

LAND OF THE FIRST
- SERVANT OF FIRE -

EXCERPT

Simon J. Cambridge

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I

- SERVANT OF FIRE -

Kur-ur-ord Um-nalvaagei
Kur-pola Renod-doneis
Kur-logith Ao-aj-lareil
No-unka Iborn-ilmhz
No-unka Deran-od-torz
No-arka Bia-anodsii
Luj-husfam A-de-aozeis



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1

FACE OF STONE

*Doho-us Ag-sm-nisan
Nht-tolaa Ors-pir-tapol
Farpa-oth Ramas-nimin
Nissel-sag Ipaj-sosoy
Kamath-aiq Oded-nomkoh
Om-zidaiz Yolod-qasteh
Od-nochis Ipeth-drilaa*



The black stepped out of the white and into the grey beyond.

For a moment he stood, sword-sharp and dark, then he held up his hand and the white withdrew. Down it went to a single star, remote but radiant, before vanishing altogether and leaving him to the grey.

He reached over his shoulder and drew out a long stave of crystal. He held it up before him and it sang with blue fire. With a wind out of nowhere the grey fled, tumbling back, ever faster, until all its horizons were achieved. Then the wind died, the light dimmed and the stave was put back into its sheath.

He found himself now upon a low hill: one amongst many that stretched into the distances. Dead stems leaned from every slope, oblique and broken, whilst every hollow cupped a pool, all unmoving as mirrors.

A pale light began, far out beyond the hills. He turned towards it, lifting his head and watching as it grew, swelling and rising. Then it arrived.

Fire fell; water, stone and air all staggered under its weight. Slopes tilted, pools opened like eyes and the dead yearned. Fire crossed the sea of hills and shattered its sleep.

For a moment he drank of it, face raised and eyes brilliant, before turning his back and walking away, off in pursuit of departing night.

On he went, one frozen wave to the next, until the shadow of a mountain reared up before him like an island. He paused a moment as though uncertain, but then moved on again, watching carefully as it coalesced from the luminous air.

The closer he came, the clearer it came, and the clearer it came, the slower he went, and by the time it was fully revealed he had come to a complete stop.

There it was, softly painted in the early morning light, wide-flung slopes and knuckled crags glowering. He stared, scouring it back and forth with his eyes, up the slanted green and over the eroded summits. Disbelief had him, until it darkened to anger.

Black fires swirled – shadows, flames – and he glared at the mountain with blood-drenched sight. Lightning spat and thunders rumbled, but the mountain would not move. As stubborn as its ancient stone, it remained where it was as though rooted in eternity.

His eyes dulled to twin bruises of pain and he turned away. His dark fires failed and his thunders echoed down into silence. For many moments he did not move at all except for his hands, which clenched and unclenched at his sides. Then he turned about and, with a face of stone, strode towards the mountain once more.

He came upon what appeared to be a road, a dark wound slicing its way across the land. He stopped at its edges and bent low. He passed a hand across its surface, feeling with his fingertips and scratching with his claws. The road glistened, a thin film of moisture on its uneven surface, tiny stones nestling in a dark and glossy matrix. He drew back in distaste before turning to his left and then to his right, marking where the road came from and where it went. He bared his teeth at it, almost a snarl, before crossing in a single bound. He did not look back.

Further on he came to a lake. It was long and wide and it barred his way. He glowered at it, standing at its edge and staring into its depths. Then he drew out his great crystal stave and held its tip to the water. Green fire filled it and a deep discordant note shivered the air. With a cracking sound the lake froze from one end to the other. Pausing only to sheathe his stave, he strode out across the ice.

Beyond the lake there was another road, much like the first, skirting the edges of the mountain like a boundary. He crossed it without so much as a glance, and then began his way to the heights.

On the pastures that ran up to the steeper slopes there were small white creatures dotted here and there, feeding upon the abundant green. They ignored him well enough if he kept his distance, but when he came too close they all upped tails and ran. He watched them for a little while as they scampered this way and that, but then he turned to the nearest and his shadow fell upon it.

As if caught on a leash, the beast came to a sudden stop. Then it turned about and walked calmly back towards him, stopping at his feet. He looked down at it and then knelt.

The beast did not move as he studied it; instead it gazed through him, blind, deaf and dumb. After a while he stood again, looking back at the mountain. The beast, forgotten, scampered madly backwards and bleated in panic as it made its escape. Finally, at what it judged a safe distance, it stopped and turned. With rediscovered bravery it stamped its feet and snorted in indignation, but he returned its gaze with cold fire and the beast ran away as fast as it could. He stared darkly after it for a moment and then moved on.

As the way became steeper he found his path crossed by numerous small streams, all gurgling noisily through deep channels and running over half-submerged stones or dropping down soil-carved steps. He turned his head to listen to the music, but he did not linger.

Finally the ground began to level out into a long and wide expanse. To his left reared a shoulder of the mountain, a greater slope than the one he had just climbed, high and steep and studded with boulders. Beyond its guarding heights lay the main mass with its many peaks, all now hidden from view.

To his right a smaller hill crouched, crowded about with rocky walls that led up to a flattened summit. He looked at the steep slope to his left and then at the gentler incline to his right. He weighed up the possibilities and then turned away from the mountain. He would go up the hill instead.

As he climbed the wind grew steadily. A sudden gust, particularly strong, took his long cloak and billowed it out behind him like two great wings. He paused and raised his head. There was a scent on the air, the faintest of odours, and one he knew all too well. He let out a long breath. It was all part of a growing pattern.

When he reached the top he searched the ground, touching rock, fingering soil, smelling the vegetation. He placed his hand against the stone and waited. And waited. Finally he straightened and gave the hill a black look as though it had failed him in some way, then he turned to the wider land about him and looked at that instead.

There were more hills further on, long lines of them stretching into the distance, summits bowed like heads as they marched through the earth. There was a settlement of some kind, low dwellings, enclosed fields, another road. Beyond lay a greater expanse, a wider wilderness that ended at the edge of gleaming waters. It was so like, yet so unlike.

He waited a while, looking, measuring, judging, but as the moments lengthened he grew ever more restless. Finally, with one swift glance at the mountain, he made his way down again.

There was a narrow path that led down from the hill, narrow but well-trodden, so he followed it and let it lead him where it would.

The path eventually joined another, rougher and wider, flattened by many years of use. It took him by a set of fields whose boundaries were written with rude walls of piled up stone. In some places the walls had collapsed, whilst in others thin posts still held everything in place, rusting even as they constrained. He looked with distaste at the broken walls and decaying metal. Such carelessness! Such abandonment! They were like the roads he had encountered: alien, unwelcome and wrong.

He came to a field where a few large and shaggy beasts were penned. They had thick brown pelts which were long enough to hide everything but their legs, snouts and wide horns. He stopped as soon as he saw them, staring in at them whilst they stared back out, uneasy under his threatening gaze.

As before, his shadow fell upon one of them and its eyes glazed over as it trundled calmly towards him. The others drew back as far as they could and watched in fearful silence.

From beyond the wall he looked the animal up and down for a moment, before finally turning away. His eyes filled with anger as he clenched his fists and shook with fury. Was this mockery? Was he being mocked?

With its release the beast ran back to its brethren, bellowing its alarm. But when it found that it was not pursued, it stopped and stared at its summoner, eyes wide beneath its great fringe of hair. It bellowed its displeasure, a challenge perhaps, but backed further away when it caught scent of the stranger's ire. Though he had not moved, the threat of him filled the air like a storm. All the beasts huddled together in the furthest corner of the field, quietly lowing their distress, but he was already gone.

He came to the first of the dwellings he had seen from the hill and found himself a place of concealment where he could watch and wait.

The dwelling, if it could be called such, was crude. Stones were piled carelessly upon one another, knitted together by some strange species of clay. It looked haphazard, primitive and thoughtless, and it was a wonder that it did not all just come crashing down in ruin. A stunted pillar erupted from its roof and he noticed smoke rising from it. Smoke? He sniffed the air. They burned wood? His eyes flickered with a dangerous light.

He looked at the trees around him. Did they take the living for this? Did they cut the living flesh to fuel their fires? Or did they merely take of the dead, the fallen, the cast aside? He hoped it was the latter, but he did not hope too much. The deeper he entered this place, the worse it became.

How sombre his thoughts were now. He tried to distract himself by studying the trees, touching their bark and leaves, following their shape and way of growth, but it was to no avail. They, like everything else, only added to his misery. Like the beasts and the land, the trees were close, so very close to what they appeared to be, yet they lacked in some way. They had the shape and the feel, but there was an uncertain quality to them, as though they aspired to something more but did not know what it was.

The door to the dwelling opened and the occupants emerged. He turned to watch them. Here it came, the final test. Let him see the masters of this world and then he would know how far this went.

Though they seemed familiar at first – their features and the way that they moved and gestured – there were differences also, and he found them as disturbing as he had everything else.

For one thing they were far smaller than he had imagined, and their skin was entirely the wrong colour, as was their hair. Their features were of the right kind, but everything was either subtly out of place or the wrong shape entirely. Looking at them now one might consider them little more than crude copies perhaps, but

underneath, below, they were other. He could feel them – unfocused, minds darting this way and that, uncertain even of their own desires.

Suddenly he saw it. This was not mockery so much as memory. He stood in the presence of children, still growing and discovering, unaware as yet of who they were and what they were; the new following the old, remembering but not knowing what it was that they remembered. He had come to a realm of shadows.

He watched as they left in a noisy vehicle of peculiar design. Now it was himself that felt wrong – alien and out of place. He smiled. That, at least, was easily remedied.

He clenched his jaws and folded his arms across his chest. His eyes burned and dark fires erupted. As if suddenly mutable, his clothing and his body rippled. His hair shortened, all but vanishing back inside his head, whilst his height lessened and his skin changed hue. His cloak shrank against him, his armour vanished and in moments he had assumed the likeness of those that dwelt in this place, shrinking, weakening, diminishing as he folded his dark light away. But he could not erase himself entirely. There was still a shadow in the spaces he occupied, and the light of his eyes would not be dimmed.

He unfolded his arms. It was done. Now, to all intents and purposes, he was one of them. He would walk the ways of this world and see what he had come here to see, and though he might now have their look, he must never sink so far as to forget who he was. That would never do. Let the purpose that had brought him here define him only until it was done.

He walked the narrow road from the dwelling all the way to its end. There was a great tongue of water to his left, flat and wide and glistening. Crossing it was a low bridge, a great sweeping curve of stone. Up ahead and to his right lay a scattering of buildings, peaked roofs poking up between tall trees. Seeing them he felt the stir of thoughts coiling in his mind. The world about him was waking up, its children rising from their slumbers, their dreams departing in a blur of forgetfulness as they prepared to go about the day's business. He walked on and went to join them.

She stared at the crowded shelves but wanted nothing of them, nor of anything else that was here. Yet here she was, compelled to remain and resenting it bitterly.

Every few days she came quietly out from her hiding place to collect her due, a brief moment in the light before returning as if to await the next excursion. It was her only rebellion, the only time she rattled the bars of her cage. But no one noticed. She had hidden herself far too well.

Not so long ago she had been free, able to walk the world without constraint. Then she had been beyond all bounds, set apart and revelling in her differences. Now she was trammelled by them.

All lives are shadowed by how they begin, and hers had begun as mystery. Found in a doorway, placed there by persons unknown, there was no clue as to her origins, just a new-born child wrapped in some blankets.

She had been fostered out to a good home and loving guardians, but the seal on her life had been set. She was different and she knew it.

At first she attracted attention. People would stop and stare. "Such a beautiful child," they would exclaim, a tumult of questions following. There were no answers though, or none that might satisfy, and rather than fuelling the fires of their curiosity her very silence doused them. So it became the tale of her childhood, of ever-growing distances, her mystery a wall about her and impenetrable to others.

By the time she came to full flower she found herself walking through her life as though through a parting sea, its waters rearing up about her before closing in again behind whilst its startled denizens stared back at this strange apparition that suddenly loomed in their midst. And though they might follow her with their eyes, none would dare to cross her boundaries, for her wall had grown as she had and now was a circling power, a warding shield to keep the world at bay.

Untroubled by the troubles of others, it seemed she could do as she pleased, but there grew a feeling inside, a sense that became ever more certain as time moved on, that this was not what she was meant for, that this was not where she was meant to be.

There were fantasies, of course, that another life awaited her, that somewhere else was a place to return to, a place where she truly belonged. But she had never found it. Instead she remained gloriously alone and untouchable.

So came the cage when all was revealed as conceit. How naive she had been to think that the world could not touch her. It could. Breaking through her barriers it casually undid her life, turning fantasy to nightmare and forcing her to flee.

He walked through the settlement, following the gently rising road. He watched the people, the few that were up and about, and wondered what it was that he would find here.

A door opened to his left, a little way ahead. He gave it a glance, the briefest of looks, but when she stepped over the threshold he stopped in his tracks. He stopped and he stared and he saw her, saw who she was, exactly who she was.

He watched as she paused to pull her heavy clothing about her, protecting herself against the chill air, and that movement, that simple act, filled him with more hope and despair than he had ever known in his life.

Of all the things he had ever expected to see, she was the last of them. Neither could he be mistaken. Though all else might be a shadow and a sham, in this he was certain. It was her. She was here. She had come again, into this strange place, this shallow resurrection. But how could that be?

He had seen the others here, seen them in their entirety, their crude clay the merest promise of what was yet to come. But now here she was before him, walking amongst them like one of the first. How was that possible?

He had no answer. He had been warned that he would understand when the

time came, but he had disbelieved it as he had disbelieved so many other things in his life. Now he had no choice. This changed everything.

Her eyes wandered in his direction. Was she going to see him? He panicked. He was not ready for this. He needed time.

"Do not see me," he told her with his mind, his thoughts falling against her like a wall. *"Do not see me,"* he commanded. *"Do not see me at all!"*

But even so, for the briefest moment – the very briefest – she defied him as though she was still his equal, her eyes catching his and widening in sudden shock as she met his gaze.

He staggered. Was that recognition? Was that accusation? But then, just as quickly, she succumbed and turned away as if nothing had happened at all.

He remained where he was, rooted to the spot and unable to move.

The taste of her, the taste of her thought, was like a knife through his heart. She was exact, brilliant in every detail, a brightness that tore his shadow to shreds. The sense, the touch, the very touch, it was all there, all inside her like a flower awaiting its opening. He watched in broken darkness as she walked away, and then tears fell from his eyes. Nascent fires threatened the circling air and it was all he could do to keep himself from burning to ash.

Should he follow? Should he dare her presence once more? Could he even? He closed his eyes and shook. This was the worst of all, and yet the most wonderful.

He could ignore the mountain, the land, the beasts, the smell of the air and the shape of the trees, but he could not ignore her. Once more Obelison walked beneath a sunlit sky. That she was here meant that he should be here as well. It was fate, written in stone, and on this all would be saved or damned.

He let out a long and shuddering breath. He had thought that he had understood what it was he was meant to do, but clearly that was no longer true. His purposes lay shattered at his feet.

He slowly calmed himself. He would follow her and see where this would go, so he wrapped himself about with shadow and illusion and vanished from the day. Then up the street he went, waiting for the moment when he could act and reveal himself at last.

He watched as he followed; everything that she did, from the way she brushed back her hair to the way she placed her feet upon the ground, it was all as familiar to him as were his very own hands.

Deep she was, pale and beautiful and lit from within with that self-same fire that long ago had claimed his heart. Obelison was written within her with words even a fool could read. There lay the perfection, the grace and the beauty, once born of long-vanished Uriel.

Her hair was just as black, and whilst not so long it still covered her slender neck like a gleam of midnight. She was tall also, far taller than the others that dwelt here, but then how could it be otherwise? She was not as they. She still possessed that

beauty, that perilous beauty from before: a form beyond forms, a proportion beyond proportions. He had only to look at her to see once more that wondrous grace he thought never to see again in all the Bright Heavens.

There were differences though, many of them. Being born of this world she had been marked by its taint. Her skin was not the right colour, though it retained a glorious paleness nonetheless and was just as peerless. Her ears were wrong and the tips of her fingers also, but that meant little to him. One look in her eyes told him everything that he needed to know. No other spirit could fill them so. He could drown in them for ever and never again see the light of day. He could die at her hands now and call himself blessed. So he watched her in all her ways, and burned.

At her house, still swathed in shadows, he waited beside a low tree heavy with dark-green foliage.

It bothered him somewhat, that tree. It had a strange, unpleasant smell, something he had not come across before. He fingered the rough black bark and glanced at the thick green needles and the sparse red fruits that dotted the branches. He grimaced. They smelled of poison and death. Why have such a dark and morbid thing here? He felt a sense of foreboding. Obelison would have dwelt amongst drifts of bright flowers, amongst the tall and the shapely. She had liked the air and the light, not stifling shadow. She would not have borne this dark and crouching thing. Had he fooled himself? He turned from the tree to the house, trying to summon up the courage to approach its single door, but he could not move, not yet. Something told him that the time was not yet right.

A grey vehicle, another of those primitive mechanical devices, larger and more intimidating perhaps, entered slowly through the gate. It made a wide circle and came carefully to a stop. A confusion of thoughts tumbled briefly from inside before one of the occupants emerged, all in grey like his vehicle. Looking neither left nor right, the stranger walked smartly up to the door and knocked three times upon it. The others in the vehicle remained where they were, hiding themselves from view. He reached out with his mind, but their tumbling thoughts were oddly muffled, almost as if they had folded themselves away inside. He frowned. What strange play was this?

The door was a moment opening, but even as its locks were lifted the stranger threw it wide with brute strength. He crossed over the threshold and grappled with the opener. It was her.

She fought back, and if the stranger had been alone she would have been successful, but others leapt from the vehicle and were soon upon her. Too many hands came for her, and she was held down and overpowered. Then they slowly dragged her back to their vehicle.

He could not believe it. They were attacking her? Was this supposed to happen? His anger rose up like wildfire and he snarled. How could these crude brutes even dare to touch her? He needed no further goad. He stepped out of the shadows and

let his anger speak.

The first she knew of it was a rush of darkness. Her assailants were thrown aside and she was suddenly on her feet again, though how it had happened she had no idea. She stared about in bewilderment. Her attackers lay scattered before her, three of them, all sprawled upon the gravel, faces identical with pain and shock. They were staring, mouths slack, eyes wide, but they were not looking at her.

Now she felt it. There was something behind her, at her back, something hot. For a moment she could not turn, dared not even, but when the hand was laid upon her shoulder she had no choice. Then she looked and instantly froze where she stood.

It towered over her, dimensionless, pale fires in the darkness, threatening wings of air. She could not see and yet she could. A great statue, wreathed in light and shadow. There was a face, a pale face carved of fury, but like no face she had ever seen before. It was as though stone had come to life, beautiful stone, perfect stone. If ever the powers had descended, if ever they had clothed themselves in substance, then surely here was one of them now, immortal spirit caught in imperishable flesh. Living stone stood behind her, Heaven's will set upon the world and filled with its avenging wrath.

She looked at the hand upon her shoulder. It was beautiful and luminous and she caught a fragrance, the scent of it, something delicate and wild. The hand gently squeezed – reassurance, a moment of warmth – and then the statue moved.

It raised its other hand like a judgement, holding up a long shaft of crystal filled with yellow flame. The statue lowered the shaft towards the nearest of her attackers and there came a sharp sound like a distant bell of ice. A heavy flicker of air fell from its tip, a glistening shroud that enveloped him from head to foot.

There was not time enough even to scream. Instead he silently shrank into himself, head, limbs and torso, all curling up into each other as he was crushed down into a ball. But the shroud did not stop; it continued all the way and he continued with it: compressing, shrinking, bones popping, skin bursting. Nothing that was his escaped. As the shimmering cage of air shrank, so did he, too – his features blurring, geometries simplifying, until everything that he was, his body, his flesh, had fallen to a single point. Then he quietly vanished away and nothing remained of him at all.

She stared at the sudden vacuum in disbelief, not daring to think what it was she had seen. She stood now in a still place whilst events about her went whatever way they would.

The shaft of yellow fire moved again and the others were quickly touched. With every touch came that bell of ice and a shroud of crystallised air to crush silently whatever it touched to nothingness. A sense of horror began to grow inside.

The large grey vehicle roared and started to move, its terrified driver only now beginning to understand his peril. But the great shaft of crystal was already there

and it touched the vehicle even as it spun around to leave. Covered in its entirety, the vehicle came to a full stop as though it had run into a wall. For a moment it shivered, daring to deny its fate perhaps, but then it compressed as well. She caught a brief glimpse of the driver silently shouting at his window, fists pounding against the glass as if he were drowning inside, but then the vehicle folded up around him and he vanished under shattering glass and bending metal. Soon all was crushed from sight and only she and the statue remained.

She stared about her in utter dismay before glancing back at the statue. She had been wrong. Here was no angel. Here was something else entirely. This was one of the fallen instead, darker by far and irredeemable.

The statue looked back at her with eyes of seeing flame and its sight went through her, through her walls, through her horror and dismay. It turned about inside and revealed her thought to itself. It saw what she had seen, saw it through the filter of her comprehension, and the revelation all but undid it. Its flame guttered on its hungry wick and its fiery eyes darkened and shed tears of regret instead. Contrition and grief filled it up: great contrition, greater grief. For a moment it bowed before her as though for forgiveness, and then it turned about and fled.

It moved so quickly that she could not follow, not even with her eyes. In mere moments it had gone and she was alone again. But was she? There was something still inside her, a presence, as though a connection had been made, and there was a peculiar sense to it: a sense of the familiar. But where had she felt this before?

She sat in her accustomed chair and shivered, rubbing her shoulders for warmth. What had just happened? What had she just witnessed? Though it was all there in her mind, every single thing, its meaning eluded her. She even began to wonder whether it had not all been some waking dream, some terrible waking dream.

She started. That was it. She had it. It had been a dream, but it was her dream, pulled from her head and out into the real world. She had been in peril, in peril from the grey, and a protector had come to save her.

The dream first appeared just after she had hidden herself away. To begin with she thought it nothing more than her hopes and fears given form, but then it had come again and again, as though she was being told something. Now she could guess what it was.

The dream would start with fear. She would be in danger, grey horrors pursuing her through some fog-bound labyrinth of broken stone. They waited around each corner, lurking in the shadows or crouching behind the walls. She never caught them clearly. A brief flicker of claws or a brief flash of teeth were all she ever saw. Beyond lay only suggestion and shadow.

Eventually her saviour would come, swathed in potent darkness, a great sword of fire in his hand. Into the shadow he would go and the horrors would flee. Then he would return to her and he would comfort her, shielding her from the world, his

arms about her like a wall. Leading her back up into the light he would speak softly to her with words she could never remember when she awoke. But she knew that they were wonderful words of reassurance, gentleness and truth. Though it would start in terror, it would end in bliss with her clasped in the arms of her saviour, the world about them fading into twilight and a crown of ancient stars above like a blessing.

But the dream would not allow her to linger, and with every recurrence the terror seemed to swell and grow whilst the bliss seemed ever more fleeting. She longed to stay, to tarry with her saviour and escape her predicament, but it was almost as if the world had other ideas, closing in over her head and slowly drowning her hope.

She thought again of that face, a thing never seen before in life, so perfect, so still like living stone. Then she thought of what it had done and the old admonition came back to her. Be careful what you wish for. Her protector was not what she had thought it to be. Instead it was some untamed thing, acting in her stead with all the appalling power at its disposal.

She thought of her assailants and shuddered. They had come to her with violence, but a greater violence had taken them in its turn. What terrible force had crushed them from the world? Four people, four of them, had suddenly ceased to exist right there in front of her, right there before her eyes. The memory was cruel in its detail, brutal and appalling. Whatever power it was that had enfolded them, it had been merciless.

Should she tell someone? Should she call for help? Should she tell her tale of assault and rescue? How could she, though? Her assailants were gone, along with her protector, and she had no proof that anything had happened at all. They would look at her as if she were mad.

But four people had died. Four people that had once lived in the world lived in it no longer. That would be noticed, wouldn't it? But that, too, was hopeless. Who would admit that they were gone? They had attacked her. Who would admit to sending them?

There was an answer, an obvious one, but she did not like it. There was one person she knew of that was capable of such an act, and he was the reason she had hidden herself away in the first place.

From the moment their paths had crossed he had pursued her with a will, her unseen shield powerless to stop him. He sent her gifts and she sent them back again. He followed her and she eluded him. He turned up in places she did not expect and she ran from him. She resorted to the law, and though he bowed before it in public she knew that even in this he would not be dissuaded. His last promise to her confirmed it. Someday he would have her. Someday, near or far, she would be his.

Now even her wall seemed to work against her. It was almost as though he was in there with her, caught inside, within a place denied to all others; and as her wall

kept out the others, it kept out their help as well. She was on her own.

So she enacted her final sanction, collected up the pieces of her life and hid herself away as deeply as she could. A new life and a new identity, but even in this she had clearly failed to escape him.

Single-minded, obsessive, he knew no bounds. His wealth the engine of his desire, he knew how to get the things that he wanted. She had been a fool. Seeking her out would be child's play to him. She felt again that stifling feeling she had always felt in his presence, of being held down, unable to move and constrained by unbreakable bonds.

Now, though, a protector had come and the bonds had been broken with a single touch. But what exactly was it that had stepped into her life?

He walked to the centre of the bridge, full of sorrow and racked with grief. He looked up at the mountain but did not see it; instead he stared into his depths.

He had acted without thought – it had ever been his downfall. He had been warned so many times in the past, warned not to let his passions rule him, but he had not listened. He had never listened. Once more he found himself surrounded by his failings as if by a great wall of shame.

He could see the mistake now. For all its crudity this land was a far gentler place than he had at first thought. Death by violence was rare. He had come to an island of order set within a turbulent sea and had judged far too quickly. The slaughter he had committed was considered a crime here, but what could he have done? They had attacked her! The answer though was obvious. He could have put them down with his hands and his feet, not his indiscriminate power. There had been no need to kill.

He saw himself again through her eyes, the terror of him and the brutality. That was not what he had intended at all. He should have paid more attention and looked rather for meaning or understanding.

The language here, both the word and the thought, now hummed in his mind. He listened to it with far more consideration than he had before, as he should have from the very beginning. But then it had all seemed like a tangled chaos and he had been far too impatient to try to unravel it accordingly. Impatience! Acting before the time was ripe, jumping to conclusions. It had ever been his fault.

He felt again that sense of return, that dark feeling that the heavens repeated themselves, great cycles of time turning and turning again. He had been down this path before, mistaking the signs, acting without consideration. Now, perhaps, he had one final chance to put things right. The heavens did not offer up such chances blithely.

She gazed out at the world beyond her window but hardly saw anything at all. On a clear day one could see everything from here, from the mountain to the far hills and all the way to the sea, but her mind was filled with the image of a living

statue: a fallen angel caught in stone, impossible powers at its beck and call.

