"Even though we will travel underground for part of the way, we will wait for the blizzard to abate before leaving. Thus, when we reach the upper course of the river, we will have good weather to travel. In my best estimate, we will leave in two to three days."

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Attendants brought in a sumptuous breakfast, into which the travellers dug in hungrily. After breakfast Kurden continued.

"My good friend Andrack, informed me that you have brought, with you, a wide assortment of metals from your world. After you rest for a few more hours, we will meet and discuss what I can forge for you, with the metals. Until then...."

The dwarf leader stood up, saluted with a nod and followed a scantily clad young attendant, with a leer on his face. They stepped behind a silken curtain. A slap and some hearty giggles were followed by the sound of running feet.

Ludger felt a small delicate hand on his shoulder. The young woman who had waken him begged him to follow her. He took the offered hand in his own and gladly did so. He was happy to notice that her expression did not suggest a period of rest. She lasciviously smiled as he was dragged back to his room by this surprisingly strong girl.

He judged that, even if she was no taller than a nine year old, she must be at least seventeen or eighteen years old and used to get her own way. As she closed the door behind her, she turned toward him. Leaning against the carved panel, she said.

"I am Leta, Kurden's youngest daughter. I was very disappointed when I lost to my twin sisters. Now I will have to do my best to catch up to them."

The young girl quickly wriggled out of her vaporous garment. She posed in front of him, showing off to their best advantage every inch of her trim, shapely body. The twin domes of her pert young breasts were tipped by wide budding nipples. They were a shade darker than her tawny skin. Her muscular abdomen was slightly raised in the centre. It was indented by the smallest of navels. She slightly parted her powerful thighs, showing him a glimpse of the thick, curly, black hair covering her hidden pleasure nest, as she slowly turned away. Her perfectly shaped back widened, at its base, to the tight globes of her buttocks. They were deeply dimpled at the side. As she finished her display, she looked at him deeply in the eyes and asked in a sweet little voice.

"Do you like what you see?"

Ludger, being mesmerized by those dark eyes, nervously coughed. A familiar stirring in his loins, tenting his golden garb, answered for him.

Leta looked down at his staff, pushing at the silken fabric. She beamed as she proudly said.

"It is obvious that you like what you see. Now it is time to put it to good use."

Ludger blushed at the boldness of the young woman. She slowly walked toward him and put her hands on his shoulders. Since the top of her head barely reached his chest, she had to crane her neck to look at his face. She grabbed his neck and pulled herself up by the strength of her arms, sliding her warm body

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against his, through the silk of his gown.

When her face reached the level of his own, she wrapped her powerful legs around his waist. She locked her delicate feet, together, in the small of his back and firmly anchored herself to him. She let go with her arms. She held herself solely by the strength of her legs. She reached behind her head and unpinned her silken black hair. She shook her head, daintily sending a cascade of raven coloured locks floating like a cloud around her delicately featured face.

Leta smiled again. Her hungry mouth grabbed his own and greedily bit his lips, then his tongue, in a lust filled passionate kiss. Ludger lost his balance and stepped backward. He hit the edge of the bed with the back of his knees. He collapsed backward into the deep softness of the feather mattress.

As he was falling back, Leta flew through the air, above him, executing a perfect somersault. She landed with the aplomb of a trained gymnast. The young woman giggled and came back at him with a vengeance. She grabbed his long robe and forcefully pulled it over his head. It landed on the floor by the bed. She clasped her thighs on either side of his head and lowered herself to his waiting face. What followed could only be described as a two hour long sexual workout. It was a very technical display of erotic prowess lacking warmth and affection. It reminded Ludger of the multitude of people studying the martial arts to learn a technical skill, without ever understanding the philosophy and the mind control behind it.

Even though all the right buttons were pushed and their bodies responded like well oiled machines (no pun intended), Ludger felt somewhat empty, laying spent on the soft mattress with Leta wrapped around him. He was basking in the afterglow of a particularly rousing final climax, when his mind started drifting to the image of a crying young redhead, who was waiting for the return of her brother in a faraway castle. Ludger angrily told himself that she disliked him, that she was not even his type. But he could not keep his mind from her, as he drifted into sleep.

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A sharp slap on his behind woke him up. A playful voice was saying.

"Come on, lover, we have to get cleaned up and dressed. We cannot make my father wait."

Leta was pulling him by the arm as he slowly stood up. His body was dully aching. It felt clammy, being covered in dried sweat and other bodily fluids. She dragged him into the shower and quickly cleaned him up and helped him into a clean silk robe. As she slipped back into her abbreviated clothes, she instructed him to fetch his bag of metals. After he did so, she dragged him down a series of corridors, to a large ornate door. She sharply knocked, opened the door and pushed him in, rapidly closing the door behind him.

Ludger stumbled into a small room, whose walls were covered with a panoply of edged weapons of all descriptions. Kurden was seated on a cushion, behind a low square table. It was the only piece of furniture in the room. On its exotic woods, inlaid top, rested an antique balance with an ornate set of

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weights.

The dwarf leader lifted his eyes from the leather bound grimoire that was laid out on his lap. He studied Ludger with his gaze. He pointed to a cushion at Ludger's feet and silently invited him to sit. He grinned, noticing how stiffly Ludger lowered himself to the cushions. With a twinkle in his eyes, he said.

"I notice that you have had a run-in with Leta. I am told that she has a tendency to sap all the strength, of even the most vigourous man."

Ludger blushed again and answered.

"I do not think that I have ever experienced such a vigourous workout. Are all your daughters so, humph..., athletic."

"No. Leta is the most quiet one of the lot."

Ludger digested this bit of information. For an instant he feared for his life. He quickly decided that there could be worse ways to go. He put the thought aside. He told Kurden.

"I have been asked to bring a variety of metals from my world. I do not think that there is much to be done with them. They are all so different and I do not have much of each of them."

"Young man, let me be the judge of that. As you know, our world is ruled by its magic. Anything in it must abide by its rules. Any mystical sword that I could forge from metals mined in this world could be a powerful weapon with no equals. But it still could fall prey to a high concentration of dark magic, like Magdar's supposedly controls.

Since the metals that you have brought me are not of this world, I can forge you a weapon that cannot be attacked by this world's magic. This will make it indestructible."

"I still do not understand how you can mix metals that cannot be alloyed in my world."

"As the ruler of this commonwealth, I am also the Grand Priest of our religion. Our god, Vulcan, reigns over the other minor deities. He his the patron of blacksmiths and of all those working with metal. He will help me in combining the metals in modifying what you would call the atomic structure of its different components. By this way we can achieve a composition that cannot be duplicated anywhere else in the universe."

The burly dwarf put aside the grimoire that was still open on his lap. He donned a pair of thick lensed, half spectacles. He looked at Ludger over their rim. He said with a tremulous voice.

"Now lets look at what you have brought me."

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Ludger took the long rolled-up leather pouch from his lap. He deposited it in front of him, on the table. He slowly started to unfold it. Kurden, rubbing his hands in anticipation, urged him to proceed faster.

When the large piece of leather was finally laid out, open on the table, Ludger took out the assorted pieces of metal from the pockets stitched into it. He laid them out on the leather and pushed the entire collection toward the waiting dwarf. He looked more like a kid than like a great leader.

Kurden passed his hands over the foreign metals, mumbling an incantation. His eyes were closed and his face was contorted in a mask of great concentration. He suddenly opened his eyes and said.

"We will be able to do great magic with these foreign treasures."

He took every scrap of metal and examined it carefully under the magnification of his spectacles. He rubbed a spot with his powerful thumb, lightly licked it, then placed it on his forehead. His eyes would close and a great tremor would shake his body.

When the tremor subsided he would open his eyes, put the bit of metal on the scales and weigh it carefully. He wrote the results of his inspection down on a wide sheet of parchment that was laid down in front of him. The metals were placed in three different piles. After he had finished examining all of the metals, Kurden took a deep breath and said.

"I am impressed by the subtle metallurgy of some of those alloys. They have made some of those metals very strong, without the aid of magic."

"This is the result of our technology." With a smile Ludger continued. "You should have a discussion with Andrack, about this subject, one of these days...."

Kurden looked up sharply at Ludger, then his eyes softened.

"I will be able to forge you a sword and a chainmail. If you already have a strong knife, I should be able to greatly improve it. Now we will discuss what kind of sword you wish."

The dwarf made a widely encompassing gesture with his arms. He pointed at the wide array of edged weapons hanging on the walls. Ludger examined the amazing collection with glee. He soon realized that no matter how exotic the blades looked, he was not trained in handling any of them. The only type of sword that he could use, with any hopes of proficiency, would be a samurai sword. It resembled the long bamboo staves (shinai) that they used in the sport of kendo, which he had practised for many years.

He explained his dilemma to the dwarf. Kurden invited him to describe, in every detail, what he was looking for. They spent the next hour designing the sword and the lightweight chainmail. Ludger described his modern version of the traditional kukri. Leta was called in to fetch the large, curved blade knife from Ludger's room.

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When she returned, Kurden examined it. He approved the design of the graceful, yet massively powerful blade. He put it with the smallest pile of metals. He turned to Ludger.

"You should go and meet with Andrack. He will instruct you in some relaxation exercises. They will enable you to clear your mind of any thoughts and to focus your inner soul to the magic of this world. Later, some of the girls will come and fetch you. They will prepare you for the purification of your soul, that will precede the forging of your weapons. We will start at sundown."

They were interrupted by a group of six priests, dressed in crimson robes. They were coming to fetch the metals to prepare them for the ceremonial meltdown. Kurden followed them out of the room. He carried the bundle of foreign metals. Leta gently tapped Ludger on the shoulder. It brought him back to reality. She escorted him to Andrack's room.

The tall, portly, wizard effusively greeted him. He handed Ludger a cup of wine. They sat comfortably, discussing the events of the last few days. When they finished their wine, Andrack took on a professorial tone and started to lecture him on the three stages of mystical meditation.

"First there is the emptying of the mind of all thoughts and emotions. Second, is the baring of ones soul from the confine of its outer protection. Third, is the filling of ones soul with the essence of the Gods and the magic of the earth.

Somebody trained in the magical arts, should be able to instantly attain step three, in any kind of situation and under any form of external or internal stress."

Andrack thought Ludger some meditation exercises to aid in the liberation of the soul. Ludger was able to reach step three without too much problems, in the quietness of the wizard's room. He had regularly indulged in similar exercises during his martial training. He would now have to work on attaining it rapidly under stressful situations. He would also have to maintain it under duress.

Andrack instructed him in a series of exercises that would help him attain this goal with daily repetitions and practice.

A discrete knock at the door interrupted Andrack's lecture. He answered it curtly. Six of Kurden's daughters, dressed in black silk robes, were there to bring Ludger to the purification ceremony, that was to precede the Holy Forging. Amongst them were Leta and the twins, looking demure in their long silk robes.

Ludger excused himself from Andrack. He followed his lovely escort. He was brought to a high ceiling room where hundreds of thick, aromatic candles, burned. The air was laden with powerful exotic smells. In the middle of the room was a series of five narrow pools. On each side of the four furthest pools, stood three young women also dressed in long silk robes. The colour of the robes ranged from crimson for the attendants of the closest pool, to cyan, yellow and white for the furthest. Stairs led into the first pool and out of the last. At the far end of the room was a wide portal closed by white silk drapes. A wide, low, altar stood at a distance of one of the sidewalls amongst the burning candles. As

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Ludger stood restless at the top of the stairs leading into the first pool, a discordant music suddenly echoed behind him. He turned to see an elderly dwarf priestess, garbed in a flowing white robe, walk into the room. She was carrying a white alabaster jar. Behind her a solemn looking young girl was carrying an imposing volume, bound in white leather. She was dressed like the elderly priestess, as were the young musicians following her.

The old woman put the alabaster jar on a white pedestal, that stood near the far end of the room. She slowly walked to the back of the altar, where she stood motionless. The young girl deposited the leather bound book in front of her and quickly removed herself. The musicians seated themselves in front of the altar while performing their strange melody.

With a flourish of hands the priestess opened the book and silenced the musicians. She took a deep breath. She then declaimed a prayer in a strange tongue as the music followed her halting speech pattern. She nodded toward the black clad girls surrounding Ludger. They quickly removed his silken gown. He stood there, naked in front of a room full of young women. He blushed in embarrassment.

Ludger and his escort walked slowly into the warm scented water. The water soaked their silk gowns, making them cling to their young, firm, bodies. They sat Ludger in the shallow pool. They lathered his hair and beard with a sweet smelling soap. He was instructed to swim through an underwater passage to the next pool.

He held his breath and swam the short distance. He was greeted by the crimson garbed young women. They lathered up his body and propelled him to the next pool. The women in blue trimmed his hair and beard. They also did his finger and toenails. All of this was accompanied by the eerie music and chant.

In the next pool, the young women in yellow silk anointed his hair and body in exotic oils. When he reached the last pool, some drops were placed in his eyes. They stung him for a few seconds. As he was led out of the pool, he admired the way the white silk clung to his young attendant's bodies, becoming translucent in the process.

He was vigorously dried with plush towels. His hair and his beard were combed. He was asked to kneel. The music and chants reached a crescendo, then suddenly died. The priestess stood in front of him. She held, high above her head, the alabaster jar. She chanted a last incantation while scooping a small amount of the balm with her long, fragile looking, fingers. She anointed his forehead, his lips and his chest, over his heart.

Ludger felt a burning sensation at her touch. It was as if a great amount of energy had flowed through him. When the pain subsided, he felt lightheaded. his soul felt cleansed of all the burdens of the world. He had never felt so fresh. He had just been reborned.

The young attendants draped his body in a gown similar to the one worn by the priestess. He stood up and white sandals were put upon his feet. The priestess motioned him past the milky silk curtain closing the portal.

He was greeted by an impressive sight. He stood at the top of an imposing staircase, leading down into

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a gigantic room. Coal fires were burning and imposing machines worked soundlessly. They were attended by strongly build dwarves, dressed in black leather pants and aprons.

In the middle of the milling throng, by the hearth of an imposing forge, stood Kurden. He finally noticed Ludger. He signalled him to come down and join him.

They were ready to start the proceedings. He waved at a burly dwarf, standing by a large gong. The man took a long mallet and crashed it on the large copper disk. A deafening sound reverberated through the room. In its aftermath, the room was strangely silent. A trumpet blew in another room. The six priests dressed in crimson walked into the room, two by two. Each pair was carrying a wicker basket between them. In each basket laid part of Ludger's metal collection.

They, in turn, dipped each basket in the water of a small stream flowing through the room. They emptied the content of the baskets in three waiting crucibles, that stood by a large open pit of red hot coals.

Some herbs and potions were thrown over the fire, making it flare deeply. The priests began a low chant while a group of smiths, using an overhead crane, lowered the crucibles into the hot coals. A crew of young dwarves, manning a large bellow, started to pump it rhythmically. The coals glowed white around the crucibles. Soon the various metals flowed into a uniform fluid mass.

Ludger, who stood by the fire near Kurden, was instructed to let the energy flow into his soul. He concentrated. He could feel an entity of amazing strength gently nudge into his consciousness. He felt the fire grow inside him. He was one with the planet.

One by one the crucibles were brought out of the fire. They were put in front of Ludger. Over each one, Kurden took Ludger's right hand. He held it firmly while a priest, holding a long thin needle, lanced the tip of Ludger's thumb. Kurden squeezed seven drops of blood into each crucible, while the priest mixed the blood with the molten metal using a ladle.

Their content was then poured into three waiting ingot moulds. Ludger came out of his trance, while the metal was cooling. Kurden took each ingot with a pair of long metal tongues. He quenched them in the water of the stream.

He took each ingot in his powerful hands, feeling the power flow through them. The priest blessed the three ingots. The lightest one was given to a waiting smith to be drawn into a long thin wire, to fabricate the mail. Ludger observed, as the ingot was softened in the coals. It was brought to a large machine consisting of drums, turning against one another. The softened ingot was passed between the drums and rolled into thick wire. That wire was continuously fed to a second machine where it was pulled through a die plate. It was thus drawn into a long, thin, wire that was spooled on the far end of that machine.

Kurden explained that this wire would be cut in short pieces that would be bent in small loops, that would be woven together and welded shut. This would form his chainmail. He gave the smaller ingot to

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another smith who would reforge his kukri. He took the larger ingot to his own forge and started on the sword.

He buried the ingot in the coals, with a large pair of pincers. He instructed the bellow crew to start pumping. When the metal was white hot, he pulled it out of the fire. With mighty blows of his hammer he elongated the piece over a large anvil. He briefly returned it to the coals then notched the middle. He sprinkled some flux on the metal's surface, folded it upon itself and hammered it back into a homogeneous mass. He repeated this procedure countless times. When he reached the requisite number of folds he hammered out a blade out of the ductile metal.

The hand of the master swordsmith quickly became a blur, when two of the priests joined him in a chant that was echoed from different areas of the large cave. The noise was deafening and sparks were flying everywhere. Ludger grew dizzy, watching Kurden work. After what seemed like hours, in the timeless glow of the forge, a rough outline of the sword had emerged from the ounce shapeless lump of metal.

He quenched the hot blank in the waters of the stream. He held it to the light and closely examined the metal surface for imperfections. He went to a large grinding wheel, that was turning, lapping at the river's water. He was accompanied by the two priests. Kurden ground a long bevelled edge along the length of the blade. He honed it to razor sharpness on a finer grit wheel. The sword was uniformly grey and dull, except for its sharp edge. Ludger had never seen any metal work like that. The round guard and handle had been forged, with the blade, out of the same piece of metal.

The only thing left to do was to polish the sword and to quench the blade. Kurden brought the sword to a large buffing wheel. He rubbed some polishing compound on its edge. He applied the sword to it. From the dull grey skin of the metal emerged a brightly shining smooth surface. Ludger noticed that the mirror-like blade was covered in inlaid gold runes. The guard had the glow of platinum. The handle was covered in a rubber-like substance similar to the one his kukri's had been.

Ludger looked at Kurden with wonder showing on his face, as the sword was handed to him. He could not believe its sheer beauty and its perfect balance. He was interrupted from his contemplation by the sight of the six priests carrying a large round platter, loaded with a mound of a substance looking like pure white tallow.

The greasy mess was dumped in a large shallow pot and heated over a flame. As it melted it released an acrid smoke that made Ludger's eyes water. Ludger was asked to get back in his trance. His left thumb was now lanced by the priest. Seven drops of his blood were mixed with the melted fat. It hissed and bubbled, then suddenly turned a deep crimson.

The fat was cooled down and mounded back on the large platter. A gigantic ceremonial bowl, holding a bed of glowing coals, was wheeled into the room and put in front of them. The six priests surrounded the tub. Accompanied by a flourish of trumpets they started a long incantation. Each one, in sequence, threw a small packet of powder on the coals, making them glow in a different colour.

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When they finished, Ludger plunged the sword into the coals. When the blade was glowing red hot, Ludger went back in his trance and grabbed the glowing blade with his bare hands. He did not feel the heat. He pulled it out of the coals. He raised the blade high above his head while being led through a prayer to Vulcan. Great bolts of energy were flowing through him, making his hair stand on end. He lowered the blade into the crimson mass. A great ball of flames engulfed him. He was feeling an intense bond forming between himself and the blade. When the flames subsided he stumbled and sat hard on the floor. He felt totally drained.

Later, when they were ready, the ceremony was performed again with the knife and the armour. During the last ceremony, with the armour, Ludger had spent so much energy, in the last few days, that he collapsed before the end. The abrupt termination of the mind-link with the Gods, created a backlash of energy, that engulfed Ludger with a cloud of glowing plasma. He laid on the ground, twitching violently, until the energy dissipated. His still form was carried back to his room under the worried eyes of Kurden and Andrack.

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Chapter 9

When Ludger woke up, he felt as weak as a newborn baby. His mind was so foggy that he had the impression of having slept for years. He tentatively stirred on the soft feather mattress.

From somewhere in the room he heard the patter of small feet on the tiled floor. He did not have the strength to open his eyes, to investigate the sound. He decided that it would be easier to sleep it off. He sighed and proceeded to do just that.

A few hours later he had a passing moment of lucidity, where he remembered the dark eyes of Leta, looking worriedly at him. The next day, when his mind finally crawled back out of unconsciousness, the first thing that he saw was a pair a dark eyes.

Thinking that they were Leta's he grinned and winked at her, mumbling an off-colour comment. As his mind cleared he realized that he was grinning like a lovesick puppy at Kurden. The dwarf was studying him, concern showing on his broad face.

When the dwarf decided that Ludger had recovered sufficiently, his face lit up and broke into a wide smile.

"I will take note," He said. "of what you suggested. But I can tell you right now that you are not my type.... Welcome back to the land of the living, my friend. You have scared us in the last few days. I did not think that you were so sensitive and such a powerful conduit for magic."