Perhaps she had judged too harshly. After all, she had been in danger. Who knew what would have happened if her abduction had been allowed to continue. For all its brutal perfection her protector was still one of the numinous, and surely, surely, it knew more than she did. Perhaps she need not fear. Perhaps this was her way out.

As if summoned by her thought, she suddenly noticed an unaccustomed shadow on the road over the bridge. There was someone down there, alone and indistinct, standing somewhat near the middle. There was nothing else in view, and both the bridge and the road were clear of traffic.

She looked down at the lone figure. How still it was and how unmoving. There were no dimensions to it at all. Was it her mysterious protector? Her breath caught in her throat.

Suddenly reckless, she resolved to find out. The admonition still rang in her mind, "*Be careful what you wish for,*" but she ignored it. She had to know the truth, she had to.

She ran all the way to the bridge, heart beating furiously, hope and fear indivisible. The shape was still there, standing against the parapet and looking towards the mountain, so she stopped a little way off and gathered up the shredded fragments of her courage. Then she approached.

She made her way forwards slowly, carefully, as though towards some wild and wary beast that would flee the instant it saw her. But the shadow shape made no move to leave; rather, it stayed where it was and gazed up at the mountain.

It was tall, very tall and broad, a face of clouded stone above featureless clothing. Even its feet were rumour. There was a wind, a breeze coming down from the mountain, but it passed the tall shape by and seemed powerless to disturb it. It was as she had first seen it, a statue given life, and yet it was more than that now. Something else lay under its pale stone, something warmer, the faintest hint of mortality.

There was a scent riding the air, the same one she had noticed before – delicate, elusive and just out of reach. She thought of flowers, a wreath or crown of blooms, but there was nothing that she could see.

Then it seemed as if she crossed a boundary, for the scent suddenly swelled and the statue moved at last and she could see him. He turned to face her and she stopped in her tracks.

She could see his features, see them fully, and yet they were still veiled to her eyes. His countenance was a mask for something else, she thought, but that was enough. His face that was not a face took her breath away. The sun was suddenly full upon it and all she could see was beauty.

Impossibly perfect, impossibly strong, here stood stone that walked the earth: older than man, older than life and mightier than both. He was as beautiful as in her dream, but here in the light it was a far more terrible beauty, too wonderful, too

proud, too sad, too grim. Too much.

The mask shifted a little, softening perhaps. His fine mouth curled slightly into a smile, but it was a sad and regretful smile, the only line in an otherwise unlined face. His eyes were old and filled with time, a deep and curiously gentle darkness from which she suddenly found herself unable to look away. The brutal memory of what he had done was almost forgotten as she gazed up at him, but it did not vanish entirely. It still sat, like a dark warning, at the back of her mind.

"Who are you?" she dared.

He did not answer.

"Who are you?" she repeated.

He still did not answer, but his eyes shifted and sharpened. They peered through her as though they saw something else inside more worthy of their consideration. It was almost as if she was not there at all, that something else occupied the spaces she inhabited, moving as she moved: something of far more consequence. She did not like the inference.

"Who are you?" she demanded, surprising herself. She was actually angry.

"Three times is the way of it, after all," he murmured.

His voice was deep, abstracted, a rush of sound like the slow fall of an avalanche. For a moment he seemed to tower over her, his eyes swelling with force. She backed away, ready to run, but then he retreated and dropped his gaze. She caught a brief glimpse of contrition, before it vanished again into the shadows. He sighed and his face became stone once more.

"I am sorry," he said. "I misunderstood. When I saw them attack you I did not stop to consider. I was angry and acted without thought. I am sorry."

Now his voice was darkly musical, like no other she had ever heard before in all her life. She thought of all the voices and all the accents she had ever encountered, but none of them came close.

"Who were they?" he asked. "Why would they wish you harm?"

"I don't know," she answered.

He looked at her as though he saw deeper, saw guesses, saw truth, but she did not want to pursue that line of questioning. She wanted to know about him. She waited a moment, gathering strength. Her next question would cost her.

"Why did you do it?" she asked. "Why did you rescue me like that?"

His eyes sharpened further. Did he understand this also?

"Perhaps I was wrong," he said. "Perhaps I should leave."

He looked away. She stared at him.

"But why?" she asked.

"I had no right to do this," he replied. "I had no right to interfere again."

Interfere again? This had happened before?

"But you saved me!" she said. "You came here to save me! Why? What am I to you?"

He looked back again. Now his eyes were fiery and they were hard to meet.

"What are you to me?" he asked. "Is it really your desire to know? Is it? For if I were to answer you fully, it would change your life for ever. Is that what you want? Do you truly want to know what you are to me? Sometimes ignorance can be a blessing. You have a life here. I do not."

She looked down. She could not look at him and think at the same time. 'It would change your life for ever!' he had said – and there was the promise. Wonders, marvels, possibilities filled her. Maybe this was her chance. Maybe this was the doorway that would take her on to the places she belonged. She shivered and pushed her fear back down. He was more than the darkness, she was certain of it. She would take the chance. She looked back at him and dared the fire.

"Yes," she told him. "I have a life here, but it is not the one that I want. So if there is a way out, I want to know what it is."

He looked at her strangely and the fire dimmed.

"You do not want your life?" he asked.

She shook her head.

"No, that is not what I meant. I meant..."

She floundered. She could not think of the words. He continued to watch her, his stone softening once more.

"I understand," he intervened. "You mean your life as it is. But that is why I am here. The mistake I made, the slaughter I committed almost made me leave, but I was compelled to stay. I cannot leave this place whilst you are in danger."

He waited while she gathered up her thoughts again.

"What are you telling me?" she eventually asked.

He sighed.

"There is no easy way to answer such a question," he replied. "But even so, an answer must be given." He looked at her and his face gentled further. No longer stone, he was flesh and blood now. His eyes lost their fire and became dark and sad. "You have the face and the form of someone I once knew," he continued. "Seeing you, I wished to speak to her once more before the end. I had hoped for understanding, maybe even forgiveness, but perhaps it was a vain hope. Perhaps you do not remember her. She died long ago."

She went still. She felt a shiver deep inside like the sudden touch of infinite cold. She thought of tombs, of burials and the long, slow sleep of death. It was as though he had awakened such a memory in her, the memory of her very own ending. She shook her head. It could not be true, could it? But her old fantasy of having come here from somewhere else rose back up into the light and now she wondered if she was who she thought she was at all.

"You think I am someone else?" she asked him.

"No," he answered. "You are one, a single soul. I sought only memories."

"Memories?"

"Of other times, other lives. Sometimes they linger."

"They linger?"

"Sometimes we are not washed clean by death," he told her. "Sometimes we remember feelings, visions and voices. Sometimes a face brings it back, sometimes a name."

Did she agree with that – to have lived before? But he said it with such certainty. She looked at him, searched him, but he remained as occult as ever, perhaps even darkening a little as he spoke of death. It was as though he coloured the air about him with his moods.

"What are you?" she asked at last. It was her only possible question. He looked back at her as if he fully understood what it was she was asking.

"What do you think I am?" he asked.

"I don't know," she said.

"But you have guesses," he returned. "Before, when you were attacked, I saw your thought. You saw me then as one of the powers pulled down into the world from on high. But I am not that. Like you, I was born. Like you, I am mortal."

"But the things you can do," she said. "You were in my mind. I felt you there."

He sighed, and his hands made a gesture she did not recognise. They came together, palm to palm, and then parted widely.

"Perhaps we should begin again," he said. "Perhaps we should start with our names, as when two strangers meet?" He paused a moment. "So here is mine," he offered. "At the time of naming, I was given the name Korfax."

His eyes intensified as he said this, flickering over her face, searching and seeking. And as he waited, so did she, waiting for recognition and tasting the name as it echoed through her mind. But there was nothing there, nothing at all.

She looked back at him. 'At the time of naming', he had said. Such an odd way of putting it, but it seemed to fit somehow. Now he was watching carefully. Did he want her to remember his name? She suddenly felt distrustful. He could get in her mind, so who knew what else he could do? She decided to stall.

"Just that? Korfax? Nothing else?"

Was that a glint of surprise she saw? Or was it a trick of the light? She could not tell. He masked himself far too well.

"No," he said. "Once I had both titles and family, but they are no more. Time and tragedy have swallowed them both."

His tone was curiously mild now, but she was not deceived, or so she thought. He wanted her recognition at the very least.

"Titles? What titles?" she asked.

He drew himself up slightly, straightening his shoulders. Was that pride she saw now? Again, she was not entirely certain.

"I had titles once, many titles," he told her. "I was born Noren, destined to become Enay. I achieved Geyad and then became Geyadril. Once I was honoured with the title of Meganza, but in my heart I was ever Faren Noren Korfax, my first title, my first name, the one gift that remained and never changed inside. My memory goes back there when it can."

It was almost as if he had just announced himself, as though his strange titles were momentous and that she would know them. But she did not. Noren? Enay? What words were they?

The light in his eyes intensified as they flicked across her face, but finding nothing to their satisfaction they quickly dimmed again. Was he disconcerted? Had she confounded him? But what could she say? She truly did not know the words.

"Perhaps I should offer a translation," he suggested. "To you, 'Faren Noren' might mean 'Heir to the house of following'."

His eyes darkened as she waited.

"You do not recognise them?"

"No," she said, but that was no longer entirely true. It was only now, now that she understood the meaning of the words, that a curious feeling began to grow inside. She felt a sense of time, of ages long gone, as if something born in the dim and shadowed past had been brought back into the light once more. Now she was the stranger here, not him, as though some elder world had supplanted her own, a world she had once known and whose rules she had since forgotten. Korfax inclined his head, his eyes steady as they held hers. Did he see her? Did he already know what she had only just seen?

"Well?" he said. "You have my name. Where I come from many would consider you to be in my debt. Simple courtesy requires that you give me yours, at the very least."

He gestured at the land, at the mountain.

"So tell me," he said. "How are you called in this place and time?"

In this place and time? There it was again, that sense of ages past, and with it a feeling of profound self-consciousness, only this time it seemed that she had suddenly been transported into a great hall filled with many hundreds, all of them gazing at her in expectant silence.

She thought of her name. That was difficult. She had a new name now. Should she give him the old or the new? She weighed the two in her mind and a strange question came to her. Who was she? Who was she really? Was everything about her a lie? The thought unsettled her so much that she almost didn't answer.

"Helen," she said at last, giving him the new.

He looked at her sharply for a moment as if he knew, or had guessed, even this.

"Just that?" he asked. "Helen? Nothing else?"

Was he mocking her now?

"No," she said, "my full name is Helen MacLeod."

He smiled, but she did not trust it.

"Helen MacLeod," he mused. "That has a music to it. What does it mean?"

Music? And what did he mean by that? This had become as strange a day as any she could ever remember. Abductions, pale statues wielding shafts of light, brutal slaughter and now the import of names! What had suddenly stepped into her life? She looked at him. He was waiting for his answer.

"Helen means 'The Bright One'," she answered.

"I like that," he told her. "That is a wonderful name to be given. But what of MacLeod, what of that?"

Helen felt even more self-conscious. What could she say? 'Mac' meant 'son of'. How could she tell him that?

"Well, MacLeod means 'of the family of Leod'," she offered, hoping that he would not see the shift of emphasis. He appeared not to notice.

"So I was right," he said. "We are closer than I had at first thought."

"Closer?"

"Leod is your house. Does it have a proud history?"

"I believe so, but you have never heard the name MacLeod before?"

"No."

"Then where do you come from?"

She regretted the question as soon as the words left her mouth. So stupid! She would have cursed herself for it, but he clearly did not think it stupid at all. He looked up at the sky for a moment and then looked back at her.

"Distant lands," he said, and Helen felt a sudden chill. How distant? How far had Korfax come to be here? Suddenly the world seemed to shrink about her, dwarfed by the power of two simple words. Distant lands!

She watched him again. The mask was still there, like a cloud about him keeping the world at bay, but now she understood this at least. That was how she lived her life. Like knew like. And with that understanding, and everything else she had seen, she finally saw in his depths the need to trust, the need to know that what he saw was true. He doubted, just as she did.

Seeing it all, and in a single glance, she decided that she would take the next step. It was time to put away her doubts, time to risk all on a single throw and see if what she had wondered all her life was true.

"You said earlier that I do not remember," she said.

"Yes, I said that," he answered.

"Well, that isn't quite true."

His eyes became piercing.

"Not true?"

It was like being pinned in place. It was difficult to continue in the face of such brightness, but she carried on as best she could.

"It's only that I have had these dreams," she told him, "and you were in them, or someone very like you."

Suddenly he was upon her, two hands clasping her shoulders. She gasped at their strength. Two eyes stared into hers and they were so piercingly bright that they almost blinded her.

"You have seen me in your dreams?"

She could only tell the truth before such a demand.

"Yes."

The sudden change in him was profound. For a moment the mask fell completely away and she saw the naked grief and a longing so deep that it was an utter agony to see. Korfax released her and sank to his knees, clasping his hands to his head.

"What is the matter? What did I say?" she asked.

He looked at her again, and now his eyes were full of tears.

"What did I say?" she pressed, her hand half moving to console him.

He smiled, tears coursing down his face.

"What did you say?" he answered. "Why, you said everything. You said everything."

Before she could stop him or back away he took her hand in his and drew her closer.

"Now I know what I must do," he told her. "I must reveal myself to you."

That startled her.

"What do you mean?"

Korfax gave her a careful look.

"This," he said, gesturing at himself, "is not how I am. The face, the form, these are as you have seen them. But I am not as you. I am other."

"I am not sure what that means," she told him, feigning uncertainty.

"But you are," he countered. "You understand far more than you are willing to admit. You already know that I wear a mask. You see the illusion well enough. I see it in you."

He bowed his head slightly.

"But you doubt yourself. I see that also, so let me explain. You see me much as you see the others that dwell here. But I am not as they. Though I have pulled a cloak of deception over every eye, I would lift it for you. Will you permit it? Would you see me as I truly am?"

She thought about his question. When had she crossed into the realms of the fabulous? She suddenly wondered whether she hadn't entered the mad place where all things were possible if one were lunatic enough to think them. But she had no choice now. She had confessed herself to him. She had already stepped over the threshold.

"Yes," she said at last, "I want to see you."

He stood up and smiled, and the smile was so gentle that she was almost overcome by it. How could he contain such brutal power when he could smile at her like that? But then, as if to confound her even in this, he darkened once more.

"You do understand that I am not one of you," he said, "that I come from another place, that I am not of this world?"

She shuddered. There it was, out in plain sight. Distant lands he had said and now she had the truth of it. Childish visions of alien forms swam through her mind, but she cast them aside. What foolishness was that? Hadn't he already said that the face and the form were the same?

"I still wish to see you," she said.

The darkness lifted and he smiled again, but then he closed his eyes and the mask fell away completely.

He grew and she stepped back from him. She was considered tall, but now he dwarfed her. He was huge.

He rippled and changed and his clothes fluttered about his body as though they had a life of their own. His featureless coat became a long dark cloak, heavy, full and voluptuous and of a fabric unknown to her. Underneath the cloak dark armour gleamed, incised with swirls of strange patterns, dark and glowing. Much of his attire seemed to be set with such markings, even his long boots, intricate forms running lengthways from the top to the bottom.

There was a sword over his back, a great long blade crossing from the left to the right. In the opposite direction there appeared to be a long shaft of crystal set in a sheath. The crystal was white and it gleamed with an inner light. She recognised it immediately. This was the implement he had used to kill her attackers.

She watched as his straight black hair grew until it lay almost halfway down his back, dark and luminous, the blackest of blacks. His skin changed colour also, becoming even lighter, if such a thing were possible, but now it took up a subtle hint of violet, the very palest of shades. Then she noticed his ears and put her hands to her mouth in shock.

His ears were longer, stronger than hers, but somehow more delicate also, each rising up from the sides of his head like two fleshy horns. But that was not what shook her. She felt a nervous laugh bubble up inside as she stared at their greatly elongated tips, each ending in a sharp point. They were long and pointed. Pointed? Of course they were! What else would they be? She had entered the realms of the fabulous after all.

Finally she looked back at his face again and watched his features refine themselves. If he had been beautiful before, now he was perilous.

She watched in fearful astonishment and also a strange joy, not quite believing it but wanting it to be so all the same. And when she looked into his eyes she knew that he was real, for they were clear now, the irises a deep, deep purple set in a sea of unbroken white, whilst at each centre an island of midnight sat. He was real, no phantom miracle this. He was flesh and blood.

"What are you?" she whispered, entranced. Korfax looked down at her and his eyes saddened.

"Perhaps the last of my kind," he told her.

She shivered at the naked power of his voice. No longer masked, it filled her up as though sound itself had been reinvented.

"The last?" she queried.

He looked away from her and out over the water.

"There are no more," he said. "Leastways, none that I would call such."

For a moment Helen could not breathe. She felt herself caught in a web, strangling in its threads, held unmoving by its subtle snare. How noble he looked,

and how singular. He amazed her. She could see him, but still he was beyond her, her senses unequal to the task of describing him. Something was lost between perception and comprehension.

"What are you?" she repeated.

"I just told you," he said.

"But what are you? What do you call yourself?"

He looked at her for a moment as if he did not quite see her, his eyes distant, looking through her. Then he drew back and took a deep breath.

"I am an Ell," he said.

An Ell? What did that mean? What did it mean to be an Ell, and what did that mean to her? Suddenly she wondered if that meant she was, in some fashion, one as well. Was that the answer to the mystery that was her life?

"I am an Ell," he repeated. "My people were the Ell, the first ever to grace the Bright Heavens. None came before us. We were the first to walk under the light of the young stars, the first ever to name the substance of the world: earth, air, fire and water."

Here he looked about him, marking the mountain, the sky, the sun and the sea.

"We saw the first flowering of the heavens, the first stone, the first wind, the first flames, the first waters. And as we were the first, so we were the most potent. To us were given the greatest gifts, and those that have followed in our wake remain but pale imitations, never to know again the glory that went before. But the echoes of our thought still stir the ageing void."

He looked back at her.

"How do you think it is that we share so much. Your form, your gestures, your customs, even your very thoughts? You have heard our memories in your burgeoning minds, like all the others that have followed in our wake, and as you reach into the fire, so it reaches into you. You even name us in your legends, though we have never met until this moment. You repeat what has gone before, like a dim echo of what once was."

Disappointment filled her. That was not what she had hoped to hear at all. She was an echo? She did not want to be one. Echoes can never be free.

"What is it?" he asked. "You suddenly look sad. What did I say?"

"It's nothing," she answered, rubbing her shoulders. She wanted to go, to leave, to hide. "We should get off this bridge," she continued. "You will be seen."

He smiled.

"Do not be concerned," he told her. "No one here can see me unless I will it. But yes, let us return. At this time it is better to be inside than out. You have been in danger. You might be in danger again and I cannot allow that."

She stood in the doorway and watched as he went about her living room, looking, touching and smelling. It was fortunate that the house was as large as it was, the ceilings high, the rooms spacious, otherwise he would have had great

difficulty moving anywhere at all. As it was he had to bend very low just to get through the doors.

Every so often, as he moved, she caught his scent, that elusive and delicate scent she had noticed before of strange and unknown flowers. But that was not all she noticed now. There was a light that was within him, or about him, that moved as he did, brightening or darkening according to his mood. She could not take her eyes from him; she had to watch, though he was far from easy to look at. With his armour and his sword, his great crystal staff and his unearthly beauty, he was an unsettling mixture of the barbarous and the divine.

He was clearly at ease in her house, despite his apparent unfamiliarity with everything he encountered. He tested it all, running his hands over this surface or that, feeling the fabric, touching wood and stone, taking books from her bookshelves and quickly, but delicately, turning the pages. He seemed able to recognise an object's purpose merely by looking at it, but his comprehension was a distant thing, as though he saw how such things could be, but not why they should.

Then her decorative chess set caught his attention and he went to it, kneeling down beside it and peering at it in rapt fascination. He studied it for a long while, not touching, just looking, and then he turned to her.

"What game is this?" he asked.

He knew it was a game? She wondered whether it was insight, or knowledge gained by more occult means. Had he asked the question to confirm what he already knew? She wondered whether she should be circumspect. Who knew what she might surrender if she admitted his assumption was correct? Was he testing the world about him, or was he testing her? Caught by indecision she suddenly noticed how he was looking at her. It was almost as if he was willing her to answer.

"It is called chess," she told him, almost without thinking. Then she felt a momentary dismay as though she had just betrayed herself. He, though, simply smiled back at her before carefully picking up a piece. It was a castle. He studied it for a moment and then looked back at her again.

"A tower?" he asked.

"A castle," she corrected him.

He picked up another piece.

"A sayer?"

"No, that is a bishop!"

She felt a stir of anger.

"You already knew the answer," she said. "You can see into my mind. Don't play with me!"

He put the piece back down again and frowned.

"I was not playing with you," he said. "I truly did not know your name for it. It is just that there is a game I once played which was like, yet unlike, this one. The pieces were set somewhat differently, but the concept struck me as familiar – two

sides, two lands set against each other in stylised combat.”

He turned to her.

“Nor was I looking into your mind; my people considered it impolite to do such a thing without asking.”

“But you have done it before,” she accused.

“I cannot help it if you are undisciplined,” he told her. “You do not control yourself well.”

He raised another piece from the board and looked at it sadly. How apposite, she thought.

“That is a pawn!” she snapped.

He frowned. Her growing anger seemed to spark the same in him.

“Pawn?” he questioned. “Not so! It is a warrior. It must be. And warriors are not ‘pawns’, not puppets, whatever else you might think. They act, they live, and they die of their own free will. Such a name is demeaning.”

He fixed her with a black look that froze her where she stood. A sense of violence filled the air, as though the room, the whole house even, had suddenly been drenched in blood. She thought of her abductors and their brutal ending. Here it was again, his other side, the unmerciful dark.

“Fight a battle, any battle,” he told her, his voice hardening by the moment, “and it will change the way you think of such things for ever.”

He turned away, his expression almost a snarl.

“Such matters should never be taken lightly. All life is diminished by such callous disregard.”

She drew back from him. In mere moments he had gone from beautiful to bestial. It was almost as if he coloured himself with his passions, changing even his physical form to accommodate them. Now he seemed all teeth and claws, like some great hunting beast. She had not noticed before, but his teeth were long and pointed, and his nails also were not nails at all, but claws, strong and sharp. It was an unsettling realisation. She had forgotten how dangerous he could be.

“I had not thought of it quite like that before,” she said as she backed out through the door. For a moment he remained where he was, gazing out of the window, then he noticed what she was doing.

His speed was terrifying. As large as he was he was up and across the room in an instant, taking her hand and kneeling before she could do anything about it.

“I am sorry,” he said. “I am sorry. I forget who you are and where I am. Let me make amends.”

He looked at her, eyes sorrowful once more. Such pain there was in them, such contrition. She found herself breathing hard. Though he held her gently, she could not pull away. His huge hand almost swallowed hers whole. He was too strong, too absolute. She could not compete.

“You doubt me,” he said.

“No! I mean yes! I mean...” she said, stumbling over her words as she fumbled

for the truth.

"You doubt me!" he asserted. "You do not trust me. I understand. You have seen me slay, you have seen my anger, and to you this is a terrible thing."

He now held her with both hands. She could feel his touch, firm and gentle but trembling, as though he feared to break her.

"I want your trust," he continued. "I want to show you that this is not all that I am. You have seen powers you have never seen before. You see a form and a purpose beyond your experience. These are not what you are used to. I understand. I do not want you to see strangeness. I do not want you to know fear. Let me show you something better."

She didn't answer. She had no idea what she could say.

"Would you see something of the place I come from?" he asked.

That caught her. She found her voice again.

"What do you mean?"

"Would you go to a place of light, a place certain enough to banish all your doubts?"

"I still don't understand."

"I have the power to take you to my world, after a fashion."

"You can take me to your world?"

Competing forces swirled, fear and hope and everything in between.

"There is a way that you could make such a journey," he told her. "It would not be real, not in the sense that you and I are real, but once you are immersed in the illusion you would live in it as though it were."

Not real? Disappointment had her. She would have turned away, but the fire in his eyes would not let her.

"Would you be willing to make such a journey?"

Such need there was, or was it desire? But before she could answer he stood up and went back into the room, taking her with him. She had to follow. She had no choice.

At the centre of the room he released her and turned to the window. Then he gestured with his left hand as if beckoning to something outside. She frowned and was about to question him when the window, and then the entire wall, came apart. She gasped.

The wall of her house fell away from her as though down a well. Vague distances beckoned, and out of them advanced a great crystalline form. It grew and it grew until it all but filled the room, all but filled the house even. It was the simplest of shapes – four triangles, four sides – and, as if to demonstrate its symmetry, it gently rolled about each axis in turn. Then it stopped and waited, almost as though it had just asked a question. It hung in the air, patient and unmoving, but there was nothing that she could say.

Korfax came to her side and gestured at the great white crystal.

"Here lies the doorway to that which is no more. Would you enter?"

She had no answer, neither for him nor for the great crystal. All she could do was stare in astonishment. The crystal dwarfed her. It dwarfed Korfax even, if such a thing were possible. The crystal loomed before her like some ancient and primordial god.

“Would you enter?” Korfax asked for a second time.

But still she did not answer him. She had eyes only for the glorious light that fell from the great crystal; that and the music, for it seemed to her now that she heard a song, infinitely distant, infinitely far. The melody plucked at her. It appeared simple enough at first, so simple that she dared imagine that she understood what it said. But then it turned about itself, revealing subtleties she had not yet considered, and the more she listened, the more complex it became.

“Would you enter?” he asked once more.

The music withdrew and, with a start, she finally heard his offer. Now she understood. Or did she? The music had given her an answer. Or had it? She shook herself. She was being foolish. What was real? Everything was a cage in the end, an illusion of one kind or another. She could not escape; she could only leave one and enter the next. All she need do was choose.

So she turned to him and accepted, a simple nod of her head, and he smiled back at her as though she had given him the greatest of all gifts. He bowed to her and held out his hand. She took a deep breath and held out hers. Their hands joined, hers vanishing inside his, and as they both stepped into the substance of song everything she had ever known quietly disappeared, subsumed by an all-encompassing light.

2

A DREAM OF VANISHED GLORY

*Zinzn-a Torz-hil-kormged
Toa-kohar Odtri-dr-pan
Mator-kas Pl-nak-piljo
Oth-loesa Pazen-muh-aa
Nio-basul Sasor-anord
Bia-hozaa Odmapp-tolorn
Soi-kamaid Odom-maqaih*



Out of the light they stepped and on to another world.

"I must warn you," said a voice at her shoulder, "and you must remember my warning at all times. What you see here is but a dream of what once was. This place no longer is."

It was Korfax. She heard him, everything that he said, but she could not agree. If this was a dream then it seemed more real to her now than her life ever had.

They stood upon the brow of a high green hill amidst a sparse grove of trees. A few scattered clouds hung motionless in the high vault and a scented breeze warmed them both with the gentlest of touches.

The sky was blue and the land was green, but that was all that was familiar. She saw everything, each and every shape, and felt everything, each and every sensation, but it was no longer enough for her to merely see or feel.

First of all, there were the trees.

It was as though she had never seen trees before, that all the others she had ever met were mere dreams themselves, uncertain copies for ever striving towards the paragons that now stood naked before her. She gazed at each in turn but found herself unable to say why she found them flawless. They were trees, that was all. They had root, branch, leaf and flower but, for some inexplicable reason, they surpassed everything she had ever known. A chord far down inside had been struck, and her depths knew that which her reason denied. Unadorned perfection. Forms grew here that could never grow in less hallowed places. She suddenly felt giddy.

She looked down at her feet and found even the grass beyond her experience.

Every single blade, each sword of green, was of consequence. She suddenly wished that she did not have to stand upon it at all.

There were flowers scattered here and there, petalled delicacies reflecting the light. She bent to them but could not look for long. Their simplicity, their beauty, was almost too much.

She turned to the distances to steady herself, but found only more of the same. Beyond the perfect flowers and the perfect trees lay perfect hills and perfect mountains. How was it that such simple forms and colours could so lift her up?

But there they were, rolling shoulders of green and great spires of rock striding across the land. With their roots sent deep into the ground and their proud heads sent far up into the sky, they breathed in the air.

She looked from mountain to tree and back again and suddenly realised what it was that she saw. The trees and the mountains, the hills and the grass, they were all the same, kith and kin, growing together, growing as they should. Nothing had ever marred or broken them. She looked upon a land without stain.

She turned to Korfax and found that even he had changed, the years lifting from his shoulders, the grief from his soul. For the moment he was young again, revelling in what she saw and seeing this place through her eyes, seeing it all as new.

More of the puzzle fell into place. Not only was this land unbroken, but everything around her was in the very first bloom of youth, unsullied and unwearied by time. It was true. She had come back to the beginning, as he had said that she would, to the very first world of all.

He took her hand in his and led her to the edge. She started. Either he had shrunk or she had grown, but now their proportions seemed far more equal.

"How?" she whispered, drawing back.

He smiled.

"Do not be concerned for now," he said. "Allow all things to be. You will understand soon enough."

Then he turned and pointed. Below, upon the plain, a beautiful city waited, tall and ethereal, strong yet delicate.

If she had been asked to describe it she would have failed in the task. As with everything else she had encountered, mere words were inadequate. Though she could see the towers and the walls, the streets and the squares, the gardens and the fountains, sharp and clear as if carved of light, there was so much more to the city than mere form and substance and colour. It unfurled itself before her like the rarest of blooms and it reared up from the plain below like the shapeliest mountain.

So she saw further, her comprehension increasing in leaps and bounds. Some unknown power had woven the city's many towers from the living rock itself. No violence had carved it; instead, it had been coaxed out of the pregnant earth as though obstinate stone could be persuaded to grow and flower. She felt a sudden

and painful longing to dwell there and know all its ways for ever.

"Where is that?" she breathed at last. "Who lives there?"

Korfax sighed.

"No one now," he said. "You look upon a revenant. Though I have foresworn such conceits, the temptation is ever with me. It would be so easy to remain in the past and relive it as though it might shield you against all the times that are yet to come."

He turned to her and his eyes were dark.

"I did that once," he said. "I sank back into a reinvented past and wallowed for a time in forgetfulness. I let the real world, the one that mattered, burn in my ignorance. I would not do so again. Once is enough!"

Helen shook her head.

"But it all looks so real."

He darkened further.

"And so you fall into the trap," he murmured.

He took her face in a careful hand and turned her towards him.

"Hear me now and mark my words!" he warned. "This place no longer exists. You stand inside a well-made dream. Your senses can be fooled, but your soul cannot. My people understood this long ago, and they wisely prohibited it. Resurrect no true image. Perhaps your people understood this once, but you have since distracted yourselves and so forgotten it again. Thus you dare to peer back into that terrible abyss, not knowing what it is that you seek but yet seeking it anyway. You still have so far to go."

He drew back, folded his arms and then gave her a searching look.

"There are two ways that a people may understand the world into which they find themselves born. They can unmake it, pulling it apart and putting it back together again to see how it all works, or they can test its substance, taking the knowledge thus gained and pouring it back into the furnace of their thoughts, continuing on and on, generation to generation."

He frowned for a moment.

"Your people have taken this course – neither a good thing nor a bad, as it is just the way that you have been made. But there is another way. You once knew this path also, though you scorn it now."

Helen frowned at the remark.

"What do you mean?" she asked.

He smiled.

"You know what it is. You call it by many names, but one seems particularly apt: magic!"

She turned full about and looked again at everything.

"Magic?"

"Yes, you call it magic and you scorn it. Even the very name implies falsehood to your understanding. I can see it in you, there in your eyes. But what you see here is

the truth. The Ell had the great gift. They perceived the word of The Creator, the unfolding act of creation itself. Unlike you we did not need to tear the world down in order to understand it; we were born already knowing. That which was in us became that which was without, and that which was without became that which was within. The simple truth that reveals all."

Helen felt incredulous.

"Then I am seeing magic?"

Korfax laughed and Helen was immediately taken aback. It was the first time she had heard him laugh and, in spite of herself, she smiled because the sound was so clean, so honest. Korfax turned to her and smiled gratefully.

"No," he said. "Not that. You do not see that kind of lie. You have not yet understood. You do not look upon a work of magic; you look upon an act of creation, that truest of acts that comes only from the many ways of creation itself, the will made manifest under Heaven's gaze. We of the Ell were born with our eyes open, as your people are not. You are the distracted. You mistrust what you see. You have taken the long path and submitted to the mask. You have so far to go before you can cross the divide."

"I don't understand," she said, and his eyes brightened as though ignited by some inner fire.

"Is the truth so impenetrable?" he asked. "Here, before you, is the word of The Creator. By seeing the word we open ourselves up to the divine fire within, that fire given to all that lives. From what is within we see how to reshape creation, and by reshaping creation we reshape ourselves. What you see as divided is not divided at all. We act within that unity, becoming creation itself. We are no longer bound by the blind movement of unthinking forces; we stand above them."

She had a sudden glimpse of what he meant but rejected it immediately.

"I still don't understand," she said.

"Yes, you do," he disagreed, "but you reject it. Too long have you been immersed in the waters of a world that would deny such truths – not the belief but the fact. To say a word that would raise up a mountain, another that would subdue time, another that would destroy an entire world? To you that is impossible. In your world such things cannot be. But that is why I have brought you here, so that you can remember it once more and know a better truth."

Korfax turned about.

"Now let us depart this place," he said.

He beckoned to the trees and a beast emerged from within the shadows. She watched carefully and thought that she understood, but when it had fully emerged into the light she knew that she still had so much further to go.

At first she had taken it for a horse, larger, mightier, but still as well-proportioned as the finest of thoroughbreds. Black, all black, it raised its noble head as it came, its laughing eyes proud. But when it saw Korfax it bowed to him, and then she really saw it. She clasped her hands to her mouth in shock, for from its

forehead, from the very centre, a single great horn was thrust, a great and curving horn of black, both solid and strong.

"A unicorn?" she finally gasped.

Korfax turned to her with eyebrows raised.

"No!" he admonished. "This is no mythical beast of yours, for this is an ormn: air of earth given flesh. Here is the exact likeness of one I once rode to a ruinous battle, the finest ever to race under the sky. You now look upon his shade, held in perpetuity against that time when he might yet come to the Bright Heavens once more. My father named him Enastul in regret, but I called him Enastul in joy."

He stroked the great flanks for a moment, an unreadable look in his eyes. Then he turned to her again.

"Can you ride?" he asked.

She could only shake her head. Her tongue was tied by the revelation. Korfax smiled.

"Well, that can easily be remedied," he said. "And have no fear, you will know how to do it soon enough. Besides, no ormn would ever let its rider fall. That is not their way."

He gestured again to the pregnant darkness under the trees and glanced back at her.

"Here comes your steed now," he said.

Another ormn appeared, more delicate perhaps, smaller maybe, but just as magnificent with its large dark eyes and its shining coat of white.

"This one is Gahlus," he told her. "I give her to you, though perhaps I should say that I return her."

Korfax stared at Helen with a look in his eyes, as though expecting the name to mean something, but Helen could say nothing. She had missed his intent entirely. She had eyes only for Gahlus. When had anyone given her a unicorn before?

They raced down from the hills, their steeds all but flying over the green. It was as Korfax had said. When he had helped her mount Gahlus she had felt trepidation, but then, suddenly, there it was within her. She could ride.

Now they crossed the great plain, devouring the distances. Her hair streamed behind her, so fast did Gahlus go. Though she held on tightly, she did not need to, because she could ride as though she had ridden all her life. It was both a surprise and a delight to her, like the return of a long-lost memory. Besides, Gahlus was both smooth and still beneath her, almost as if it was the land itself that moved.

As they went, Korfax named the hills around them, and with each name that he uttered, the world to which she had come sank further inside, claiming her a little more with each passing moment.

They came to the city and slowed their pace. At the gates were guards, as still as the stone they served. But as Korfax and Helen approached there was a flash of eyes and the sentries suddenly moved. They came forward and took the visitors'

steeds, bowing. Korfax bowed back but Helen could do nothing. She remained spellbound by the ride. She had flown.

For a moment she did not notice, but then the guards caught her attention at last. They were cloaked and caparisoned in red but had argent armour, polished to a brilliance that made it almost glow. They had lances and swords and shields, all treated the same, but underneath they were Ell. She could not help it. She stared.

They were like Korfax, yet unlike him. She wondered if they would speak, but they merely bowed to her and waited for her to dismount.

Korfax came to her side and offered up his hand. She took it and found herself back upon the ground. She looked behind her with longing as the guards took her steed away. Would she ever do that again?

Korfax led her into the city.

"Where is this?" she asked.

"You walk upon what was once called Lon-Gohed," he answered, "the largest of the southernmost lands that lay off the coast of Lon-Elah, the one great land that stretched more than halfway around Uriel, my world that was. Here now is the city of Gar-Asan, last as it was amongst the first, and beyond us lie the eastern edges of the Leein Gellad. North of here, far away, almost on the other side of the world, is the place where I spent my childhood. On the northernmost tip of Lon-Elah is the Lee Izirakal, and on a low hill at its northern end Umadya Losq was built, my home that was, the place where I was born."

She turned to him.

"Those words," she said, "Lon-Gohed, Lon-Elah, Gar-Asan, are they from your language?"

"Yes, they are. You are hearing Logahithell, a language few know, for few have ever heard it. But it is the first speech of all that was ever spoken in the Bright Heavens."

"Can you let me hear some more?"

Korfax smiled a little and looked down.

"Let things unfold as they should," he said. "Do not rush them. There is time yet for such pleasures."

They walked hand in hand through the streets of Gar-Asan, he leading, she following whilst staring all about her with eyes now able to accept anything at all.

She watched the inhabitants as they went by, watched them walk the cities many ways, going about their business as if everything was as it should be. All were tall and graceful, moving with a singular ease as they travelled through the world they inhabited. They were pale of skin and dark of hair, but she could never mistake them for her own kind, as they were far too unearthly and far, far too beautiful. No one she had ever met could walk, gesture or stand like that. She saw one now, simply standing, standing by a wall and looking, nothing more and nothing less. But even that was almost too much. No one from her world possessed such poise, such composure.

She looked away, looked inside. When had she stepped into the ring? She thought of spirits and of wilder powers that dwelt deep in the ancient forests or slept under hills or yet danced on moonlit nights about the standing stones. She thought of being stolen away, carried upon the wings of night to dwell in the places of dream far beyond all mortal knowledge. But now she was here, walking through the dream of the Ell, and it felt as if she had become the dream instead.

They came to a fountain in a courtyard, a gentle spray of water from a stone-carved flower down into a leaf-shaped bowl. She listened to the music for a moment, but then it struck her. The fountain, the courtyard even, showed no sign of wear. Everything looked clean and fresh, as though it had been made only yesterday. She turned to Korfax.

"You said that this place was old, but it looks almost new."

"If you look closely enough you will discover signs of wear," he told her. "The dream we walk through is, at times, almost cruel in its detail."

He paused for a moment as if that was not what he had meant to say at all, but then he gestured at the fountain.

"When we built we used the hardest stone that we could, stone strong enough to withstand the ravages of time for many long ages. But we also strengthened it when it began to fail, rejuvenating it, holding back time itself with our arts. Most of the buildings you see here were made and remade again, by will and by lore. We followed the way of the world in all our endeavours, so if we built a tower like a mountain, should not that tower last as long? We mirrored the world about us, we did not wage war upon it."

He paused again, as if something had just occurred to him. He turned to her.

"Would you go to a banquet?" he asked.

"A banquet?" she asked in reply. That was not what she had expected.

"Yes, a banquet," he said. "And in your honour, no less."

"But why?"

"Because I ask it?"

"No, that is not what I meant. What I asked was, what I meant was, why should it be in my honour?"

"Because you are here again?"

That caught her.

"And who am I?" she asked.

He took a deep breath. Here it came, she thought.

"You are Obelison," he said, taking the plunge. He looked back at her. What did she see? Trepidation? Fear? Need? Desire?

She tasted the name. Obelison. She felt her centre shift as she repeated it. Something awoke, something below thought and memory. What had he touched in her now?

"That was her name, wasn't it?" she asked.

"Yes," he answered.

"Is that how you think of me?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because you are her."

"But I don't remember. Who was she?"

"My love," he said, and he took a long shuddering breath. There were tears in his eyes again. She watched them and did not know what to think.

"Is that how you think of me?"

He bowed his head.

"I dare not presume. Not again."

Then he looked away and gestured ahead, breaking the moment.

"Come," he announced. "The feast awaits."

They came to the door of the tallest tower of all, three spires made one, the Umadya Lusell as Korfax named it. He held out his left hand to the guards that stood there, fingers lightly curled, the hand at a slight angle as though he cupped something. The guards gestured in return, with a sweep of their left hands towards the door. He stepped up to the door and touched a gleaming stone set into the wall beside it. A distant chiming sound came and went.

The door opened and a tall and most beautiful Ell stepped up to the threshold. She looked older than Korfax, much, much older, and outlined by the distant light from within she became the very image of elder memory. Helen saw further again, further than she had yet seen before. It was as Korfax had said. The Ell, all of them, communed with forces beyond her understanding. Whether in the dark or the light, they stood upon thresholds she had not even imagined were there. They occupied places denied all others and burned with fires that would consume less potent vessels.

The Ell in the doorway bowed to them both and held up her right hand, palm forward, fingers spread.

"Zak od zamran," she said.

Helen had never heard anything like it. It was not so much the words themselves, but the way that they were said. The syllables thrummed in the air, like music, like an invocation, demanding an answer. She felt compelled to speak, but did not know what to say. How could she? She turned to Korfax and found him smiling at her. He understood. He turned back to the Ell that waited in the doorway and answered the challenge, his voice transformed by the words, or the words transforming his voice.

"Zirnoqvan Eaijo," he said, holding up his left hand in turn, palm inward and fingers closed.

The Ell smiled and stepped aside, gesturing with a sweep of her arm that they should both enter.

"Pirqaan hoeihte," she said.

“Od pirqaan hoauhtekr,” he answered back. Then he took Helen gently by the hand and led her over the threshold.

“Those hand gestures, those words,” she whispered. “What do they mean?”

He stopped and turned to her.

“Question nothing yet,” he told her quietly, “let it all unfold about you. As with everything else here, you will understand it when you need to. I will not let you fall.”

He led her in silence through great corridors, climbing wide stairs and crossing many an empty hall, before they came to it at last, the source of the light. It was almost as if it shone through the stone itself, growing and deepening as they approached. Ahead of them was a tall doorway, and beyond it was movement and sound and beauty.

There was a vast hall of stone, but the stone was neither hard nor cold. Instead it was warm and living and filled with light. Pillars grew here like trees, their wide trunks sinking coiled roots down into the floor whilst their luminous branches spread out across the ceiling. Each pillar was set with many living flowers whose varied scents drifted this way and that on the whims of the air. Lights were set amongst the higher branches, caught deep in the vaulted ceiling, flames of red and orange, yellow and green, blue, indigo and violet, captive stars caught in their orbits, the heavens held in abeyance.

Helen thought herself beneath a vast forest canopy at night. The illusion was all but complete and she stared upwards, caught in wonder and in rapture. She would have stayed there for a long while, staring upwards, had she not then noticed the others that had also been summoned to the feast, wandering where they would amongst the pillars.

There were ladies, simply clad in modest robes and gowns, but each seemed tall beyond measure and radiant in their beauty. There were tall lords, armoured or robed, beautiful also, though to Helen’s eyes their beauty was of another nature entirely. Watching them she felt like a child again, grown small, caught up in a play of her elders.

She turned to Korfax, her head full of questions, but they fled her the moment she saw what he had become.

Now he looked like a great lord in truth, mighty and proud, bright crystal upon his brow, a great dark cloak of purple swirling about armour that was suddenly brilliant. He returned her gaze and smiled, and then he gestured that she look at herself as well.

Helen gasped and stepped back. Though she had no idea how it had happened, her clothes had suddenly vanished. Instead she was arrayed in paleness, a long gown of a soft and flowing fabric she could not name. It suddenly felt as if she was naked, so lightly did it sit, but yet it flowed from her neck to her feet like the never-ending fall of many waters.

Korfax bowed to her and then took her hand again, leading her gracefully to an

annex where there was a tall mirror waiting in solitary splendour. He led her up to it and then stepped aside.

She looked at her reflection and saw another standing in her place. It was like her, this image, for there was her face, her well-remembered face, but as for the rest? Nothing remained. She stared at the transformation in utter astonishment.

On her brow sat a crystal filled with a bright and steady flame, though how it had got there she had no idea. She had not felt it arrive, nor the cirlet that contained it. Then she realised that she was taller, that her skin had changed colour, that her hair was suddenly longer, almost down to her waist, that her ears were now long also and that they were pointed. She reached up to touch them.

"How..?" she began, turning away from the mirror to look at Korfax again, but then something moved behind her, flicking gently back and forth between her legs as if to announce its presence as well. Her eyes widened in shock.

She possessed a tail. She suddenly possessed a small tail. She carefully placed a hand behind her and felt it even as it tucked itself neatly away again. She had suddenly acquired another limb. How strange was that?

"I have a tail!" she hissed, almost an accusation. "What have you done to me?"

His expression became the most careful she had yet seen on his face.

"I have made you one of the Ell," he answered, as if that explained everything.

She stared back at him, as if to say it clearly did not.

"I am sorry," he offered. "I should have warned you. All I can say is that we all possess tails, though they are seldom mentioned. They are considered... intimate."

She watched his face. How uncomfortable he looked now. It was such an unexpected expression that she was a moment recognising it. But there was contrition also, as when he had killed her attackers. She saw what it was. He feared he had made another such mistake. But it wasn't like that. She moved to reassure him, though she still felt far from reassured herself.

"I am sorry," she said. "It came as a bit of a shock, that was all."

He stepped closer and bowed his head.

"I am sorry, too. I keep forgetting that you are not born to this. You would know these things otherwise."

His expression was almost one of pleading now.

"Please," he asked, "be one with the Ell tonight? Please, let it all be as it should?"

There was a pause.

"Even the tail?" he continued.

She closed her eyes. It was almost too much, or was it? Something calmed her even as the delirium of her fantasy rolled in to overwhelm her. She felt the brink recede as a semblance of calm returned.

"Even the tail!" she acquiesced at last.

He smiled again, relief flooding him, and he bowed deeply to her.

"Then let the shadows live once more," he said. "Do nothing but watch, listen, know and feel. Allow a world that once was to be again, if only for a little while."

She heard it in his voice. Regret! Such pain, such sorrow. She found an echo in herself and turned away in embarrassment, even as she understood.

Beauty and regret – that was it! She had come to the dreaming lands of beauty and regret. She had seen legend made flesh, light given substance and had herself been transformed into something fabulous. She had been named for an ancient love and had returned to the place where it had all begun, where innocence yet held sway and the words of creation were written across the land with naked fire. How could she not trust this? So she let him lead her away from the mirror and on to the banquet. *“Let it all happen,”* she thought. *“Let everything be.”*

First came the dances, dances she thought that she did not know, only to discover that her feet and her body had already remembered them for her. Like the others that swirled about and around, she found herself threading an intricate pattern of delight across the floor. Hands were lightly clasped and parted again as their owners turned and turned about. Many beautiful faces smiled at her in turn as each partner shared a brief moment by her side, but she found herself ever looking for Korfax, waiting for each quick touch of his hands with a longing she would never have believed possible before this hour.

Between the dances there were delicacies, all placed before her like so many offerings – meats and fruits and pastries in abundance, none that she could identify, but yet whose tastes she dared believe she actually knew.

The pastries melted even as they touched her lips, and the delicate sweetmeats within enticed her tongue. Nothing could she name, no flavour, no texture, but neither was it altogether strange either. Something inside her decided that all was as it should be, even though she had never tasted such delights before in all her life.

Wines there were also, served in tall crystal and falling upon the tongue like a gentle ecstasy. But her senses were not dulled; instead, they were exalted, and now she heard the voices about her as a music, a music she dared imagine she could understand. She dined upon pleasure, drank light from crystal and no longer stood upon the world at all, but instead danced above it.

After the dances she was led to an exquisitely carved seat, not beside Korfax, but opposite. His place was set at the other end of the hall. Instead she was to sit between her hosts, a tall lady and her even taller lord. When she was seated the lady spoke to her, strange words falling from her lips like a tapestry of sound whilst her lord looked on with smiling eyes. Helen listened, entranced by the cadences and rhythms until she suddenly realised, almost with a shock, that she understood what was being said to her. And stranger yet, she was able to answer in return.

It came to her then like a reflex, like a long remembered habit, the language of the Ell, filling her up in that very instant, all the rules and all the subtleties.

So she answered, speaking words she had never spoken before, yet understanding exactly what it was that she said. Her hosts did not ask where she came from, or even who she was; rather, it was as though they already knew

everything about her, treating her as if she had been away for a very long time and had now returned to her own.

It was at the end, when all had drunk their fill and eaten what they would and danced with whom they pleased, that Helen found herself seated beside Korfax at last.

"How do I know what I know?" she asked him.

"Because knowledge of it was returned to you in this place," he replied.

"But how?"

"Let us just say that you have been allowed to remember it."

"Will I remember it always?"

"Yes," he told her. "Consider it your due. Consider it one of many that I shall return to you."

His arm encompassed her and she sank against him. She no longer doubted anything at all.

Another stepped into the light in the midst of the company, an Ell she had not seen before. This one stood quietly for a moment, looking this way and that, meeting the eyes of all that waited. She bowed to the lord and the lady of the feast and offered up that which she held. It looked something very much like a harp, but it was not. The lord bowed his head just so, and the musician held her instrument close. Then she passed her hands across it and a strange music, like a gentle wind through trees or the slow fall of waves against a shore, filled the air. She let the music speak for itself for a moment, and then she joined it with her voice and sang.

Helen did not know the song, and yet, like everything else, she did. Like a well-loved melody it spoke to her and conjured visions for her amazement.

She saw far cities, riders entering their gates or leaving them. She saw battles between the darkness and the light, each clash of fury heralded with a fanfare of horns, each aftermath sombre with the call of a solitary pipe. She saw mighty heroes, lords and princes both, matching each other with sword and lance upon the field of combat, and she saw the dream of what had been and found herself glad simply to know it at all.

At the end, when the guests began to depart, Korfax led her to a door and turned to her.

"Do you wish to see the night?" he asked.

"The night?"

"Then you will understand why that which you call the universe, we once called Madraxalus instead, the Bright Heavens."

Korfax opened the door and guided her outside. Before her stretched a great lawn set about with tall trees and scented flowers. She walked up to each in turn and gazed at their beauty. He watched her and smiled, letting her take her time. And when she was done he gestured that she look up. So she did, and then all but staggered in astonishment.

Across the black sky were strung stars of every conceivable colour. Above her

was a riot of light, a chaos without any apparent order but beautiful beyond compare.

Some of the stars lay in long twisting bands whilst others came together in great groups, some scattered randomly, others gathered in loose circles. Wrapped around many were great cloudy folds, fabulous curtains of fire draped carelessly across the sky. One such concourse, low upon the horizon, even formed a fiery spiral. It was like the spill from some fabulous jewel box. The stars above her were larger and more brilliant than ever she had imagined they could be, and Helen felt tears fall from her eyes. It was a release, a final release from all the wonders she had endured. Korfax came to her side and gently brushed one of her tears aside. He offered her another of his sad smiles.

"As I told you before," he said, "I do not often come here. For me, the memories are almost too painful. But with you beside me, I find that I can bear it all again."

She looked back at him for a moment, before looking up again at the spectacle above. She sighed and wiped away the last tear even as it began its journey downwards. Night on Uriel made all the other nights she had ever known in her life seem dim and paltry by comparison.

As she let her eyes wander this way and that, she noticed a faint luminosity growing above the distant hills where they had first stood. Helen watched in fascination as the limb of a moon rose slowly up into the sky. Larger than she was used to, it seemed unblemished also, a smoother orb perhaps, born not of violence but instead carefully placed in the sky by some god's hand, and as it rose higher, so she saw its colour! It was green, a green globe of spun crystal glittering in the firmament and wrapped around with the naked substance of its birthing. Gently it rode the upper oceans like some great and wonderful vessel of dreams.

She turned to Korfax.

"And this is what you saw every night?" she asked.

"No," he said, "not every night. There were clouds, of course, rains and snows falling from them as they should. But a night of clear skies? Those were always the best."

He pointed to a large group of stars that fell more or less into a rounded group wrapped about by a gauzy nebulosity of faded red. The stars themselves were many shades, some brighter, some darker, but all were crimson, and the largest and brightest looked down at them from the exact centre like an eye. Korfax announced them as if they were triumphant.

"Behold!" he said. "'The Vovin', herald of the rising year!"

She looked back at him.

"You had constellations?"

He smiled.

"Of course! What people now alive or long dead have not at one time or another looked up to the heavens and filled it with their fancies. So here we have 'The Vovin', whilst above it is 'The Mother', then 'The Urn', 'The Tower', 'The Dancer'

and then 'The Lamp'."

Having swept his finger across the sky he was now pointing to the horizon, to a great coil of stars that seemed more brilliant than all the others.

"And there lies 'The Gyre'," he said. "The Creator's mark upon the heavens, reminding us all that we are still mortal, no matter how mighty we may think we are become."

She felt herself caught by the idea that they had so much in common. She pointed back to the first constellation he had named.

"I know all the other names," she said, "but what is a Vovin?"

Korfax laughed quietly and the sound of it sent a shiver up her spine. There was a play of light in his eyes now, flickering like a flame but not with any secret humour. He was deadly serious.