"What happened? How long have I been sleeping?" Ludger queried in a thin raspy voice.

"You collapsed after the last ceremony. So much magic flowed through you, and was amplified by you, that you were almost consumed by the backlash of energy when the magical connection with Vulcan was broken when you collapsed in total exhaustion."

Andrack, who was now standing behind the dwarf, said.

"It took all of my skills to bring back your mind from the void it had been thrown into."

"I was not aware of anything. It only felt like I was sleeping."

All of his friends visited him and inquired about his health. Bacchus came in with Dregnar. She nuzzled him while whimpering softly. Ludger spent a long time petting her soft fur, very glad to feel someone from his own world close to him.

A servant brought him a meal tray, that he shared with his dog. He was feeling homesick and depressed. His gloomy contemplation was interrupted by Andrack, who was coming to check on him. The wizard was holding a small silver flask. He offered it to Ludger.

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"This is a special tonic that will get you back on your feet overnight. We cannot delay our quest much longer. The blizzard should be lifting tomorrow. We must be on our way."

Ludger took the small flask from the wizard and unscrewed the cap. A pungent effluvium greeted his nostrils. With a frown, he said.

"I know that to be effective a medicine should taste bad. But this is ridiculous."

"Come on, drink up, you will feel like a new man tomorrow."

"I like the one that I am, now. I don't want to turn into Mr. Hyde."

Not comprehending the literary allusion, Andrack looked at him quizzically.

"Forget it." Ludger said. "Its a long story."

He pinched his nose and rapidly gulped down the content of the flask. The taste was not as bad as the smell, but it was still fairly potent. Soon a warm glow settled in his stomach. It rapidly started to spread. He grew tired. He fell back, in the bed, asleep before even hitting the pillows.

Andrack recuperated his flask and recorked it. With the help of Leta, who had just come in, he gently tucked Ludger in his bed.

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The next morning, Ludger woke up early and felt so full of energy that he thought he could take on Magdar single handedly. After a quick shower he dressed in his own clothes. He went into the corridor in search of Kurden. He found the dwarf checking on the horses, making sure they were saddled and packed properly. He warmly greeted Ludger and urged him to join the others for breakfast.

After a hearty meal, Ludger was brought to a small room to meet one of the priests. This man would present him with his magic weapons. After a short chant, the priest anointed Ludger's forehead with a scented balm. He ceremoniously gave him his sword, knife and chainmail.

Kurden joined them to instruct Ludger into the proper wear of the lightweight mail. The pliable metal mesh was of a soft golden hue. It was of light weight, like aluminium, and felt like a soft, thick, airy fabric. It was cut like a long tunic, reaching bellow the knees, with three-quarter length sleeves and an attached hood.

Ludger slipped on the strange garment. It fitted him perfectly. He voiced his concern to Kurden, that he was not able to reach into the many pockets of his vest and pants. The dwarf leader showed him how to remodel his garment to open up for him, at any place that he wished. With a bit of meditation and the judicious use of his fingernails, the mail would open up, only for him, like hook and loop fasteners. He was also showed how to gather the garment in a seam between his legs and to split that seam to form a

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pair of riding britches.

The chainmail would react to any outside force with a counterforce that was proportional, thus preventing any harm to the wearer. In simple terms, the harder you pushed on it, the harder it would become. This newfangled armour was completed by a pair of thin, leather palmed, metal meshed, gloves and knee-high boots of subtle leather, in which were sewn thin strips of metal to protect legs and feet.

Ludger buckled his heavy gunbelt around his hips, slung his new sword over his shoulder and tied the scabbard of his kukri sideways to the back of his gunbelt, so that the handle could be easily reached by his right hand.

He pulled the tight fitting hood over his head. After donning the light gloves, he practised drawing his sword until it smoothly flowed into his hands. The sword could detect black magic and made its presence known to Ludger, by a subtle vibration of its handle.

Ludger looked at himself in a tall looking glass. He burst out laughing. In his exotic get-up, he cut a dashing figure. He looked like a cross between a Samurai warrior, Robin Hood and Rambo. He profusely thanked the priest and Kurden for his sensational new weapons. He rejoined Arexis and the others, who were ready to go. His arrival created quite a commotion. Andrack said in a booming voice.

"Now you finally look the part of the mythical hero."

Arexis added.

"I am sure that with a dashing warrior like you, we will prevail in our quest."

Not being sure if they were serious or making fun of him, Ludger said in a hurt tone.

"Its easy for you to say, but I feel foolish dressed in this carnival outfit."

Dregnar replied, apologetically.

"Master Ludger, do not listen to them. You do look like a hero and Bacchus and I will serve you faithfully."

Hearing her name, Bacchus barked to emphasize the point.

"I am touched by your feelings, but would you please stop calling me Master Ludger."

"If you desire so..., Master Ludger."

Frustrated, Ludger walked away amidst the laughter of his companions. The ranks of the Prince's guards had been augmented by ten or so dwarf soldiers leading solidly built small horses. Ludger bid

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farewell to Leta and her sisters, who stood in the palace's courtyard tears in their eyes. He kissed each of the girls on the forehead and thanked them for their hospitality. To Leta, he gave a small photograph of him and his dog standing in front of his house. He said in a soft voice.

"I will always cherish the memory of you. Our paths must sadly part, but for the short time they were together you made this alien world a better place for me. Goodbye...."

Ludger embraced the young girl and sombrely walked to his waiting horses. Kurden gave the signal to depart. They slowly led their horses out of the gates and down the main avenue. Ludger felt a little nervous. The previous day, Dregnar had told him stories about cave ghouls, that haunted the long abandoned mining tunnels. Through mimicry they could lure unsuspecting travellers from their parties, to steal their lifeblood.

The tunnels, that they would follow were a veritable maze. But the dwarves had an uncanny sense of direction, that would never lead them astray in their underground forays. This closeness with the earth's forces was the source of their magic and of their incredible success in prospecting for metal ore.

As they walked through the large underground city, Ludger noticed groups of dwarves, assembled around large fire pits, singing, drinking strong ale and swapping stories of daring do's. Obviously stories travelled fast because he heard the highly embellished tales of an alien warrior killing bandybears and kraken with a thunderstick. As he was recognized, he was cheered-on by the jovial dwarves. Ludger caught up with Andrack. He inquired.

"How good is our chances of retrieving the sceptre? Is it protected by magic or physical obstacles?"

"I am cautiously optimistic. The king must always make the pilgrimage to the Source. It is rendered more complicated by the length of time since Bluthor's demise and the drying up of the river, which reduces the magic. But if we get Arexis to the Source he should have no problems in proving himself. As for most of the obstacles I am pretty sure that they are mostly physical. But the magic of the guardian would prevent any unworthy man to take possession of the sceptre. It would cause the man to hallucinate. As the poor soul wanders through the corridors of the Source, seeing visions of paradise, he would finally die of total exhaustion."

Ludger thought that this form of deception was a very effective way of guarding an area. His house was protected by a similar field operating on fear. He had already experience its effectiveness.

They soon left the city behind them. As the diffuse lights of the city somewhat faded, they reached the opening of a small narrow corridor. Kurden called a halt. He double checked that everybody was accounted for. Without a word he dove into the darkness. Their larger horses barely squeezed through the opening. They lit torches and followed one by one. The tunnel quickly widened and permitted more comfortable progress. Ludger was near the back of the party. His torch was smoking badly, giving a flickering, orange light. Occasionally the dim light would reveal the opening of a side tunnel.

After four hours of monotonous progression, they entered a large cavern whose walls were covered in

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crystals of all colours. The light from the torches was caught and amplified in a stunning kaleidoscope of coloured patterns.

Kurden called for a short rest. He told Arexis that they were the first strangers to witness the Cave of Crystals. They recuperated for twenty minutes, watching with awe the never repeating spectacle of lights. When they were ready to continue, Kurden warned them to stay close to each other. The path ahead was very complicated until they exited near the river of Gods.

As the hours passed, the men and the horses grew restless from the wearisome monotony of the underground leg of the trip. Ludger's pack horse slipped. When he struggled back to its hooves it favoured one of its hind legs. Ludger stopped to investigate the problem. He jammed his torch between two rocks. He grabbed the offending hoof between his knees and found a small rock lodged under the horse's shoe.

While keeping an eye on the lights of the moving column, he quickly dislodged the offending rock. As he started moving, he just lost sight of the trailing man's torch around a bend of the tunnel. He picked up his pace and as he rounded the next bend, he saw the flickering light of the tail man. He let out a sigh of relief. He urged Bacchus to move faster and they were soon catching up with the light. Ahead, the light suddenly stopped moving. They had probably stopped to let Ludger catch up.

The tunnel opened up into a large cave, lit by an eerie glow. The sight that greeted him, when he entered the cave, crushed the breath right out of his chest. There was no men, no dwarves, no horses and no torches. In the middle of the room stood three ghostly creatures made of rotten flesh. They had cheekless grins on their faces. They were looking at him through lidless eyes, like a starving man looks at a feast that faith just invited him by mistake. After what felt like a century, Ludger willed himself to breathe again. He ordered Bacchus not to get close to the creatures, not that she seemed anxious to approach them.

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When Kurden called a much needed halt in a spacious cave, everybody was relieved. Soon the light banter of the men was chilled by the discovery that Ludger and his dog were missing. Nobody had noticed before. No clues on how long he had left the group could be garnered. The only sure thing was that he was still with them in the Cavern of Crystals.

Kurden decided to backtrack, with a few of his men. Since time was of the essence, it was agreed that the party would proceed under the guidance of one of his sons. After a short rest Kurden bid them farewell and started to retrace their steps.

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Ludger slowly advanced toward the cave ghouls, trying to figure out what to do. He could not turn and run. This would leave his horses to certain death. He did not think that his bullets could do much damage to a creature that was already dead. He pulled his hood over his head and donned his gloves,

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that were tucked away in his belt.

He did not relish hand to hand combat but he could not see any other way. As he was mulling this over, he felt an insistent throbbing coming from his sword. He unconsciously drew the blade. He lashed at the closest creature. An unearthly screech rose from its lipless mouth, as its arm, severed at the shoulder, fell limply to the ground. The other two ghouls rushed him in unison. He barely contained their attack. From the corner of his eyes he noticed two new ghouls entering the cave. He started to seriously doubt the issue of the combat. His mind was reeling amidst the screeches of the creatures, the neighs of the nervous horses and the barks of his dog. As the fight progressed, his handling of the sword was becoming more effective, as he increased his concentration. He was becoming more confident by the minute when suddenly, as he was backing up, a strong hand gripped his ankle and tripped him.

As he was laying down on the ground, he looked down in horror at the disembodied hand grabbing his ankle. He shook it off and before he could get back on his feet, one of the ghouls was upon him. The foul stench of rotting flesh emanating from the creature was choking him. He prepared himself to die. He heard a vicious growl coming from Bacchus and the angry dog lunged, head first, at the creature. It lost its balance long enough for Ludger to regain his footing.

The creature brushed the dog aside as if she was weightless. It returned its attention to Ludger. Bacchus, not to be undone, jumped at the ghoul's leg and came away with a thigh bone as a trophy. The ghastly creature collapsed to the ground, but it kept crawling toward Ludger. Bacchus was wagging her tail in triumph. Two new creatures rushed Ludger. He counterattacked with renewed vigour, seeing that it was his only chance at survival. For a moment he appeared to gain the upper hand. During a lull in the battle the ghouls regrouped and attacked as one. As he was retreating, Ludger felt a presence behind him. He quickly stole a glance over his shoulder. One of the ghouls, entirely missing his head with no apparent ill effect, stood there ready to grab him. At the last second it fell stiffly to the ground.

Startled by the sudden turn of events, Ludger quickly regained his countenance and attacked. From the entrance he heard the familiar voice of Dregnar yelling at him.

"You have to first behead them, then crack open their skulls and burn its content."

Ludger did not know what to make of the troll's presence. But the sight of him with a lit torch and a dwarf's war hammer was very welcome. A strange combat followed. Ludger would behead one of the ghouls. Its headless body would keep coming at him until Dregnar would crack its skull open with a sickening blow of his hammer. He would then set the pulpy green content of the mashed skull, ablaze with his torch. Only then the body would collapse.

After another twenty minutes of this macabre dance of death, Ludger and the troll were sitting, panting, on a rock overlooking the disgusting mess left by the battle. Bacchus was howling, which was uncharacteristic of her. She still was clutching the long femur that she had captured, between her front paws. After a while things quieted down. They heard Ludger's horses return to the cave. Dregnar explained.

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"I noticed that you were gone. Without alerting the others I started to search for you. I followed the trail of scents left by the horses and dog. I am glad to have found you, Ludger, at such an opportune moment."

"I am also glad that you did. You are a loyal friend, Dregnar. I thank you."

After a few minutes of backslapping and giddiness, a doubt crept in Ludger's mind. Did the others know that they were gone? Would Dregnar be able to guide them out of the mountain? As they realized that they were hopelessly lost in the cavernous maze, a joyful booming voice startled them.

"Why do you looked so gloomy?"

They turned as one and saw Kurden, with three other dwarves, enter the cave. The dwarf-leader laughingly said.

"It does not look like you need our help in defeating a roving band of cave ghouls. I am sorry that we worried about you."

After a few heartfelt greeting he continued.

"The others should be by the river by now. We should hurry to join them."

After convincing the horses to cross the cave, they exited by a side tunnel. They made rapid progress, stopping only for short rests. By early evening they were out of the mountain, on a promontory overlooking the once mighty river of Gods. Its narrow bed now lazily went its serpentine way between the mountains. There was enough room to move upriver beside the river, on the dried up portion of the bed. They would not need to follow narrow mountain trails.

Ludger, for one, was happy to be out of the tunnels, where the dwarves seemed to be so comfortable. About half an hour away they could see, by the river, the firelights of the Prince's camp. From this high vantage point Ludger decided to radio Chargo, as it was their appointed time. They told him that all was well and to expect the arrival of a battalion of dwarf soldiers. The general promised to relay the good news to Nathalia, at the palace.

After a few more minutes of breathing the crisp mountain air, they slowly made their way down to their friends, who were anxiously waiting for them. One of Army's men, on the lookout, quickly spotted them. He spread the news of their imminent arrival.

The tantalizing aroma of food on the grill reached them first, the camp was still hidden by a low knoll. Ludger realized how hungry he really was. They were greeted back to the camp by songs of joy and full wineskins. They sat down to eat by the large fire. While they revelled in Dregnar's embellished recounting of their heroic battle against the cave ghouls, Ludger quietly sat in the shadow of Andrack's large bulk, lost in his own thoughts.

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"What is wrong?" Whispered the wizard.

"Oh..., nothing. I was just thinking."

"You can tell me about your problems. I am only here to help you."

"I know, but it is not a problem. Its just that I feel closer to you, and the rest of these people, than anybody I knew back in my own world. Also, despite the discomforts, the attacks and all..., I feel so comfortable in this world. Is there something wrong with me?"

"Do not worry, this is why you were chosen by the magic of my spell. You are very compatible with the magic of this world."

Startled, Ludger replied.

"Do you mean that I could perform some magic myself?"

"You have already done so, without knowing, during the forging ceremony. But it almost killed you. To become a practitioner you must devote your life to the art and make the conscious decision of staying in this world permanently."

Ludger fell back into silence. He was torn by inner turmoils. Andrack left him alone, sensing that Ludger needed to work it out by himself. Late in the night the songs finally died down and the men retired to the tents for the nights. Ludger packed the snow, in an area slightly away from the fire. He unrolled his ground mat and bundled up in his mummy bag. He laid back, looking up at the stars, lost in deep thoughts. After a while his thoughts drifted to green eyes and a certain feisty red head.

At the thought of this challenging person, he told himself.

"I singlehandedly fought draken, bandybear and cave ghouls. I should be able to conquer the heart of one person, however rebellious she might be."

He fell into a deep slumber, with a smile on his face.

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Ludger awoke to the smell of breakfast cooking. He saw that the suns were already high in the sky. He was surprised that he had slept for so long. Bacchus was still asleep by the fire.

Andrack came to him, carrying a mug of strong herbal tea. Ludger queried.

"How come nobody woke me up earlier? I could have helped with the morning chores."

The white haired man answered.

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"You needed you rest after yesterday's events. We have still a few long days ahead of us. I thought it best for you."

Andrack left him to his morning ablutions. Soon after breakfast they broke camp. They started their slow trek upstream. At least they could now ride their horses, but progress was painfully slow. The dried up bed of the river was filled with polished rocks covered in ice and snow. They made the horse's footing precarious.

Large snowflakes started to fall. The men turned up the collars of their travelling cloaks. Ludger put on an insulated, Gore-Tex® lined parka over his chainmail. He shivered at the thought of what laid ahead.

By mid-afternoon the wind had picked up. The snow was falling heavily, blinding the men. It made their advance more hazardous. They had just decided to make camp for the night, under a large protecting overhang, when - coming at their flank - a band of dark riders attacked them.

Kurden and his men, who were leading the group, doubled back. They jumped in the battle with their war-hammers high over their heads. Once the initial surprise had passed, they counterattacked in a frenzy. They were not quick enough to prevent two of the Prince's guards to perish by the swords of the black riders.

Ludger grabbed his rifle and took a clear shot at a man who was about to skewer Andrack from behind. The startled old man did not know what had happened. Ludger was happy that his mount had not thrown him at the loud report from the gun. He could not risk firing again, due to the close quarters of the fight. The heavy snow accentuated the confusion. He holstered the G3, drew his sword and joined the melee. He was confronted by a large man with an evil grin in his face. He seemed to be the leader of the band. The man lunged at him with a heavy battle axe. Ludger deflected the blow with the sword. Sparks flew and the impact stung his right hand. The axe glanced off his left shoulder. His shoulder felt numb. Being off balanced, he had great difficulty holding on to his saddle.

He was lucky to be riding a well trained battle horse. The horse had pivoted and disengaged his opponent, permitting Ludger to regain his balance. He pulled his hood on, not wanting to loose his head in the battle. He cleared his mind and concentrated on his sword. He turned his horse around with his knees and attacked the man with uncontrollable fury. With his sword windmilling around him, he quickly gained the upper hand. He was amazed when his thin blade sliced through his opponent's massive axe, as if it was butter. With a swift pass he slit the man's throat. The man with unfathomable hatred in his eyes, slid slowly from his saddle.

Ludger turned his horse around, looking for another adversary. Dregnar had fallen from his horse. He was cornered by a laughing man. Ludger spurred his mount and rode to his defense. As he passed them, he dealt a killing blow to the man. Without stopping he went to Arexis, who was dealing with one of the last raiders.

His attack created enough of a diversion to open the man's guard to the Prince. Arexis dealt him a quick

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thrust with his sword. As the man fell, his horse stumbled, landing on Ludger, who was unhorsed in the process. As he rolled on the ground he saw with horror, out of the corner of his eye, the right front hoof of the spooked horse, coming toward his head with the speed and power of a freight train. His head collided with the hoof, or vice-versa, and all went black.

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Ludger quickly regained consciousness with a numbness in his shoulder and a ringing pain in his head. A lot of drawn faces were looking at him. For a few second he had to fight to recognize them. His mind soon cleared to the happy relief of his friends. Arexis extended his hand, helping him back to his feet. Kurden offered him a skin full of strong brandy. Ludger let out a long stream of the potent liquid into his mouth. The brandy burned his throat as he swallowed, putting back a needed vigour in his soul.

Ludger learned that the battle had quickly ended, due to lack of foes. As they made camp he was saddened that three of the Prince's guards had not survived the attack. All the raiders, bar one, had perished. This survivor later perished from his wounds. But not before telling them that they had been a band of mercenaries, hired by Magdar, to prevent them to finish their quest. The man's last word were.

"Beware of the giant rock troll."

The camp was silent that evening as the men mourned their lost friends. Trackers had been sent, ahead and back, they would report later in the evening. Ludger was surprised by the effectiveness of his lightweight armour. His parka had been ripped to shreds by the numerous blows he had suffered. But he had not suffered any ill effects, except for a stiff shoulder and a mild headache.

When the trackers returned, Ludger joined Arexis and Andrack by the fire. The men who had backtracked had disposed of an advanced patrol of dark elves. By their conversation the had found that the main body of a large force was following, about two days back.

The group who had gone ahead advised that they were about half a day's forced march from the source of the river. The side pass, from which they had been attacked, was now empty. No signs of other raiders were presents.

After a short deliberation it was decided that since they could not backtrack to face the black elves, they had to reach the Source, retrieve the sceptre and be back to the side pass, before the black elves reached that point.

After a short rest and meal they would leave quickly and march overnight. Luckily the weather had cleared up and their progress would be lit by the full moon.

They would try to return by tomorrow afternoon, at the latest. Thus giving themselves only half a day head start, up the side pass, ahead of the dark elves.

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Chapter 10

By the middle of the cold moonlit night Kellor, one of the trackers that was still ahead, came back to report. He had news of a gigantic rock troll, waiting by the source of the river. He was by a large mound of rocks, on an escarpment overlooking the Source. From this position he could hurl the rocks down on unsuspecting riders. He effectively blocked the access to the Source.

Ludger asked.

"How close could I get to the troll, without being discovered?"

Kellor answered.

"By climbing up on a ridge, in the deep snow, you should be able to get within four to five hundred yards. But the going would be difficult and I do not know what you could do from such a distance."

"You only have to get me there. Let me worry about what I will do."

Ludger went to his pack horse. He took out a pair of white coveralls. He put them on over his winter clothing. He unhitched a long, padded, leather bag from his pack saddle. He removed from it the parts of his fifty calibre semi-automatic sniping rifle. The large gun was based on the .50 calibre round of the M2 HMG. It was effective to ranges of up to about one mile. He assembled the long, heavy rifle and wrapped it in a band of white elasticized cloth. He loaded two magazines with five of the large shells, apiece. He pulled a white balaclava over his head and put some white covers over his boots. He stepped on a pair of snow shoes and fastened the bindings. He hefted the heavy rifle, by its shoulder harness, to his back.

He looked at the tracker, who was gawking at him, with astonishment showing on his face. He said to the tall lanky man.

"Lead me to the beast so that I can slay it."

Ludger felt like a medieval knight going after the fabled Dragon. Only the Damsel-in-Distress was missing. Deep down he hoped that the large rifle was enough gun to dispose of the rock troll. Never having seen such a creature before, he somewhat doubted it.

He followed his guide for over an hour. Ludger was amazed at the man's endurance through the deep snow. They finally reached the bottom of a long sloping ridge. They started the arduous climb up its side. When they approached the crest of the ridge, Kellor went prone. He slowly crept to the edge. Ludger quickly followed suit. He was rewarded by a magnificent sight.

The two sheer faces of the canyon, bordering the bed of the river, widened around a circular pool. They ended abruptly at a large vertical wall of colossal dimensions. The pool, at the base of the wall, was

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over the underground source of the river. In the bright moonlight he could see, to the right of the pool, a small plateau. It was below their level, but still a few hundred feet over the level of the pool. On the plateau was a large pile of boulders. Coming from down river, anybody would be at the mercy of an avalanche of rocks, created by somebody standing guard on that ridge.

Ludger asked Kellor the location of the troll. The scout pointed to a large ponderous black shape that stood near the boulders. Ludger thought it was a large rock. Then the rock slowly moved away.

He pulled out a small pair of rubber clad binoculars from under his chainmail. He studied closely the ungainly creature. He estimated its mass to be similar to that of a bull elephant. He had not expected it to be so large. It looked like a rough hewed snowman with massive limbs made of stone. It stood at a distance that he estimated at about four hundred and fifty yards.

Ludger slid back under the crest of the ridge. Kellor whispered to him.

"This rock troll is over twice the size of the norm. They are solitary creatures that live high in the mountains. You normally do not see them at these elevations. They are placid creatures that do not have the aggressiveness of the other troll species. This one seems very restless, as if forced by some outside force to stand guard on the Source."

Ludger acquiesced silently. He looked back down the ridge to see if the group was closing up. They were about half a mile back and riding slowly. He unslung his rifle and inserted a loaded magazine. He cycled the action, chambering a round in the process. He handed to the tracker a pair of soft foam earplugs and instructed him in their use. He put on his own pair of sound deadening earmuffs. He unfolded the rifle's bipod and laid prone on a flat area of ground hastily cleared of soft snow. He spread his legs widely to stabilize himself, in the process bracing his body for the heavy recoil.

After adjusting the ballistic compensator of the high power scope, he carefully took aim at the colossus. He set the trigger and released the safety. When he was sure of his aim, he took a few deep breaths and slowly released them. On the last one he stopped exhaling. After his last muscle tremor died down, he slowly squeezed the last bit of travel from the trigger.

The sound of the shot was deafening, even heard through the hearing protectors. The recoil numbed his shoulder and cheek. As he recovered he followed his first shot by a second, then a third, as the troll sluggishly fell forward and slowly started to roll down the hill. The violent release of gases was dispersed by the muzzle brake of the gun, raising an imposing cloud of snow. Their view was obscured for a few long minutes.

When it cleared up, Ludger shouldered his heavy gun, after making it safe. He jumped over the crest of the hill and ran down, then slid in the snow until he reached the giant rock troll, to make sure of the kill. Kellor followed at a safe distance. Ludger's fears were unfounded because the first bullet had severed the massive creature's spine, leaving its still form lifeless. They heard the sound of the troops coming toward them at a gallop. They circled around the two men, standing by their quarry, then dismounted.

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They stared in silence at the leathery bulk of the giant troll. Its hide resembled a cracked rock face. Arexis broke the silence.

"I am glad that you were with us. I do not know how my men could have disposed of such a creature. Especially in the strategic position it was. Thank you."

"You're welcome, but I'm only doing the job you brought me here for."

"We will set a day camp and start exploring the area to find a way past this stone wall. We have to get behind in it some way."

Ludger looked at the rippling surface of the pool. He quickly ruled out an underwater foray. The current was too swift and they were not properly equipped.

At the first light of the suns, one of Army's men found an opening in the vertical wall, about two hundred feet above the circular pool. They soon realized that it was the only way in. Ludger decided that with modern climbing equipment and techniques, he could easily reach the opening. There, he could secure himself so that Arexis could follow with ascendeurs on a rope.

He filled two packs with the equipment that they might need. He carried them to the base of the wall. He studied the vertical rock face. There were enough cracks and finger holds to make the climb fairly basic. He would climb to a belay point about half way up to the opening. From there he would haul up the bags and belay Arexis as he followed.

Ludger stripped to his chainmail. The bulky sweater and vest, underneath would keep him warm enough. He removed his boots and stowed them in one of the bags. He put on a pair of light friction boots, their sticky soles of special rubber would help him climb. He stowed his heavy gun belt with the equipment. He fastened a sitting harness around his waist and slung over his shoulder a bandolier laden with karabiners, assorted runners, Friends, tape slings and pegs. He tied onto the end of one of the ropes with a bowline. Arexis would belay him from the ground.

Ludger instructed the Prince on the use of the ascendeurs, those mechanical devices that enables a climber to pull himself up a fixed rope. Due to his natural athletic abilities, Arexis had no problems with the technique.

Ludger put some chalk on his fingers, from a small pouch hanging from his belt. He started climbing. The going was fairly straightforward. As he progressed, Ludger placed runners at regular intervals and clipped his rope on the karabiners as he went by. When he reached the belay point he had chosen, he anchored himself solidly on a Friend that he had wedged into a wide crack in the rock. He doubled up on a peg that he had hammered in a narrower crack. He secured the second rope that he had carried up with him. He uncoiled it to a waiting Arexis. With it he hauled up the two packs of equipment. He secured them beside him.

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The men bellow were amazed at how easy the climb was going. Arexis began his climb on the anchored rope while Ludger was belaying him with the other one. He alternately slid the ascendeurs on the rope, while stepping in the tape etriers attached to them. Every time he reached a runner, the Prince would retrieve it. He soon reached Ludger. Arexis smiled while panting slightly. Ludger said.

"I will now climb the rest of the way. You will belay me from here. Once on top I will make the area secure and make sure no bad surprises awaits us. Then you will follow."

Arexis acknowledged. Ludger took his sword, that was hanging on one of the packs, and slung it over his shoulders. He quickly climbed to an area just bellow the opening. He anchored himself there. He got a good handhold at the edge of the opening and hoisted himself up. As his head cleared the edge, he was face to face with the most hideous creature he had ever seen.

It had a puggy nose, long pointed ears, small dark eyes and a large mouth, full of an incredible assortment of mismatched teeth. The drooling, stinking creature opened a pair of long leather wings. It was a giant bat the size of a large dog. Ludger instinctively drew his sword, while hanging precariously by one hand. He lashed at the bat. The creature rushed him, but its wing being in the way, it tripped and impaled itself on Ludger's upthrust sword. Ludger scrambled up and rolled on the floor of the cave. He retrieved his sword from the bat's carcass and cleaned it. He made sure no other creatures were present. The dark cave was empty. He sheathed his sword, went to the mouth of the cave and waved to a worried Arexis that all was right. He hoisted the packs to the cave. Soon the Prince joined him.

Arexis shuddered when he saw the giant bat. The hand of Magdar was in this. They dragged the dead creature to the mouth of the cave and threw it over the edge. It plummeted into the circular pool and landed with a great splash of water. Worried men standing by the water were relieved when they discovered that it was not either men that had fallen.

After a short rest they stowed the climbing equipment in the bags. Ludger put back on his boots and buckled his gun belt around his hips. They shouldered their packs and went to the far end of the cave. An irregular opening was present. Ludger turned on a powerful seven cells torch and peered into the tunnel. Nothing out of the ordinary was revealed.

After they had passed through the opening, they were startled by a loud crashing noise, behind them. A large rock was now blocking their retreat. After a short moment of despair, they walked down the tunnel, resigned that it was the only way to go.

Ludger looked back and saw a faint golden glow coming from the centre of the rock. He shook his head and proceeded forward.

After half an hour of progress down the convoluted narrow corridor, Ludger -who was leading- saw the light of his electric torch reflected back to him from the far end of a long, abnormally straight part of the tunnel. They slowly approached the area. They emerged in a large chamber filled with mirrors forming a complicated maze, reflecting their image ad infinitum.

After exploring the hall of mirrors for over ten minutes, Ludger turned off his torch to rest his

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overloaded vision. In the darkness Ludger noticed a faded golden glow like he had seen earlier. He pointed it out to Arexis. The Prince could not see it. In the dark, Ludger fumbled for Arexis' wrist. He led him toward the light. They slowly made their way through the maze of mirrors to arrive at a section that was glowing brightly, but only to Ludger's senses. Even with his eyes closed he could feel the glow. He wondered why Arexis could not see it.

He lit his torch. They were in a section of the maze that was undistinguishable from any other. He turned off the light and the glow was still present. He approached the mirror panel and passed his hand over it. He felt a faint throbbing and an aura of power filled him. With his hand still on the panel, he touched the handle of his sword. It was not throbbing. This ruled out black magic as the source of the manifestation.

Arexis touched the panel. the only thing he could feel was the cold hard mirror. Ludger lit the torch. He tried to find a way to open or remove the panel, to no avail. He took his climbing hammer and hit the mirror dead centre with a powerful blow. It rang, clear as a bell, for a long time. Not even a scratch was made on its smooth surface.

"It must be magic." Arexis said.

Following this train of thoughts, Ludger drew his sword. He put its point on the mirror. The sword never made contact with it. It penetrated the surface as if it was not there. He slowly advanced, his hand then his arm went through the solid surface. A strange tingling sensation filled him. He grabbed Arexis by the wrist and pulled him after him.

On the other side of the mirror, they found themselves in a long, well lit corridor of marble. Pedestals with sculpted busts of men lined both walls. Arranged in chronological order, Arexis recognized in them all of his ancestors, the former Kings of the nation. They walked slowly through the corridor, as Arexis pointed salient facts about one or the other of his long dead relatives. They came to a stop in front of the last bust, that of King Bluthor, Arexis' father. There was a long line of vacant pedestals past that point.

Arexis spent a solemn moment in front of his father's effigies. He then silently walked away to the far end of the corridor. When they reached it he told Ludger.

"This was the Hall of the Kings. This is where the river of Gods takes its power and wisdom. It is supposed to be a mythical place, but we now stand in it. The more powerful the river flowed, the more prosperous the kingdom was."

They emerged from the hall into a large room magnificently decorated with tapestries depicting historic scenes. Arexis pointed to the first battle, after which Magdar was imprisoned and to the final confrontation where Bluthor lost his life. This room lacked the aura of power that they had felt in the hall of the Kings. It seemed somewhat drab and dusty amidst all its splendour, as if the source of its powers was missing. In the back of the room an intricately carved throne stood on a dais. On its seat was an embroidered cushion on which laid an elaborately carved sceptre inlaid with precious gems. On

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its tip, in the middle of a large volute of gold, stood the biggest emerald that Ludger had ever seen.

As they approached the throne, a creature that was the epitome of ugliness, with long fangs, drooly toothless mouth, open pustules, deformed bloated features, long claws and slimy limbs stepped out from behind. To Ludger it seemed to be a composite of everything that could be ugly and disgusting on a human frame. The revolting creature approached them without any signs of hostility. As it came near them it shrivelled and deflated to the shape of a white haired, ascetic looking old man. He slightly bowed his head to Arexis and said in a frail voice.

"Welcome, Your Highness, my name is Trallen. I have been waiting for you. This cave and its content are only an illusion. Would you please follow me?"

As the ornate walls dissolved to bare rock, Trallen turned and left the room by a hidden passage, without looking back. Ludger and Arexis scrambled to follow him. They were in a narrow corridor, with a lot of ninety degrees bends. After one last turn, it suddenly opened into a natural grotto. In its centre, illuminated by a shaft of light coming from a chimney carved in the ceiling, stood a large rock crystal with rainbows dancing through it. On it, laid a small gold wand. It was soberly carved and a small fragment of the crystal was embedded at one end.

Trallen stopped in front of it. He cleared his throat, startling Ludger and Arexis who were engrossed in the contemplation of the changing patterns of colours in the crystal. He said in a soft clear voice.

"This is the a seat of the King's power over the land. You are in a living mountain. This is the real Hall of the Kings."

As he said that, they saw on the rock wall, the faces of the old Kings carved in it. Past the likeness of Bluthor was an oval, in the rock, that was throbbing and glowing with an inner light.

Ludger asked about the ornate sceptre in the other room. Trallen answered.

"It was just an illusion. It would have dissolved into a deadly gas if it was picked up." Looking at Arexis, he added. "I am glad that you have found a man with strong magic to guide you here."

Ludger looked puzzled as he wondered about what Trallen was saying. He did not know any magic. Trallen continued.

"Only white magic can find its way to the cave. You, Mister Morton, have found the path. Whether you know it or not, you possess strong magic."

He turned back toward Arexis.

"Your Highness. It is now time to assume the powers of your office."

He turned to the crystal and traced some cabalistic symbols in the air while singing a strange litany

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reminding Ludger of Gregorian chants. The frail voice was amplified by the grotto's acoustics. He was soon joined by the voices of the dead Kings, coming from their effigies on the wall.

After a few minutes, the crystal started to throb, in sync with the chant. Its light patterns flickered frantically. The sound rose to a mind numbing crescendo then suddenly stopped. The ensuing silence was painful to hear. Trallen slowly turned to Arexis. He took him by the arm and led him to the crystal. He said.

"Your Highness, place your right hand on the Crystal of the Ancient Souls. It is now time to take the pledge of devotion to the land, like your father did and his father before him, back to the first ruler of this land. You must realize that your first duty is to safeguard this land for the welfare of its inhabitants. Do you understand this."

"Yes, I do."

"Now repeat after me. I, Arexis of Talenthar,"

In a solemn voice Arexis declared.

"I, Arexis of Talenthar,"

"will to my last breath of life,"

"will to my last breath of life,"

"cherish and protect this exalted land of mine,"

"cherish and protect this exalted land of mine,"

"and its many dependants, sentient or not."

"and its many dependants, sentient or not."

"I will do so with upmost benevolence and dignity."

"I will do so with upmost benevolence and dignity."

After this last phrase, a golden glow enveloped Arexis and slowly infused him. When the aura finally subsided Arexis picked up the sceptre and turned toward the wall. The shapeless throbbing oval of light had solidified into his likeness.

Trallen simply said.

"It is done."

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As Trallen was leading them out of the grotto, the lips of Bluthor's effigies softly whispered.

"Good luck, my son, may the Gods be with you."

They were led down a series of endless stairways and corridors, Trallen never looking back to see if they were following. They could barely keep up with the old man. They emerged into a gigantic cave with a slow river running through its centre. Trallen pointed to the far end of the cave and said.

"Behind that boulder lays an exit that will take you back to your friends. Your Highness, now that you have taken control of the power, the flow of the river will begin to increase. Do not stay in its path too long. I wish you, and the land, the best Fortune."

With this he dissolved into thin air without a trace. With a sigh, Ludger patted Arexis on the shoulder. He said.

"Come on, Your Exalted Kingness, it is time to go and present you to your devoted subjects."

He made an exaggerated bow and led Arexis. The new King broke into laughter. A narrow crag started behind the large boulder. It slowly widened to a tunnel. At the far end of it they could see daylight. They emerged from the solid rock near the source of the river, amidst the consternation of the awaiting men.

Ludger declared in a booming voice.

"Behold, men, of your new monarch. I present you His Royal Highness King Arexis of Talenthar."

A loud cheer erupted simultaneously from all the men. Among backslapping and congratulations, wineskins were broken out to toast the new King. As the suns were already getting high, the day camp was lifted. They hastily started their retreat. They had to reach the pass before the enemy troops.

As they made their way down river, Ludger manoeuvred his horse beside Andrack's. He hailed the wizard.

"I have to ask you a question. In the mountain, Trallen told me that I was a magician. That only white magic could have led Arexis successfully. How can this be possible?"

"Well, for what I have heard of your world, men lost their innate talent for magic due to the rationalization of their environment through science. They became observers instead of participants. Thus losing touch with the currents of power emanating from Mother Earth. It led to the point that these currents are only faintly present, in some specific areas, due to lack of use. Some people from your world, like yourself, are highly attuned to these current.

Why have you built your retreat where you have?"

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Ludger was lost in thoughts for a moment. He then replied.

"The only truthful answer I can give you is that it felt right. That I felt in harmony with nature in that particular place."

"The reason you felt so comfortable in that area, is that you can sense the faint powers of your world. You built your house at a node of this power. This is why you can sense the impoverished powers of this world, while the rest of us cannot. We are used to a much stronger field.

You should continue your relaxation exercises. But now turn your mind to the powers of this world. You can focus on these powers so that you can eventually use them. I will teach you some new exercises to help you in focusing them."

While Andrack was instructing his pupil, Army returned and consulted with the King. Arexis interrupted the wizard and said in a loud voice.

"We have to pick up our pace, the advancing army is closer to the pass than we expected. We only have a few hours lead. The flow of the river is slowly growing. It will soon slow us down, as it start reclaiming its bed."

They were rushing over the slippery rocks and at times through the frigid waters as the river was slowly swelling. News of their enemies gaining on them soon reached the fleeing men. They now might have to fight before the pass.

As they pushed their mounts harder, Andrack asked if Ludger could concentrate on the river's powers and to visualize a quicker flow of the water.

Ludger emptied his mind and tried to focus on the river. He was surprised to see a pattern of lights in the river's water. It reminded him of a similar pattern in the large crystal in the mountain. He tried to visualize a quicker flow of the water or of the patterns. His concentration broke and he lost track of the lights. He said so to Andrack. The wizard told him to concentrate again. When he locked on to the light patterns, Andrack leaned precariously from his mount. He grabbed Ludger's wrist tightly. With his free hand he fingered a spell while silently wording the incantation. Ludger felt a rush of power flowing through him, then suddenly nothing. Andrack released him gently.

They rode in silence for a while, Fifteen minutes later, as they approached the pass, Ludger turned toward the magician and asked.

"Why has nothing happened?"

Andrack smiled.

"The water has to flow all the way up from the Source. It should reach us soon."

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As to counterpoint this comment, a loud rumbling from upriver echoed in the canyon. The raging torrent of the river was once again at full flow. A towering wall of water was coming at them like a racing express train. They spurred their horses to a gallop. They were soon trudging through the frigid water, trying to reach the gulley before being swept down river by the unstoppable force of the water. When the first wave of cold water hit Ludger, he lost sight of Bacchus who had been moving beside him. She had lost her footing and was now swimming frantically. Ludger finally caught back up to her, he reached down from his saddle and grabbed the dog's thick collar and hoisted her across his lap.

Slightly downstream of the pass was the bulk of Magdar's expedition. They were rushing upstream for safety just like Arexis' men were rushing downstream. These last arrived first and were rapidly scampering up the gulley. A few of their enemies followed them. Dishearten combat followed. Magdar's men were more interested in saving their lives than in fighting. They were quickly pushed back in the river.

The last members of Arexis' group were now in the relative safety of the narrow gulley. They watched in horror as Magdar's men were swept away by the now turbulent flow of the river. The river was now again flowing majestically between the sheer vertical walls of the canyon.

Ludger looked in awe at what had happened. He turned toward Andrack and said.

"Did I do that?"

"In a way, yes. You are not trained in the art of magic and you never learned the gestures and incantations needed to control your powers. But you have a natural affinity for our magic. You may be more powerful than any magician that ever lived because you are not bound by the ritualistic nature of our art.

What I did was to channel the weak powers of this world through you, where they were amplified. As I linked up with you I cast a spell that execute through you with great success."