"What is a Vovin, you ask? I think the answer to that question might surprise you. You have already ridden an ormn, mistaking it for something from your own myths and legends. You have the language of the Ell inside you now, so can you not guess what a Vovin might be?"

He was right, she could feel the word inside her, but there was no image to go with it. She shook her head. What did it describe? Mythical creatures of all shapes and sizes fell through her awareness, but which one would it be? She had no idea.

"I cannot guess," she said. He raised an eyebrow.

"Can you not? But there are many stories of such a beast, even upon your world."

He smiled and looked up at the sky again.

"Once you believed in a creature that breathed fire, a great and potent monster that prowled through your dreams and your fantasies, your myths and your legends, most fabulous of all – and most deadly."

She widened her eyes.

"Dragons?" she asked. "Do you mean dragons?"

"No," he said. "That is not what I meant. You have not gone far enough. You still judge everything by what you think you know of your own world, but you should not. As with everything else, we of the Ell knew the archetype of your dim dreams. For we knew the Vovin, and they were no mere legend."

He looked at her for a moment, gauging her capacity for wonder perhaps.

"Shall I show you?" he offered, and then, without waiting for an answer, he raised his hand and beckoned to the moon. Immediately, almost as if it had been dragged into the heavens by his finger, a distant form reared up, and Helen stared at the remote silhouette in utter astonishment.

Though it was far, far away, a mere speck of black against a brilliant backdrop, she already understood that it was huge. There was a sense of ponderous immensity in the slow beat of its wings, a sense of vast power held in check. Then, without a sound, it turned upon itself and fell straight towards them both.

Its speed amazed her – that something so big could be so quick! In moments it

had reached them, passing low over their heads, claws glinting and wings outstretched. The fury of its passage had her diving to the ground, but Korfax stopped her, holding her firmly against him.

"Do not be alarmed," he said. "It will not hurt you."

His expression changed and became sad again.

"It cannot, not here."

Then he turned her about and gestured. Like a miracle, the Vovin was already at rest behind them, eyeing them both with an imperious lift of its head. Appalled and astonished, Helen stared up at the Vovin, and the Vovin stared back down at her as if she was something it might devour.

She tried to see it, tried to encompass it with her senses, but she found the task altogether beyond her. To see a dragon painted, modelled from clay or pigment, was one thing, but to meet one in the flesh? That was something else entirely.

First there was its scent, a rich odour that rode the air about it, something hot and powerful. She could not place it, for it was unlike anything that she had ever tasted before, but neither would she ever forget it again. Images and impressions came to her as though she had already known them: of fire, of mastery, of power and an indomitable and savage will. Across the landscape of her mind volcanoes were suddenly flung, vast enough to encompass whole worlds, and she found herself flying carelessly between each boiling cauldron, feeling the hot wind across her body like a scourge as she hunted the broken land below for unwary prey.

She blinked and was back before the Vovin again. But now she could hear it, the deep rumble within, the furnace of its life. For the moment the furnace slept, but dare awaken it and the rising would be both swift and deadly. She had a sudden impression of fire as an element – solid, a shaft of flame ejected from the very fount of destruction itself. She could even feel it, the heat of it, enough to undo her completely, to burn her body and even her spirit to ash, whilst that which did the burning looked on with terrible dispassion and dreamed of endings.

And finally, at the last, she could see it; its long head crowned with longer horns, its long jaws filled to the brim with curving teeth. She ran her gaze across its neck and body and watched the slow, impatient coiling of the great bladed tail. With its taloned limbs folded beneath it and its great wings arched up and over its back like a throne, it stared down at her like a lord.

This was no mere beast, she realised, but the element of fire made flesh. The Vovin was absolute. Here was that which knew exactly what it was, the length and the breadth and the height of what it was. Here, waiting before her with immortal certainty, was the master of all hunts. It brooked no rivals. It had none.

Helen turned to Korfax again. She felt herself falling, but he remained to catch her even now. His hands held her and he smiled his most gentle smile yet.

"It is so beautiful," she breathed, like an admission.

Korfax bowed in agreement.

"So give him a name," he urged. "He is yours. I give him to you. A gift."

Helen looked back at the Vovin in disbelief, startled back from the brink.

"Mine?" she asked.

"Yes," he said. "Whenever you are here, so will he be. Give him a name. He is waiting."

She could not think. What was a good name for a dragon? She thought of all the stories she had ever read and the names of all the dragons that she had ever heard of, both the good and the evil. Smaug? Kalessin? Ancalagon? Yevaud? She looked at the Vovin's dark flanks and knew what her choice would be. She turned to face Korfax again.

"Then I name him Ancalagon," she said.

Korfax smiled with approval.

"That is a good-sounding name. I like it. But what does it mean?"

Helen looked at him.

"I don't know that it means anything. It is from a story I once read."

Korfax bowed his head.

"Then so be it."

He gave her a curious look.

"Names come from the soul, after all."

He turned to the Vovin and pointed.

"Ancalagon you are!" he told it. "Do not forget it!"

The Vovin threw back its head in silent assent, before launching itself back up into the sky. In moments it was gone, first a shadow against the moon, and then nothing.

Korfax turned to her after the Vovin was gone.

"Now it is our turn," he said.

"Our turn?"

"To leave."

"Must we?"

The look of pain that crossed his face astonished her. He knelt before her.

"I would like nothing more than for us to stay," he said. "But it cannot be so. The world, the real world, is broken. That is our purpose. Under our hands it must be made whole again. To deny purpose is to deny ourselves."

She did not want to go, and neither did he. She trusted that, more than anything that had gone before. Cage or not, illusion or not, she now trusted everything she had seen and experienced.

Light encompassed them both and they stepped back into the world. Her first impression was how drab it all was, how untidy, how dirty. She had stepped from the pure to the corrupted and she felt like crying again, but this time with bitter disappointment. She wanted to go back to the fantasy; she wanted it with all her heart.

She looked down at herself. She was no longer an Ell. Her body had diminished. She was plain Helen MacLeod again, except that in her mind something else now

sat: memories, knowledge and an understanding that had not been there before.

He watched her, and the look upon his face was most eloquent.

"I understand," he said. He reached out and took her hand. Once more her hand vanished inside his. Neither spoke for long moments, but finally he broke the silence.

"Now that you have seen something of my world, I should tell you the rest," he said. "What you have seen is something of the good times, but we were not always at peace. Sometimes we disagreed with each other, violently."

He paused. She watched him, watched how his gaze turned inward.

"There was a time when my people were divided by their beliefs. On one side were those that believed their lore was supreme, whilst on the other were those that believed it was not."

"Lore?" she asked.

"Yes, but it was not just a matter of knowledge – this was a way of life. At the heart of it lay a discipline known as the Namad Mahorelah, and like all such lores it could be used for both good and ill. Unfortunately, those that employed it tended to use it for ill."

She tasted the words. Namad she could work out – it meant something like lore or knowledge – but what of Mahorelah? She had no idea what that word meant at all.

"Mahorelah?" she asked. "What does that mean?"

He looked up for a moment in puzzlement.

"I am sorry, I was forgetting. Even though you now have my language within you, you still cannot hold it completely. You would need to change the way that you are and see the world about you in entirely different colours."

He held her with his gaze.

"Namad Mahorelah would be something like 'the Lore of the Abyss' to you, though that does not fully describe how intimate was the involvement. You have no words in your language adequate to the task. As I said before, you are not born to this, so you see creation in a way we of the Ell never did."

He pointed downwards.

"This place, your world, the Bright Heavens, is not all that there is. Below us, elsewhere, lie other realms. They have never been fully explored and none know them in their entirety, but they are as similar to each other as they are different from the Bright Heavens."

"I am not sure I understand," she said.

"Think of them as abysses, lesser than the Bright Heavens perhaps but older, much older, and based upon entirely different principles. They exist elsewhere, occupying other spaces than the one the Bright Heavens exist in, separated from it by almost unbreachable walls. We live on this side of the wall, and the denizens of the Mahorelah live on the other."

"There are living things there?"

"Living, yes, but not life as you know it. The creatures that dwell in the Mahorelah are born of more chaotic processes than are found here. Many exist in a state of continual flux, their shapes and purposes fluid. In their own realms they are safe enough, quiescent and serene. But take them from the places that they know and they become the very touch of chaos."

She thought about that.

"We have legends that sound uncomfortably close to what you are describing," she said.

Korfax bowed his head.

"I know that you do. You call them underworlds, pits, the abode of demons, and you are not so far from the truth. We called them the same. But we, the Ell, knew them for what they really were. And some of us were their masters."

Helen frowned.

"Masters?"

Korfax looked out of the window for a moment and then back at her. There was a gleam in his eyes now, a dangerous gleam.

"An adept of the Namad Mahorelah, one of the Argedith..." he checked himself and smiled. "I am sorry, you have words, 'sorcerer' and 'sorceress'. Think of the Argedith in those terms."

He paused again, clearly troubled by something.

"But do not be misled, either," he continued. "The Argedith were more than mere workers of wonders, as you might consider them. They could do in an instant what it would take one of your people a lifetime to learn. But such lore comes at a price: the temptation of power. It is insidious, growing within until it consumes you and you are no longer the master but the slave."

He looked at her.

"The best of them were mighty indeed. They knew where their summons reached, and why. They could send their thoughts beyond the confines of the world and through the walls that kept the realms apart. By that very act they momentarily joined what was separated, making inconstant holes in the substance that divided the deeps from the heavens. And from whatever abyss they had access to, they could summon forces, elements, creatures, demons or gods and make them do their will."

"Gods?"

"There is no other word in your language that I know for such beings, so I used the best that I could. What you call God, the Ell called The Creator. But you use the word in so many ways. There are tales I have seen inside you, myths and legends, where you talk of gods many times many. So I use the word as you would use it. And the gods of the abyss are more like the beings that fill your ancient myths than your conception of The Creator. But the Ell knew them by another name, the one they gave themselves. They called themselves the Ashar."

"And these 'Ashar' can be summoned?"

Korfax darkened.

"Yes, they can," he said, "though you have no idea what such an act entails. But even here there are rules governing such things. The more powerful the summoner, the more powerful the entity that can be summoned. But overreach your aim and that which you summon might tear out your heart, or your soul."

Though he had denied it, this really did sound like magic.

"They can be summoned here?" she asked. "But how? It is hard to believe!"

Korfax smiled.

"After all you have seen?" he said, gently chiding her disbelief. "Believe it, for it is most certainly true. The abysses of the Mahorelah exist. Energy can be stolen from them, just as the inhabitants can, and then put to use. In the earliest days, those days that are still remembered by the Ell, many a city was built with the aid of adepts of the Namad Mahorelah."

The smile remained, but there was no humour in his eyes.

"There were other powers of course, powers based entirely upon natural talents. There were the powers of the mind, the ability to see another's heart or even to breach the walls of time, but everything changed when we rediscovered the Namad Dar."

Korfax bowed his head as though he had just offered up a terrible confession.

"And what is the Namad Dar?" she asked.

He was no longer smiling.

"Of all the many lores that we knew, none was more perilous or more glorious than the Namad Dar. With it, an entire world was subdued and unified. With it, the Ell sailed upon the ocean of the heavens itself, the first ever to do so. And with it they committed the ultimate folly – they tried to touch The Creator."

Korfax took a deep breath and shuddered.

"The Namad Dar is astonishing, for with it we learned to make a substance that would echo our very wills."

Korfax drew out his white crystal stave from its sheath as if it was an answer in itself.

"You have seen something of what this can do, but only the tiniest fraction. This is a kabadar," he announced. "From this all but imperishable crystal I can call up forces, forces that I can order and employ in the service of my will."

He lowered the stave and looked at her.

"Let me demonstrate so that you do not mistake me. Come!"

He led her out of the house.

"Where are we going?"

"You will see."

He took her to the moor. They walked for a long while until they were completely hidden from view. There were no roads or houses in sight. He turned to her and bowed slightly, a brief tilt of the head before he stamped the heel of his stave into the ground.

The stave glowed with a yellow light and there was a sound like that of a deep bell. Then the ground shook. Helen could feel tremors passing to and fro beneath her feet. The land about her danced, all of it, from where she stood to as far as she could see. The hills, the pools, all flexed as if suddenly adrift upon a stormy sea. It was as though the world had suddenly decided to shake itself apart. She dropped to her knees, she could not stay upright, but when she turned to Korfax she found that he had not moved at all. He appeared rooted to the spot, he and the earth a single thing. He smiled back at her, lifted his stave again and the tremors ceased. Helen stared about her in amazement. Everything was as quiet as it had ever been. She could stand again.

“What did you just do?” she asked carefully.

But Korfax did not answer. Instead he held his stave aloft. It glowed blue and there was a high-pitched sound, a rising whistle that was almost a shriek. Energies gathered about them both and Helen felt a wind rise up. She looked at him for a moment, but he was not looking at her, he was looking over her shoulder. She turned about and stared in utter disbelief. Bearing down on them both was a whirlwind.

It was huge, a great whirling mass of air that towered into the sky, growling hungrily as it span about its hidden centre. But it stopped before Korfax’s outstretched stave and waited like some obedient ogre, grumbling all the while as loose soil and detritus flew up from the ground beneath. Then, after a long moment, Korfax withdrew his stave and the whirlwind subsided, thinning and failing before vanishing completely. Twigs, leaves, clods of earth and everything else it had collected up into itself fell back to the ground again.

Helen had only a moment in which to catch her breath before Korfax raised his stave for a third time, now pointing it at the sky. It hummed, a low sound, angry, like the deep hum of a swarm, and red filled it. Lightning flew from its tip, shattering the day and scorching the heavens. The clouds fled and the land about them shivered under the inconstant brilliance. Thunder rolled about them, peel after peel after peel. She bent over and covered her ears. What a sound. It thundered through her, shaking her, shaking her bones. She could not move.

Then it ceased. Echoes of violence crossed the land until all was as silent as before. She looked up again but realised that Korfax was not done yet. He had one last thing to show her. He turned away from the land and pointed his stave at the sea.

Helen turned with him and watched what he did. There was a chiming sound, a ripple of falling notes, and his stave filled from the inside with a green light. Then the far sea rose up as though pushed from below by some monster of the deep. Soon a great wave swayed in the air, a wall of fish and water. Mighty it grew, towering into the sky and blotting out the light. It dwarfed the land over which it now leaned like some immense fist and Helen stared up at it, dumbfounded. Korfax let it subside again, slowly, carefully, leaving the sea as it was before. He

turned to her.

“Do not be afraid,” he said. “I would never let anything harm you, ever.”

He gestured to a large rock. They went to it and sat down on its wide, flat surface.

“But I had to show you,” he continued. “I had to let you know.”

She thought about what she had just witnessed and what she had been told. Seeing his power gave his words even more weight; if only she could understand everything that he had said. Though he had given her much, there were still gaps in her mind, knowledge she did not have because she had not experienced it for herself.

“What you have just seen,” he told her, “is the Namad Dar made manifest. With it, earth, air, fire and water were ours to command. Energy, freely brought through the doorway in each crystal, was ours to do with as we pleased. We had found the ultimate power, how to split the nothingness from which all creation was birthed. We had found how to reorder creation itself. And in our arrogance we came to believe, in truth, that we had become The Creator’s Sword.”

“The Creator’s Sword?” she asked.

“The act of creation itself,” he told her, “slicing through the nothingness, creating everything. It is the endless act, Matheoi, the unfolding word. All things owe their existence to it: matter, energy, light, dark. The sword creates all things, even good and evil, for all things are made known by their opposite. Contention – the action of opposing forces – is the way of the world.”

Korfox held up his stave and looked at it with a complex expression.

“Even this pure crystal is of such a nature. It grew out of need, the need for opposition. The Argedith, those who employed the Namad Mahorelah, had to be opposed.”

“Why?”

“As I said, they used their lore for ill. They desired too much, and in the end only dominion would do. They became convinced that their way was the only way. Those who would not agree were forced to fight or to bow. There was war and Lon-Elah was soaked in blood for many, many years. Victory was a long time coming, but it came in the end. The world was cleansed.”

“Cleansed?”

“You have had it here, though you know it by other names. Call it what you will, cleansing or crusade, as the name does not matter, only the deed. For the victorious it became a necessity, the only way to bring peace. For the vanquished, those that survived it, it became an abomination.”

Helen watched his face. Korfox looked angry now, full of scorn for the past.

“Our lives became ruled by dogma,” he said. “And for a while we were a blind people, but not all heresy vanished into the night. Indeed, heresy was our saviour, but only for the fortunate few, and only for a little while.”

He turned to her.

"I know, I was there."

"During the war?"

"Which one? There have been many."

"The one in which sorcery was defeated."

"No," he said, "I was not present for that. It happened long before I was born. When I was young the world had already been at peace for over six thousand years. I grew up in a world of plenty and order, a world united under the rule of the Velukor. Some called it the long wait, others the blessed pause, for we knew that the next war would come someday. So we remained in the posture of vigilance and waited."

She frowned.

"Now I really don't understand," she said. "You were waiting for the next war? But if the world was at peace...?"

Her voice trailed away in incomprehension and he smiled at her, but it was a sad smile. He reached out to touch her cheek, the gentlest of touches.

"You are such an innocent," he said. "Do not believe that what happens in the past remains there, because it is not so. No act of violence exists in solitude; there are always consequences. Though they may take an age of the world, the seeds of vengeance will always sprout where you least expect them. And that is what we of the Ell understood. Though defeated, we knew that the malice of the Mahorelah would have its day in some far-flung time. And there were prophecies. Karmaraa, once said to be the greatest of us, called Logah Qahn, called Audroh Eithar, said that evil would return and that we had to be ready. So we prepared ourselves for that eventuality. Though there had not been an enemy in all that time, the Ell kept themselves ready for the war yet to come. Blades had to be as sharp as they were when Karmaraa himself rode out to battle, and minds had to be just as vigilant, for Karmaraa demanded that the Ell never cease their watch. And who would dare go against the word of the first Velukor, the chosen of The Creator?"

She shook her head.

"But if this all happened such a long time ago, if there were no more wars, what happened to your people?"

"I did not say there were no more wars. I have not told you everything yet."

He looked out over the moor.

"Karmaraa foresaw it. He said that a war would come, and the seers agreed. He was the only one to oppose the darkness in the beginning. He was the only one that all others would listen to."

He turned back to her.

"Karmaraa was a prince of the west, of a people called the Korith Zadakal. For ages past they had contention with others, the Iabeiorith, who lived in the North. These people had a prince also, Sondehna, and just as Karmaraa was said to be the greatest of us, Sondehna was said to be the worst. The story is long and sad and it ended with the death of Sondehna and the beginning of a terrible war. The peoples

of the south and the east allied themselves with the west to defeat the Iabeiorith, but even so the war itself lasted almost a thousand years."

She could not imagine it.

"A thousand years?" she questioned.

"A long time," he answered, "for the Iabeiorith were strong and proud, and even without their prince they were mighty. They used the Namad Mahorelah in terrible ways. Think of it. They could call up armies of demons to do their will. If the west had not employed the Namad Dar, the north would have been victorious, despite their losses."

She thought she detected a certain bitterness in his voice. What was this? She had listened spellbound to names she did not know, deeds she had not witnessed, lore she had only the barest conception of, but here was a suggestion of something else, something deeper, some other, subtler play.

He looked at her.

"I said that when I was born there had been peace for over six thousand years, but that does not mean that there were no more wars. The peace of Karmaraa finally came to an end whilst I was still a child, and it marked the beginning of the last and greatest war of all. It is the reason I am here and the reason you are here."

"The reason?"

Korfax looked back at his stave. There was a strange look on his face now, something she had not seen there before. She could not fathom it.

"I have already told you that no act of violence exists in solitude. Many believed that the powers of the abyss were behind the troubles that came to our world, but I discovered a different tale. Something else caused the fracture, a deeper evil that waited in the background, biding its time."

He leaned back and closed his eyes.

"The Ell had another enemy, a greater enemy, though they knew it not until the end. We fought its servants, thinking we still opposed the malice of the abyss, but we did not. Only at the end did we realise what we were set against. You see, our enemy was not just our enemy. It is the enemy of The Creator, of all creation. And it is this foe, and its servants, that I have striven with ever since, across time and across space."

"The enemy of The Creator?" she asked.

He sat up straighter and his eyes shone.

"I know what is in your mind," he said. "I see your doubt. Your world is full of it – doubt and disbelief. But answer me this. What was it that first moved across the face of the deep?" He gestured at the land. "And if it is proof you desire then look around you. What miracle was it that made all of this? The void was divided so that this, all of this, could be. But what divided the void?"

He looked darkly back at her.

"You have not seen what I have seen. If I have learned anything in this life, it is that no force exists without opposition. For every love there is a hate, for every

light there is a shadow, for every creator there is also a destroyer.”

He pointed at the sky as though it proved what he said.

“The Ell saw The Creator as a sword, slicing through the nothingness, the non-existent void, cleaving it in two and creating all worlds. But to create light one must also create darkness.”

He gestured at himself.

“So it is no surprise that we, the created, do both good and evil. This is the way of all things, everything made known by its opposite. Even the very act of creation itself cannot escape that most fundamental law, for the nothingness from which creation is drawn opposes such an act. And we know this because it has come here to the Bright Heavens, breaking its very own commandments by clothing itself in matter and form. It has taken on the substance of creation in order to destroy it, fighting the heavens with its own weapons. Inevitably, it took a name for itself, and a long time ago I learned what that was.”

He waited a moment, watching carefully. He was testing her again, she could see it.

“It is the name of evil. Once you have heard it, then you will know.”

Even the day seemed darker now, and Helen felt a rising chill. She should have expected this. No good without evil, no God without a Devil. It was not something she had ever thought about seriously until now. Korfax had done this. He had forced the issue merely by his presence. But this was his world, not hers. She still stood upon the borders, or so she thought, peering over the edge into a world of powers, of absolutes and certainties. She had seen beauty, astonishing beauty, but did she really want to see its counterpart?

She looked at Korfax. To him she was his ancient love, and in the name of that love she knew that he would do anything for her. She had already seen something of how far he was prepared to go, and it made her wonder how much further it would take him. If she crossed over to stand at his side, if she fully entered his world, would she ever find her way back again? Would she even want to? He had taken her to a place of light and beauty, shown her a world without stain. Yes, he was the answer to the longing she had known all her life, but he also had a darkness inside him, a fearful darkness. He could kill without hesitation or mercy, if he so desired.

He was waiting, waiting to tell her the name, but if she heard it, this name of evil, where would it take her? Would his battle become hers? What was she to do?

“Would you hear it?” he asked. “Would you have certainty?”

Helen fought down her fear. Perhaps she was mistaken. Perhaps she was making too much of this. After all, what harm could there be in a mere word? But Korfax had already spoken of the power of such things, and he was a creature of power. Dare she doubt this?

“Surely a name is just a name?” she replied. But even as she said the words she could hear herself. How false she sounded. Korfax looked at her for a moment as if

he could not quite believe what she had just said.

"You ask that after all you have seen?" he questioned. "You still doubt?"

He drew a deep breath.

"You must not, you cannot doubt. You must have certainty, you must know."

He turned to her.

"I shall prove it to you. And you shall see," he said.

He leaned closer.

"Qorazon," he said, and the word filled her world.

She fell inwards. A door opened in her mind and she fell through it, and for a brief moment, the very briefest, she was suspended over an abyss, an abyss so vast and deep she knew that it had no ending. She shrank to a mote, the smallest of the small, caught between one moment and the next, caught in the nothing.

Now the abyss was not just below her, it was all around. Impaled upon the substance of nothing she no longer knew up from down. She would have fallen, tumbling end over end, but something caught hold of her and pulled her upwards. The vision disappeared and she found herself in Korfax's arms.

"You were about to fall. I caught you," he told her.

She pulled herself away from him.

"What did you just do?" she said.

"I gave you the name," he said. "What did you see?"

She looked at him. What had he done to her?

"Nothingness," she said. "I saw nothingness."

"Yes!" he smiled grimly. "That is it. Now do you understand?"

She backed away from him. Her world suddenly seemed inordinately fragile, and she could feel its walls crumbling away. She did not want to lose the world, just the cage she was in, but here was Korfax intent on pulling everything down, brick by brick, stone by stone, showing her what lay beyond, whether she wanted to see it or not.

Korfax stayed where he was, watching her with eyes that were now almost black.

"You are frightened?" he asked. "But this is the truth. Would you remain in ignorance all your life? Would you deny what is? You did not deny the beauty that I showed you, as you wanted to linger, to live in the dream of the Ell, but you must understand that beauty in itself cannot stand alone. With nothing to compare it to, it ceases to have meaning. That is immutable. To see one side, you must also see the other. You may run from such things, but in the end you cannot hide. The truth will seek you out."

"What do you mean I cannot hide?" she asked. "What have you done? Is this some sort of trap?"

He stood up, suddenly alarmed.

"No, not that! Never that!"

He bowed his head.

"I just wanted you to know. I wanted you to see. I wanted you to understand and

perhaps to remember.”

He looked up again, his eyes pleading with her.

“Would you go through your life with a veil pulled over your sight? Or would you know the truth?”

“Your truth?”

“No, this is the way things are.”

He gestured with his hands, spreading them wide.

“I am sorry. Fear and pain are the last things that I want for you. Now that I have found you once more I only want to preserve you, to know that you are safe. What happened earlier – you were already in danger here. Those others that attacked you? What if I had not been present? What was their intent?”

He leaned forward.

“You have known of me all your life, in your dreams and in your heart. Now we have met and you have seen a little more. All I ask now is that you see the rest. How can you judge what I say unless you see the truth of it with your own eyes? How can you judge me unless you know my tale?”

He turned away for a moment, suddenly tense. Then he looked back at her again, peering over his shoulder as though beckoning her to follow. And there was an odd expression on his face. He looked almost eager now.

“So we come to the heart of it,” he said. “Will you know me? Will you know my story, live it, so that you understand?”

She suddenly saw that everything else had been leading up to this point. This was the question he had wanted to ask all along. She thought long and hard. This was what he wanted. But what of her? What did she want?

She already knew the answer, though she did not want to admit it. He had already seen it in her. Despite her fears, she still wanted a release. She wanted to escape this life and to find a place where she finally belonged.

“Yes,” she said at last. “You are right, I want that, you know that I do.”

His expression went beyond her. It was as if the last chain had been broken and her simple statement had been the hammer. He came to her and knelt, head bowed. It was a long moment before he spoke again.

“Then I thank you for this gift,” he said. “I will show you what no other has ever seen since the very beginning. You have experienced the dream, so now let me show you how it was when I was young, when the birthing fires of the Bright Heavens still raged across the sky and the beauty of the first of all worlds had not yet passed beyond.”

Back in her house he took out a single black crystal and held it up before her. She looked at it. The crystal had smooth sides and rounded edges, as though it had been washed in a river for a very long time, but she could tell that it was no ordinary stone. There was a light in its black heart, a dim glimmer that seemed to wax and wane as though some imprisoned flame flickered deep inside.

Korfax laid it in the palm of one hand before touching it, just so, with the other. The crystal erupted into life.

The dim light at its heart now boiled outwards, spinning about some unseen axis. Helen stared at the sudden fires, caught by the play of light. Marvels had her in their grasp again. Korfax watched for a moment and then placed his hand under her chin, raising her face up so that she had no choice but to meet his gaze.

"Do not be distracted now," he told her. "This is of the utmost seriousness."

He gestured at the black and burning stone.

"This is a mapadar," he continued. "You might call it a stone of stories, you might call it a stone of memories, but it is much, much more than that. In here is the memory of my life, my story, my time upon Uriel. In here is the truth."

He looked sadly at the stone for a moment before looking back at her again.

"This is the past. This happened. It was. And if ever anything can truly be said to have been, then you will see it now, if you allow yourself to do so."

He drew back a little.

"Imagine if you will that you hold in your hand a book of stories. Imagine that when you turn to the first page the words rise up about you and become the story itself, that the words become you and you become the words. Suddenly you find yourself there, with the players as they stride across their landscapes, hearing their thoughts, their words, feeling their passions, becoming them and partaking of their lives, their being, their truth."

As he spoke, so the light mounted up in his eyes, until they were almost too bright to look upon at all.

"Here," he said, "naked and unashamed, are the Ell as I knew them. Through the mapadar you will see, for you will live their lives and know their truths. You will know their souls as if you were them."

The stone also grew brighter, its inner fire waxing between his fingers until it became blinding.

"I am in here," he announced behind the brilliance, "and here you will see me at last, body and mind, heart and soul. Accept this stone and you will know me from my heights to my depths, from my innocence all the way to my guilt."

Then Korfax withdrew the light, hiding it away within an enclosing fist. He held up his other hand in warning, his face suddenly grim. The change was frightening; Helen had never seen such darkness in a face before.

"But I must warn you," Korfax said. "There is great evil here also, the worst that you will ever encounter in all your days. I cannot help that. It is the way of the world. For every beautiful thing there exists something equally hideous. Nothing exists without its opposite."

He drew back his hand and revealed the stone once more.

"Yes, there are terrors here, but there is also joy and love in equal measure. So here is my gift to you, held in my hand, loyalty and betrayal, war and peace, love and hatred. But I cannot force you to see this. It is for you to decide alone. It is your

choice.”

Helen did not move. Choice? There was no choice. No choice remained to her now at all. She had been tantalised by shadows and illusions, lured by possibilities she had only ever imagined in her dreams, and then only dimly. What could she say? She had longed for such truths ever since she could remember, and that longing subdued the very real terror she also felt. The only possible answer was yes.

So she bowed her head and Korfax touched the stone to her brow, and as soon as it touched her she fell, down and down again, falling away, falling completely. And all the while she thought to herself that here it was, her deepest desire at last, that her true life would step out of the past and claim her.

3

THE TOWER

Go-saldor Kar-nor-ialaa
Lap-pimith Do-gei-agi
Nimin-las Kua-jil-tolef
Fal-zadaid Odkon-tasorn
Moz-lonjes Av-belisong
Bao-inho Lai-in-uthar
Kri-do-zid Ino-tello



She dwelt within infinite night. There was nothing that she could see, or hear, or smell, or feel or taste – even time seemed meaningless. She simply was.

After an age or a moment, she could not tell which, she felt a dim stirring, the lightest of touches. But it did not diminish; instead it grew and it grew until it swelled to the movement of immensities, and, like the opening of a great eye, intolerable brilliance enveloped her.

It was too bright, too much all at once, and she cowered from it, but there was nowhere to go. It was everywhere. As blind in the light as in the dark, it took her long moments before she realised that the brilliance had begun to lessen. Structure and form coalesced about her, and she found herself deep within a vastness that her sight could not contain.

She fell through an inferno, ponderous fires and slow eruptions, and passed like a mote into realms of filigree effulgence. Through caverns of light and burning clouds she tumbled, through tempest and rage and endless flame, until all parted before her and she found herself in gentler regions.

Here were stars, many stars, all still swathed in the furies that had birthed them. She passed them by, touching this one or that briefly with her thought until one, mightier than the rest, reared up to bar her way.

Alone, proudly alone, it poured its magnificence out into the night. She understood. Here was the very first, the archetype of all that were to follow. She felt herself caught by it, summoned to it as though it alone was the reason for everything, the very centre of creation.

As she fell inwards she found a shadow blocking her path, the limb of a mighty

world, clouds of indigo slowly circling. Over it she went, and over its dark rings, wheels within wheels, dim reflections ever turning. Briefly its sombre mass pulled at her, then, like a leaden weight dropped into the ocean depths, it fell away again, back down into the void.

Another world loomed, banded in blue, even larger than the first. Storms raged across it, great eruptions of light and serpentine coils of clouds. For a moment it threatened her with its wrath, but then it, too, fell away, its storms fading back into the outer dark.

The star drew her in. Huge it grew, a brilliant disc of violet hurling the energies of its burning heart ever outwards. She flew over its surface, through flame and storm, under great bridges of light and over turbulent seas of fire. Around it she went like a world herself, before rising again from the violence and unbearable heat.

Now she came upon a red world, so close to its star that it boiled. Fires glowed and molten rock flowed as its surfaces flexed, made and remade again by the first force of heaven. Over its rage she went and then on again, back out into the night.

Another world, veiled in deep orange, emerged from the darkness. Serene it floated by, hidden and mysterious, a thing of mists and vapours. Unknown it came to her, and unknown it left her again, turning slowly as it vanished in her wake.

Her speed increased and she barely had time to see the next, a brighter world, smaller, faster, flashing in the light as it span its quicksilver way. A brief glimpse she had of a labyrinth of yellow stone, before it, too, was lost to sight.

And so she came to it at last, her final destination, a world of many colours wrapped about by white cloud and circled by a green moon.

Over the moon she went, as barren as the world below was verdant. But it was not dead, for its unsullied surface smiled with a gentle spirit upon its companion, a ripple of pale greens. Its surface rolled under her and she found herself traversing a vast uncut jewel.

Now the world of many colours drew her in, and she knew that it was all true. Here it was, the first cradle of life, the very well-head of all the stories that were yet to come.

Down she went, dropping through blue air and white cloud to a green ocean, a huge ocean, its ever-moving surface glittering in the light. Over it she went, towards a dark horizon where a storm sat, a wall of fury that roared across the water. She crossed its boundaries and pierced its heart.

She came upon an eye, a calm circle about which the storm turned. Down below her lay the ocean again, but it was no longer empty. A maelstrom span right at the very centre and she could see no limit to its depths. But even as she came to it she went on again, moving back out through the storm and away from the mystery of the great gyre.

A vast land rushed up to meet her, one great continent that spanned more than half the world. Over proud mountains and fertile valleys she glided, over forests

that stretched from one horizon to another, over great rolling hills around which rivers wound their questing way, all held in the hand of the ocean like a gift for the air.

There were cities here, great cities carved from crystal or grown from stone, many spires flung proudly at the sky – tall, ethereal, dreams caught upon a single moment, each of a beauty and a form unique unto itself. She wanted to linger but now had only scant moments left to her in which to mark them, for her purpose was quickening and she could feel it pulling her on. So she went her way, leaving everything behind her like a dimly remembered dream.

Her speed decreased. Up ahead lay another great mass of clouds, curling themselves across her path and blocking out the light from above. Though not as potent as that which circled the great gyre, this storm seemed more ominous.

The rain caught her as she flew under the clouds and she felt the water wash through, dissolving her, each droplet taking part of her down with it as it fell onto the hills below. She was merging with the world about her, her story and its story becoming one and the same. What was strange became familiar and what was extraordinary became commonplace. She was both reinvented and exalted, and she finally became one with the Ell.

She knew this place now, seeing the land about her, knowing the rain, knowing the storm. She wanted to wait so that she could take her time, experience this place as it should be experienced and remember what she had apparently forgotten, but the story had her in its ineluctable grasp and would not let her go. Her last sight was of a single tower rushing up towards her, before she came apart completely and drowned in the tale.

Umadya Losq! With its tall tower and its high encircling walls it dominated the summit of Lee Losq, the furthest hill, most northerly of all the heights of Lukalaa.

The tower itself was a single spar of furrowed stone, four sides facing the four directions. The passing ages had blunted its contours somewhat, gentling the sharpness of its youth, so that now it looked more like the trunk of an ancient tree rather than a tower of stone, a great and tapering trunk, still clinging to the hilltop with its old and obdurate roots.

Low about the main tower clustered lesser cousins, the houses and the out buildings. Four square and tipped with smaller spires at each corner, they held firmly to the roots from which they had seemingly sprung, all the way out to the high wall itself. And with its sloping sides curving up into the sky and passing gently down into the ground below, the high wall encircled everything like a comfort, a great bowl of flowering stone, the last flower of the north.

Beyond the tower and to the north the land dropped away to rippling moorland and scattered pools before rearing up again as cliffs, final bastions set against the boundless ocean beyond.

To the west was a wide and flat valley through which a meandering river wound

its uninvolved way northwards, meeting at last with a great tongue of water thrust deep inland. Beyond the valley other hills strode across the land in ordered rank, straining towards the north, marching ever on towards the ocean.

To the south reared the seven great peaks of Lee Izirakal, larger by far than Lee Losq. Five lay in a line, a long and wandering ridge set about with many crags and cliffs, whilst the others glowered to the west, their weathered faces bent over the lands below.

To the east was a lake set about with tall and shapely trees, whilst further on a labyrinth of smaller pools and low hills stretched all the way to the far horizon, a frozen sea of soil and stone.

Over it all grey clouds rushed like some interminable herd, for ever spitting their cargo of rain at the ground. The distances vanished in a deepening gloom, and even the warm yellow lights set in the high windows were touched by it, shadowed by the darkening world without.

In the highest room she sat, thin and spare and ancient. Mortality had her in its grasp and the look in her eyes said that she knew it all too well.

She was the naming seer for all the lands between Faor Raxamith and Umadya Losq, between Tohus and Dialsen, a position she had honoured nearly all her long life, performing her duty with both diligence and humility, but she had never encountered anything like this before.

A child lay in blankets upon the floor, as new to the world as she was old, newborn and naked, the sweat of his birth still lingering in the air about him.

Between them both lay four square boards, each incised with the requisite rows and the requisite columns, forty-nine by forty-nine. Here were the seven gates and the four elements – no more and certainly no less. Here, within their exactness, were gathered the proper words, taken from the corners of the world and set out as a mirror to the movements in the heavens above.

Out there, beyond the world, the conjunction moved on, not yet complete. It was the rarest of all, a sword, when all the children of Rafarel came together in a single line. For that was the way of it, above and below, the order of creation, the one reflected in the other.

Seven times had she entered the trance, seven times casting the markers upon the boards in the complex pattern of naming, and seven times the very same name had come back to her, leering up from the stone like a curse.

What evil power had invested this place she could not tell, but she was certain that it was here, holding both her and the child in its vile fist. Though she could neither see nor feel it, she had proof enough. It lay in the name, the dark name that ever came back to her from the trance.

She was caught, huddled about failing flames, for she could not leave this place until a name had been given. Terrible consequences would result if she did, for names were sacred, names were purpose, and to be nameless was to be cursed for

all time.

She turned her head from side to side, hunting this way and that with quick movements of her eyes, looking for the footprints of her foe, a shadow, a glimmer, a sense even, but nothing revealed itself, in neither the stone nor the air.

Even after all these long ages of sleep she was certain she would have known it if the Mahorelah had stirred once more. She would have known it, deep inside, that sense of immanence, of lurking immensity. It had been a long time indeed since she had held an angadar in her hand, one imbued with the essence of the abyss, but she had never forgotten the sensation, not in all the years since. Such a frightening and terrible feeling it was, the giddiness of infinite deeps and the dim sense of an almost limitless malevolence. But, colour it how she might, the Mahorelah was not here this night. Something was, though, reaching out over its unknown thresholds, powerful enough to corrupt the most necessary of all rituals.

She looked down. What could she tell the mother? What could she tell the father? They were the best of the north, the best of all, most worthy of honour and service. She remembered naming the father himself, more than one hundred and fifty years ago, and she remembered when he had returned with his young and beautiful bride from the west. She had known them nearly all their lives, and when it had become common knowledge that there would be a naming, that a son was to be born in the time of the sword, many had gone far out of their way to tell her what a wonderful day it would be and what a great honour it was. So how could she reveal this? What could she say to them and to all the others that now waited below to hear her words?

She could have howled, she could have wrung her hands in supplication, she could have rent her clothes, but she did not. Instead she looked at the child nestling in his soft blankets and let rare tears fill her eyes. Two fell together, precious reflections against the parched desert of her face. This one was such an innocent, innocent of everything. How could she stain such innocent flesh with so terrible a name?

She found herself longing to pick him up and cradle him in her arms, desiring to feel his new life like a comfort against her ancient heart, wanting to wrap him about so that she could shield him from whatever it was that lurked nearby, but she did not. Rather, she picked up the markers and threw them at the boards in impotent rage. They bounced and rattled for a moment, and then they came to a stop.

Their movement caught her – the slow tumble, edge over edge, the flash of polished surfaces as they settled like purposeful stone. She stared at the pattern revealed. The markers, by sheer chance, had fallen as if they had been cast from a naming trance. There was even a name there, a good name, a very good name indeed. She stared at the markers and the temptation had her. Dare she, she wondered. The thought coiled seductively in her mind. Perhaps she could use that name instead. But even as she considered it, she stopped where she was. Shame

had her. This was false, and not only was it false, it was profane.

She held her hands to her mouth and suddenly dared not even to breathe. Was that it? Was that the real intent here? Was she the one that was being tempted? Now it would be her that corrupted the ritual, not the other, that other that waited within its unseen shadows. She stared all around the room, expecting to surprise an eager grin or a brief flash of satisfied eyes, but she caught nothing unawares.

She looked at the name again. It had not come from the trance, had not been called up by the deepest layers of her being, had not come from her immersion in that holy and primordial water whence all names have their being. Instead it had been born of her rage, born of her frustration and her corruption. By even considering such a name she was betraying everything that she had ever held to be sacred. Her vows of service, her oaths, her acts – all would be rendered meaningless by such a choice. Names did not come by chance, they were chosen! But what of that other, that name from the trance? What did her service mean in the face of that?

She looked at the false name again. It was so good, so true, so rare. Dare she take it? Dare she not? Perhaps she was wrong. Perhaps The Creator had spoken to her with the simplest of answers. As she had been denied the river, was she not now being shown another possibility? Her shoulders dropped and she finally surrendered. She would give the second name to the child and accept the consequences herself. Let the sacrifice be hers, not the child's, and as a penance she would let this be her very last act of naming ever. It was for The Creator to judge her now. The giving of this name was an act of mercy. Let that other, that lie, let it fall back into the depths from which it had so untimely risen. Not until creation had fulfilled itself should that name ever rise again, and then only when the last judgement was at hand.

She reluctantly gathered up her boards and her markers and put them in their wrappings. Then she lifted the child up and held him to her, holding him tight, her thin arms like walls about him. He was asleep now, his lips gently open and his face innocent of any thought at all. She looked at the tiny face and suddenly considered it the most beautiful that she had ever seen.

Tears fell from her eyes again, but she brushed them aside as quickly as they came. It was long past time, long past time indeed, so she gathered up the last vestiges of her authority and carried her charge from the room in a rustle of robes.

Down the narrow stairs she went, down and down, past the fifth level and then on to the great bedroom where they were all gathered, waiting for her, waiting for her words. The mother still lay upon the birthing bed and the father still stood beside her as he had at the birth, still holding her hand. Both looked up with glowing eyes as she entered, both ready to hear their son's name. Around them, and to either side, stood the rest of the household, all eager for the same. They were not a large company, but they filled the air about them with enough passion to make them seem a multitude. She could feel it now, a swirl of love like a caress, an

abiding love, a shared love, a love that mirrored the trust and the peace that lay upon the child's face, that self-same face she now held carefully against her breast.

She swallowed hard and handed the child back to his mother, who smiled gently in return before gazing in wonder at her little one's face. The father stood straighter now, quiet pride in his eyes as he stared down at her.

The moment had arrived. They awaited the name, and if she did not speak it soon they would begin to wonder. She cleared her throat.

"Your son has been named," she declared, her voice as steady as a rock. "Into the river I have journeyed and out again, bearing the symbol of his spirit. For he is named Korfax, and he is of the Farenith.

There were gasps of surprise and approval. Hands were clasped and there were many sudden tears of joy. It was done. The name was good indeed, almost too good perhaps, but she did not falter yet. She dared not.

"May his life be long," she continued. "May his spirit be untroubled and may his time amongst us be of great worth. And may he drink of the light of The Creator for all the days that are his."

Many hands were held up in thanks, but the lie stuck in her throat. She looked down and took a deep breath. She must be strong now, stronger than she had ever been before in all her life. Too much depended on this. But when she looked up again, for an instant, for the merest instant, she saw the mother frown. So she covered the falsehood with a mental wall that even the mightiest of the Exentaser would have trouble seeing through, and just to be sure she bowed low to the father, looking away from the mother entirely. Strict formality informed her as she raised her head again and she became stone at last, impervious and unreadable.

"Enay, this naming has tired me greatly. I fear this will be my last naming ever under the Bright Heavens, for the river was unwilling to let me depart this night. I will not impose upon your hospitality, nor upon your joy. Instead, I will leave. The ride back to my home will help settle my thoughts."

They tried to dissuade her, but she was adamant. They said that she must, at the very least, attend the birthing feast, but she refused all the same, even though she risked causing great offence. They were not offended though; rather, she could see that they were all somewhat saddened by it, for their judgements were already written upon their faces. She was old, they thought, eldest of all, and the old had always been stubborn, their lives rooted in a soil of experience so deep that the young could never know it. No one suspected, not even the mother; they were merely concerned, that was all. But even after such an insight nothing they could say would make her relent.

The servants helped her leave, solicitous and grateful, and she rode out of Losq with many a blessing at her back. But she wanted neither them nor the memory of the lie. She only hoped that young Korfax would find a brighter path to follow and that The Creator would forgive her her crime.

The journey home was long, made all the worse by the storm, but she was inured

to hardship. One had to be hardy to live so far north. Her steed was almost as old in years as she was, relatively speaking, and it knew the way as well as she did, so she let it decide which path was best to take. She was far too wrapped up in her own thoughts to consider such things.

When she arrived at her tall and lonely house overlooking the Piral Gieris, she took out her naming boards, along with their markers, and looked at them for a very long time.

Though her house might be ancient, built before the wars even, her naming boards and their markers were older yet. They were older than even she dared consider.

Some gifted artisan, far back in the deeps of time, had made them. They were not signed with any famed sigil, but she knew in her heart that their maker had dwelt in the light when making them. All the boards were slightly worn now, and the markers were not as sharp at the edges as they once had been, but they were all still marvellous works, potent tools of the hand, the eye and the mind.

She took them to her place of contemplation, a high crag set above a cliff overlooking the plain below, and placed them all in a pile at the very centre of the stone circle that was set there. She looked down at them, blinking back yet more tears, before she went back to her house to fetch the large stone she used for meditation. It was the hardest thing that she possessed and it was polished to an altogether shining smoothness. She clutched it in both hands as she knelt before the boards and the markers, and her face showed not a flicker of emotion as she raised the stone high above her head. Then she brought it down with all the force that she could muster.

With a flash of light the boards shattered and the riven pieces scattered under the blow. She sighed briefly and collected them all up, and once she had made a pile she raised the great stone above her head and brought it down for a second time, smashing the wreckage into ever-smaller pieces.

She continued at her labour for a very long time, ignoring the pain and the fatigue that mounted with each passing moment. Agony began to consume her, pain upon pain upon pain, but this was her due. This was the price she must pay. Only when she had pounded every last piece to dust could she lay down at last – and then only to die. The reason for her life had been taken from her, and there was nothing else to live for.

Seasons flew by like wind-borne leaves. There were days of joy and laughter, nights of dream-filled wonder and new eyes beheld an elder world and made it young again, repainting it with brighter colours, sculpting it with new-carved shapes. The world, regardless, rolled ever on its ancient way, its path about its mighty star the well-travelled road it had always been, but now that road was seen afresh, and each scar, each well-worn rut, became unknown again, reinvented with expectancy, reinvented as mystery. What pleasures there were, and what

discoveries.

All too soon, though, the halcyon days, the golden times, become a thing of fond memory. All too brief they are and all too fleeting, as the world, awakened by knowledge or coaxed by familiarity, turns about its hidden centre and reveals its darker face. Then the dreams of innocence fail, falling away like so many discarded playthings, and harder truths rise up to take their place.

Sometimes awakenings are long and slow, drawn out, savoured and experienced. But sometimes they are abrupt and sudden. Then the world tumbles from its orbit and certainties shatter.

At the great gate they stood, a line of tall riders upon fine steeds waiting in the chill air. Helm and armour gleamed, the dark reds of fury. Cloak and pennant burned, the brighter reds of fire, but all was still. Nothing moved. It was not yet time.

At their head and set slightly apart, two more riders waited, each tall like those behind but one especially so. The shorter was cloaked in red and held a lance also, but the taller did not. He was arrayed in purple and his hands held nothing. They rested instead upon his saddle. Neither did he wear helm or armour; instead, there was a long stave of red crystal in a sheath across his back, and on his brow was a shining stone of the palest violet set in an argent circlet. He was the only one to move, and then only his eyes. They scoured the horizon as if hunting prey.

"Baschim?" he suddenly announced. "I was thinking. It is the eve of Ahaneh once more."

Baschim turned and looked expectantly at his master, bowing his head slightly.

"Yes, Enay," he said, "that it is."

Baschim waited. They all waited. The time for leaving had not yet arrived, but it would be here very soon. Dawn was coming and the east was brightening with every passing moment, but Baschim knew that his master would not move until he was ready to do so.

It was always at this time of year that his master grew restive, his thoughts darkening and turning to strange imaginings. Baschim tried to comfort himself that this was how it had always been, the patterns of their lives repeating themselves, year in and year out, as they ever had. It was the ritual cycle, the smaller rituals joining with the greater, a weight of movements that felt not only right but necessary. There was always that deeper fear, though, that his master's moods might one day turn him aside. It had never happened before, but the possibility always loomed large at this time of year.

"No, Baschim, that was not what I meant," said his master.

Baschim put his thoughts aside and listened attentively.

"I was thinking rather it seems only yesterday that we enacted Kuslah last. The arrow of time flies quicker with each passing season, carrying us ever nearer the end."

Baschim started. The end? That was new. His master really was in a black mood this day, blacker than he could remember for many a year. And was that a certain reluctance he heard now? Surely not! This was Great Ritual they did here, and his master knew it all too well. How could he not? He was Geyad Faren Enay Sazaaim, Geyad of the Dar Kaadarith and Enay of Losq. He was the mightiest in a long line of the mighty, for the Farenith went all the way back to the great wars themselves. Theirs was an ancient and noble heritage. Some even dared call it unique.

Baschim waited a moment in disquiet. What could he say? In some respects his master was an utter mystery to him: a wielder of powers he could never understand, a keeper of secrets he could never fathom. But his moods were the most mysterious of all, and occasionally there was no accounting for them, like now, for instance.

It was at times like these that his one and only nightmare came back to haunt him. Under its infrequent spell he would find himself cast adrift upon an uncharted sea, floundering in its immensity whilst his master stood upon the prow of a great ship above and looked to distances only he could see, speaking words only he could hear, unaware of his servant's turmoil below.

Baschim squared his shoulders and hid his uncertainties behind his mask of duty, as he ever did in such circumstances.

"We should set off soon, Enay," he said. "Time draws on, as you rightly say. Rafarel is near to rising."

Baschim gestured to the east, where the light was now gathering apace. But his master did not look. Instead he offered his servant the faintest of smiles.

"Good Baschim," he said, "you have ever been my goad."

Baschim bowed his head in gratitude and relief, but when he looked up again, he saw that his master's face had an older cast to it now. Perturbed, he dared a question.

"What troubles you, Enay?" he asked. "What really troubles you?"

Sazaaim inclined his head just so.

"So you see me, do you?" he said. "It is as it ever was. Your father was the same."

He leaned closer and his eyes lost their smile.

"I have a sense of foreboding in me, a feeling that has been with me for a while now."

"Foreboding, Enay? But what of?"

"I do not know, but I begin to feel that we should not go out this day. I fear something will happen if we do, something wrong. I suddenly find myself reluctant. I seek a sign, Baschim, a sign that my fears are groundless and that all will be well."

Baschim bowed his head in acknowledgement. So it was reluctance that he had heard. What had caused it? He thought of prophecies and portents and of other, darker things. But that was not his affair, nor his estate, so he pushed it all aside as best he could and told himself that this was neither the time nor the place for

indulgences. He had a duty to perform, and his master had said it well. He was a goad, a thing of necessity, as he ever had been.

“Enay!” he announced brightly. “All will be well, of course it will. Why should it not? This is Great Ritual we do here. We must go out. The observances must be kept.”

Sazaaim looked sad for a moment, but then he turned his gaze on his servant and fixed him with his hardest look yet.

Even after all their years together, Baschim still felt far from comfortable under that piercing scrutiny. For all his apparent gentleness, there was sometimes a hard fire in his master’s eyes, a most unforgiving fire. Now here it was again, and Baschim had no choice but to endure it.

“Yes, Baschim,” Sazaaim said, “the observances must be kept. But in all the time I have been Enay, I have never had such a presentiment before. Something has disturbed me, something out of place. I suddenly find myself wishing to seek it out.”

Baschim bowed his head. Here was his ingress.

“But surely, Enay,” he said, “that is a good thing. That is the purpose of Kuslah, after all, to travel the boundaries and to see that all is well.”

Sazaaim gentled his gaze again.

“No, Baschim, no! You do not understand. It is the ritual itself that seems wrong. It is as though this is precisely the wrong time to perform it. Ritual should feel right, necessary, inevitable. But that is not how I feel at all, and if I find no comfort in my thoughts then I shall order that we forgo it at this time.”

Baschim opened his mouth as if to speak and then closed it again. He was suddenly struck dumb. Forgo Kuslah? Forgo Great Ritual? But that was unthinkable – and doubly so for his master.

He looked away. Their entire lives were ruled by tradition and ritual. There was a place for everything, and everything had to be in its place. He glanced at the sky, searching it for dark clouds, but there were none to be seen. He looked to the far hills, seeking shadows, but there were none there either. The dawning day was already far too bright for anything to hide from.

Ever since he had become Balzarg, first servant to the Farenith, Baschim had never known his master shirk a duty or miss an observance. Indeed, Sazaaim was far more diligent than many another he could think of. Only those in the west were as attentive, or so he had heard. But Baschim had never travelled that far. He felt a momentary touch of pride. Few other great houses, whether of the north, the west, the south or the east, could equal the Farenith. The Farenith had served with honour for almost seven thousand years, a line that had never wavered and a service that had never faltered. The Farenith were as steady as stone, Enay after Enay, Geyad after Geyad.