"You mean in technological terms, that I was the hardware amplifying and channelling the power. You were the software operating the spell."

"I am not quite familiar with the terms, but essentially it is correct."

Ludger felled back in a long silence, as they rode up the narrow gulley.

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Chapter 11

They eventually reached the highest point of the pass. It conveniently widened to a flat, well protected area. They quickly set up camp. The cold, exhausted men soon huddled in front of a few large fires to dry their clothing and personal effects.

As they ate a soggy meal, they reassessed the situation. They had been lucky, no army was now following them. Kurden assured them that the pass would easily, and safely, lead them in the general direction of Arnor, where they could rejoin the bulk of the army.

It was nearing the appointed time of the day when they could contact Chargoff. Shielded by the canyon they had not been able to do so in a few days. Ludger set up the radio. After many tries he finally established a weak noisy link. It brought in bad news. A small detachment of Magdar's army had raided Talenthar. They were repelled with difficulty, but Nathalia had to flee the castle. She left for the elven forest. No contact had been established with her, since her disappearance.

Since it had been so difficult to repel the attackers in a fortified city, it was agreed they would not succeed in their assault on the Gates of Doom, unless they first unlocked the Magic Dam on the river of Power. Only with the flow of water reestablished would they be able to use magic against magic.

They would discuss the details tonight and would call back Chargoff in the morning. The men soberly took in the bad news. Arexis led a council meeting. He called the meeting to order.

"We now agree that we can only attack Magdar's stronghold, after we open the dam and release the water. Without magic we are doomed in our assault, as recent events in Talenthar showed us. But even without any magic we will have to launch our attack, we do not have any choice. We cannot let Magdar win. Does someone has any advice on how to reach the dam."

Kurden cleared his throat and said.

"A direct approach would make us pass directly in front of the Gates of Doom. This would surely get us detected. The best way to the Great Dam is through the Valley of Perils."

Arny joined in.

"The problem is that to reach the valley the obstacles are unsurmountable. The way through the northern mountains is too well patrolled for a team to get in. Even if one was to reach the foot of the dam, the lock is at the level of the lake. It is only accessible after a vertical climb of over fifteen-hundred feet."

Ludger asked.

"Is there any way of reaching this valley undetected?"

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Army replied.

"One cannot cross the Desert of Death undetected. Thus the only way is very involved. First you have to pass through the elven forest. Then, through the rolling hills into the Plains of Ice, behind the Howling Mountains. From the plains you can enter the far end of the Valley of Peril."

"What is so complicated about this?"

"First one cannot go into the elven forest unguided, for fear of getting hopelessly lost. The forest is protected by elven magic and no outsider is admitted without an elf guide. The way through the hills should be uneventful, but it might be patrolled by Magdar's minions.

The worst part would be the Plains of Ice. This area is permanently frozen. No animal can survive the extreme cold for any length. Even if someone could dress warmly enough, he would have to travel, on foot, over three-hundred miles to skirt the Howling Mountains and reach the valley."

Ludger said soberly.

"I see.... Then, if somebody could reach the top of the cliff by this long route, what is the nature of the lock? Is it magical or mechanical?"

Andrack answered.

"The lock itself is mechanical, but it is gigantic. An enormous force would be needed to break it. To open it , you would need the magical key that, of course, is in the hands of Magdar."

"If the lock was broken how would the gates be opened?"

"The pressure of the water would be enough to force the gates open and the water would flow again. With this, enough power would be available for me to vanquish Magdar."

Turning toward Arexis, Ludger said.

"My good friend, I will go back to Talenthar and follow the traces of Nathalia into the elven capital if need be. After I find her, I will go back to the Mist of Dreams. I will gather the equipment that will permit me to attempt the route that Army proposed. I think that it is our only chance. If I reach the dam, I should be able to defeat the lock."

"I cannot ask that of you, my friend, you have already done enough by helping us with the river of Gods."

"You are not asking me. I am going on my own, for my own selfish reasons. I have decided to hang around this world for a while and Magdar doesn't look like the ideal landlord. Also I would not mind

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having a talk with your sister. I did not like being talked to like a servant.

My mind is set don't even try to change it."

"The only thing that I can say is..., thank you."

Andrack offered Ludger a small amulet of delicately carved jade, threaded on a leather thong. He said.

"Take this, it will help you in getting a guide around the elven forest, to reach Elvanor. This should also open the doors to Valnor, the elven King."

"Thank you, old friend, this will be of great help. I will leave, alone, in the morning."

Dregnar, who was coming back from walking the dog, said in a loud voice.

"No, Master Ludger, Bacchus and I will accompany you. You will need our aid to guide you."

"All right, but only until we reach Elvanor, after this I go on alone. And please, don't call me Master."

"It is agreed, Master..."

The men, around the fire, broke into laughter. It eased the tension that had built up. Discussions went late into the night. They agreed on the details and schedule of their plan. Ludger would be given one week to reach Talenthar and get ready. Another week to search for Nathalia and get his supplies from the Mist of Dreams. Then two more weeks to reach the dam. Thus in four weeks from that day, at exactly 06:00, the attack would be launched. Kurden would attack from the northeast, Arexis and Chargoff from the east. Ludger would try to convince Valnor to attack from the south. The attack would go on, whether Ludger would break the lock at this time or not.

After all the details were ironed out, Ludger retired to the comfort of his, now dry, mummy bag. Bacchus curled up at his feet. He fell asleep petting his dog.

At dawn Ludger, Dregnar and Bacchus headed south with Arexis' and Andrack's blessings. They rode all day, pausing only to rest the horses. Since the moon was bright, they rode late into the night.

At the end of the next afternoon, they arrived at the camp near Arnor. They were led to Chargoff upon their arrival. Troops were massing in the plains around the little town, preparing for the upcoming battle. The general had no new information about Nathalia. She had left Talenthar less than a week ago. Nobody had seen or heard from her since. She supposedly fled to the elven forest, when the attempt to capture her at the palace, failed. Chargoff feared for her safety, but he thought that she should have reached Elvanor without too much difficulties. She should be safe there.

Around the campfire, that night, Ludger was relaxing while leaning back against a few bales of hay. He was absentmindedly scratching Bacchus behind her ears, wondering if Dregnar had fed her that night.

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A silent reply came to his mind. She had been fed. Startled, Ludger looked around and found no one within sight except for Bacchus. He sighed thinking he had dreamed. A silent reply followed.

"No you have not"

He looked down at his dog. He could see in her eyes that she was the one who had communicated with him. He passed his hand over her head. He could feel a rush of primitive thought patterns. This new development astounded him. He could not help but wonder at what this new world held in store for him. Looking down at Bacchus he thought.

"Good night."

She replied in kind.

At dawn, when Ludger woke up, he considered that he had dreamed the events of the previous night, as he watched his dog go about her morning business. Grooms had prepared their horses. He set about to find Dregnar. He was eating breakfast with Chargoff. Ludger joined them. After they finished, they set off for Talenthar.

The next day, as they approached the capital, they found signs of the recent battles. Burnt farmhouses were seen in abandoned fields. Piles of human, troll, and goblin carcasses dotted the muddy road at regular interval, left for the carrion birds to clean. They gave a rotten stench to the bloody, melting snow.

They arrived at the northern gates of the city at sundown. They were quickly admitted before the gates were locked for the night. There was a subdued activity in the portions of the city bordering the river. People were cleaning up after the battle. Weary souls carried on their desperate work without any guarantees about their future. A large section, toward the northwest, had been partially burned down. It forced its inhabitants to seek refuge with friends and relatives.

Ludger could not support the desperate stares of the men and women lining the streets. He silently pledged to do whatever was in his power to help them. After following a convoluted path, to bypass most of the damaged roads, they reached the citadel. The Captain-at-arms allowed them in, as they were expected. Armed guards escorted them across the bridge to the palace. Balnor was anxiously waiting for them in the courtyard. Footmen took care of their horses, while their equipment was unloaded. Ludger was relieved that the scribe was fully recovered.

They followed Balnor to his office, in the royal library. They sat in comfortable chairs in front of his desk, while servants poured them refreshments. The small grey haired man was dressed in a heavy brocade robe. He crossed his long fingers and looked at Ludger, deep in the eyes. He said in a professorial tone.

"Six days ago an attack was launched against the city by a somewhat disorganized force composed of trolls and goblins. I am sure that their attack had a single purpose. To capture Princess Nathalia and

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bring her to Magdar.

As the action came close to the palace, She left the city by a hidden exit, with four guards and her friend, Lady Maria. As they were fleeing, east of the city, they came under attack. The small group disbanded. The Princess was last seen heading toward the enchanted forest, with Maria, under the protection of one guard. She has not been seen since then."

After a long pause he continued.

"King Arexis contacted me last night. They are safe and sound with General Chargoff. Troops are starting to arrive from Baldour, Leventhar and Baldycree. At the same time in the blackened plains, in front of the Gates of Doom, a massive army composed of all the evil races of the Kingdom is assembling. With this army and his black magic, Magdar's forces seem invincible."

"The attack will be launched in exactly twenty-four days, tomorrow morning. We will be leaving in two days time for the elven forest. In the meantime you should organize search parties in that direction to look for traces of Nathalia's passage. Also I would like access to the library and your help in finding all the information possible on the elven forest, the Great Dam and the Gates of Doom."

"I will see to that, right now. Do you need anything else?"

"No, I will retire to catch up on my sleep, so that I can get an early start in the morning."

They shook hands and Dregnar escorted Ludger to his room. They parted company at the room's door. Ludger threw his gun belt and sword on the bed. He split his chainmail between his legs and removed it. He threw his clothes in a corner and slipped in a thick dressing gown. He called in a maid. When the dour faced older woman came in, he instructed her to launder his clothes before morning. He relaxed in a hot bath until the water turned cold. He then went to bed. He fell asleep as soon as his head hit the pillow.

*

Early the next morning Ludger was awakened by a loud knock at his door. He let in Balnor, who was carrying a tall stack of dusty old books. They laid them down on a long table and started their search. Breakfast was brought in by a servant. Dregnar came in to fetch Bacchus for her morning walk. Ludger was amazed to see them so close. At first Dregnar had been so afraid of the dog. As they walked out the door, Bacchus let him know silently.

"This guy is great, he walks like one of you, but he smells like one of me. He must be a distant cousin of mine."

Ludger grinned widely and went back to his lecture. They spent all morning reviewing historical books. Balnor had previously visited Elvanor. He told Ludger what he new about the elves.

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"The elven forest is protected by a conjuration of the elder elven spirits that are reincarnated into the trees of the forest. Elves, whose lifespan is at least five times that of a human, do not really die at the end of their long earthly journey. Their body shell dissolves and their essence, or spirit, is metamorphosed into one of the tree that forms the magic forest.

The magic spirits, in the trees, protect Elvanor from any unwanted intruder. It makes them hopelessly lost. The deeper one tries to go into the forest, the more disoriented one will be. People have been known to travel in circles in the outskirts of the forest without getting any deeper, but also without being able to escape. They travel until they collapse from exhaustion and eventually die.

People of elven blood are the best trackers in the known world. Their natural gift is augmented by the conjuration of elders. In this way they can travel through the forest without any problems. The worst punishment for an elf, is to become an outcast and be banished from the city. They are then kept out by the conjuration and stripped of their tracking powers. With this, two things are accomplished. First they lose their identity and affinity with mother earth. Second they will never see Elvanor again for as long as they live.

This is harsh punishment because this city is the jewel of this world. It is carved out of one gigantic tree whose trunk is close to a mile thick. Over many levels in the trunk and the crown of the tree, living and working quarters are arranged. They are topped by the royal palace. The city is always green and protected from the elements. It is a marvel to visit."

The search through the old tomes was frustrating, since they were not indexed. They had to read everything to know the contents of the books. By mid-afternoon, Balnor decided that they should move to the old archives, where their search might be more fruitful.

Ludger followed the scribe, first to the kitchen, where they ate a quick lunch under the scornful eye of the head chef who did not appreciate his kitchen being invaded by outsiders. Balnor then fetched two large oil lamps and lit their wicks with a spell. He winked at Ludger.

"It is not only our friend Andrack who can use magic."

Ludger smiled. He was led through a series of dark corridors and staircases that plunged deeply in the bowels of the palace. The journey finally ended in front of an old oaken door that was undistinguishable from any of its siblings that they had passed on their way.

Balnor produced a long skeleton key from his pocket. He unlocked the door. He showed Ludger in. The large low-ceiling room was lined by rows upon rows of bookcases. The air was full of the aroma of dusty old tomes.

Ludger helped Balnor search through the shelves for any books that could be useful. He found a small bound essay by a famed wizard, that Balnor identified as Andrack's mentor, on the source of power of the Gates of doom. Simply stated it said that the strength of the Gates is unimpeded as long as the flow of the river of Powers is at its yearly average or above. Below that, the Gates gradually weaken with

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the lessening flow of water.

Balnor remembered that during the summer that Magdar had escaped, the Kingdom had suffered from one of the worst droughts in its history. The flow of the river had been at its lowest ever. It could explain why Magdar had been able to get free with the help of his minions.

Later, Balnor came up with a handwritten diary from an itinerant magician who travelled the north. It confirmed that during the year of the drought the power of the Gates had been weaker. Magdar had sent some emissaries from beyond the gates. They had no power of their own but they managed to rally to Magdar's cause the goblins and troll that lived in the mountains. Later, even one of the King's advisers was enrolled in their ranks. All had the same goal, a lust for power and riches.

The flow of the river was slowed further by the trolls piling up rocks creating makeshift dams. Magicians who were travelling the outskirts of the realm were kidnapped. Nobody knows what happened to them. The river flow was slowed enough to permit Magdar to escape from the Gates. After this was the great Magic War where all the magicians, but Andrack, disappeared without trace. Both sides suffered tremendous losses but Magdar managed to lock the Magic Dam with the key he took from Bluthor's death grip.

The Dam was under magical protection but constructed of normal building materials. In the middle of its curved wall was a massive lock that could be used to control the flow of water. It had been closed to dry up the land. But since it was built of stones, wood and metal, Ludger believed that it could be destroyed.

They searched for more information until the next evening, taking only short periods of rest. Nothing further, of any consequence, was found. Ludger decided to retire early. They were leaving in the morning after debriefing the scouts that were expected back overnight.

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Chapter 12

Early in the morning, the word from the scouts was that traces of Nathalia's passage were found in the vicinity of the small fishing village of Dugra, near the enchanted forest. She was travelling quickly with one guard and Lady Maria. After a short rest in Dugra she headed into the forest. This news was good. Ludger decided to travel to Dugra then into the forest, retracing Nathalia's steps. He would leave by midday accompanied by Balnor, Dregnar and Bacchus. They would take the truck to speed up their travel.

He loaded his equipment in the back of the truck and checked all the fluids' levels. He refilled the gas tanks with his spare containers, while Dregnar helped Bacchus into the back of the truck. They settle themselves amongst the equipment. Balnor eyed the passenger seat with suspicion. Under Ludger's prodding he finally climbed into it.

When Ludger started the engine the sound frightened the scribe. His reaction was similar to Dregnar's when he had first been a passenger, he jumped out of the truck. It took a great deal of persuasion on Ludger's part to convince him to retake his seat. After a long argument, that Dregnar was not helping by laughing hysterically, Balnor finally relented. They eventually got under way.

They wound their way slowly through the streets of the city, under the glazed stares of the crowds, working to reconstruct the broken buildings. They exited the city through the southwest gate. The air was heady with the fish aroma of the docks. The sea was gently rolling and the activity was abnormally subdued at the fish market. As they followed the coast they met many groups of fishermen or peasants with their families and possessions, who were moving grimly toward the city.

They stopped one of these families, whose patriarch nervously acquiesced their request for information. The sturdy old man sitting in front of the rickety cart, holding in his hands the reins of the two large placid oxen, told them.

"We are running away from the pillaging of the evil armies. They are rumoured to haunt the region." He slapped without looking, one of the dirty youngsters, who was climbing on his back, and continued. "I think we have a better chance of survival in the city. We can help rebuilding the fortifications and my eldest sons can join the dwindling ranks of the army."

Ludger sent them off with his blessing. He was proud of those people who had decided not to resign themselves to their faith. It furthered his resolve to help them as best as he could.

After a restless night in an abandoned beach hut, where their sleep was interrupted regularly by strange noises from the sea, they resumed their progress early in the cold misty morning. By mid-morning, as they crested a rolling hill, they saw -on the horizon- the telltale dark band of the elven forest. They hoped to be there by the next day. Their progress was growing increasingly difficult, due to the frequent thaws -due to the closeness of the warmer sea- breaking the already damaged surface of the road.

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At the end of the day they stopped to stretch their legs by a deep fissure in the side of a low hill. Ludger was leaning against the grill guard, watching Bacchus lick one of her forepaws. Suddenly her ears turned toward the fissure. She excitedly bolted into the dark crack. Sounds of a vicious fight soon reached Ludger's ears. He instructed his friends to return to the relative protection of the truck. He grabbed his sword and dashed in the direction of the noise.

When he was about to reach the fissure a large cat-like animal ran out, tail between its legs. With one mighty surge it jumped at him. Ludger dropped to one knee. He thrust his ready sword in the centre of the creature's body. The dark feline lifelessly collapsed on him, knocking his body off balance in the muddy snow. He pushed the twitching remains of the cat off him and stood up slightly dazed. Loud barks brought him back to reality. He dived into the crack to investigate.

After only a few yards, the narrow fissure widened into an elongated semi-circular area where a drama was unfolding. A tall elegant man of slender build, wearing tracker's greens, was laying down, wounded. He was fighting for his life, with the help of Bacchus, against a large hairy, deformed beast in tattered clothing. The creature was wielding a large spiked club and bashing at the fallen man. If it was not for Bacchus's distracting attacks the combat would have been over a long time ago.

Ludger quickly assessed the situation. He lunged at the creature sword held high. The husky creature, with lightning reflexes that its bulk did not promise, flicked its club at Ludger's sword and knocked it out of his hands. A second blow landed square in the middle of Ludger's chest, lifting him right off the ground. He landed hard amongst the rocks. If it had not been for his chainmail, Ludger was sure that he would have perished from massive internal injuries.

The creature, sure of having disposed of Ludger, returned its attention to the fallen man. Ludger pulled out his long kukri and stealthily approached the creature's back. He jumped at it. While he wrapped his legs around the creature's thick middle, he slipped his left arm around its neck. The muscles of the creature felt like rippling steel under its leathery hide. Fingers as powerful as a vice dug into Ludger's arm. He groaned loudly at the painful, crushing grip. With his free hand he brought his curved blade to the creature's neck. With a jerk he pulled it toward him. The creature lurched wildly. Slowly, the hulking beast fell backward. After a bone crushing crash, Ludger was pinned under the bulk of the creature. He struggled and finally managed to roll it off his chest.

Panting, Ludger slowly stood up. He wiped his bloody blade on the creature's tattered clothing and sheathed it. He retrieved his sword and turned toward the fallen man. The tall man was fighting Bacchus's affectionate attacks.

After Ludger regained his breath, he called Bacchus to attention. He bowed deeply and said to the man.

"Let me introduce myself. I am Ludger of the Mist of Dreams at your service. My friends and I were passing nearby, when my dog heard a scuffle. She led me to your help. Whom might I have the privilege to address."

Ludger felt very proud of his statement. The fallen man replied.

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"Thank you, Sir Ludger. My name is Lynor, son of Valnor of Elvanor."

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Your Highness."

"Please call me Lynor, There cannot be any formality between us, I owe you my life."

"If you prefer, Lynor. Let me have a look at your ankle."

Ludger crouched and examined the swollen ankle of the young Prince. He continued.

"It seems to be only a sprain. I will help you back to my vehicle and tend to your injuries."

Ludger helped the Prince back to his feet and supported him as he hobbled back to the truck. Luckily the tall man was slender and his weight was negligible on Ludger's shoulders. When they exited the fissure, Balnor and Dregnar ran to their help. The scribe was surprised when he recognized the Prince, but not as much as Lynor when he saw the truck. He looked at it mouth agape, then back to Ludger. He said.

"Then, it is true. Our elders had sensed a disturbance in the universal fabric and there has been rumours of a hero from another world helping us against the evil hordes."

"Hero is a big word, I am just doing my best to help you since I now have to share your world."

Ludger opened the tailgate of the Suzuki and installed the Prince as comfortably as was possible on his bedroll, amongst the equipment. He taped his ankle with a wide elastic bandage. He then filled a large plastic bag full of snow, sealed it and placed the Prince's swollen ankle on it. He gave Lynor some strong analgesic and anti-inflammatory tablets.

Ludger moved the vehicle to a secluded area that Lynor assessed to be safe. With the help of Dregnar he raised the soft top over it. He lit a small catalytic heater and a camp stove. He then prepared a hasty meal. They would rest for a few hours and listen to the Prince's tale, then slowly proceed toward Dugra.

Over a steaming cup of herbal tea, Lynor told his story.

"For the last few months, rumours of a massive army of dark elves assembling in front of the Gates of Doom, have circulated around our Kingdom. These blood relatives of ours have eschewed the elders and turned to the dark forces. They would make a vicious enemy to any army. Then, last week, we heard rumours from Dugra about fighting mermen that were attacking the coast with the help of ogres and their fighting sand-cats. My father, King Valnor, sent me to investigate these rumours.

I had confirmed my father's suspicions and was following a group of ogres, when I slipped and sprained my ankle. I slipped in the fissure to recuperate. I was awaiting the departure of the ogres, who had set up camp in a nearby clearing. A scouting ogre cornered me with his sand-cat. These creatures

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are trained to viciously attack humans. Only the judicious arrival of your dog saved me from the sand-cat and yours from the ogre."

"I am glad to have been of any help. We are, ourselves, following in the path of Princess Nathalia, who was last seen near Dugra. Have you found any traces of her?"

"She is sound and safe in Elvanor with her friend, Lady Maria. She was rescued by a party of our trackers from an attack by trolls and goblins. She was brought back to my father's palace."

"We would be honoured to drive you to Elvanor ourselves. We were looking for the Princess, but are also on a diplomatic mission from King Arexis to request aid from your father, King Valnor."

"I will gladly guide you into Elvanor and arrange an audience with the King."

The conversation soon died down. The men arranged themselves as comfortably as possible to take a short rest. Ludger reclined his seat back and showed Balnor how to do so with his own. He set the alarm on his watch for a few hours hence. Soon the only sounds heard in the truck were the regular breathing of its passengers and the soft whistling of the catalytic heater.

Ludger awoke to the cheerful musical chimes of his watch's alarm. He angrily turned it off. He had always hated alarms of any sort. He normally woke up on time without their help, but now he was too tired to do so. He turned on the overhead bezel light. He woke up his crew, who protested loudly. As he brewed some herbal tea, he made a mental note to bring back some coffee from the Mist on his next visit home. He could not stand the bitter tea of these parts.

They partook in a cold lunch. After everything was stowed safely, Ludger announced his intention to proceed to Dugra. Balnor protested.

"How can we travel at night. It is so dark on this cloudy night, that we cannot even see a yard in front of us."

Ludger started the engine and said.

"Let there be light." As he switched on the headlights.

A gasp of amazement came from his passengers, but the biblical allusion was lost on them. In turn, Ludger turned on the powerful auxiliary driving lamps and wide beam fog lights. The wooded rolling hills in front of them were better illuminated than by daylight. Taking a handheld spotlight from its bracket under the dashboard, Ludger said.

"And if we want to see on the side or back, we use this."

He rolled down his window and flicked on the light with his thumb. The powerful beam of the searchlight petrified a group of goblins that were standing less than 10 feet from the truck. They were

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as startled as Ludger was. He switched the light to his left hand and grabbed the silenced MAC 10 from the floor. As soon as it was pointed in the general direction of the ungainly creatures, the small submachine gun hiccupped in his hand and laid devastation in its path. The leading goblin literally exploded in a spray of bloody gore. Ludger dropped the empty magazine to the floor. He put, grip up, the empty gun on his lap. As he reached for a loaded magazine in a pocket in his door, he yelled to Balnor.

"Roll down your window"

He slammed the magazine in place and handed the searchlight to the scribe. Leaning to the passenger side he emptied the gun in the direction of his attackers. He dropped the empty gun on Balnor's lap, switched off the searchlight, put the truck in gear and raced out of the clearing. They bounced heavily through deep ruts. As they passed under some low laying branches, the screaming shape of a troll jumped at them. He landed hard on the bonnet. He hung at the side mirror trying to get in. Ludger tried to push the creature off but it was hanging on for dear life. Finding his action futile, Ludger finally grabbed his 45 from his hip and thumbed the safety off. As the troll tried to get in, he punched it in the chest with the muzzle of the gun. He jerked the trigger twice in succession. Twin tongues of fire jetted from the handgun's compensator. They were accompanied by a deafening report. The creature's chest exploded as it fell backward, arms flailing, into the darkness.

Ludger put the safety back on and holstered his gun. He concentrated on his driving before their escape ended down a hill or around a tree. They reached the muddy road. Ludger, using all of his skills as a rally driver, took the way to Dugra. He was pushing at the limit of control on this unfamiliar path. The Suzuki was more often than not flying through the cold winter air and landing heavily with a resounding crash. He was going through the curves, skidding sideways with his front wheels in opposite lock. His passengers and equipment were getting battered. They were relentlessly thrown back and forth. Ludger felt like he had all the daemons of hell pursuing him. In a way he was not far off. After many long minutes of this infernal rate of progress, sanity slowly came back to him. The adrenalin rush faded and he decided that there was no reasons to kill them all. He slowed down imperceptively bellow the ragged edge. A few minutes later he slowed down, to the great relief of his companions, to a more comfortable pace.

He drove silently for close to two hours. In the middle of a long stretch of road, where they could see to the limit of his driving lights' illumination, he rolled to a stop. He turned on a rear facing halogen light. With a sigh Ludger slumped forward on the steering wheel. Balnor inquired about his health. After a few long, silent, minutes Ludger raised his head and said with disgust.

"I could have killed us all. I should never have gone to sleep without posting a guard first. This was shamefully stupid of me. I jeopardized our mission. I am not cut off for this kind of work."

Lynor who was disentangling himself from the equipment, said.

"Do not blame yourself, everybody was tired and needed rest. I am the one who chose that area as safe to set camp. If it had not been for your quick reflexes, we would all be troll sustenance by now."

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Looking at Dregnar he continued. "Nothing personal of course."

Balnor, always his calm self, said.

"I totally agree, no one is to be blamed. We are lucky to have escaped and that is the most important. I suggest that we rearrange ourselves more comfortably, then proceed calmly to Dugra."

Everybody agreed gruffly. Ludger reloaded his firearms and stepped out of the truck. He went to the back to help restack the equipment. He emptied Lynor's snow pack, that was now mostly water by now, and refilled it with fresh snow. When everything was secured, he pulled out a wineskin and some chocolate confections. He squirted some wine in his mouth and broke off a few pieces of the chocolate. He passed the rest around. After closing up the back, he returned to the driver's seat.

Balnor handed him back the wine. He took a few more gulps and passed it back. He turned off the back light and the small bezel on the rollbar. With a sigh he put the truck in gear and accelerated on the slippery road. Large lazy snowflakes soon made their appearance, cheering up the bleak landscape. They thudded wetly on the windscreen. Ludger was forced to turn on the wipers. He went on slowly with only the regular squeaks of the wipers and a quartet of light snores breaking the monotony of the trip.

They reached Dugra at dawn. The little village was deserted. Many houses showed signs of combat. Broken windows, doors hanging crookedly from their hinges and collapsed, burnt outbuildings added to the oppressive gloominess of this place. The only sign of life was present on the quays. Only one fishing boat remained in the protected inlet around which was built the village. A few silhouettes were moving around it.

They decided to investigate. Ludger drove down the main street to the edge of the water. He parked the truck near the end of the dock where the fishing boat was moored. Ludger helped Lynor out of the truck. With the Prince leaning on his shoulder they walked toward the boat. They had decided to leave Dregnar and Bacchus hidden in the truck, not to arouse any suspicions.

A crusty grey haired man with powerful, callused hands hailed them. He was accompanied by a couple of burly young men. They were looking at them with misgivings. Lynor returned the greeting.

"I am Lynor of Elvanor, could you tell me what happened to mayor Myrtle and the rest of the villagers?"

The grey haired man replied.

"The ones that survived the combined attacks of the mermen and the ogres, fled by boat to the capital a few days ago. We are the only ones remaining."

"Why have you stayed here?"

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"Me and my sons were born here and we plan to die here. Our boat is strong. We do not fear the mermen and the ogres cannot reach us at sea. We plan to remain here and make their life miserable for as long as we can."

"May the Gods help you in your endeavour. I wish you many victories against our enemies."

Lynor and Ludger turned away. They left these determined idealists to their faith. Ludger wished them well but could see the futility of their efforts. The he realized that his own efforts were not based on much firmer grounds. He murmured to himself.

"I guess that each of us need his own windmills to attack."

Lynor looked strangely at him. Ludger shook his head to discourage any comments on the Prince's part. They climbed back in the truck. Lynor told the sad news to his companions. Ludger slowly drove out of town. An hour later they were in the enchanted forest.

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Chapter 13

Lynor guided Ludger through the forest. By nightfall they were halfway to Elvanor. Ludger was in awe of the majestic trees of the forest. They stood widely separated at the base, but their crowns were touching high overhead. This left the travellers in a constant penumbrae, with the occasional shaft of sunlight coming through. Ludger felt that he was driving inside a giant cathedral, with living columns supporting the ceiling. The further they went in, the less snow was present. By nightfall the last vestiges of winter had been left hours behind. They set camp on the spongy soil. Dregnar lit a fire to chase the coolness of the evening. Lynor explained.

"The closer we will get to Elvanor the warmer the temperature will be. The spell protecting the capital also maintains its temperature to a constant 75oF all year long. The city is always green and comfortable without any extremes of temperature."

Ludger silently called Bacchus to him, as they revelled in stories from Lynor and Balnor. He looked down at his dog and silently asked.

"Do you like it here?"

"I feel even better here then when we were at home."

"I noticed the same thing myself. This is truly a magnificent place. I almost wish we could stay here and forget about Magdar and all the fighting. I never expected that we would have to constantly fight for our lives."

"Why don't we? We have done enough for them. All I want is a warm place by the fire and a good hunt occasionally. As long as there is food and someone to pet me, I would be in heaven."

"You dogs are all the same. As long as you are fed and cuddled, you don't care about anything else. But it is my duty to help these people because I fear that even here Magdar will eventually extend his influence."

"You humans are all the same, you cannot forget about duties and such. You can't revel in the simple pleasures of life with a clear conscience. You are truly an inferior species."

With this, Bacchus closed her eyes and promptly fell asleep on his lap. Ludger grinned broadly and admired the narrow-minded philosophy of his dog for its utter simplicity.

The next morning they made an early start. By midday they had reached Elvanor. Ludger stopped the Samurai at the edge of the clearing where the colossal tree-city stood. The squat tree of titanic breath stood with sunlight streaming through its enormous branches. Portals were opened amongst its gnarled roots. A colourful array of elves was milling through them. The canopy of the tree was full of multi-coloured family dwellings.

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Lynor pointed to one of the portals. Ludger slowly advanced in its direction. He had never seen anything so utterly amazing in his entire life. He was driving with his face glued to the windscreen. As they approached the foot of the colossus, a crowd of cheerful onlookers gathered around the truck. Ludger was forced to slow down to a crawl, to prevent any injuries. Tall elves in green and crimson guard uniforms parted the crowd in front of them, to permit their entrance into the tree-city. They were escorted to a high ceiling room, that was quickly cordoned off by more guards. A youngish looking elf in tracker's greens joined the guards. With a smile Lynor pointed to his younger brother, Prince Symor.

They exited the confines of the truck and were warmly greeted by Symor. Introductions were made and concern was showed for Lynor's ankle. He declined any help for the long walk into the city. They followed Symor up a long staircase carved into the bulk of the tree. As they went the young Prince explained the layout of the city.

"Underground and at forest level are mostly storage, heavy industry and stables. Further up there is two levels of commercial bazaars and tradesmen shops. They are followed by a few levels of communal accommodations."

They reached a large esplanade at the level of the first branches. Symor continued.

"These lower branches are also used for communal living. Further, in the periphery of the canopy are the family dwellings of the upper classes and the rich merchants. Also the nobles of the court reside there. The royal palace is in the centre."

At the core of the canopy stood, in the delicate interweaving of smaller branches, the royal palace. To Ludger it looked like a delicate bejewelled piece of lace all festooned by greenery. It was surrounded in the thicker branches by the elven institutes of higher learning. What made the scenery more beautiful was that it was all composed of the living tissues of the tree-city. A glorious architecture had evolved, it was part art, part science and part life itself. The smoothly flowing organic curves of the city could never be duplicated out of man-made materials.

They passed through a serene reflective garden. They reached a delicate archway leading to an ornamental pool, in the centre of which stood a graceful gazebo. A narrow bridge connected the gazebo to the garden in which they stood. One by one they crossed the bridge. They were ushered into the gazebo-cum-audience room. In the airy structure, made out of weaved branches, stood or more accurately grew, out of a dais, twin thrones on which were seated a tall handsome couple of regal bearing. To their right was seated Princess Nathalia, their guest of honour.

Nathalia was staring at Ludger with a cold, calm look with a touch of resentment thrown in. Ludger returned the stare and slowly examined her. Her face had the exotic beauty of a high fashion model. Wide set green eyes, high cheekbones, a delicately chiselled nose and a wide, lushly lipped, sensual mouth. Her dark red hair had a metallic sheen to it. It was brushed straight past her shoulders.

She was dressed in a shiny black, sleeveless sheath, that was moulded to her athletic body. She had

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strong shoulders and long powerful hands. Her breasts stood proud and upthrust against the shiny fabric. A long slit down one side of her dress revealed a tantalizing glimpse of a long, muscular thigh and a shapely calf.

Ludger turned his attention to the royal couple. They were dressed in identical long gowns of white silk. A thin band of gold circled their high forehead. Ludger was somewhat self-conscious dressed in dirty battle stained clothes, his chainmail covered body bristling with weapons. He felt like a barbarian invited by mistake to high tea at the Queen's.

He was brought back to reality by Lynor whispering to him, to state his case to the King. Ludger stepped forward, cleared his throat and declared in a clear voice.

"Your Royal Highnesses, I am Ludger of the Mist of Dream, special envoy of His Royal Highness King Arexis of Talenthar." As she heard this, Nathalia's face was lit by a broad smile. All the coldness evaporated from her eyes. Ludger continued. "The reasons for my presence here are twofold. First, I was to make sure that Her Highness, Princess Nathalia, was safe and sound."

He turned toward Nathalia and continued.

"I am pleased that she managed to reach Elvanor unscathed. Her brother and I are deeply relieved." He turned back to the King. "Second, I am to request, in the name of King Arexis, your help against our common foe, Magdar.

Two week from tomorrow morning at exactly 06:00, the combined forces of King Arexis, from the east, and of Kurden McNish from the northeast, will launch an attack against Magdar's army in front of the Gates of Dooms.

King Arexis would appreciate it if you could form the third prong in the assault, by sending some soldiers from the south. Also I will need a guide to the Mist of Dreams. I will fetch some special equipment that I need to cross the Plains of Ice, on my way to the Great Dam. I am intent in destroying its lock and releasing the flow of the river."

Ludger bowed his head and stepped back into the awaiting group. The King looked at him with gentle eyes and said.

"My dear Sir Ludger, I see that you have travelled a long way to reach us. You should rest until tomorrow morning. We will meet at 10:00 and I will give you my answer. In the meantime enjoy our city. My son Symor will show you to your quarters." He saluted with a nod and continued. "Now I will talk with my son, Lynor."

Symor took Ludger by the elbow. He led him out of the audience room. Balnor, Dregnar and Bacchus followed. When they reached the other end of the reflective garden, footmen took charge of Balnor and the troll. They were escorted toward the university. Bacchus looked at Ludger, then at the troll. She then ran to catch up with Dregnar.

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Ludger shrugged his shoulders and followed Symor into the middle of another garden. A large branch emerged from the middle of a circular meadow. Steps were carved on its upper face. They gently rose to a tree-house that grew out of the branch amongst a canopy of leaves. Ludger followed the Prince up the stairs. They entered the small house. Ludger's possessions were neatly arranged against one of the walls.

All of the main furnishings grew out of the smooth rounded surfaces of the room. They glowed from the polished, light coloured wood. Ludger pointed to the large bed. He asked Symor.

"How do you make furniture grow out of the floor, or for that matter a house grow out of a branch?"

"It is all done by selective pruning and training, aided by our special brand of magic. Our priests and gardeners can make our tree-city grow into any useful shape. All that you see is not carved or machined out of the wood, it is grown that way. A chair is grown then harvested for use."

"This is amazing."

"Our city is the repository of the countless souls of our past Kings. It is alive. Even the plumbing are done via the trees own circulatory system." He pointed to a doorway at the far side of the room.

"Behind that door is the washroom. Food will be brought to you around 19:00. Feel free to visit the royal gardens in the meantime."

Symor left him alone in the room. Ludger slowly removed his weapons and his chainmail. He undressed and walked into the washroom. He stepped into the shower and luxuriated under the powerful stream for a long time. He looked at himself in the mirror, as he dried himself with a thick towel. He was in better physical shape than he had ever been, but his body was covered by an amazing patchwork of bruises. He brushed his hair and beard. They were getting longer than he had ever let them grow. They gave him a certain primeval look, shades of the barbarian, again.

He rummaged through his bags and found a light cotton pullover and a pair of thick sweat pants. He pulled them on and slipped into a pair of leather soled moccasins. He left the house for a stroll through the wonderful gardens. He was soon joined by a rather short elf, dressed in a red felt outfit.

He introduced himself as Professor Meldor. He walked silently with Ludger for a while. He then hesitantly said.

"I was meditating yesterday and was contacted by my friend Andrack. He told me to expect you and to help you with your meditation exercises."

"It is very nice of you to offer your help. I was wondering why I felt so much at ease in this city? Could it be that I am more in sync here, or that this place's make-up is close to my own world?"

"The aura of this city is probably close to that of the part of your world that you have brought with you."

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You should try to visualize the auras. I will help you with the procedure."

They sat down on a park bench and Meldor continued.

"You first have to achieve transcendence. Then you concentrate on the essence of an object or a person. Then you visualize it. It will be expressed by different colours." He reached into his pocket. "Here are a few objects of different manufacture. This piece of silver was forged and engraved by the dwarves. This small obsidian amulet was given to me by Andrack. This iron star was forged by black magic. The amulet around your neck was made by me."

Ludger removed the small piece of carved jade from around his neck. He gave it to the elf. Meldor placed the four small objects on the wooden bench between them. He then said.

"Now please vacate your mind." Ludger sat cross-legged on the bench, facing the elf. He concentrated. "When you reach the third stage, concentrate on the essence of the objects. Visualize the objects and their essence around them.... Now open your eyes and look at them."

Ludger slowly opened his eyes. He looked at the collection of small objects laid out in front of him. The small piece of silver was shining bright red, the jade had an emerald glow, the obsidian was in a milk-white cloud and the iron star was lost in blackness. His own arm was glowing a brilliant blue. He let his concentration wane and the auras soon faded. He discussed the process with Meldor for an hour. They then parted company.

Ludger resumed his aimless walk through the gardens. He heard the sound of a scuffle coming from behind a high growing hedge. He rushed to an opening in the shrubs. He was greeted by the sight of Nathalia and a short, round faced, blond haired girl practising a form of martial arts.

They were both dressed in identical outfits consisting of white tights and matching loose fitting tank tops. The short haired girl, which he assumed was Maria, was fighting a studied and concentrated bout that she was easily leading. Nathalia had great spirit but was fighting with her heart, not her mind. She was more often than none putting herself in trouble with her wild attacks. Ludger observed with great interest until a break in the action.

He said with a grin, startling the girls in the process.

"Your Highness, you should not attack wildly like you do. You leave yourself open for a counterattack. Use your mind, analyze your opponents then use their powers against them."

Nathalia replied with a shriek.

"You, like all of my teachers, want me to fight like a woman, delicately. I want to fight like a man, and prove myself."

"You can fight properly and survive in combat, or, as you say, like a man and end up a dead woman.

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Let me show you." He bowed to them. "Would you please attack me, you and your friend."

Ludger prepared himself. As they launched themselves at him, he used fluid movements to counter their attack and redirect their power. They tumbled away from him time after time. During all this he kept instructing them. After a time they took a break and sat on the lawn. While the women were catching their breath, Ludger, fresh as a daisy, said.

"As you both have just experienced, fighting with discipline can be very effective. It might be less exciting and the romance of fierce combat may be lost, but you will survive to fight another day."

As he continued his lecture, his concentration was put to a supreme test by the closeness of the two young women's glistening bodies. Just as the sight of their bouncing breasts under their thin camisole had distracted him during combat. He realized, as they were talking, that the only thing that he really missed from his world was his tri-weekly sessions with his sensei, Master Yakumi. Strangely enough he had not thought about the most important person in his life, his old Master, since he had entered this world.

Ludger had been orphaned when he was eight. His uncle and aunt raised him. They were always travelling and did not have all the time they should have given him. They soon realized that the boy needed direction in his life. They enrolled him in Master Yakumi's school. Ludger had been studying under the care of his sensei since then. His mind drifted back to the philosophical and technical discussion at hand.