So what was his master thinking now? The pride wavered. For the Enay of Losq to put aside his duty was unthinkable, yet this was precisely what Sazaaim seemed

to be considering. But before Baschim could say another word, someone else spoke from behind.

"Forgo Kuslah? That is unthinkable! You must not do it. The Velukor himself commands you."

They both turned about and Baschim breathed a sigh of relief. Thank The Creator! His mistress was here at last. Now, perhaps, his master's thoughts would turn to other things, to duty, the needs of his house and Great Ritual itself.

Tazocho, Uren of the Exentaser, Enay of the Salman Farenith and mother of the heir to the Tower of Losq, stood sternly by the gate.

Baschim saw how she bore herself. She had that same sense of power and command about her as that of her sire, but she and her beauty had a sharpness, a seeing sharpness that Sazaaim lacked, as though she saw things unmarked by others.

Beside her stood her son, the heir to the Farenith himself, the Noren of Losq, and for all that he favoured her, he had softer features and gentler eyes.

Sazaaim squared his shoulders and looked down.

"So, you have come to see me on my way after all, even though you said that you would not. Have you become my goad also?"

She offered him the briefest of smiles.

"After a little thought I decided it would be best. Your mood this morning was dark, so I came to reassure you once more that your concerns are groundless. I still see nothing ahead, so gather up your certainty and perform Kuslah without fear. All will be well, you will see."

He smiled briefly again and bowed his head to her. Then, after a brief pause, she bowed back. For long moments they held each other's gaze, before Sazaaim finally turned to look at his son, waiting in his mother's shadow. Sazaaim's expression changed entirely. Now he looked almost happy.

Baschim took the opportunity to glance at the other riders and was pleased to see that all remained stiffly erect, eyes forward, lances raised. There was not a hint amongst any of them that they had marked anything of the previous exchange at all. Baschim expected nothing less, of course, but it was still reassuring to see. He needed reassurance, especially today. He turned back to look at his master, still looking fondly at his son.

"And who is this tall youth I see before me?" asked Sazaaim. "No son of mine, I'll warrant. They said he was still in his bed and couldn't be bothered to see his father on his way at all."

The heir to the Tower of Losq laughed.

"Mother thought it would be best if I were here," he said. "After all, it is only fitting that the old master of Losq be seen on his way by the new."

Baschim allowed himself a careful smile as a few gentle chuckles rose up from the ranks behind. His gloom fled him entirely. Thank The Creator his master now had a son! Ever since the birth Sazaaim had been so much happier.

It was difficult in a world without strife to ever turn your mind to thoughts of war, but that was how it was. They were guardians, and that was even truer for the Farenith. Preparedness at all times, as it was written. Who knew when the inheritors of the dark past would rise again? But so it had been decreed. No act of violence existed in solitude, as it was written. There were always reprisals, no matter how long it took.

Sazaaim looked down at his son, smiling a little wider, a brief flicker of appreciation before raising his eyebrows and drawing himself up in his saddle. Then he leaned over the pommel in mock threat, and his eyes gleamed.

"So that's the way of it, is it? Well, let me warn you now. Your mother is teaching you to desire dominion far too soon. I always suspected that she plotted against me, and now I see the truth of it. I will deal with you both when I return."

He gestured at the tower.

"And though you lock the gates against me I shall storm them and throw them down. Then I will have you and she put in the deep holds until the Velukor comes himself to pass judgement upon you both."

For a moment he smiled his rarest of smiles, a wonderful thing of love and care, before becoming serious again. But it was a happier lord of Losq that looked back at his lady. Baschim saw the resolution in his master's eyes and smiled in return. Sazaaim had finally thrown aside his doubts and would now do his duty. All was right with the world again.

"We will return in seven days, as it should be," Sazaaim announced. "May the light of The Creator shine upon you, my love and my life."

Tazocho smiled gently in return. She came forward and lightly touched his hand.

"And may the light of The Creator shine upon you also, my heart and my whole."

Sazaaim's gaze intensified for a moment, two points of fire piercing her. She waited in turn, cold light consuming the fire. Then the Enay of Losq turned to his son and pointed with a steady hand.

"And you, Korfax, look after your mother whilst I am gone. You are now the master of this place until I return."

He smiled again.

"May the light of The Creator shine upon you, my son."

Korfax swallowed and bowed his head.

"And may the light of The Creator shine upon you, Father."

It was time. Great Rafarel finally touched the edge of the world and the growing dance of fire cast its gentle light across the land. Sazaaim reached over his shoulder and drew out his kabadar from its sheath, that long stave of crystal with which he practised both his art and his holy duty.

Baschim never saw the kabadar without feeling a certain sense of awe. It was an object of power, the will made manifest in stone, and with it a master could

command the elements. With it, earth, air, fire and water could be subdued and made to serve.

Sazaaim was a master of fire, so his stave was red: yellow for earth, blue for air, red for fire and green for water. Baschim had never been told why that was so, but that was the way that it was, a holy mystery, as it always had been and always would be.

Sazaaim held his kabadar up before him and tightened his grip upon it. Deep within, along the axis of its heart, a thin line of luminosity waxed, a sliver of light like that between two distant but immense doors.

Sazaaim pointed his stave at the sky. His gaze intensified for a moment and the stave glowed with red heat. A low, angry hum came and went as a shaft of fire erupted from its tip, a great tree of flickering flame that roared upwards, ever upwards, until each fiery branch shattered against the gathering clouds of morning, driving them back again to the four horizons. A brief peal of thunder shook the world and then was gone. Sazaaim lowered his stave and sheathed his power. He waited a moment and then turned his steed smartly about, before riding off down into the west, followed closely by Baschim and the others, the pennants on their many lances fluttering behind them.

Tazocho and Korfax watched them disappear beyond the edge of the hill and then turned back to the gate. They went inside and the great stone doors closed shut behind them.

Korfax smiled as he gazed through the window, sitting in the morning room, his first meal of the day set before him. His father had left him in charge.

It was the first time that he had ever said such a thing – and what a glorious feeling it was! Korfax savoured it, thinking what it meant, whilst at the back of his mind a small voice reminded him that he was still only Noren, heir-in-waiting to a seat of rock and soil, whilst his father was Enay, master of mountain and valley. Losq was not his yet. But one day, one far off day, he would be Enay, too, and then Losq really would be his.

Morning meal done, Korfax went on his way to his lessons. No doubt Doanazin was already there, eagerly waiting for her pupil to arrive. Doanazin was always eager.

He had heard her earlier, just after his father had left, singing the morning prayer from the highest balcony of the tower.

It used to be his mother who sang it, but now Doanazin did it in her stead. Korfax had heard it said that she had asked for the honour when she had first arrived and that his mother had granted it gladly. Not for the first time he found himself wishing that his mother was still the one to sing the prayer. She did it quietly.

He went the way he always did. Now, though, he found it all suddenly different, the familiar reinvented by a few well-chosen words. 'You are now the master of this

place until I return.' The words rolled in his mind.

He went along the third landing with its long line of shields, each emblazoned with the sigil of a house of the north. He looked at each in turn as he passed on by and thought of what they meant, of where they had come from, and at what price they had been bought.

He thought of other heirlooms, the special pieces, those marked out by the tale that they told. There were many relics of the past scattered here and there throughout the tower, and Korfax knew much of their history. His favourites, though, made an odd couple. They were of a kind, but as unlike as any two such objects could be. One was an open scroll, but the other was a complete mystery: two fine and beautiful swords.

The first was the great kansehna that was set above the north door in the great hall, its hilt pointing downwards and its blade pointing up to the sky. The blade was longer almost than he was tall, and upon it was inscribed a single line taken from an ancient poem. Korfax knew the words well and always spoke them quietly to himself whenever he walked under the blade.

'Zirido Soygah Koh', said the words. I am the fall of doom. Korfax looked up. Given the size of the sword, who would dare to doubt it!

In its day, when the sword had been wielded with a purpose, it must have been a terrible weapon. It was said to have been the blade of the Meganza himself, the champion of Anolei, the seventh Velukor. There had only ever been one Meganza, and that had been Noqor, sixth Enay of Losq. Noqor was said to have been tall and strong indeed, but then he would have needed to be in order to wield so mighty a blade.

The second heirloom Korfax favoured was a beautiful and delicate avalkana that hung from the wall in his father's day room. It had the slenderest of blades and the finest of hilts. It had obviously been made for duelling, but Korfax doubted it had ever been used in anger. It looked far too stylised for one thing, and far too new for another. Swords that had seen use in combat never looked so perfect, like the great kansehna of Noqor, for instance.

Korfax did not know the avalkana's history, as no one would tell him, but he had often entertained this fantasy or that as he had tried to account for its prominence. It had obviously been made for his father, but when had his father ever fought a duel? The question always perplexed him, for no one had ever mentioned such a thing to him. His father, whenever he was asked, said that it was a gift, but that was all he would say.

It was hot and Great Rafarel had risen far enough to banish the cool of the morning. Korfax felt both bored and sleepy as he listened to Doanazin drone on and on about the subtleties of service.

Wisdom, fortitude, discipline and justice, his tutor proclaimed, raising her hands dramatically in the air, those were the four pillars that defined the boundaries of

the world. Korfax sighed to himself. And how many times had he heard that before? But Doanazin loved such contemplations with a passion. She loved to quote the philosophers, the thinkers and the writers, raising up the acts of the mighty departed, their words and deeds, retelling their lives so that she could bludgeon her pupil with their collective message. Tradition! Service! Ritual! Reason!

Korfax let his mind wander. How much more interesting would it be if his lessons were taken from the house archives instead? There were crystals there that were far more entertaining than his tutor.

There were logadar, as green as deep water, each filled with histories and tales, wars and journeys, stories from the deeps of time. Touch one of them whilst thinking of meaning and the air above would blossom with words. That had been one of his very first lessons in the application of power.

Then there were kamliadar, the colour of the sky, filled with many voices, all recounting the long days of the Farenith. Touch one of them whilst thinking of speech and those voices would speak again, the long-vanished dead sending their thoughts through time so that others might know their wisdom, or their mistakes. Korfax had listened to many.

And then there were oanadar, crystals of the palest violet, each filled with the images of the long-vanished past. Touch one of them whilst thinking of sight and the air above would fill with ancient visions, old shades captured in perpetuity as they went about their business. Korfax had only touched a few, but the images that he had been allowed to awaken were altogether astonishing.

One was a tour of a city in the furthest east, Thilzin Gallass by name, a great port upon the banks of a wide river. Another revealed a duel, clearly a matter of utmost seriousness. Both combatants were fully armoured and their faces were obscured, but the cut and the thrust of combat had Korfax gasp in astonishment. It was fast and furious, almost a dance, and both seemed well matched.

Baschim had told him once that many of the weapons and crystals kept at Losq were unique, that few other houses had such collections in their possession. Once Korfax knew this he was filled with questions. Why was that so? What was their history? Had the blades been used in the wars? Did the crystals tell of the same? But having summoned his curiosity, Baschim would offer little further to satisfy it. So Korfax went looking for his answers elsewhere.

He went to his father, but his father would tell him little either, saying only that he was not yet ready for such knowledge.

He went to his mother, but she said even less, preferring instead admonishments intended to curb his appetite, but it did little good. Korfax remained insatiable. The romance of the long-lost past filled his dreams.

It took him a while, but he eventually discovered that the rarest of all was a great collection of kamliadar that held between them a somewhat unique perspective on the Wars of Unification themselves. They were filled to the brim with the voices of

witnesses, those that had been present during many of the great events. Hints picked up from conversations, and from innocent questions, told Korfax that he was not even supposed to know that this great collection even existed, for his father kept it hidden away, only occasionally, on certain days, taking them all out from their hiding place so that he could gaze at them for a while. And once, a few seasons back, Baschim had stood guard outside the topmost room of the tower whilst his father had sat within, listening to each crystal in turn, crystal after crystal after crystal. His mother had been angry that day and Korfax had not dared to ask what it was all about. So, instead, he had crept quietly to the room below the one in which his father sat, and he listened to the sound of distant voices through the stone. It was wrong to do so – very wrong – and he felt guilty even as he did it, but he could not resist the temptation. Stories, especially those from the war, excited him like nothing else.

Korfax could not hear half of what was said, but the little he did glean filled him with a wistful longing. There was a lot that was not common knowledge, and certainly nothing in the histories his tutor taught him. There were many voices, many different voices that spoke from within each stone, the words of the long-vanished dead held in perpetuity by the arts of the Dar Kaarith.

Korfax had listened as long as he was able to, then he had left quietly with snatches of sentences still echoing in his head.

“It was on the first day of Lahrasom that the forces of Karenor were finally driven back...”

“I was there, I saw it. The ash was still upon the floor and the cold remains of a pyre still lay in the place of the burning. There were bones within the ashes, all scattered about, burnt bones...”

“They fell upon us like demons. If it had not been for the timely arrival of the forces of Zamandas, we would have failed utterly...”

Korfax shuddered with a guilty ecstasy. What a wonder battle must be.

Though some of the words mentioned momentous events from history, like the death of the enemy or the fall of his black city, others were far more cryptic and Korfax could not imagine to what they referred at all.

He was still pondering the mystery of the crystals when Doanazin’s voice brought him sharply back to the present.

“Korfax? Korfax! Are you listening to me?”

Korfax looked up. He had drifted away entirely and his tutor had seen it.

Doanazin was glaring down at him.

“Well?” she asked.

Korfax suddenly felt angry. Why did he have to endure this, and on this day in particular. Hadn’t his father named him master only that morning? It wasn’t the first time he had been brought to task for inattention, and no doubt it would not be the last, but today he would not. Today, he decided, things would be different.

“I was doing what you taught me,” he told her in his best matter of fact voice. “I

was using your art of memory.”

Doanazin deepened her glare, if such a thing was possible.

“Were you indeed?” she exclaimed. “I do not think so. You had not assumed the correct attitude.”

“But I was,” Korfax insisted.

Doanazin narrowed her eyes.

“Then you should be able to tell me what I just said.” She leaned closer. “All of it! Every single word, every single gesture!”

Korfax knew that he could not. He hadn’t been listening at all. If he had been, he would have heard and seen everything in perfect clarity and would have been able to repeat it all in exact detail. It was one of the more impressive disciplines Doanazin had taught him – how to still the mind and turn it into a blank piece of parchment upon which everything could be written – but Korfax had not done so this time, and his tutor knew it.

Korfax looked back angrily.

“I do not see why I should,” he said. “I heard what you said the first time.”

Doanazin frowned.

“So you insist that is the truth, do you?”

Korfax did not waver. He had decided. This would be the day that he defied Doanazin, openly, brazenly. He had had enough. His father had named him master only that morning, so that is what he would be.

“Always you do this,” he said. “Always you twist everything that I do.”

“Twist?” Doanazin drew back. There was a look of shock on her face now. “That is the one thing that I have never done, in all my life. I hope, for your sake, that was not a serious accusation!”

“But you always look for fault! Nothing ever pleases you!”

“And which one of us is the teacher and which the pupil?”

“So, of course, you are never mistaken!”

“I did not say that!”

“But that is how you treat me! I am the one that is always wrong, always doubted, always at fault.”

He was standing now, glaring back at her.

“So you insist you heard everything I said, do you?” she said.

“Yes,” answered Korfax. “I am tired of being doubted like this.”

He glared at her for a moment and then turned his back upon her, the worst thing he could possibly do.

“So that is the way of it, is it? You dare to dismiss me? I am very disappointed, Korfax, disappointed and hurt. This is not the first time that you have let your attention wander, and if it was only that I could forgive it. But open defiance? Accusations? Wilful lies?”

He heard her sigh.

“You are the son of a noble house,” she said quietly, “and with that privilege

comes obligation. This is Great Ritual we do here, performed since before the wars themselves. All so blessed have had this honour bestowed upon them, but you especially are favoured. Few indeed have their own tutor these days, but that is how it should be for you, for you are born of a great house."

He could hear it in her voice – the hurt, the reproach. Perhaps he had gone too far, but it was too late now.

"And it is not that you lack in some way," she continued. "You do not. You have great potential, great potential, yet you continue to waste it in inattention. You may well desire to take up the staff of your father and be the master of the forces that he is, but as of now you cannot even master yourself."

At last he turned about to find her glaring back at him from the middle of the room, her eyes bright and sharp with anger.

"All that is required of you at this time is your attention, but instead you dream. And it is not as though you have never been told this before."

She held up a single finger.

"Inattention has ever been a fault of youth. We were all young once, but open defiance? Lies?"

She stepped forward. Korfax was tempted to step back.

"When someone lies," she told him, "they murder a part of the world."

She turned to leave.

"I have no choice before me now. I must speak to your mother about this."

Korfax glowered at her as she left, but he said nothing more.

It wasn't long before the summons came. Doanazin delivered it and left again.

Korfax went to his mother's day room and found her standing in the exact centre. He stood a little way back and waited. She watched him all the while, her eyes shuttered and cold.

"So you were inattentive again?" she asked.

Korfax looked down. His mother did not move.

"I am also told that this time you were openly defiant, that you lied and then turned your back upon Doanazin. Is this true?"

Korfax continued to look down.

"Well?" she pressed.

Korfax looked up, hot with guilty anger.

"But Doanazin makes it all so dull," he complained.

His mother still did not move.

"Dull?" she asked. "Is that all you have to say?"

Korfax looked down again.

"Yes," he told his feet.

"We have had this conversation before, you and I."

Her voice was colder now. Korfax continued to look at his feet.

"And what did I tell you the last time?" she asked.

Korfax took a deep breath.

"You said that those who do not pay attention in their instruction will suffer for it in the years to come."

"Indeed I did," she said. "Those were my very words. It seems that you can attend well enough when it suits you."

Now she moved. Suddenly she was closer.

"And do you think that your father would refuse to do his duty, even if he found it to be 'dull'?"

Korfax had already guessed what his mother would say next, but even so, he still felt a certain shame at the comparison.

"No," he answered quietly.

"No," echoed his mother. "He would not. There are many things he would rather not do, many things. But he does them nonetheless. He does them because it is required of him, because it is his duty and because he serves."

Korfax tried not to look up, tried not to look up at his mother and instead to keep his eyes downcast, but he knew that she was looking at him. He knew it because he could feel the weight of her regard. He could not resist the temptation and glanced up briefly. He immediately looked down again. Her eyes were frozen in place and each was now lit from within by a distant but brilliant flame. She spoke again.

"You are the son of a noble house. You are privileged as few others are, but your privileges come at a price. For you, at this moment, that price is your time."

He heard his mother sigh, but it sounded more like a hiss.

"When your lessons are over you are free," she told him, "but what of your father? What freedom does he have?"

He felt her move away. She had gone to the window. He glanced in that direction. She was looking outside. She was angry now, really angry, and he could feel it even from where he waited. It filled the air about him like a cold wind. He suddenly wished that he was anywhere other than where he was now.

"You have so much time to yourself," she murmured. "Is a little diligence on your part so much to ask?"

Korfax suddenly thought it not. He looked down again.

"Your father did all that you have done," she told him.

"And more," she added, turning about. "He took the discipline he learned as a child and earned much honour with it, great honour. And that is what both he and I expect from you."

Korfax suddenly realised that she was standing over him again. He had not noticed when she had moved away from the window. Though he was looking down at his feet he could feel her closeness. It was at moments like this that she actually scared him. Like his father, she also possessed great powers, but hers were of another order entirely. Her mind was her strength. She was an Uren of the Exentaser, one of the potent few, a mistress of names, of thoughts and of visions. She could see things no others could.

He dared not look up, not now.

She waited a while and then spoke to him again, and her voice all but filled his world.

"At this time in your life you have only one obligation, the obligation to learn. Your knowledge of the world about you should reflect your position within it. You should appreciate all the subtleties, all the details and all the difficulties, for you cannot pick and choose. To each is given their due."

She leaned closer.

"But also, each is expected to pay in turn."

She placed her hand under his chin and lifted his head. He had no choice but to look. Her eyes were terrible, as brilliant as his guilty imagination had already made them.

"Doanazin is here at my request," she told him. "She is here to give you a great gift, yet you scorn it and turn your back upon it."

She paused a moment, gathering herself up.

"Do you realise that by turning your back upon Doanazin you are also turning your back upon me, your very own mother? Was that your intent?"

Korfox could not answer. Shock held him where he was. He had not thought about that at all.

"Your father named you master of Losq until he returned!" she said. "Is this how you would be? Is it?"

Her eyes narrowed as if she were now peering deep down inside him. They became knives of light, carving him up as they sought for the fundamental truth.

"Defiance? Lies? Scorn?" she said, widening her eyes. "I am ashamed of you."

Korfox stared up at her, held in place by her gaze. He could see the cold in her, the ice in her mind so cold that it burned. She reached in and turned his thought upon itself, revealing to him exactly what it was that she saw. Her shame of him became his own. Now he was ashamed of himself, horribly and uniquely ashamed.

Goal achieved, she withdrew her mind and turned away. She turned her back on him, dismissing him just as he had tried to dismiss Doanazin.

"Leave me now!" she told him in her coldest voice yet. "I do not want to see you again this day, not before the evening meal at the very least."

And that was that. Korfox fled her presence and ran all the way to his room.

Korfox sat on his bed and glowered at the floor. He hated Doanazin, but he hated his mother more. She had never punished him like that before. Why, today of all days, had she chosen to do so? Hadn't his father named him master only that morning? His thoughts wandered along the same path they had before. One day he would be Enay, and then no one could tell him what to do, or berate him for inattention. The thought circled in his head until he realised what it actually meant. For him to be master meant that his father was master no more, and the only way that would happen was for his father to be gone.

Korfox felt a chill at the thought. He could not imagine such a possibility. His

father gone? It was unthinkable. Wherever had such an unpleasant thought come from? He wondered whether his mother hadn't deliberately set his thoughts along this path as well.

She could do such things, could his mother. Thought was her domain – the mind, its order, the hidden, the buried. It was a rare thing, like his father's ability with stone, a rare gift rarely used, but as far as he could remember she had never used it so harshly before.

He thought about that. She had become hard of late. He remembered back down the years. She never used to be like this. She used to laugh and dance, she used to touch his mind with love, but recently it was as though nothing he did would please her. She had become cold.

Perhaps it was just that the older he became, the more she expected of him. So why couldn't she understand what it meant to him to have his father name him master of Losq? Shouldn't she be pleased by that, that her son was coming into his own? As if in answer, his earlier thought intruded. For him to be master meant that his father was master no more! Perhaps that was something his mother did not want to think about either.

Korfax tried to shake the thoughts from his head, but they would not go. Why was he dwelling on this? This wasn't how he had wanted his day to be at all. But the thought, like an unreachable itch, persisted.

It was much later that Korfax finally emerged again. He had hidden away in his room, shame and resentment battling away inside him, but finally, bored with his own company, he went in search of something to occupy his time until the evening meal. Quietly, he slipped out of the tower and down to the courtyard below.

He tried to forget what had happened earlier, but his mother's words sat upon him like a great weight, as they always did. So he drifted like a sullen cloud until he found himself at the doors to one of the stables. Chasaloh looked up from his work and smiled.

"Noren?"

Korfax bowed his head slightly but did not say anything. Chasaloh widened his smile.

"Now there is a face that would shatter stone," he said.

Korfax still did not answer. Chasaloh folded his arms and lessened his smile.

"And do you believe that you are the first in all the world to find their lessons dull?"

Korfax glowered back.

"Does everybody know?" he murmured.

Chasaloh smiled again.

"Of course not! How could they?" he asked. Then he leaned forward, suddenly conspiratorial.

"But I am a special case," he whispered loudly. "I possess an advantage all others

lack."

Korfax frowned.

"What advantage?" he asked.

Chasaloh gestured at the stall behind him.

"Why, I have only to ask old Homral over there what occurs in the world and he tells me everything."

Korfax glanced at the huge gahbal contentedly chewing the grasses in its bier. His despondency started to evaporate. Whatever the weather, whatever the season, Chasaloh always knew exactly the right thing to say.

Korfax considered Homral. Whilst he had been magnificent in his prime, the proud sire of many a gahbal from Umadya Losq to Faor Raxamith, he looked altogether milder now, a behemoth gentled by time. He still kept the appearance of might, but his eyes were less bright than they had once been and his movements were far more considered.

Korfax walked over to the aged beast and affectionately stroked the fringe of hair that lay between his wide horns. Homral raised his head a little and snorted his pleasure. Korfax smiled at last. No, no deep thoughts lay inside that great wide head; instead, Homral dreamed. He dreamed of his youth, of his prime, of the time when his bellow had echoed from the hills to the sea and back again, when he alone had been the undisputed master of the herd.

Chasaloh stood beside Korfax and reached forward to tousle Homral's mane as well.

"Age wearies him, I think," he said. "His end approaches and he knows it all too well."

Korfax looked down. There it was again, that terrible comment upon mortality. What did it all mean? He looked at Chasaloh.

"Chasaloh?"

"Yes?"

"Why does everything have to end?"

Chasaloh turned and looked down at Korfax with bemusement.

"Now there is the question," he said. "You like the hard ones, don't you? Why does everything have to end?"

He paused a moment.

"Could it be," he finally offered, "because that is the way of the world?"

Korfax looked at Homral again and gently stroked his wide muzzle.

"But why?" he persisted.

Chasaloh drew back a little.

"Perhaps it is merely what The Creator has decreed! Let each be given their measure! No more, no less! That way, perhaps, we can all appreciate what we have."

Chasaloh smiled for a moment.

"And I thought you a scholar? Have you not read the works of Talazur and

Jerdess?"

Korfax scowled even as he looked at Chasaloh.

"But they do not answer the question," he said. "None of them do. They all play at the edges. There are no certainties anywhere in all that they have to say."

Korfax looked as hard as he could at Chasaloh, but Chasaloh held his gaze with ease, smiling all the while. Korfax finally relented and looked at his feet instead.

"So that is why I ask you," he said.

Chasaloh maintained his smile.

"Then you have been paying attention in your lessons after all," he said. "I suddenly see that you are the victim of a great injustice. Perhaps I should call Doanazin out and challenge her to a duel so that this dreadful wrong may be put to right?"

Korfax continued to look at his feet.

"And do not make fun of me, either," he said. "Besides, you still have not answered my question."

Chasaloh bowed his head slightly and his smile became somewhat rueful.

"But if you cannot divine the truth from two such great thinkers, how do you expect me to know the answer? You might as well ask The Creator."

Korfax offered Chasaloh another scowl and Chasaloh finally dropped his humour, though it still lurked somewhere behind his eyes.

"Very well then!" he said. "I can see you are in no mood for jest this day."

He turned about and pitched another load of sweet grasses from the pile at his side up on to the bier. Homral turned to it immediately and took it as if it was his due. Chasaloh watched carefully for a moment, gauging the time Homral had left in the world perhaps, then he looked back at Korfax again and his expression was finally serious.