He stood up and sparred with Nathalia. She had learned quite a bit, but was too often tempted by heroic manoeuvres. During such an attempt he flipped her over his side with a simple hip movement. He followed her fall and ended up straddling her midriff holding her wrists in his hands. He looked at her straight in the eyes. He lowered his head until their foreheads almost touched. He said to her in a stern tone.

"Your Highness, if you remember only one thing from today, please do not fight so often with your heart, use your head. I have a feeling that one day it might mean the difference between your life and death. It might buy you enough time to use a mistake of your opponent to your advantage. Please listen to me."

A deep voice coming from the edge of the clearing startled them.

"Your Highness, please listen to this man, he knows what he is preaching, for your own sake."

They quickly scrambled back to their feet. They came face to face with a tall, strongly built elf. He introduced himself as Keldor, King Valnor's Chief-of-Arms. Nathalia stormed, furiously, out of the enclosed meadow. Maria followed chuckling softly. The Princess obviously did not like to be disgraced in front of an audience.

The tall elf looked inquisitively at Ludger and said.

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"What is the trouble with the young lady?"

"She does not like loosing a fight."

"You have learned much from your sensei, Master Yakumi. He would be proud to see you teach. You have done well."

Ludger replied with disbelief.

"How do you know about Master Yakumi? I have not told anyone in this world about him."

"It is a long story. Over twenty years ago, when Magdar started to play with black magic. King Valnor was afraid that the balance of powers in the universe could be ultimately affected. Some of our best teachers searched the universe with their mind, using meditation, looking for other entities that could respond to our alarm. A few minds were reached. They were advised to prepare for an eventual disturbance in the fabric of the universe. Nothing specific was envisioned but our plea was heard.

Your sensei was one of those few minds that were reached, He told me that he was training a special student for such an eventual fight. I am glad that faith has brought this student to us."

"Are you telling me that I have been trained for this fight all of my life?"

"Not for this specific battle. But in general terms you were moulded to respond well to the challenge at hand. When Andrack unwittingly brought you to our world, you could not have been better trained to respond effectively."

This news shocked Ludger. The elf continued.

"Would you like to meet your sensei? I could try to bring his essence into me. You could train with him while I meditate."

Ludger mumbled.

"Of course I would."

The elf sat crossed-legged on the ground. He extended his arms to the sky, then clasped his hands high above his head. He brought his hands to the level of his chest. He started to chant in a strange lilting tongue.

Ludger followed suit and sat in front of the elf. He achieved transcendence. He concentrated on Keldor's aura. At first it was bright green, then it slowly changed to a shade of blue that was growing deeper by the minute. Keldor's shape started to waiver. It reduced to the shape of an elderly japanese man.

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Master Yakumi opened his eyes. An exceptional smile brightened his face when he saw Ludger. He looked around and took in the strange surroundings. He said.

"It is good to see you, Morton san. I have been told that you have been doing well in this world. You have been erased from our own. Not a trace of your presence in our world remains, except in my heart."

"It is good to see you too. Your lessons are the only things that I really miss from our world."

"Then we should proceed."

Master Yakumi touched his forehead to the ground. Ludger did the same. They stood facing each other and bowed their heads. They started an elegant ballet with a deadly purpose. The two men fought like they never had. Ludger was holding his own better than usual. At the end of the fight he managed to pin his sensei for the first time in the more than two decades they had been together.

Ludger helped him up. They bowed. As was common practice after their sessions, they sat cross-legged in front of each other and discussed the fight. After a while the talk wound down. Master Yakumi continued.

"You realize that now that you have defeated your sensei, student must become teacher, himself. I wish you good luck. Keldor assures me that we can meet again, when you come back to visit him. I am proud of you, Morton san."

Yakumi bowed until his forehead touched the ground. Ludger did likewise. After his sensei's shape filled up to Keldor's he realized, for the first time since he had entered this world, that he was here to stay. When he straightened back up, tears were rolling down his cheeks.

He thanked the elf master, stood up and bowed. He silently walked back in the general direction of his quarters. When he left the hedged meadow, he saw from the corner of his eyes two furtive shapes disappear. He did not pay any attention to them. His mind was a nest of conflicting emotions and ideas. He ran into Dregnar who was out walking Bacchus. The troll inquired.

"Master Ludger, what is wrong? You look ill."

Ludger forced a smile.

"Nothing, Dregnar, I have just finished a long workout and I feel very tired. It should pass after I take a long shower."

The troll did not insist, but Bacchus did not let this pass. She gave him a long look. She communicated sarcastically to him.

"From the look on your face I figure that you have finally realized that we are here to stay. Come on, its

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not that bad. The food is great, there is always a nice fire to relax in front, the females of your species seems to find you attractive. So what if we have to fight once in a while to earn our keep. It is better than working in that smelly city, in that noisy office of yours and... I saw that Princess, the fringe benefits are much better here."

Ludger patted his dog on the head. With the attention span typical of her species, she ran after Dregnar, who had continued his walk. Ludger shook his head and muttered to himself.

"She might be right... she might be right. But why have I inherited a dog with aspirations of becoming a philosopher?"

When he reached his tree-house, he rapidly climbed the stairs and went in. The first thing that he noticed was that his clothes had been cleaned and were laid out on his bed. He found his boots, well polished in an alcove behind a curtain. His chainmail and sword seemed to glow in the shadow of the closet. He put away his clothes, took a fresh tracksuit from his luggage and went to take a shower.

When he emerged, refreshed, from the washroom, a young maid was serving dinner on a table, by a window overlooking the gardens. Some crisp vegetables, an exotically spiced cut of meat, bread and cakes were laid out on a pewter platter. A bottle of deeply coloured red wine and a fine crystal glass accompanied the food. The maid ceremoniously bowed and left the room silently.

Amongst the objects laid out on the table was a slim volume entitled: THE WORLD ITS AURA AND YOU. An essay by Professor Meldor of Elvanor University (E.U.). Ludger smiled and put the book on the table for later reading. He sat down and proceeded to do justice to the meal.

His dinner was interrupted by a soft knock at the door. He uttered in a loud voice.

"Come in."

Maria entered the room. She was a sight to behold, dressed in a short toga of thin white cotton. Ludger could clearly see the dark buds of her nipples through the gossamer thin fabric. Maria looked down at what he was staring at. When she realized what it was, she blushed sheepishly. Ludger turned away and said in a shaky voice.

"Ergh..., to what may I warrant the pleasure of this visit."

"Master Ludger, my Mistress -Princess Nathalia- formally request your instruction in the martial arts. She would be glad to start her first lesson tomorrow morning at 07:00, in the meadow where we met today, if you would so agree."

"I would be delighted. Will you be joining us for the lessons?"

"No, Sir. Princess Nathalia wishes to be instructed alone...." She hesitated and continued in a lower tone. "Please Sir, be nice to her. Behind that braggadocious façade there is a vulnerable young woman

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that is ill at ease with herself. She does not know if people respond to her because she is a Princess or because of her true self.... I am sorry, I have said too much.... Please do not tell her what I have told you. Forget I said anything."

With that she turned and bolted out of his room. Ludger caught a glimpse of her shapely rear end as she ran down the stairs. He did not know what to make of the visit, or what had prompted Nathalia to request formal lessons. She had not seemed too thrilled with the idea, during their bout this afternoon, especially after Keldor had interrupted them. Since he could not answer these questions, he instead finished his meal.

He brought the bottle of wine to the table where he had left the book. He got himself a cigar from his case. He installed himself comfortably and lost himself in the philosophical essay. After the sun had long been set he decided to retire for the night.

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He awoke at 05:30. For the first time since he had been in this world, he performed his morning meditation and exercise routine, that Master Yakumi had designed for him ages ago. He vowed never to forget the combination of stretches and katas ever again.

Ludger entered the hedged meadow promptly at 07:00. Nathalia was there waiting for him. She greeted him with a warm smile. They sat cross-legged in front of each other and Ludger explained the philosophy of the Arts. After the preliminaries they started with basic exercises. They proceeded to actual short bouts. The lesson ended at 09:00 on a formal note. They each went their own way. Ludger returned quickly to his room to wash up and get properly dressed for his audience with the King. Shortly before 10:00, as he was hanging his sword over his shoulder, Prince Symor came in to escort him to his father.

They joined the King in the gazebo. Valnor received him in a more informal setting. He was seated at a side table and invited Ludger to join him. A servant brought them some tea. After they departed the King started.

"Dear Mister Morton, I hope that you have enjoyed our hospitality. I had a long talk with Professor Meldor and Master Keldor, this morning. From their accounting I warrant that you are a brave young man lost in a strange world. But it also seems that you have been unwittingly trained for most of your life, for such a situation."

Ludger was about to interrupt, but Valnor silenced him with a gesture. He continued.

"Due to the grave situation at hand, and the possible ramifications of Magdar's attempts at controlling this world, I have decided to grant you my help. A battalion of Royal Long-Bowmen will participate in the attack on the Gates of Doom at the appointed time. Last night I talked with your friend Balnor. He confided in me your plan to destroy the lock of the Great Dam.

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I find that campaign of yours very foolhardy and with very little chance of success. But only you can know if your technology can produce the results that you have claimed. Like surviving and crossing the Plains of Ice, climbing the tall cliffs in the Valley of Perils, or destroying the actual lock. The only major flaw in your thinking is that you will not be able to orient yourself properly in the featureless icy desert."

Valnor let the thought sink in. Ludger felt somewhat foolish at not having thought of that. Before he could say so, Valnor continued.

"To help you in this endeavour, we will bestow upon you an honour that has never been given to anybody not of elf blood. We will give you the power to communicate with the elders of the forest. This will give you our gift of orientation. We feel compelled to do so because your presence in this world is partly our fault."

"I do not know what to say."

"Shush..., nothing has to be said. We are honoured to help you. Please come with me."

Valnor stood up and took Ludger's hand. He brought him to a small clearing on the far side of the gardens. In the middle of the clearing was a semicircle of shrubs surrounding a low wooden platform growing out of the soil. Ludger was told to sit on the platform. Valnor stood at his right with his left hand on his shoulder. Queen Juniper joined them and stood on his left with her right hand on his shoulder.

A procession of officials, led by Professor Meldor, entered the clearing. Meldor instructed Ludger to concentrate on his own aura. Ludger concentrated and rapidly basked in the earthy blue of his aura. Chants rose slowly around him, remembrance of wind passing through foliage. A tall emaciated grey haired priest stood before him. The King and his Queen turned to face each others, still keeping him in their embrace. Their glowing emerald aura was touching his own cerulean one. Touches of white and ruby were streaking from his chainmail.

The priest took the Monarchs' free hands and pressed them together. As contact was made, a large flow of energy coursed through Ludger's body. It was as if a large door was opened and he was witness to an ongoing conversation held by millions of voices. The disorienting chatter soon faded to the background. A deep serenity emerged. It was a feeling of communion with the soul of the planet and of oneness with nature. Ludger's aura had settled into a medley of all the colours present around him, white, green, blue and red.

Valnor and Juniper released him and he slowly emerged from his trance. Lynor brought him a map of the realm. He told him.

"With this map and the amulet given to you by Andrack, you will always be under the guidance of the elders. Use this gift to better our cause."

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One by one the elves silently left the clearing. They left Ludger alone with the royal couple. He said.

"I wish to leave in the early afternoon. I will proceed to the Mist of Dreams to fetch my equipment. I will meet with Balnor, Dregnar and Bacchus in three days time, at the fringe of the rolling hills. He pointed to the agreed meeting place on the map. With the help of some of your trackers they will reconnoitre the area. I bid you farewell."

"We bless you, young man, may the Gods be with you."

Ludger parted company with the monarchs and returned to his quarters. When he arrived Symor was already supervising the removal of his equipment to return it to his vehicle. He told Ludger that fresh provisions would also be included. He would be back in half an hour to escort him to his truck.

Symor had not been gone for a minute, when an urgent knock shook his door. Without waiting for an answer, an angry Nathalia burst into the room. She scowled at Ludger while pacing back and forth in the middle of the room. She looked radiant in her tight fitting dark green, velvet pants and jerkin. She finally stopped her shuttle between the ends of the room and stood rigidly in front of Ludger. She uttered through clenched teeth with barely controlled anger.

"How dare you not including me in your plans for the final battle. If Arexis was here he...."

Ludger interrupted and said.

"If Arexis was here he would have done exactly the same thing as I did. We cannot put you in a position where Magdar can easily capture you. Both for your sake and the sake of the Kingdom. With you as a hostage, Magdar would be able to bargain away the powers of the King with little fear of reprisal."

With the wind taken out of her argument, Nathalia slumped in a chair. She said in a low childish voice.

"I know you are right, but I wanted so much to be part of the final assault. Also I do not want to lose my teacher so soon after starting my lessons."

She looked so cuddly and vulnerable that Ludger relented. She would accompany him to the Mist of Dreams, then to the rolling hills where she would be left under Balnor's supervision. They would stay in Elvanor during the attack. Ludger sent her to gather her belongings.

He met Symor in the meadow and Nathalia joined them carrying only a bulky, soft, shoulder bag. They walked down the tree-city to the chamber where the Samurai had been left the previous day. Nathalia threw her bag in the back. Balnor, Dregnar and Bacchus wished them good luck. They were soon on their way out of the city.

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Chapter 14

With his newly acquired talent, Ludger could see the path through the forest, as easily as if it was a marked highway. He only had to close his eyes and concentrate on the destination he wanted to reach. The conjuration of the elders would enter his consciousness like a thousand voices urging him in the right direction. When he reopened his eyes the aura of the true path was highlighted against the background. He only had to follow this path.

Slightly before dusk, he decided to stop for the night. He chose a clearing that his second sight told him to be devoid of any potential problems. All the auras were friendly. While he was gathering some firewood for the night, Nathalia remained in the nominal protection of the truck.

The weather was cooler than in the city, but winter did not make itself felt because they were travelling toward the Desert of Death, where the cold season had no hold. Ludger was lost in deep conversation with Nathalia when a sudden noise, coming from the woods, startled them. Nathalia fell, trembling, into his arms, hugging him tightly. Her face showed fear.

Unaware of their presence, a long eared wild hare hopped slowly across the clearing. Closing his eyes Ludger probed the surrounding area with the help of the elders. He found no traces of any intruders. He closed his arms around Nathalia and patted her softly on the back.

"Come on." He said. "As you can see there is nothing to fear."

Nathalia blushed and pushed herself awkwardly out of his embrace. She turned away from him, her shoulders quivering from silent sobs. He lightly touched her and she recoiled from his hand. In a slow stern voice he said.

"Come on Nathalia. Nobody can penetrate the protection given to us by the conjuration of the elders. With their help I scanned the area and nothing out of the ordinary was revealed."

He had slowly leaned toward her. He gently put his hands on her shoulders. With a gentle squeeze he continued.

"I am here to protect you. I will not let anything happen to you. You can count on this."

Nathalia suddenly turned toward him. She hugged him tightly, resting her tear streaked cheek, on his chest. He let his arms gently encircle her, while he waited agonizingly long minutes for her sobbing to subside. As he caressed her head, she said in a small, strained voice, interrupted by gasps.

"Why are you here...? Humph.... Yesterday...,humph..., I spied on you... humph... while you were with Master Keldor... humph... I saw you cry...." She remained silent until her breathing became less laborious, then continued.

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"You do not belong here. You were brought here against your will, leaving all of those you loved behind. They do not even know you ever existed.

Why, then, do you continue to help us when we are the one who kidnapped you without any chances of returning? If I were you, I would stay out of our fights, either in Elvanor or in the Mist of Dreams, where you would be out of reach of Magdar."

As she paused, Ludger was about to say that she should do the same, but he thought better of it. She continued her monologue.

"Also, why, after being thrust in this mad situation, do you show no doubt, confusion or fear? This is not natural."

Ludger thought about this for a long time, having no easy, logical answer. He gently kissed her forehead and after a long sigh, replied.

"Since I arrived unexpectedly into your world a short time ago, the rapid pace of events has prevented me to really rationalize my presence here. But I can tell you that I have never felt more comfortable than in this world. Which I am the first to be surprised of, considering the uncomfortable and deadly nature of our quest.

Also I feel at ease with this world's inhabitants. A thing that I had always had problems with, back home. I have grown to love my companions, some of them more than others." He gently squeezed her in his arms to emphasize his point. "As for fear and confusion, I have enough of them to outfit an army but..." He laughed softly. "... it would destroy my image as a hero if I would let them show."

She hugged him tightly and said.

"Your secret is safe with me."

Later Nathalia fell asleep in his arms, a hint of a smile enlightening her features.

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Ludger awoke at first light, with Nathalia still sleeping soundly in his arms. His body felt stiff from the uncomfortable position he had slept in. His right arm, on which Nathalia was resting, was numb and lifeless.

He slowly disentangled himself from her embrace without disturbing her sleep. He went to answer nature's calling and when he returned he stirred up the fire and added a few pieces of fresh wood. He removed his weapons and chainmail. Shivering in the cold morning air, he reluctantly started his morning exercise ritual.

He was in the middle of a complex series of katas when Nathalia finally awoke. She patiently sat by the

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fire, watching intently, until he finished. They ate a light breakfast taken from the supplies provided by Valnor. When they finished their tea, Ludger led the Princess in a short lesson, after which they broke camp.

By mid-morning they reached the edge of the enchanted forest. The blackened desert loomed ahead of them. Ludger consulted the map. While he was holding the small jade amulet in his hand, his concentration revealed a bluish glow over the horizon slightly west of their position. This was the blue aura of the Mist of Dreams. He also noticed a dark cloudy area roughly in their path to the Mist. He decided to investigate it, on their way home.

After an uneventful trek through a monotonous succession of burnt rounded hills, Ludger's sword handle started to throb silently where it rested on his lap. He rolled to a stop and scanned the area around them. A little ahead to their left, beyond the crest of a low hill, the dark aura of black magic clouded a hidden valley.

He took a pair of powerful binoculars from the floor behind him. He studied the area, finding nothing out of the ordinary. He decided to have a closer look. He instructed Nathalia, who was to remain in the truck, in the operation of the silenced MAC 10.

He grabbed his G3 and after making sure it was loaded, proceeded on foot to the crest of the hill. After fifteen minutes of easy climbing, using all the available cover, he reached a position where he could observe while remaining hidden. He put the binoculars to his eyes. He spied on a group of forty to fifty trolls, goblins and ogres revelling around the broken carcass of a large shapeless animal.

Ludger guessed that they were a reconnaissance party assigned to the surveillance of the Mist. He noticed that no sentries were posted. He was glad that they were as inefficient as they were undisciplined. He retreated, unobserved, from the area. He returned to Nathalia's side and when he drove off he made a wide detour avoiding the area entirely. They were at the edge of the Mist by late afternoon.

He stopped the truck with its front end just touching the thick vapours. He turned toward the Princess and said.

"As we go through the mist, it is easier if you clear your mind first. It helps in preventing any stray emotions interfering with the transition to this small enclave of my world."

She acquiesced with a nod and closed her eyes. When she reopened them, Ludger drove in slowly. There was a strange tingling sensation as they passed through the mist and they were on the path to his house. Ludger was surprised that wherever he entered the mist from, he always ended up at the same place on the path. He took in the view. Nothing had changed since his last visit, even the shape of the clouds. He assumed that time stood still or flowed at a greatly reduced rate when he was absent.

As he reached the house, he riffled through the glove compartment. He found his remote control. He keyed off the alarm and opened the right hand garage door. He drove directly into it.

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Nathalia was intrigued by the strange architecture of the house. After they unloaded the equipment, Ludger gave her a grand tour. He wanted to start the inventory of the supplies he needed and make sure of the readiness of his transportation. Nathalia wanted to learn more about his world.

He brought her to the media room. He taught her how to operate the video cassette recorder. When she had mastered the machine, he brought to her a wide array of books, magazines and tapes. He let her to her studies, as he went to work in the garage and the shops.

By early evening Ludger was done with his survey. He prepared a quick supper that he brought to Nathalia, who was still lost in her studies of his world. They both ate in silence. As they finished their meal, Nathalia broke the silence.

"You come from a strange world. The minority has a lot and clamours for more, while the majority is starving in abject misery. Also the minority, in its quest for more, is destroying the fragile environmental balance of your planet."

"You are very astute in your observations. Often the individuals are fairly benign, but as a assemblage we can become very destructive. As one of our great philosophers once said: "Its not that the idea of our ancestors climbing down the trees was bad. I think that the bad idea was to have come out of the seas and climbed up the trees in the first place.". Or something similar to that."

Nathalia laughed softly and stretched languorously. She said with a smile.

"I feel very weary and would appreciate a bath."

"I have something even better than a simple bath to propose and after, I am sure that a good back rub will vanquish that weariness."