"Noren," he announced. "We live in a world of opposites. To live, one must know death. To be happy, one must also know sadness. To know creation, one must also be aware of destruction. There is no light without dark, no heat without cold, no pleasure without pain and no good without evil. Everything in our world is made known by its opposite. And that is how it is."

Korfax grimaced.

"I know that," he said. "Everyone knows that! But the question I asked was why? Why is it that way?"

Chasaloh pursed his lips.

"I suddenly think that there is no answer that would fully satisfy you. So let me ask you this in return. What other way could there be?"

"I do not know," Korfax answered. "But it all seems so... so... convenient."

Chasaloh suddenly snorted and his face became graver still.

"Convenient, is it? There may well come a day when you find such truth more than you can bear."

Korfax drew back a little. Chasaloh looked fiery now as he held up a single

finger in warning. Korfax stared at the finger.

"The Creator's sword slices the void," Chasaloh told him, "making all opposites – the light and the dark, the heat and the cold – in equal measure. The Creator makes opposites manifest, but the contemplation of such absolutes is only for the strongest souls, only for the mightiest, and they do not speak readily of what they have seen."

Chasaloh looked away and breathed deeply for a moment. Then he turned back to the sweet grasses at his side.

"Leastways," he murmured, "they do not speak to me."

It was not long after Korfax left the stables that his mother entered them. Chasaloh looked up and bowed immediately. With her he kept his habitual smile all but hidden away.

"Enay!" he announced. "You are not in good favour with the Noren, I fear."

She dropped her habitual severity ever so slightly.

"He is still a child, filled with all a child's judgements," she said. "He will learn."

Chasaloh let his hidden smile emerge a little.

"And is it really so important that he pay attention every single moment of every single day of his young life?" he asked. "Youth and time are bad companions. He has enough days before him yet to learn what he needs to learn. Besides, his father named him master only this morning, and that is more than enough to stoke the fires of any youthful imagination."

Tazocho dropped her severity a little more and even offered him the faintest of smiles, but Chasaloh thought it still too cold. She had not always been so. There was a time when she had danced, but of late? As Korfax had grown up, so she had grown colder. He wondered about that as he waited for her answer.

"And what did you say to your son when he let the herd wander where they should not?" she finally asked.

Was that an admonition? Chasaloh bowed his head again.

"I told him something of what you no doubt told the Noren. But that was my son I spoke to, not Korfax. He is of another temper entirely."

Tazocho became still.

"Indeed?" she returned, and the ice in her voice was unmistakable. Chasaloh wondered how he could turn it aside. He certainly did not want it aimed at himself.

"Enay," he said, "you may ask yourself what I might know of such things, but the patterns of creation repeat themselves for the high as much as they do for the low. I know it when a young gahbal or achir is ready, and which will be master and which will be servant. I watch it happen year in and year out. And as I have marked the coming and going of the seasons, so I have watched your son as he has grown. I know what he will be."

Tazocho deepened her chill, but Chasaloh carried on regardless.

“Korfax will be alone,” he said. “He will not serve as his father does. He, alone of all of us, questions why things are as they are! He does not accept the world as we do, and that is an uncommon thing in these gentler times. Most are happy to dwell in the dream of service, but not Korfax, unless my eyes have deceived me. But I do not think they have. And neither do you, I believe.”

She did not answer. Instead she left without another word, but Chasaloh thought he caught something in her eye as she turned. It was sadness. That shook him. He had never seen that in her before.

A solitary figure walked the walls. Korfax stopped and looked upwards. It was Ocholor, old Ocholor, the quiet and the thoughtful, an Ell of very few words. Guarding Losq was his duty, his life and his love, and he took such things very seriously indeed.

Ocholor was the Branvath of Losq, master of all the Branith that dwelt there, and he had been their master for more than a hundred years. Korfax could not imagine such a time, the weight of it, the length of it, the depth.

Ocholor was the oldest inhabitant of Losq now, but even so there were not many who could match him in the contest of arms. Of those the best was Orkanir, his son, one of the very best with a blade in all the north and also a Bransag of Losq.

Korfax liked Ocholor. He could walk beside him for an entire watch and hear nothing more than a few spare comments upon the weather. Ocholor did not waste his words on inconsequential matters, as his time was far too precious, far too concentrated upon the moment at hand. If he had something to say, he said it, otherwise he said nothing at all. And his silence was usually an answer in itself.

Ocholor and Chasaloh – two ends of the very same thread. Chasaloh had an opinion on anything and everything, whilst Ocholor said little or nothing at all. All things made known by their opposite. How true that was. But Korfax was still no closer as to why.

The door to the kitchen was open and the smell of cooking drifted out. Korfax walked by, and though he smelled its delicious air he did not give it a second glance. But then a voice called out to him from inside.

“Noren, you are a good judge of such things! Perhaps you can decide.”

Korfax turned back. It was Geziam, wife to Baschim, looking out at him even as she came to stand at the opening.

“Hello, Geziam. Decide what?” he asked carefully.

“Whether my feast cakes are better or worse than last year,” she answered.

“I am sure they are as good as they have ever been,” he told her.

Another voice came from behind Geziam.

“Now that sounds as if judgement has already been made. It is as I have always said, Korfax has never been fair in such matters.”

Korfax smiled. That was Kalazir, wife to Chasaloh. She also never failed to make him smile, whatever his mood.

Of all the retainers in Losq, Korfax liked Geziam and Kalazir the best. As unlike as any two friends could be, they argued over everything, except him of course. Him they doted on. In their company he truly felt like a lord.

Geziam moved back inside and Korfax followed her, but he stopped when he reached the door itself, content instead to stand upon the threshold and just look within.

The light gave the kitchen a certain agelessness as it slanted in through the high windows. Everything was surrounded by a soft glow so that even the simplest pot seemed exalted.

As he stood upon the threshold, Korfax felt himself struck by the sight: Kalazir and Geziam standing at this table or that, the work of their hands scattered about them, all rendered timeless by the light of the passing day.

Then Geziam gestured, breaking the moment.

"Try a cake," she proffered. "See what you think."

Korfax came forward and tasted the one he was offered. He smiled. It melted in his mouth even as he bit into it. Feast cakes had always been one of his favourites, and Geziam had a talent for baking the very best.

"I cannot say," he said between mouthfuls. "This is as good as any that I have ever tasted."

He took another bite and Kalazir snorted.

"But how you can say that?" she complained. "The harvest this year has not been as good as those before."

"That isn't so," Korfax told her.

"Oh yes it is," she said. "Which of us is the elder?"

"And which of us has the better memory?" he countered.

Kalazir wagged her finger at him with a sharp look in her eye, but Korfax gestured at the cakes.

"Or perhaps it is simply that Geziam has made an especial effort this time," he offered.

Geziam smiled at that and came forward. She held out her arms and hugged him.

"You always say the right things," she said.

Kalazir folded her arms in mock displeasure.

"Keep on doing that and his head will swell to such a size that the pair of you will float up and off into the west."

Korfax laughed and Geziam hugged him again.

"And now that we have settled the matter of the cakes," Kalazir continued, "where were you off to in such a hurry?"

"I was only going up onto the wall," Korfax answered.

"Only going up onto the wall? I doubt it was as innocent as that."

Korfax glanced back over his shoulder.

"I was going to walk with Ocholor for a while," he said.

Kalazir laughed.

"With Ocholor?" she exclaimed. "What a glutton for punishment you are! That one never knows when to keep quiet. Talk, talk, talk! Loves the sound of his own voice far too much."

Now Korfax really laughed.

"And have you ever looked in the mirror?" he said.

Kalazir grabbed at him and he dodged out of her way, still laughing.

"By my life," she said. "I will teach you not to mock me, whelp!"

Korfax stopped on the other side of the table.

"Whelp?" he said, standing as tall as he could. "It will not be much longer before I am taller than you."

Kalazir softened her look.

"And is that not the truth," she said. "The years go by so quickly. I remember a time, not so long ago it seems, when you could have walked under this very table without bowing your head."

Korfax paused, suddenly serious. There it was again. Yet another comment on mortality.

"The years go by so quickly," he repeated softly.

"What is it?" Kalazir asked.

"It was something I was talking to Chasaloh about," he told her.

Kalazir and Geziam exchanged glances.

"And what was it this time?" Kalazir asked.

"Why everything has to end!" Korfax answered. "I wanted to know why."

Geziam looked bemused for a moment, but all Kalazir did was laugh.

"That husband of mine has been drowning himself in philosophy again. Such a danger it is, all that thinking. I can see it now. One day he will so blind me with cunning words that I will find myself carrying out his tasks as well as my own."

Korfax laughed along with her whilst Geziam smiled. Then Geziam looked back at Korfax.

"But really, Noren, what do you mean by such a question?"

"I mean... what I mean is..." Korfax struggled for the words. "What I want to ask is why are things the way they are? How did it all come about?"

Kalazir leaned forward and tapped upon his shoulder with a finger.

"Sometimes one can look too deeply. There are some things that can never truly be known."

Korfax looked back at her.

"But I am an Ell," he said. "What can be beyond the reach of my thought? I have the power of imagination, and imagination has no limit."

Kalazir glanced at Geziam for a moment and then looked back at him.

"Give to The Creator The Creator's due," she admonished.

Now Korfax scowled.

"But I wasn't blaspheming," he answered quickly.

"And I wasn't saying that you were. I was merely warning you."

"About what?"

Kalazir sighed.

"Noren, let me answer you with a question of my own. Do you know what it feels like to be an achir?"

"I can imagine it," he said.

"But do you know what it feels like?"

Korfox thought for a moment.

"I think I can see what you are saying. In order to really know what it feels like, I would have to become an achir myself."

Kalazir leaned back.

"Exactly! And now you have the answer to your question. To know why things are the way that they are, you would have to become something other than an Ell. Either The Creator would have to tell you, or you would have to become The Creator yourself. And until such a marvel occurs, things will remain the way they are."

A little while after Korfox had left, Kalazir and Geziam received another visitor. A shadow occluded the light from the door and they both looked up from their work. Kalazir smiled.

"Enay! You are just in time."

"And what am I just in time for?" asked Tazocho.

"For a feast cake," Kalazir said, offering one up. "The Noren has pronounced them as good as they have ever been."

Tazocho glanced at the cake but did not take it.

"High praise indeed," she said. "But what do you say, Geziam?"

Geziam looked down.

"I cannot judge my own work," she said. "I leave that to others."

Tazocho cast a brief glance about the room, eyes searching, marking, measuring.

"And where is Korfox now?" she asked.

She looked at Geziam for a moment, but Geziam's head was down. She turned to Kalazir.

"I think he went up on to the wall to walk with Ocholor," Kalazir told her.

Tazocho smiled, but it was cold.

"Thank you," she said, and then she left as silently as she had arrived.

Geziam watched her leave.

"She is following him!" she said.

"And she has done it ever since the day she bore him," Kalazir agreed.

"But why? Why follow him all the days of his life?"

Kalazir glanced at her friend.

"You have never had a child, have you? You do not understand. I hear that she admonished him earlier. Well, if that was the case, she now feels the guilt of it. It

was ever a mother's lot. I know how I felt after I had given Permanual a good talking to. I felt as though I was the one that had transgressed, not him."

"Even so, she is in a fierce mood this day."

"She is in a fierce mood most days."

Geziam glanced at Kalazir.

"What do you think Chasaloh said to her?"

"I do not know," said Kalazir, "but I intend to find out. If he has caused the Noren more trouble by his meddling, then I will teach him better wisdom this night."

Geziam frowned.

"Do not, I beg you. Korfax loves him. And he loves you. He would not see contention between you."

Kalazir smiled, almost laughing.

"And you should be so concerned," she said. "I know my husband's heart. Besides, I am not the only one here that Korfax loves."

Geziam looked down. Kalazir watched as her friend fought with her timidity.

"That his mother should be so cold!" Geziam said at last.

Kalazir agreed.

"All the Exentaser are cold. They sell their passion for power. Did you not know?"

Geziam looked away as if suddenly guilty.

"I did not mean such a judgement," she said.

Kalazir clasped Geziam by the shoulders.

"And you should not be so afraid of your own words. You see well enough, as do many others here. The Enay is ambitious for her son. Think of it as a well-known secret. She desires the gift of power for him, power through action, power through knowledge. Why do you think she had Doanazin brought all the way here from Emethgis Vaniad? Even I, closeted away in the north, had heard the name Doanazin before. The Enay will let nothing stand in the way of her ambition. Remember that she is also of holy blood? The Velukor himself is her cousin. Born of greatness, she desires greatness for her son."

Geziam frowned.

"I had not considered that."

"No, you had not. But then you did not need to either. Instead, you saw the underlying truth, as you should have all along. But that is our estate. We see what lies beneath. Let others seek the lofty, we are of the soil."

Kalazir looked up, her face catching the light.

"And the final truth of it is all that we may ever have. We can watch, but we cannot interfere. Korfax will find his own way in this world, though his mother may not like it. All I have ever wished for him is that The Creator should light his path. Then we will have yet another Enay of Losq. As it was before, so it will be again."

She sighed and then looked sternly at the pots and the trays that had been used for baking.

“But speculation cleans nothing! If we do not clear away before the evening meal then we shall truly drown in chaos.”

Back in the tower Tazocho watched her son from the window, standing back somewhat, out of the light. Chasaloh’s words had disturbed her. He saw the very same thing in her son that she did, but he drew very different conclusions. Though she did not like to admit it, Chasaloh saw the patterns behind the world much as she did. He saw them in a simpler light perhaps, but sometimes it took a simpler perspective to cut through all the layers and expose what lay beneath. Perhaps it was time for her to look beyond her bounds. It was so easy to slip in a place like this, lulled by the rhythms, by the slow and gentle shift of the seasons. There was a momentum to such things, a weight.

She knew what the others here thought, of her and her son. Him they loved, much as they did his father, but she they had come to fear. They feared her power and her coldness. But they did not understand. None of them, not even her lord, could see the reasons behind what she did. But she had seen beyond these days, and she would not deny her vision.

She turned away and went back to her meditations. Yes, Korfax dreamed, as did so many others here, and that pained her. Such dreams achieved nothing in places where the long, slow sleep of life held sway. She could only hope that the dreams would lead her son on, beyond this place to where he needed to be, the still centre where all truth was revealed and there was but a single direction. Off the straight path lay only failure. It was one of the first lessons she had ever been taught, and it was something that she had tried to instil in Korfax. It was why Doanazin was here. The straight path. But her son rebelled, because of his dreams.

She considered this latest incident and sympathised with Doanazin. Korfax could be so utterly frustrating at times. He certainly did not lack the ability – most definitely not – but he just would not apply himself to his full extent. It was infuriating. If she had been of another temper she might have hated herself for shaming him as she had, but that was how it was done according to the Exentaser. Shame was a most potent goad, its fire turning the will upon itself, healing the mistakes, creating the desire to do better, burning away the imperfections. Her son had to be kept upon the straight path, or he would not fulfil his potential. And as the path brooked no deviation, she had to be just as unyielding. It was her task to see that he become Geyad, like his father, and then more than Geyad. Let him attend the seminary of the Dar Kaadarith and learn the Namad Dar, but let him also be armed with all the advantages that she could give him, and then perhaps her vision would come to fruition and all would come to appreciate the nobility and the power at the heart of the Farenith. Her lord might deny this, but her son would not, she would see to that.

THE TOWER - EXCERPT

So, in the meantime, she would keep a watch over him and make sure he did not stray.

4

THE INCOMING TIDE

*Nim-inan Korm-talunlo
Azon-ring Thar-mya-qasar
Faor-urus Lu-kal-omin
Zad-nisso Norpul-ap-li
Urq-molnis Imul-torzu
Abai-vim Tol-a-dr-pan
Kri-nor-arp Odna-stl-to*



Korfax ran across the courtyard and up on to the wall, his feet brushing the fine green fronds that peeped through the cracks in its well-worn surface.

His brief visit with Geziam and Kalazir had lightened his mood, as it ever did. Listening to their words, their thoughts, their laughter, was like listening to the wind and the sea.

He thought back to the morning's lesson and how dry old Doanazin made it sound. No lightness ever entered her orotund speeches. Instead it was all inevitability, all ritual and the undeviating path of service. There was no joy in her world, just the great circle of history, coloured by ritual and tradition, all marching across the sere landscape of her dispassionate mind.

Korfax sighed. It wasn't that he had not listened in the past – he had, and with respect – but today had been different. His father had named him Master of Losq and it seemed only right to him that such a thing should be recognised. Surely Doanazin could have found something more worthy to mark such an occasion – tales from younger times, perhaps, of heroes and villains, of dark princes and bright saviours, of courageous endeavours and the glory of battle.

He leant against the wall. None of the Branith here had seen war. No one had, not in these latter days. Battle was a distant dream, reduced either to ritual or drama. The last flames of the great wars had guttered and died during the reign of Anolei, the seventh Velukor, he that was called the unifier and after whom the wars had finally been named. That had happened over six thousand years ago. Ermalei was Velukor now, but he was the forty-eighth to sit upon the holy throne. How long ago it all seemed. And how very far away.

It was strange to think that the world had once been in upheaval. One look at Losq and you would have thought that the great tower had been standing here since the dawn of time.

He looked back at the tower and the realisation hit him. Old! Everything around him was old! His tutor was old, most of the retainers were old, and even those that weren't were still far older than he was! Everything in the tower was old – the tables, the chairs, the tapestries, the paintings. There wasn't a sword in the whole of Losq that did not have a lineage of less than a thousand years, except, possibly, that avalkana in his father's day room. Some were greater, some were lesser, but all had been handed down from generation to generation to generation, and the collected years of them all suddenly seemed like a great and crushing weight.

He looked up at the tower and saw it as he had never seen it before. Umadya Losq, his home, his beloved home, was the oldest of all, for the tower had been here before the first Velukor had ever sat upon the holy throne, before the great wars even, and the stones that made her remembered times so ancient, days so young and distant that they almost lay at the other end of creation.

It was his father that had started all of this, naming him master of Losq only that morning, and from there it had all sprung. Kalazir was right. There were some things that it was not wise to dwell upon too much. All day he had been consumed by the meaning of those few simple words, and now he had finally learnt a real lesson because of it. He took a deep breath. Was this what it meant to grow up? He suddenly did not want to. Where was the joy?

He leant against the wall again and looked along its great curve. Ocholor was only just visible now, walking along the opposite side and nearly hidden by the tower.

If you could get him to talk, Ocholor did have one or two tales to tell. In his youth he had been both a duellist and an instructor in the Nazad Esiask, one of the seven great guilds, and the only one to teach all the arts martial. Korfax had learnt much under Ocholor's stern but careful hand. He had certainly been attentive then.

Ocholor had even been to the capital, not just the guild house in Othil Zilodar, but all the way to great Emethgis Vaniad itself, the centre of the world. Few others here had gone there, a mere handful. There was his father, of course, along with Baschim, the Balzarg of Losq. His tutor had also been there, serving in the tower of the Erm Roith for many years, but his mother had been born there. She had lived for a while in the Umadya Pir itself, the greatest tower yet reared under the Bright Heavens, until she had met his father and joined with him in its great hall. And it was also in that great city that his father had received his kabadar, thereby becoming a Geyad of the Dar Kaadarith.

Korfax thought about the kabadar, that long stave of imperishable crystal which all the adepts of the Namad Dar carried. As his father's son he was expected to follow in his footsteps and become a Geyad as well. The son became the father, as it was written. Tradition demanded that he go to Emethgis Vaniad and become an

acolyte in the seminary of the Dar Kaadarith, just as his father had done. But it was what he wanted, for there he would learn the Namad Dar, the lore of stone. He would learn of the forces that bound the world together and perhaps, if he was successful, become a master in their application. But there was no doubt in his heart that it would be so. Each first-born son of his house, all the way back to Haldos, the very first Enay of Losq, had been of the Geyadith.

It was a heady thought, for the whole world was driven by the Namad Dar. There were stones that made light, stones that made heat, stones for storing words and visions and thoughts, stones for flying and stones for sailing. Then, of course, there was the kabadar itself, the staff of a Geyad. With that an adept of the Namad Dar could command the elements themselves, calling up not only the raw forces that composed the world, but also their essence, their very spirit. The four pillars of creation had been subdued by the art of the Dar Kaadarith, and earth, air, fire and water now did the bidding of the Ell.

Not so long ago he had seen his father use his power to hold back a ruinous storm, turning the air aside and diminishing its force. Afterwards he had watched as a wall was repaired, his father making the broken stone flow back into its many places like water. Only that morning his father had shattered the sky with fire, but it was rarely used, that power, only ever employed for ritual or necessity, as written in the Namad Dar. It was strange, but such events, by their very rarity, made any such act all the more impressive.

He looked out from the parapet above the gate, across to the eastern edges of the hills beyond the valley. Chasaloh had allowed the achir to wander where they would this day. Korfax watched them as they drifted across the slopes beyond like small, wayward clouds, a scattering of white over the rolling green. No doubt Chasaloh was already high up on the slopes of the Lee Izirakal, walking his accustomed way, looking for strays.

The sky was clear and a light breeze played with his hair. Korfax smiled and closed his eyes. How he wished that he had been born into days of excitement and glory so that he would not be troubled by trivial accusations of inattention! But all he could do in these quieter times was dream and imagine the giants of the past as they strode across the world, carving it up with sword and fire.

The distant sound of bleating drifted over the hills. Korfax looked up. He blinked. He did not know why, but something about the sound bothered him. Achir rarely complained, if they ever did at all, and the only time one heard them was during the birthing season, but seldom otherwise. Their lot in life was simple. They went where they were led, they ate the food they found there and they made more achir. But the cries he heard now, they were wrong.

He scoured the land, across the valley to the hills beyond, but there was nothing to see. Perhaps they were down below the lower slopes. Not everything could be seen from the wall.

The cries continued: distant, echoing. Was that panic he heard? Perhaps one of

them had disturbed something? He could not think of anything that could so upset even one achir, let alone half the flock. Besides, there were no dangerous beasts here, and only the largest would dare tackle an achir anyway.

He wondered if one had blundered too near the nest of a vabazir as it wandered over the distant rocks in search of sweeter grasses. But he dismissed the thought, even as it came to him. The only nest that was anywhere near to Losq, the only nest that he knew of, was high up on the western crags of the Lee Izirakal. Sometimes its builders could be seen far off against the bright sky, circling lazily out over the lower lands in search of prey, or yet indulging in airy play, claws clasped as they tumbled together from the brightness, only to part at the very last moment with screams of ecstasy. No, such beasts as were hereabouts had better things to do with their time than to bother with the achir of Losq. They preferred easier meat. Whatever had upset the flock was something else entirely. Korfax suddenly dared hope it was a Vovin.

Losq was, perhaps, too far north for that almost legendary beast of the high mountains, but Korfax found himself wishing that today it was not so. He would dearly love to see a Vovin.

He could imagine it, a vast winged shape swooping over the ground, talons outstretched, jaws agape as the fire within it swelled. He had seen many pictures of them, even a stone-held vision of one in full flight, but it wasn't the same. Like so many of the wonders he had heard tell of, he longed to see a Vovin in the flesh. He bowed his head. There were so many things in the world that he had never seen.

The bleating grew louder. Korfax looked up again, glancing from side to side, but there was nothing untoward upon the hills or off them. So what could it be?

Perhaps one of them had fallen and its brethren now echoed its distress.

Korfax was about to run around the wall to find Ocholor when a few of the herd came into view, bouncing frantically over the distant ground in obvious panic, and as they ran they scattered, a semicircle of white forms spreading out over the lower edges of the hill. Korfax watched them stream this way and that, as though the very fire of The Creator was after them, but there was nothing there. All in all, it was most peculiar. The achir were running, but nothing was chasing them. Whatever could it be? And then he finally caught sight of movement. Something was coming after all, approaching the tower from the west.

Several figures emerged slowly, one after another, as if out of a mist. Where they had come from he had no idea, but he could see them now, indistinct forms running lightly up and over the lower slopes. They were not using the road. Korfax watched them for a little while, confused and curious, before looking around for Ocholor, but he was no longer in sight. He had been eclipsed by the tower as he walked the far wall. Korfax frowned in indecision and looked back again. The figures remained indistinct, and it was difficult to make out details, but even at this distance he could tell that they were different.

He stared in rapt fascination. What were they? There were no beasts that he had

ever heard of that ran on two legs. After all, it was the one thing that marked out the Ell. Whilst the Ell stood upright so that their faces could be lifted up in praise of The Creator, the beast faced the ground in noble ignorance. So what manner of creature were these?

As they approached he began to see more clearly, and he noticed that they appeared to be carrying things, pale surfaces that caught the light with dull gleams. He frowned. It almost looked as if the running things were carrying shields.

He drew back from the wall. That could not be right, could it? Surely he was imagining it. Shields? They had shields? He looked again, wondering whether he had been mistaken, but he was not. There was something else, too – thin shafts of grey held forwards, each a flicker of dim reflections. They were carrying swords.

Korfax felt the world tilt about him. They had weapons? They were armed?

This was a dream, surely. Strange creatures bearing weapons? What did it mean? Korfax looked behind him, but there was no one else in sight. He was alone, the only one on this side of the wall. He looked back again.

The running things were getting closer by the moment, but he still could not see all that they were. It was like watching shadows.

There were other beasts in the world that were hard to see when they moved. Take the wild yanar of the hills, for instance. Green-eyed, dark and solitary, they stalked their small prey unseen until the very moment that they pounced. But these running things were of another kind entirely, for they defeated his sight in some way, like an advancing fog.

Then he finally saw it.

They were headless.

The running things were headless.

Korfax felt the world go dead around him. Where each head should have been there was nothing more than a crude mound of skin. They had no heads? But it was worse than that, far worse, for each mound, each headless neck was broken by a great black slit, a great grinning wound of a mouth, filled to the brim with gleaming teeth.

Korfax could not move. Shock held him immobile. He had longed to see many things in his short and sheltered life, filling his imagination with what he believed to be their likenesses, wars and battles, cowards and heroes, tyrants and saviours, but he had never imagined anything as wrong as what he saw before him now. The creatures that came towards him were an outrage, an atrocity. They defied the very order of creation.

They defied? He was suddenly outlined in light. Now he understood. Now he knew what they were. Was it not the eve of Ahaneh? Was his father not travelling

the bounds even at this very moment? There was only one possible answer, and his learning, a learning given to every Ell almost from the very day that they were born, told him what they were. Here were the products of sorcery, beings called up into the world from the abyss below, demons dredged from the Mahorelah and enslaved to another's will.

All his childish imaginings were overthrown. Demons were abroad in the world again, in the here and the now, running swiftly towards his home, towards Umadya Losq. Like an arrow loosed from a bow, like the tip of a lance that had been tilted and aimed, they were coming straight at the walls as though they intended to pierce the very stone itself with their appalling flesh.