He led her up to his suite and filled the sunken Jacuzzi with hot water and scented oils. He told her to disrobe in the dressing room. She joined him in the bathroom wrapped in a thick terry cloth robe. He ushered her into the hot water and admired her lean muscular physique in the process. She squirmed when he turned on the powerful jets, but soon relaxed with a look of ecstasy on her face.

Ludger left her, relaxing in the tub. He came back dressed in a pair of comfortable sweat pants, after having taken a long shower. He handed her a snifter of armagnac. He returned to the kitchen, where he filled a container with very hot water. He heated a bottle of scented oils in the microwave oven. He plunged the plastic bottle in the water. He returned to the bathroom, where he left it on the vanity.

He fetched a folding massage table from a locker. He set it up under some heat lamps that were recessed in the ceiling. He turned the lamps on to warm up the table's surface. Taking a large plush towel, he went to the tub's side.

He held up the towel in front of him. He wrapped Nathalia in it when she emerged, soaking wet, from

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the tub. He vigorously rubbed her dry until she took a healthy red glow from head to toes. Her skin had the winter remnants of an even summer tan. He led her by the hand to the table. He informed her to lay, face down, on it. He said in a conversational tone.

"I wonder, how a proper Princess managed to get an all over tan, like you did?"

She blushed and replied in a coy voice.

"Maria and I, always sneak up to a secluded roof top garden at the palace, to take in the summer sun. We see no harm in it."

"Neither do I. It is very nice."

Her body turned a deeper shade of crimson. Ludger took the hot oil bottle from the water and dried it with the towel. He popped open the cap and poured a generous amount of the oil, between her shoulder blades. She cooed softly as her back arched. Ludger started to massage the scented oil into her soft flesh, at the base of her skull. He proceeded to her shoulders and arms, then to her upper back. He added some oil to the small of her back and kneaded the firm muscles of her buttocks, then her thighs and calves. After a long time he asked her to turn onto her back.

He had a long look at her flawless figure. He poured a little oil in the palms of his hands and rubbed them together. He started on her forehead. He moved down to her temples then under her chin and neck. He took one of her long arms. He started at the fingers and slowly made his way up to the shoulder. He repeated the process with the other arm. He poured some more oil onto the middle of her chest. He worked it into her sternum and ribs. He cupped her heaving breasts with his slick hands until her dark nipples jutted prominently. He rolled the twin engorged nubs between his fingers as she moaned deeply in her throat. It was getting more and more difficult for Ludger to concentrate on his work.

Nathalia gasped as he poured more hot oil in the rounded hollow of her navel. He massaged the unctuous salve into her firm abdomen, to the edge of her neatly trimmed mound. He placed one of her feet on his chest and kneaded her flesh from toes to upper thigh. As he finished the other leg, Ludger noticed that the young woman was breathing regularly. She was fast asleep.

He went to the bedroom and opened the bed. He carried her limp form effortlessly to the bed. He placed her between the crisp sheets. He tucked in the covers to her neck and kissed her on the forehead. He left the room quietly.

He went down to the media room. He put on some soft music while sighing deeply. He looked out the large bay window, seeing only the mist at the edge of the decking. An idea came to his mind. He rushed onto the deck and plunged his hand into the mist trying to make contact with the Guardian.

The cosmic consciousness, that was the Guardian, was with him instantly. The disembodied voice boomed into his mind.

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"Welcome back Master Ludger." It said mimicking Dregnar's tones. "I have not heard from you in a long time. You should have sent me a postcard."

"Stop being a smart aleck." Ludger silently replied. "I need your help."

"Having trouble with the young lady?"

"No..., I just want to know if you can turn the featurelessness of the Mist, into an image of the lake that was there before. It would be nice to look at something other than clouds of cotton."

"Sure..., I'll work on it right now. Anything else you need?"

"No that's about it. I will talk to you in the morning."

In front of Ludger the mist started to coalesced into geometric shapes. Soon the cloud was replaced by the view that had originally brought him to this place. The moonlit landscape stretched in front of him. The grey hills bordered the lake, island dotted its surface. Far bellow, Ludger could see the water lapping at the base of the cliff, on top of which his house stood proudly. The air was full of the smell of pine trees. Far away cried a lone loon. The illusion was perfect in every details.

He walked back inside and switched on the outside speakers. He poured himself a snifter full of armagnac and returned to the edge of the balcony. He sat on top of the railing facing the panorama, lost in thoughts. After a timeless interval, he heard the soft patter of bare feet on the wooden deck, behind him. Long arms circled his waist and a warm naked body pressed itself against his back. Nathalia gently nibbled at his ear and said in a sultry voice.

"I thank you very much for the massage. I have never felt so good and relaxed in my life. Are you always so hospitable with your guests?"

"No..., only with the special ones."

"Have there been many special ones?"

"Since my divorce with Maggy, over a year ago, I have not met many women who enjoyed the isolation of this place.... It is very difficult for me to get close to someone. I am afraid of getting hurt."

"Come on..., a big man like you should not be afraid of getting hurt," She hugged him tightly. "Tell me, are you as good at getting a massage, as you are of giving them?"

"It depends. I received regular massages after my training sessions with Master Yakumi, but I don't believe that is what you meant. Otherwise no..., because nobody ever offered."

She pulled him off the railing and said.

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"Come, its time that somebody does."

Nathalia dragged him by the arm, up into the bathroom, where she had set up for the massage. She pulled down his sweat pants and pushed him faced down on the table. She poured some hot oil on his back, it felt wonderful. She started kneading his flesh, paying particular attention to the numerous bruised areas all over his body.

"It looks like you have been at war." She said.

"I have..., I have." He muttered softly.

Later, as she was finishing to massage his second leg, she looked unashamedly at his obvious arousal. She grabbed the almost empty bottle of oil and anointed his rigid organ with it. Ludger reluctantly stood up. He lifted her into his arms. For the second time that night, he carried her to the bed. He deposited her quivering body in the middle of it. He threw the sheets to the floor and laid down at her side.

They explored each others bodies with a passion that Ludger had never felt before. Every touch, every nibble was fraught with uncontrolled passion and excitement. They exchanged a long deep kiss and while he was looking deep into her green eyes, he mounted her. They made love with sensual urgency, as if there was no tomorrow, until they collapsed in each others embrace.

They awoke before dawn, ready to repeat the previous night's performance. Nathalia pushed him on his back. She murmured while nibbling at his ear.

"Last night you were the one in control. Now it is my turn."

She straddled his hips and rubbed her young firm body against his, while kissing him sensuously. When she noticed his arousal, she rode him until they both climaxed in a kaleidoscope of mind numbing passion. She laid panting on top of him, her body slick with a film of perspiration. Ludger hugged her until they both recovered their breath and their heartbeat settled to a more reasonable tempo. He kissed her and said.

"Your Exalted Highness, it is time for a shower, then I have some work to do."

She raised to her knees, still straddling him, and said, coyly.

"You are sure that you do not want to do it again."

"It's not the desire that is lacking, but I am getting old and I need my rest."

She did something with her hand that made him moan deeply. He pushed her off him. He said, laughing heartily, as he rolled off the bed.

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"Oh no, you don't. I don't want to become a crippled man with all of his energy sucked out of him."

He ran into the bathroom and turned on the water sprays in the shower. He adjusted their temperature. He stepped into the enclosure under the invigorating jets of water. Nathalia ran into the bathroom giggling. She joined him in the shower. She did with her hand what she had done before and, again, he moaned loudly. Ludger looked down and said with wonder in his voice.

"Your Highness, you must be a practising necromancer, you have just managed to raise the dead."

He pushed her back against the tiles. He grabbed her muscular thighs and wrapped them around his hips. He mounted her with the harsh sprays of water beating on his back.

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Later, after breakfast, Ludger explained his plan of action.

"I will travel through the Desert of Ice on a snowmobile. A machine designed to travel on snow and ice. Today I will tune the machine for the extreme conditions that I will encounter. I will pull my supplies, and extra fuel, on a lightweight sleigh.

I think that with arctic clothing, I will be able to reach the far end of the Valley of Perils without any problems. Come, I will show you."

He showed Nathalia the sleek, yellow, tracked machine. Its powerful engine would permit him to travel quickly. As a bonus the heat of the engine would also keep him warm. The thick, down filled, arctic parka, pants and boots, combined with many layers of insulating clothes, should keep him comfortable. At night he would make camp in a small one person insulated tent, heated with a small stove using solid, canned fuel.

Ludger went into the armoury. He opened a secret compartment. He withdrew two small, heavy, nylon bags and a third lighter one. The two heavy bags were filled with one inch square by eight inches long sticks of military explosive. He took one of the paper wrapped sticks of dark green putty and showed it to Nathalia. He said.

"I have been collecting military hardware for many years. Not long ago one of my regular suppliers offered me these. It was highly illegal but, strangely enough, I was compelled to buy them. I felt like I would need them in the future. A couple of these sticks would be enough to reduce this house into tinder. I think that with two bags of the stuff I will be able to destroy the lock on the dam."

Nathalia shrank away from the bags he was holding.

"Don't worry." he said. "They are only dangerous if a primary explosion, inside their mass, triggers them."

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"I do not care, be careful with this stuff. While you work, I will go back to study your world. By the way, do you have any women's clothes in the house."

Ludger replied with a laugh.

"No..., I don't look very good in them.... But seriously, there is two large suitcases full of clothes and accessories, that a young and enterprising lady had delivered here, in expectation of a long weekend of romance that never happened. They are in the walk-in closet by the bedroom. I was about to return them to her when I was brought to this world."

In a dry voice she replied.

"The poor girl never new what she missed."

She turned around and left Ludger to his work. He stowed the explosives in a sturdy nylon pack. The content of the lighter bag was emptied on a wooden bench. He sorted through the wide array of detonators that it contained. He packed a bag with electric detonators, batteries, timers, a large spool of small gauge electrical wire, a continuity tester and assorted tools and supplies. He brought the two bags to the garage.

He would travel light. Only extra gasoline, the explosives, camping supplies, MREs (Meals Ready to Eat), water and climbing equipment would be packed on the sleigh. He worked all morning preparing the snowmobile. Around noontime, Nathalia brought him lunch. She was dressed in tight fitting jeans, an emerald coloured silk shirt and high heels. She turned around like a fashion model and asked.

"How do you like this?"

"The look suits you, it is elegant yet athletic."

"Thank you, I am glad you approve."

She left him, walking away with the assurance of a runway model. Ludger shook his head, grinning. She amazed him more and more. By mid-afternoon the snowmobile and the sleigh were loaded on a small trailer. After servicing his off-road truck he backed it out of the garage. He hitched the trailer to it. He loaded a powerful radio and a directional antenna in the other truck. Nathalia came out to see what he was doing. She said.

"Where are you going?"

"Only to the edge of the Mist. I will try to contact Chargoff and tell him that all is well. I am sure that Arexis will be glad to hear the news. Also, I want to confirm the day and time of the attack, just to be sure. You should remain here, I don't want to expose you unnecessarily."

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As she climbed aboard, she said.

"I am very touched by your concerns, but I want to be the one who talks to Arexis. I have not yet given my allegiance to the new King."

Ludger fetched his shotgun from the other truck. They drove into the mist.

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Later that afternoon Ludger was preparing dinner. He was ready to leave, but did not want to camp in the Desert of Death. They would depart before dawn and try to reach their rendez-vous point that evening. The attack was to be launched on schedule. Arexis had a long talk with Nathalia while Ludger stood guard. She had spent the rest of the afternoon happily leafing through fashion magazines.

He was setting the table in the little used dining room. He usually preferred to eat in either the media room or the kitchen. He was preparing an elaborate meal composed of his favourite dishes. This could possibly be his last meal ever in a normal setting. The first course was Assetra caviar and Strassbourg paté, accompanied by a bottle of Bollinger R.D. 1973. A fish course composed of a terrine de saumon et de crevettes avec sauce aux trois moutardes would follow. It would be well complemented by a bottle of Louis Latour's Corton-Charlemagne 1987. The entrée was noisettes d'agneau à la sauce au Porto et aux champignons sauvages accompanied by baby carrots and pommes de terre Sarladaise. For this hearty dish he had chosen a bottle of Chateau Latour 1970. Strawberries Romanoff and Capucino would be served as dessert.

Just thinking about the meal and of his companion for the evening made Ludger's mouth water. He wondered where Nathalia had disappeared to. The table was finally set with pewter and delicate white and celadon bone china. Paper thin crystal glittered in the subdued light. To Ludger's astonished stare, Nathalia made a regal entrance down the main stairway.

She was clothed in a short, low cut, backless, black cocktail dress, that was moulded to her perfect body. Her long legs were clad in sheer black stockings. Her feet bore black evening pumps. A single strand of pearls adorned her neck. Her face was lightly, but expertly, made up and her shiny hair was worn straight, draped over a naked shoulder. Her poise would have made her the perfect hostess at an elegant high society party or at a royal gathering.

Ludger bowed deeply and kissed her extended hand. He said in a hoarse voice.

"Milady, excuse my casual dress. I will return shortly attired appropriately."

He rushed upstairs to the bedroom and changed rapidly into his tuxedo. After combing his hair and beard, he returned to her side. He opened the chilled champagne. They toasted the evening, that would remain in Ludger's mind, as one of the best he had ever experienced.

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They awoke before dawn, intertwined in each others arms. They silently prepared themselves for the trip, still basking in the afterglow of the previous evening. There was a certain surrealistic feel in the air during the preparations. Ludger felt that this could be the last time that he would see this enclave of his world. He was sad, but in a funny way he felt that it was time to break with his past.

They were quickly on their way to the rolling hills. Before crossing the Mist, Ludger had a last, tear eyed, look at his retreat. He hoped that he would be able to return some day.

While crossing the desert, he steered clear of the enemy's outpost, by avoiding its telltale aura. After an uneventful journey through the plains, they reached the first, sparsely wooded, snow covered hills by sundown.

Under the harsh glare of the blazing halogen lights, they reached the assigned rendez-vous point. They were greeted warmly by their friends. Soon the group was happily chatting around the roaring fire.

Lynor had thoroughly scouted the area before their arrival. No traces of any enemy patrols were found. It was soon decided that Ludger would proceed through the snowy hills alone with the elf. On their way to the Plains of Perpetual Ice, Ludger would teach him how to drive the truck. The tall elf would return to Elvanor with the vehicle. In the morning the rest of his friends would get under way for the elven capital.

The conversation turned to tales of past exploits. Ludger was happily petting his dog under the watchful eye of Nathalia, who was sitting across the fire talking breathlessly with Maria. Later that night, Ludger retired to a lone tent with Nathalia, under the cheerful stare of a giggling Maria.

Early the next morning came a tearful separation. Ludger made Nathalia swear that she would remain in Elvanor under the watchful supervision of Balnor and Maria. Balnor promised him that he would not let anything happen to the Princess.

Ludger drove off into the bleak landscape. Lynor was a quick learner. By midday he was handling the small utility vehicle like a pro. The temperature was steadily dropping as they approached the plains. When the depth of snow made their progress hazardous, it was decided that Ludger would proceed alone, on the snowmobile. They made camp for the night. Under the glow of the ceiling light, they studied the map to pick the best course through the featureless plains. Ludger would have to drive deep into the icy desert to find a way past the western tip of the Howling Mountains. This part of the journey would be the most perilous, because of hidden fissures and several precarious snow bridges he would have to traverse.

The next morning Ludger struggled to put on the many layers of his arctic clothing. He kept his chainmail over his regular clothes, but removed his side holster containing his compensated .45 to gain flexibility. He would only keep his Glock that was neatly tucked away in the small of his back. He would strap his sword, his MAC 10 and the small handrifle, that he had built on a Remington XP-100 action, to the snowmobile.

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When he exited the back of the truck he felt and looked like the Michelin man. He wore the hood from his chainmail under an insulated balaclava and face mask, to reduce the bulk under his fur rimmed hood. With the chainmail's hood he would not need the protection of a crash helmet.

With the help of Lynor he unloaded the snowmobile and hitched the sleigh to it. He shook hands with the tall elf. After donning a pair of thick insulated mittens over his gloved hands. He pressed the started button. The powerful, two-stroke engine roared instantly to life. While the engine was warming up, Ludger walked around the machine, making sure everything was shipshape. He turned toward Lynor. The elf said in a solemn voice.

"I bid you farewell. We will meet again next week in front of the Gates of Doom.... May the Gods be willing."

"Amen...."

Ludger pulled down a pair of thick goggles over his eyes. He straddled the idling machine, clipped the string attached to the kill switch to a ring on his suit and, without looking back, drove off into the deep snow.

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Chapter 15

The going was slow for the first few hours. Soon the surface became more icy and Ludger was able to pick up his pace. By mid-afternoon, after having stopped to refuel, a sprinkle of snow started falling. In the distance, Ludger could see the saw-tooth peaks of the Howling Mountains. Later he decided to make camp in the shadow of an icy ridge. It would protect him from the wind that was gathering strength.

He erected the small one man, Gore-Tex® bivy tent, in the hollow between the ridge and the snowmobile. He stuffed it with his thick, down-filled sleeping bag. He brushed all the snow off his clothes and slid fully dressed in the bag. He dragged behind him some supplies for the night. He laid out his sword and his MAC 10 beside him. He unfolded the small sheet metal stove, letting its chimney exhaust in a vent of the tent, near him. He lit a can of gelled fuel and inserted it into the stove. Soon it was warm enough around his upper body, that he was able to remove his thick mittens and his face mask.

He pulled a canteen filled with water, from under his thick clothing. He filled a small pot with it, then placed it atop the stove. He opened the outer pouch of an MRE. After the water warmed up he placed the sealed, entrée pouch in the hot water. He made himself comfortable while his meal warmed up. When the water reached the boiling point he tore open the plastic pouch and poured his meal on a metal plate. With the hot water he brewed a cup of strong coffee with the packet supplied with the meal.

He rapidly finished the unappetizing meal, while thinking about what laid ahead of him. The temperature outside had dropped to minus 70F. Tomorrow he would reach the level of the western mountains. He would have to negotiate hazardous terrain. He settled himself for the night, as he finished his coffee.

He woke up in the middle of the night. The temperature in the tent was freezing. The little stove had gone out from lack of fuel. With numb fingers he replaced the depleted can with a fresh, lit one. Outside the wind was howling fiercely. He sneaked a peak, out. A blizzard was raging.

By morning his tent and snowmobile were buried under two feet of fresh windblown snow. Ludger could not believe that it could be so cold and still snow. It took a couple of hours of back breaking work before Ludger could get under way again. By midday his pace had slowed to a crawl. He often had to stop his machine and go probe the snow ahead of him for hidden fissures, with his sword. He took the precaution of attaching the end of a long rope to the snowmobile, the other end being looped around his waist. It once prevented a harsh fall, when a narrow snow bridge broke down in front of him.

Later that afternoon, as he was negotiating another bridge, the tightly packed snow collapsed, behind him, under the weight of the sleigh. His snowmobile stood precariously perched at the edge of a deep fissure. He was being pulled backward by the weight of the laden sleigh. Only a quick spurt of power, making the studded track bite the packed snow fiercely, saved him from certain death. After he had reached more stable grounds, he drove at high speed for a few hours, putting as much distance between

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him and the mountains.

By mid-morning the next day, after another high speed, breathtaking drive, the scenery started to change radically. On his right, stood the ragged peaks of the Howling Mountains. On his left, were the more rounded mountains where the river was dammed. Between them was a narrow canyon, the Valley of Perils. He stopped for lunch at its entrance. The area was more protected from the elements and the weather was slightly better, although still arctic in character.

That night, after a careful trek up the valley, he camped close to the base of the vertical wall he would have to climb in the morning.

Dawn revealed what he had not been able to ascertain last night, in the twilight. The climb would be technically straightforward, but the frigid weather, the heavy explosives and the fact that he was alone would slow him drastically.

Ludger walked to the cliff's face and was surprised to find the rocky surface well above freezing temperature. He wondered how this was possible. He concentrated on the warm feeling. Soon the aura of white magic showed up inside the rock. It was much brighter in the direction of the lake formed by the dammed river, higher up on the cliff.

He deduced, that the trapped magic in the water was heating the solid rock. This would make his climb much easier. He put the explosives and the detonators in a sturdy pack with some supplies and equipment. He strapped his sword, the MAC 10 and the handrifle, to it. He brought the pack and another one full of climbing gear to the base of the cliff.

He removed his thick arctic clothing and packed it in the sleigh. He pulled a thick, white tarpaulin over the sleigh and the snowmobile. He spent half an hour covering it with snow. After everything was well camouflaged he walked back to the clear area where he had left the bags. He slowly stretched until he was warmed up and limber. He stepped in a full harness, then donned a pair of friction boots. He clipped a karabiner attached to a long rope to his packs. He distributed his climbing gear all over his body. After chalking up his hand he started up the vertical wall. He would use the "Z" system of self-belay. About forty feet up he anchored his rope solidly. He hauled up the heavy bags and secured them to a piton he had hammered in a narrow crack. He rappelled down a separate rope and retrieved his runners on the way back up the hill.

For the rest of the day he would climb a short span, putting runners at short intervals. He would then secure the bags' rope and himself. He would rappel down a third rope to the bags. After unhooking them from their previous belay, he would climb back up the rope retrieving the runners on the way. Once back up to his higher belay point he would pull up the bags to himself. This time consuming process, would be repeated endlessly.

By nightfall he had reached a fissure protected by a short overhang. He had progressed about two thirds of the way up. He decided to bivouac in the fissure. After hammering many pitons in its walls, he hung up his equipment. From his bags he pulled out a nylon hammock. He installed it between the walls of

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the fissure. He hung his small stove beside it. After securing himself on a second rope, he slid into the hammock. He was well protected from the outside elements in the fissure and the heat from the rock would keep him warm. All in all his makeshift camp, hanging a thousand feet over the ground, would do.

The long climb had drained all of his energy. He felt very weary. He ate two MREs for dinner, to try to recharge his energy. With his stomach full, hanging gently in the soft breeze, he slowly drifted to sleep. He had a restless night. At first his stomach was protesting at its diet of bland packaged food. Then the overwhelming presence of magic in the surrounding rocks filled his sleep with disturbing dreams.

Images of cave ghouls attacking him filled his mind. He relentlessly parried their thrust, but they kept coming back. Later he was running in slow motion, as it is common in dreams, pursued by a tall black clad man carrying an absurdly long sword. An enormous black bat was perched on the man's shoulder. Everytime Ludger was able to outdistance the man, he would appear in front of him. Making Ludger's efforts futile.

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The next morning, when Ludger started on his climb, it was as if he had never stopped climbing the night before. His body was stiff and tired. It took him at least an hour to limber up. It was past noon when he reached the summit. After he stretched his body on the firm ground, he hid the bulk of his climbing equipment under some rocks. He would survey the area prior to the attack. He retrieved his weapons from the pack of explosives, then slipped the pack on his back. After a short trek on a narrow path, he reached a good vantage point where he could study the surrounding area, without himself be seen. A pair of dark elves were walking away from him in a narrow pass. They had not noticed him. They disappeared in the direction of the dam.

A majestic vista stretched in front of him. Across the canyon, to the southwest, stood the bleak, rugged features of the Howling Mountains. To the southeast were the blackened plains of the Desert of Death. To the north, filling a hidden valley with its waters, was the Magic Lake. Its surface, glowing of white magic, was almost too painful for Ludger eyes to look at. An impressive structure of cut stones and heavy timber, blocked the near end of the valley. Its long, thick, curved wall contained the waters of the lake. The surface of the lake hovered dangerously close to the top edge of the wall. By concentrating on this area, Ludger could see the dark weaving of a black magic spell, preventing the white magic to overflow the dam. Ludger wondered how such a massive spell could be maintained at all time.

He studied the dam with a pair of small, powerful binoculars. At its top edge, centrally located on its span, stood a large intricately carved, rectangular structure. Ludger could barely see a faint seam in the dam's surface, running up to it. This was the lock holding together both halves of the dam's gigantic gate. On both side of the valley, in small wooden barracks by the top of the dam, stood guard a lone dark elf soldier.

To the east, on the horizon, Ludger could see Arexis' troops slowly approaching. The attack was not scheduled until the morning after tomorrow's. Ludger could not take a chance of planting the

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explosives until the next evening, for fear of discovery. He would have to remain hidden until then. In the late afternoon's suns, Magdar's troops started to arrive from the general direction of the Gates of Doom. The ragged looking, undisciplined troops set camp at the base of the dam. They probably would move out, tomorrow, to meet Arexis' forces. Ludger had an idea. If he could plant his mines tonight, the explosion and subsequent flow of water would eliminate a good portion of the enemies, before they would have time to move out. If Arexis' soldiers advanced all night, they would be able to start the attack a day early.

Ludger pulled out a small radio transmitter from his pack. After countless tries he managed to raise Chargoff. The General was enthusiastic about the changes of plans. He looked forward to an earlier start, against reduced forces. Ludger would blow up the lock, tomorrow morning at 05:00, trying to catch the enemy still in its camp. The attack would follow as soon as the troops could arrive to the Gates of Doom.

Ludger laid out the contents of his pack in front of him. He took the two bags of explosives and separated the sticks into seven charges. He unwrapped them and kneaded the sticks into an uniform mass. He chose seven electrical detonators. He buried each one of them, in one of the charges. Using the spool of wire he lengthened the leads to usable length. After checking for continuity with a small tester, he coiled the wires neatly and returned the seven charges of explosives to the bag. He made sure that his timer was operational and that the small lead-acid battery was fully charged. He set the tripping time for 05:00.

At 18:00 the guard was changed on both sides of the dam. The replacements had come from the pass where Ludger had spied the dark elves this afternoon. By the barracks on the near side the two new arrival exchanged pleasantries with the guard for a few minutes. Ludger learned, using his powerful directional sound amplifier, that the next change of the guard would be at midnight. One of the guards walked slowly across the dam to the far side. He changed places with the guard in the second barracks. This one returned to this side and left with the other guard.

Ludger tried to catch some sleep, for a few hours. At the appointed time the guard was changed. Ludger stayed still for another hour. The night was helpfully cloudy. He gathered his equipment and walked silently to a convenient pile of rubble, near the barracks. The guard was standing up, his back to Ludger. He was gazing at the camp bellow. When the moon made a brief appearance through the clouds, Ludger noticed through his binoculars that the guard's counterpart on the far side was sound asleep in his barracks.

Ludger pulled out a short, double edged, combat knife from his boot. Leaving his pack behind, he stealthily sneaked behind the guard. He covered the elf's mouth with his open hand and pulled him unto his upturned blade. The sharp metal found its way between two ribs, piercing the heart, while the guard collapsed in Ludger's arms. He quickly propped the elf up on a chair, making it look like he was sound asleep. Ludger checked and his actions had been unnoticed by the guard on the other side.

He retrieved his pack and made his way to the middle of the dam. The wide stone walkway made him highly visible to anybody who cared watching. Luckily his audience was otherwise indisposed, one was

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sound asleep and the other one would never wake up again. He hid himself in the shadow of the lock. The large stone structure was inlaid in the top of the dam. An intricate network of spells covered its perimeter. By concentrating Ludger could see spaces, between the lines of power, where he could place his mines. Since the moon was cooperating, by remaining hidden, he decided to proceed as fast as possible.

Ludger pulled a pair of night-vision goggles from his pack and put them on. When he turned them on, the night lit up to an eerie green glow. He placed a small collapsible grappling hook, attached to a rope, at the junction between the wall and the lock. He tested its holding powers and, when satisfied, swung himself into the void. With his grey clothes and the cooperation of the moon, he would remain hidden from any observers. After securing himself on the dangling rope, Ludger started to place his explosive charges. He would first pinpoint a weakness in the black magic field in a strategic area, then carefully mould the pliable putty to the lock. The proximity of the powerful protective spells made his hair stand on end, due to the flow of stray energy. He was very careful not to test the spell's effectiveness.

After over an hour of painstaking work the seven mines were in place. Ludger assembled all the electrical leads together and checked, for a second time, their continuity. He wired them, in parallel, to the small timer. After checking the tripping time, he taped the battery to the timer. He placed the timer on an unprotected area of the lock and secured it in place. He double checked every connection. When he was satisfied of his work, he threw the arming switch on the timer. He swung himself off the lock. When he stopped swaying on the rope, he pulled himself, hand over hand, back up to the walkway. He swung himself over the low wall and rolled into the shadow of the lock. The guard had not stirred. After retrieving his rope he quietly returned to his hiding place overlooking the dam. He would stand guard and make sure that his work would not be discovered.

Ludger installed himself comfortably. He had about two hours to wait before the explosion. He opened the action of his small handrifle and inserted a cartridge in it. He laid down the specialized single shot handgun on his rolled up nylon bag. Time passed slowly. No amount of looking at his wristwatch would make it flow faster. Around 04:30 the camp, at the base of the dam, started to stir with activity. Ludger was afraid that he might be too late. Suddenly he heard a sharp whistle coming from the barracks on the other side of the dam. The guard, there, was trying to attract the attention of his counterpart. When no response came back the dark elf paced nervously in front of his barracks. Ludger closed the action of his gun, chambering the round. He adjusted the focus of his telescopic sight. If need be, he was confident of making the difficult shot, that was at the extreme limit of the effective range of the handrifle's calibre.

As the clock grew nearer to the hour, the guard decided to investigate the lack of response of his partner. He stepped on the walkway and made his way to the middle of the dam. Ludger was following him through his scope. The guard noticed something abnormal with the lock. He leaned over it. As he was about to touch one of the protruding wires, Ludger lined up his scope's cross hairs with the head of the elf and slowly squeezed the trigger. The report was deafening in the still morning air. A red mist exploded from the dark elf's temple as he collapsed silently forward. The guard gracefully fell down the dizzying height of the dam, bouncing off its rough surface two or three times.

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At the same moment that some soldiers, from the camp, arrived at the side of the broken body to investigate, a large ball of orange flames erupted from the lock of the dam. A gargantuan roar accompanied by a heat wave followed, as the ground shook. In his hiding place Ludger was showered by debris and dust. At first he was disappointed to see that the dam was holding, despite a large breach at its top. Then, the irresistible pressure of the water responding to the law of gravity, bulged the wall at its centre. Slowly, at first, water started to trickle out of the breach. As it gathered momentum the masonry exploded outward, liberating a cataract of water and debris.

Thousands upon thousands of enemy soldiers were mercilessly swept to their death by the raging flow of water. A wall of the, magic carrying, liquid was rushing through the old bed of the river.

Ludger was very proud of his work. He watched the destruction wrought by his mines like a proud father watches his child prodigy perform for a large audience. Through his binoculars Ludger noticed that in a few hours his friends would arrive at the Gates of Doom. He wanted to be there to join them. He quickly returned to the edge of the cliff, where he had left his climbing equipment. He tied on to a long doubled rope, that was passed through a piton. He rappelled down the rope to a secure belay and retrieved the rope. It took Ludger three hours to reach the bottom of the hill.

He walked to the hidden snowmobile and pulled the cover off it. He stowed it and his climbing equipment in the sleigh. After refuelling he was quickly on his way out of the valley. Parts of the plains were flooded. Ludger was forced to follow the first slopes of the Howling Mountains. After a few hours he noticed the first signs of combat. Dwarves were fighting trolls and goblins in a narrow pass. Ludger's path was blocked by the skirmish. He pulled out his long sword and, while driving with one hand, rushed the enemy. He inflicted massive wounds as he went through the pass. He continued on his way amidst the cheers of the dwarves.

Ludger crested one last hill and discovered the site of the main battle. There was no snow in the valley in front of him. He parked the snowmobile in a hollow and gathered his weapons. He quickly covered the vehicle with the tarpaulin. He would continue on foot. In a large flat expanse of ground leading to the mountain's side, a fierce battle was raging. The King's forces were battling a mob of assailant in front of a gigantic metal gate set in the face of the mountain. Ludger recognized the silhouette of Arexis leading the troops. He drew his sword and marched in the direction of the King, joining the fight only if he had to.

Passing through a group of boulders he was confronted by a mob of trolls. He pointed his submachine gun in their direction and emptied the magazine. The suppressive fire laid carnage in the close quarters of the boulders. Letting the gun drop to the ground, Ludger grabbed his sword and finished the trolls that had not been hit by the devastating spray of lead. He retrieved his MAC 10 from the ground and reloaded it. He exited the area of the boulders carefully. He was surprised to see Balnor, Dregnar and Bacchus fighting at Arexis' side. They were supposed to be in Elvanor.

When Ludger reached the King, this one had a grim look on his face. He yelled at Ludger over the din of the battle.

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"You have done well in restoring the river, but it might be for naught. Magdar has kidnapped Nathalia. She had convinced Balnor, against his best judgment, to follow the elves into battle. Your vehicle, who was driven by Lynor, was ambushed and Nathalia was captured." He pointed to the large gates. "She is now behind the Gates of Doom."

Ludger was flabbergasted. He could not envision life in this world, without her. He was determined to save her, but his resolve floundered when he noticed the large portal slowly closing. He rushed to Andrack's side. The wizard was devastating the enemy with powerful spells. Ludger pointed to the gates and said.

"Can you do anything? Nathalia is in there."

"I will do my best."

The large wizard pointed his arms to the sky and chanted an incantation. His newly restored power flowed through his hands. A large shimmering ball of white energy formed over his head. His hair and beard stood like a halo around his face. As the gates were nearly closed, Andrack clapped his hands. The ball of energy leapt to the target. The white bolts of energy enveloped the massive doors, encircling them in a lacework of white lightnings. The doors stopped closing, hesitantly, as if caught by an inner struggle.

Suddenly Andrack's spell was broken by an internal flow of energy. A deafening roar was followed by a shower of sparks. The Gates of Doom slammed shut with a resounding thud. Its purple protective spell was glowing angrily.

Andrack, his arms limply hanging at his sides, said in a muted voice.

"Now his fortress is impregnable. I put all the energy available to me in this spell and he broke it. I do not know how he can concentrate so much energy. It is as if I was fighting hundreds of wizards using their powers, together."

Not accepting the defeat, Ludger looked around for Dregnar. He found the troll at Balnor's side. Ludger ran toward him. Without a glance at the scribe he said to the troll.

"You were once prisoner behind the Gates, is there another way in?"

"Well..., there is the abandoned mine shaft by which I escaped. It is hidden nearby in one of the passes."

"Show it to me right now. I'm going in after Nathalia."

"Master, I will accompany you with Bacchus. Without our guidance you will get lost in the many corridors."

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Ludger found Arexis. He told him about his plan. Without waiting for a reply, he left for the pass followed by the troll and his dog.

They skirted the fighting in front of the gates. Dregnar led them to the entrance of the narrow snowy pass. All was still and no traces were found on the fresh snow. They decided to go on. It was very quiet in the pass. The tall walls blocked the sounds of the combat. Shortly after they had entered, Dregnar stopped by a large boulder. He started to rock the large stone gently. As it gained momentum, it rolled aside revealing a dark hole in the ground.

Ludger turned on a small electric torch. He lit the inside of the passage. It sloped gently deeper in the mountain. Dregnar pushed him aside. He went in, followed by Bacchus. Ludger, having no choice, started after them. The troll led him through a complicated series of natural passages.

They finally reached a manmade tunnel. Footsteps and voices echoed from one end. Dregnar put a long digit to his lips and pulled Ludger by his sleeve to the other end. They discreetly travelled, making sure that they were not discovered. They hid in a small alcove. Dregnar said in a whisper.

"We are about to reach the prison area. I doubt that there will be any guards. There was none before. On the other side are Magdar's quarters."

They tiptoed through a large open area. When they heard steps coming from a narrow corridor, they rapidly scrambled behind an unlocked door. An eerie glow lit the room. Oblong, green, glowing shapes were lined up beside each other, as far as the eyes could see. Purple, neon like, tubes exited the nebulous forms and collected in a tall cylindrical, purple cloud.

When the footsteps disappeared down the corridor, Ludger turned on his penlight. An incredible sight was revealed. Glass cocoons were lined up on the floor of a cavernous room. They were linked by thin glass tubes to a tall glowing cylinder. The floor under the cocoons was made of black obsidian. Each cocoon was host to a human body. In the middle of the green glow, dressed in long silk robes, laid the emaciated shape of one of the lost wizards. Ludger guessed that he had found the secret of Magdar's powers. This was how he was able to maintain his spell on the Magic Dam over a long period of time, and was able to defeat Andrack's spell on the door. His black magic was amplified, using the wizards as conduits, and stored in the large vertical tube. It worked similarly to the way that Andrack had used him on the river.

Ludger pulled his sword. Its handle was throbbing heavily in his strong grip. Ludger scored the glass of the first cocoon with his sword tip. He rapped at the score with the sword's handle. The glass enclosure neatly split in half. The hollow cheeked wizard slowly stirred. Ludger said.

"Do you know how to open the gates?"

The man replied in a thin, dry voice.

"Yes, there is a control in a rotunda by the doors." He looked around, dazed. "Will you liberate my

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friends? There are more of us in the next room. Magdar rotates us on a weekly basis, so not to drain us entirely."

Ludger instructed Dregnar to see to the other wizards, while he cut the remaining cocoons open. When the last of the sorcerers was released, Dregnar escorted them to the gates. Ludger scored the large container of black magic. It burst open from inner pressure. Ludger was bathed in a purple glow. His chainmail grew rigid and he was helpless to move. The red aura of his mail glowed angrily while the black magic flowed aimlessly back into the obsidian floor. When the last remnants of black magic disappeared in the floor, Ludger slowly regained his freedom. His chainmail had protected him from the sudden onslaught of power. He quietly exited the room, sword in hand. He walked toward Magdar's quarters.

As he passed in front of an elegantly carved wooden door, Ludger heard the sounds of a violent argument. He could swear that one of the voices was Nathalia's. Sounds of a struggle followed. When he heard the crash of glass on the door, he kicked it with the sole of his boot. The lock broke and the door crashed open into the wall.

Nathalia was wrestling with a tall, black haired man. He was doing his best to prevent his eyes from being gouged out. He slapped the young woman with his forearm. She flew against the wall. The tall man turned toward Ludger. He pulled a long black sword from the scabbard hanging at his side. Without a pause he attacked. When their swords touched, they were showered by sparks. A grueling battle followed under the incredulous stare of Nathalia. Both men thrust and parried until they slowed down, exhausted. They were of even strength and their swords were a match for each others. Ludger had a few close calls but his chainmail saved his day. He was gaining the upper hand when he tripped over a broken vase. He rolled quickly to his back, just in time to deflect Magdar's deadly sword.

Magdar, hitting Ludger's hands with the flat of his blade, disarmed him neatly. The wizard put a foot on Ludger's chest. Holding his blade underhand, he said.

"You do not belong here and I will make sure that you will not meddle with my affairs."

As the man was about to thrust his sword into Ludger's forehead, Bacchus -who had just come in the room- jumped at his arm. Ludger managed to deflect the blade. While Bacchus was being brushed away by the man, Ludger pulled his Glock from the small of his back. He emptied the entire thirteen rounds into Magdar's body. The dark wizard collapsed into a bloody heap. Just then Arexis walked in the room, sword in hand.

Bacchus came to him and licked his face. Ludger could see Nathalia struggling back to her feet looking at him with love and concern in her eyes. Bacchus communicated silently to him.

"I told you we would have fun in this world. There is nothing like a good war to stir up the blood." She looked toward Nathalia and continued. "And remember the fringe benefits I had told you about.... Now its time for me to find a fire, I need a rest."

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Ludger let his head fall back onto the cold, stone floor. He closed his eyes and sighed.

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Epilogue

Two months had passed since the attack on the Gates of Doom. Summer was soon approaching. The kingdom was slowly recovering from twenty years of war. Magic was once again flowing through the land. The rumours of unrest in the Empire across the Sea of Dreams, were soon forgotten in the elation that followed the victory. The dark races had been banished, deep into the Howling Mountains. The only dark spot was that Magdar's body had disappeared during the commotion that followed the attack. It was said to have been taken by trolls, deep into the mountains. They could dispose of it as well as the King.

Ludger was laying in bed, at home, thinking. Nathalia's hair formed a dark metallic cloud around her head, resting on the crisp percale pillowcase. His future, in this world, looked bright. In a few weeks a double ceremony would give him the title of Duke of the Mist of Dreams, as well as wed him to Nathalia.

The day to day affairs of this world, now that the excitement of the war was gone, left him wanting for more. He was planning to explore this world in the company of Nathalia. His fiancée stirred on the bed beside him. Thinking of her always brought a smile to his face.

She turned to him, coiling her naked body against his. She rested her cheek on his shoulder and blew a stream of air in his ear. She looked at him with sleepy eyes. With a yawn she said.

“Are you still bored? Does life as to be boring to you if there is no quest to follow or damsel-in-distress to rescue?”

“I am not bored. My hands are full, as it is, of a particular damsel-in-distress that I have rescued. I am no longer in that business. I don't think that I could handle more.”

She playfully bit one of his nipples and said.

“Do you still plan to go exploring the world? We should stay in Talenthar. The nightlife is much better.”

“How do you know that? When we are out there, we never go out. You always keep me locked up in the bedroom.”

“Do you complain?”

“No..., but I am not getting any younger. You will drain me of all my energy. You still have not told me, how you know about the nightlife.”

“Maria told me. She says it is fantastic. She also showed me many other tricks.” She looked around the room and continued, whispering in his ear. “You would not have, by any chance, any soft butter laying around the room? I would like to show you one of those tricks.”

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Ludger thought that he definitively had a lot to look forward to, whether he decided to travel or not.

THE END

For Now



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