What should he do? What could he do? He could not think. A delirium of panic had him. Monstrosities out of legend were running under the clear light of day once more. Such a thing had not happened for long ages, for thousands of years, and all he knew of it, all anyone knew of it, were the old stories.

The old stories had once filled him with innocent delight, firing his imagination as the bright heroes of the past defeated the terrible darkness of the abyss. But now, here on the wall, he saw how wrong he had been.

The tales had all come with a warning: demons are brutal, demons are merciless, and once summoned they have no remorse, no pity and no will. They go about their summoner's bidding with no thought for the consequences. He suddenly saw how little he had understood. The reality was so much worse. Everyone in Losq was in mortal danger.

As if by a miracle it all came together. He could move again, he could speak. Though it had taken mere moments between sight and comprehension, it seemed to him then that it had taken an age. Fear filled him, and with its shivering fire fuelling him, he did the only thing that he could. He shouted his alarm at the top of his voice.

"DEMONS!" he cried. "DEMONS! DEMONS ARE COMING!"

Orkanir was the first to appear. He looked up at Korfax.

"Noren! Why are you calling out like that? What do you mean by it?"

Korfax pointed over the wall.

"OUTSIDE!" he shouted again. "THERE ARE DEMONS! DEMONS ARE COMING!"

Orkanir frowned. If this was some piece of foolishness then Korfax would find himself in the deepest trouble for it. Such things should never be taken lightly, ever. Orkanir walked up onto the wall so that he could see the truth for himself.

He gave Korfax a quick glance as he came, expecting nothing but play acting, but all he saw was fear. He quickened his pace and came to the edge. He looked out and then stepped back, eyes wide with shock. This was no jest at all. There were horrors on the hill, horrors closing in upon Losq.

He turned about and all but leapt down the steps. He ran to the gates and

slapped the locking stone. It darkened and the tiny gap between the gates and the wall vanished as the stone fused. A brief glow of heat came and went. Orkanir allowed himself a shudder of relief. Now the gates could not be opened from the outside at all. He looked back at Korfax.

"Come off the wall, that is no place for you," he said.

Korfax came down and Orkanir went to him, laying a hand on his shoulder.

"Go and find my father, but stay off the wall. If you see anyone else tell them what is happening, but find my father first. When you find him, send him here. Then find your mother and tell her what you have seen. Then you must remain with her in the tower. Do you understand?"

"Yes," replied Korfax.

Orkanir watched the young face before him, saw how it was stretched with fear.

"Go now," he said, as gently as he could. "Go and do as I say."

Korfax turned and ran as if the demons were already at his heels. Orkanir watched him leave and then looked back to the wall again. He needed aid.

"BANAVOAN!" he shouted. "SIHBRUJ!"

Banavoan appeared.

"With me! To the wall!" Orkanir told him.

Banavoan looked up at the wall.

"But why?"

Orkanir pointed at the gates behind him.

"Because there are demons outside!" he answered.

Banavoan stared back in utter incomprehension. Sihbruj appeared behind him, looking as if he had only just awakened.

"What is he talking about?" he said. "Demons?"

Banavoan could only hold his hands out in the gesture of incomprehension.

"Do as I say!" hissed Orkanir.

Banavoan looked at Sihbruj and Sihbruj looked at Banavoan. They both looked back at Orkanir.

"But... demons?"

Orkanir all but exploded in fury.

"COME AND SEE FOR YOURSELF," he roared.

Orkanir grabbed hold of Banavoan and all but dragged him up onto the wall. Banavoan pulled himself away once he had regained his balance, and he would have remonstrated but Orkanir was now pointing over the parapet. Banavoan looked to where he pointed and saw at what he was gesturing. He clutched at the wall to steady himself. He saw them, saw them all. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. They were foul. He turned to Sihbruj.

"You had better get up here," he said.

Now it was the turn of Sihbruj to complain.

"Will somebody please explain to me what is going on?"

Banavoan all but spat his answer.

"Just do it, will you?"

Sihbruj drew back. He would have answered but Banavoan had already turned about, drawing his sword.

Sihbruj frowned and turned to Orkanir, but Orkanir was not looking back either. Instead he was standing at the parapet, sword already drawn and shield raised. Sihbruj looked to the gate. It was locked. He swallowed in a throat suddenly gone dry. Perhaps it might be a good thing if he went up on to the wall after all.

Arpanad stepped out of the door that led to one of the many store rooms. He caught hold of Korfax just as he ran past.

"Noren, what is happening?" he demanded. "What was all that shouting about? One should not shout in this place, no matter the cause."

Korfax backed away, pointing behind him.

"There are demons. Demons are attacking Losq."

Arpanad raised an eyebrow.

"Well now, demons is it? If that was a jest then I find it in very poor taste."

"But it is true!" Korfax insisted. "There are demons!"

He sounded almost desperate. Arpanad watched as Korfax ran off towards the outhouses as though his life depended upon it.

Arpanad frowned and looked to the wall where Korfax had gestured. Orkanir was up there now, sword drawn, standing in battle stance over the main gate, as were Sihbruj and Banavoan. The main gate was shut and, by the look of it, locked as well. Arpanad felt a sudden chill inside. Maybe this was no jest after all. Maybe he should go and find himself a lance.

Ocholor had heard the shouting, even from the other side of the tower, and now he marched smartly back to discover the cause. Shouting? No one did such a thing in Losq. He would have stern words with whoever was responsible.

He caught sight of someone running towards him from the northern side of the tower. It was Korfax. Ocholor descended the steps and frowned.

"Noren, what was all that shouting about?" he demanded.

"There are demons!" Korfax told him. "Demons are outside the walls. They are here. Orkanir told me to find you and tell you. He said that you must go to the gate."

Ocholor stared down at Korfax.

"Demons? Join him at the gate? Noren, what are you talking about?"

"I have to find my mother," Korfax answered. "Orkanir told me to tell you and then her."

As though he could stand still no longer, Korfax ran off. Ocholor stared after him, dumbfounded. Was that fear he had seen? Was Korfax actually afraid? He turned about and looked at Losq, his world, his charge. It looked as it ever had. This was some sort of foolery, it had to be.

He strode back the way Korfax had come, back to the western wall. If this was a jest, he thought to himself, someone would pay for it. Whatever this foolishness was it had gone far beyond what he considered acceptable. But as he entered the courtyard and looked up, he saw them, up there, on the wall, swords and shields at the ready, Orkanir, Sihbruj and Banavoan. There was another with them also, Arpanad, keeper of the ormn, a long lance in his hand. Orkanir, Sihbruj and Banavoan had all assumed battle stance, but Arpanad was holding his lance down as though to ward something off on the other side of the wall. Ocholor felt a breath of coldness touch him. This was no jest.

He climbed the steps, keeping his silence. Let him see what he must see first. Then he would say what needed to be said. He looked down.

Below him they stood, a little way off, seemingly looking up at him, except that they had no eyes. All he saw were mouths where their heads should be, and a horrid grimace of teeth. Beyond that it was difficult to tell where one began and another finished, for they seemed to merge together. Everything he looked at seemed wrong – swords, shields, limbs – but it was as though his head had suddenly filled with fog. He took a moment to steady himself before turning to his son.

“Who saw them first?” he asked.

“The Noren,” answered Orkanir. “Did you see him?”

“He gave me your message!”

“Good. I told him to seek out his mother also. I told him to go with her into the tower and stay there.”

Ocholor frowned and looked back down at the demons below. They had not moved. He felt his skin crawl. Orkanir spoke again.

“Do you know what they are?”

“I have never seen the like,” said Ocholor, “in or out of a bestiary.”

He glanced to the side.

“Arpanad? What are you doing here? You have no armour.”

Arpanad did not look back.

“I am doing what I should be doing,” he said. “Besides, there was no time.”

Ocholor was about to answer when a voice rang out from across the courtyard.

“Branvath? What is happening here?”

He turned. Tazocho was standing at the entrance to the tower.

“We are under attack!” he called back. “Demons!”

He glanced at his son.

“If they move, call out.”

He ran back down to the courtyard and felt the weight of his years almost as a physical thing. Of all that he had ever expected to see in his life, demons from the Mahorelah were the last. Thank The Creator that the Noren had seen them and raised the alarm. The wall was their best defence.

Apart from himself there were only three others of the Branith in the entire

tower. Add to that the twenty-two retainers, none of them greatly skilled in arms, and they were in a sorry state to repel any sort of siege, let alone an attack by demons. But then, even with its full complement of arms, Losq had never been heavily populated.

Disbelief threatened him. Demons from the Mahorelah were all but unthinkable, but he had seen the horrors for himself. They stood upright, they were armed with sword and shield and they were headless. Ocholor shuddered as he thought of what he had studied briefly from atop the wall. In all his life, in all his dreams, he had never imagined such abominations.

Putting down his fear and his doubt, he looked back at the wall. Banavoan, Sihbruj, Arpanad and Orkanir remained where they were, watching. They were ready, all of them, and he could almost taste their resolve from where he stood. They waited like warriors, even Arpanad, ready for the foe to make the first move. He looked with especial favour at his son and felt a sudden surge of pride. Orkanir had been the first to act. He had always remembered his teachings.

Ocholor met Tazocho at the centre of the courtyard. She stopped in front of him, her face as hard as it had ever been, her eyes sharp and clear but utterly unreadable. He found himself wondering what thoughts were going through her mind now.

"Demons, you say?" she asked.

"They are just beyond the wall, Enay," he reported.

"And what are they doing?"

"Nothing, Enay. They appear to be waiting for something."

He watched her, saw how well she controlled herself. Not a flicker crossed her face at the news. Only her eyes showed anything at all – and that the cold hardness of stone.

"How many of them are there?" she asked.

"I am not sure, Enay, but there may be at least thirty," he replied.

She looked surprised.

"Can you not count them?"

"It is difficult to tell where one ends and another begins," he told her. By the look on her face, she clearly did not like the sound of that.

"And do you know of what kind they are?" she asked, hardening herself again.

"No, Enay," he told her. "They are of no kind I ever remember reading about. No bestiary that I ever saw described such things. They are armed with sword and shield, but they have no heads, just mouths."

Ocholor suddenly looked angrily back at her, as if his own failures found her wanting instead.

"And here I was thinking that there were no Argedith left in the world," he said.

Tazocho fixed him with an even harder stare.

"Then explain to me why you were trained in the art of war? Was it not to counter such a threat as this? Why does the Enay of Losq enact Kuslah at this very

moment? Do I have to remind you of the words of Karmaraa?"

She drew in a great breath, as though what she had to say next required nothing less.

"Though it take an age of the heavens," she intoned, "the Ell shall always be prepared, for evil does not sleep, it merely bides its time!"

Ocholor blinked back his surprise at the rebuke, but there was nothing he could say in answer. She was right, of course, and her words pulled him back to himself. Self-doubt was fatal, especially in the face of battle. He admonished himself with strictures from the Namad Alkar: 'Without constant practice, a warrior will be nervous and undecided when facing battle; without constant practice, those in command will be wavering and irresolute when the crisis is at hand'.

Seeing the effect her words had, Tazocho changed the subject.

"And who raised the alarm? Who saw the threat first?"

"The Noren," answered Ocholor. "He was the one that raised the alarm."

A glint of pride gentled her eyes before a flash of concern sharpened them again.

"So where is he? Where is my son? Where have you sent him?" she demanded.

Her thoughts were suddenly clear upon her face. Ocholor hid his surprise. This was the first time he could ever remember seeing through her walls. Behind her concern for her son lay something deeper. If only Sazaaim were here. Now the defence of Losq lay in her hands, and her hands alone. She had no other to turn to. He was about to answer when another voice interrupted.

"But I am here, mother."

Korfox stepped out from behind her. She closed her eyes for a moment, closing them in thankfulness, and laid a light hand upon his shoulder, holding it, caressing it, before withdrawing it again. That was all she would allow.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

"Looking for you," he replied. "I told everyone that I passed what was happening."

She smiled and then gestured back towards the tower.

"Good, you have done your part. Go inside now – and do it quickly! Lock the doors. This is no place to be."

Korfox looked up at her. Surely they were safe now? Why did he have to go to the tower? He wanted to see. He opened his mouth to object, but Ocholor interrupted.

"Noren!" he growled in his fiercest voice. "Do as the Enay says! And do it quickly!"

Korfox backed away, blinking furiously. Ocholor had never spoken to him like that, ever. Why was everyone so angry with him today? First Doanazin, then his mother, now Ocholor. But as he was about to answer, warning shouts came from the wall.

Korfox span round and stared in horror as grey shapes came over it in horrid profusion. They came almost in a flood, far too many for Sihbruj, who they fell

upon and threw back over the wall. He vanished from sight. Banavoan, Orkanir and Arpanad retreated and dropped down to the courtyard, their faces frozen in shock by the speed of the attack.

Time compressed. Ocholor drew his sword and gave a great cry as he rushed into battle. Korfax stared after him even as his mother took hold of him and pulled him back towards the tower. Indistinct shapes dropped into the courtyard from the wall, crouching snarls of tooth and blade.

Ocholor was upon the demons in moments, his sword a whirling arc of metal. It all became a confusion of sound and motion, words shouted in desperation, hisses and roars following them like answering echoes. More demons tumbled over the wall, and more after them, one after another, each lofting a blade gleaming with a hungry light.

Ocholor withstood them for a brief moment, but then even he retreated as the grey advanced like a wall. Then he disappeared from sight. All Korfax could see now were Orkanir, Banavoan and Arpanad, their weapons a flicker of bright reflections.

Korfax watched Arpanad. He was moving fast, faster than Korfax had ever seen him move before, his face twisted into a grimace of the most astonishing ferocity as he impaled one of the demons on his lance, all but lifting it bodily from the stone. Korfax gasped in astonishment at the sight. He had never seen Arpanad look so fierce, or so grim, or so daring. For the briefest moment he saw a hero, a slayer of demons.

But it did not last. As Arpanad tried to withdraw his weapon, a second demon came at him from the side and cut him down with a vicious swipe of its blade. Korfax cried out, a wordless denial. That was not how it was supposed to be. Heroes did not bleed! But Arpanad fell to the ground nonetheless, eyes wide, mouth wider, as his assailant leaned over him and bared its teeth. A tongue lashed out to lick at the blood that now ran from Arpanad's wounds, and then the mouth reached out to take a bite. Korfax could not look away. This was wrong, horribly wrong. Battle was supposed to be glorious, not bloody and vile.

The demon raised itself up again and stepped forward, red with blood. Another joined it. Now Korfax stared at them, and it was almost as if they stared back, their tooth-filled mouths like great eyes. They were coming for him.

Someone raced by, a rush of orange, a flash of blades. Korfax was almost too surprised to recognise his tutor. Was that Doanazin? Was that really Doanazin? Korfax stared at the two blades she held – one high, one low – in the posture of readiness.

"Get the Noren to safety, Enay," Doanazin called back as she ran. "I will hold them off."

Then she was on the demons, her two blades a dance of reflections, notching shields, blocking thrusts, forcing them back again. Korfax felt numb. He had never imagined anything like this at all. That his tutor could fight? That his tutor could

wield a blade to such deadly effect? But even as he watched, dumbstruck, he saw others rushing up to join the battle, each suddenly armed with blade, staff or lance.

There went Eilrom, famed for his skill in metalcraft, his hair flying behind him, a large two-handed duelling sword held before him. And there was Permal, the son of Chasaloh and Kalazir, a long sword clutched in his left hand, a short shield held in his right.

Korfox dwelt in a slow and fevered nightmare, his mother dragging him back to the tower, he following her in a daze. Somewhere out there a battle raged. He heard the clash of arms, the hiss of demons and the cries of the dying. What had happened to his world? The morning had started out so bright and fair. Now, with the end of the day, it had descended into blood and chaos.

As they reached the door to the tower, Tazocho turned to look back. Korfox could see the questions in her eyes. Who was living? Who was dying? He understood as never before. This was where the world turned.

In the courtyard Orkanir appeared to be the only one left, retreating towards them as if fighting his way free from a quagmire. His blade slashed this way and that and for a moment it looked as if he would fail as the demons hurled themselves at him, but he pushed them aside with his shield and then ran on, running hard back to the tower. He came headlong towards them, his blade a-drip with slow, grey fluids, but the demons were after him, picking themselves up or leaping over the fallen, mouths wide, swords pointing like promises.

"ENAY! NOREN! GET INSIDE!" Orkanir called. "CLOSE THE DOOR AND LOCK IT! DO IT NOW!"

Tazocho forced Korfox inside but held the door ready. Orkanir leapt through the gap and the door slammed shut. Thudding sounds came from outside as if things were being piled up against the stone. Tazocho locked the door and a brief heat came and went. It was sealed. Orkanir breathed hard and looked at her.

"You should not have waited, Enay," he said.

"I do what I must," she replied.

"Then you are mine to ward. I am the last."

Tazocho bowed her head as if grateful, but something in her eyes darkened and they became even colder than before.

It was quiet outside now, but there was a sense that something waited just beyond the door, something eager.

The door to the tower began to crack. It seemed only a moment ago that they had closed and locked it, but time was moving quickly now, and its ever diminishing moments were measured out by the eager blows that rained down from outside. The nightmare rushed headlong to its conclusion as the shadows of evening lengthened, beckoning to night.

Orkanir stood to the fore, standing in front of Korfox and Tazocho, his sword in his left hand, his shield in his right. He faced the failing door like a statue, his feet

planted on the stone as if immovable.

"How many do you think are left? I counted eight," Tazocho said.

"Eight there are, Enay," he answered.

"Is anyone else alive?" she wondered.

"I do not know," he returned. There was the briefest pause, the slightest tightening of the eyes.

"I saw my father fall."

Another pause.

"Banavoan took many of them before he was caught. Arpanad, Eilrom, Permanal and even Doanazin killed not a few between them. But all now lie in the courtyard and there is no one else that I know of. I think some of the demons went through the outer houses earlier and I thought I heard a cry a little while ago, but I have heard nothing else since."

Korfax stared at Orkanir. He had never heard him speak so. Orkanir seemed perilous now, elemental and deadly, filled to the brim with cold fire. Like the high mountain snow, he was ready to fall down each precipitous slope and crush all that lay in his path. Korfax turned away again. He was not equal to this. Was this what it meant to be Enay, to stand by and watch as others died in your name? It was wrong. He could not do it.

Korfax glanced up at his mother, marking the swift and seeing glance she passed over Orkanir, brief concerns clouding her eyes before she wrapped herself in stillness again. She seemed even more determined than ever, clothing herself in a mantle of the hardest stone. Korfax looked away. He had been abandoned, lost in a world of terrifying absolutes. Orkanir had become an avalanche in waiting and his mother the mountain to which it clung. But where was he?

"They will not be satisfied until we are all dead," his mother announced.

"So it would seem, Enay," Orkanir answered, but he did not turn his attention from the door.

"We must warn others of this danger. Others should know."

"Yes, Enay, others should know." And that was all he would spare. So since he had become her echo, Tazocho said nothing more.

The door cracked further and a fragment fell to the floor. A grey sword thrust its way through the hole before pulling back again. Orkanir glanced over his shoulder and his face was suddenly alight with anger.

"Enay! Why are you still here? Take the Noren and go! He is your care now. Find somewhere! Hide! I will hold them here! They will not pass!"

But Tazocho did not move.

"I must see," she said.

Korfax looked up at her in growing distress. They should go, just as Orkanir had said. What was she waiting for? Orkanir had told them to leave, and Korfax so wanted to obey. He did not want to die at the hands of a demon. But his mother remained where she was. She remained and she waited, watching, her eyes looking

beyond the borders of the world. She was seeking for a sign, he told himself, looking for a moment yet to come, a moment that would gain them all an advantage. He had no choice but to stand beside her and wait in ever-mounting panic.

There came another blow upon the door and more of its stone fell. Korfax stared at the destruction in fascinated revulsion. It suddenly seemed that, given enough time, these abominations could even shatter the stone of the tower itself!

The gap in the door widened, more stone fell and under the stone a demon, a noiseless blur of movement that darted through the jagged opening with blade and shield before it. But Orkanir was ready.

He leapt forward and dispatched the creature even before it had a chance to defend itself. The demon hissed briefly and then fell to the floor where it slumped, its body disintegrating with undue haste into a foul pool of grey slime. Korfax felt sick as he watched, unable to look away as the horrid thing corroded onto the flagstones.

The door broke a little more and Korfax looked up. Two more demons surged through the gap as though suddenly boneless, one high, one low. Orkanir repeated his previous move. One demon slashed its sword in response, lightning-fast, but Orkanir, faster still, ducked as it swung, attacking before it could react, taking away its legs with an irresistible sweep of his blade. The second demon brought down its sword in a vicious arc, but Orkanir caught the blow upon his shield and turned it aside, forcing the demon off balance. Then, before it could right itself, Orkanir thrust his sword upwards and the demon shuddered, fluids erupting like a fountain from its mouth. Orkanir leapt back. Now the look on his face was brutal as he watched the demons fail, relishing their demise with dark satisfaction.

An unpleasant sucking sound came from outside and a fourth demon came through the gap in the door like a spear. It found Orkanir unprepared, and its outstretched sword caught him under his right shoulder. Blood spattered the walls and Orkanir gasped with pain. Two more followed, and all three attacked almost as one, blades and shields dancing in strange, unequal patterns.

They were fast, mere blurs of movement, but even though he was wounded, Orkanir still matched them. He took one across its belly, disembowelling it with a great sweep of his sword, before spitting a second with a heroic thrust through its chest. But the third was poised, and it attacked at exactly that moment, returning the compliment a hundredfold. With a jagged grey sword buried in his side, Orkanir staggered, his face filled with sudden mortality.

His shield dangling from his arm, Orkanir dropped to his knees. He looked back at Tazocho and blood ran from his mouth. Then he slumped to the floor like a broken thing and a weak cry escaped his lips.

“Run!” he gasped. Then he lay still.

Tazocho finally moved as if that had been the sign she had been waiting for. As two more demons squeezed through the crack in the door she dragged Korfax

away with her. For a moment the last three demons stood over the body of Orkanir, tongues flickering, mouths drooling, and then they danced quickly over his body and followed in pursuit.

They fled grey death. Up many stairs and through many rooms they ran, Korfax following, Tazocho leading, taking as wild a path as she could contrive.

They came to the upper halls, darting through this door or that, along corridors, through adjoining rooms, before dropping back down again and into the main hall, skirting around the great table, aiming obliquely for the door again. As they ran through the hall, Tazocho reached out and flicked one of the lances from its place upon the wall, catching it adroitly in her left hand. Korfax found himself caught by the deftness of her movements. Now it was her turn to surprise him with her speed. She caught his glance and gestured towards the far door with the lance. They ran on, but even as they left the hall two demons entered behind them, silent knots of grey racing over the floor like hungry shadows. Tazocho steered Korfax down the lesser stairs that led to the under rooms. He heard her muttering to herself.

“But where is the other? There were three of them!”

Korfax could not answer. He knew even less than her.

They came back to the ground level, but even as they reached the corridor that led to the outside, the third demon stepped forward out of the shadows, waiting for them as if prescient, a grin of teeth betwixt sword and shield.

Tazocho came to a stop. This one had doubled back to wait at precisely the right place. Now it stood before them, hissing its lust, the shadow of a tongue flickering between its many teeth. They fell back from it and almost into the arms of the others as they danced down the stairs from above.

Boxed, Tazocho pulled Korfax to the side and into an old and all but forgotten room, one only ever used for storage and seldom visited by any. She slammed the door behind her, and Korfax, almost by reflex, set the lock with a single touch of a finger. Outside a faint growl of frustration came and went. Korfax looked up at his mother and allowed himself a sigh of relief. But his relief was short-lived. Their pursuers were not to be so easily thwarted.

A strange sucking sound came through the door, the same sound that they had heard before. It was followed by a momentary silence, and then hard blows began to rain down upon the stone. Each dull thud echoed heavily and Korfax stared at the door with renewed horror whilst his mother looked carefully about her.

There was no other way out. There were no windows and the only light came from a small piradar set in the ceiling. She tested the lance she had chosen, flexing it in her hands, a quick set of movements giving her its feel. Old it might have been, but it was still sturdy and certainly lethal enough in the right hands. It was something at least.

Korfax stood beside the door and gazed in fear at his mother. The filth of the Mahorelah were beating against it now like great hammers, their muffled exertions passing through the stone like curses.

Tazocho remained where she was, erect and commanding, her long lance tilted at the door.

"Get behind me," she said to him. "They will be through soon enough. That door will not hold for ever."

But he did not move. A haze of indecision had him. Before this moment he had never seen his mother wield a weapon of any kind. Watching her now, though, he could see the practised ease with which she hefted her lance. She clearly knew what she was doing. But here he was, a lad of only thirteen years, named master by his father only that morning, and his mother was the only one who could protect them both. He felt worse than helpless.

"Korfax, do as I say!"

Her voice whipped through the air and he had no choice but to obey. His mother still ruled his every horizon, despite his dreams. Korfax leapt over the table so that he could stand at her side. Then he looked up at her and saw her features clench.

The door shuddered and dust fell, but it remained in place, obstinate enough to deny the demons entry just yet. They had only scant moments left.

"I should have a weapon!" he complained.

Tazocho did not look around.

"There are no others," she told him. "This lance is all that there is. Besides, what weapon could you use?"

"But Ocholor told me only yesterday that I was good for my age."

She sighed and looked down. A gentler smile played across her lips and she looked fully at him. She reached out a hand and stroked his cheek.

"But that was just play, young of my heart. We face an altogether harder truth here. So be still now and wait behind me. I will need all my strength for what comes next. There will come a moment when you must run. Seize it and do not look back."

She leaned in and kissed him gently on his brow, but then looked away again. Abandoned once more, he turned about. He could feel tears in his eyes, fear and frustration fighting for control. Run? How could he? There must be some other way. This was not how it was supposed to be – demons and death and carnage.

He searched the room again, desperate to find something that he could use, something with at least a measure of comfort. There was a chest in the corner behind them, an orderly stack of pots in another, several boxes of assorted oddments in a third, and a set of folded banners in the forth. The only other occupant of the room was the table, and there was nothing under that.

He looked around again, before coming back to the chest. It was old, bound about with age-blackened laidrom, darkly nondescript, but there was suddenly something about it, something familiar. A distant memory stirred in his mind and

he gasped even as he caught it. Once, a long time ago, he had seen his father lift a great black blade from out of that chest.

How strange it was to remember that now, he thought. It had been so many years ago. But hope lifted within him as he thought of the great black blade.

He had been small, only recently able to walk on his own two feet, when he had found himself by the door to a strange room he had never been in before, watching, wide-eyed and innocent, as his father lifted up a dark sword from out of a small chest, holding it up for a moment before putting it back again with a hard look on his face.

Korfax would have stayed there, watching, but voices from above had called out his name and he had tottered off, his father still unaware that he had been observed at all. Korfax, though, had never thought of the moment again, not until now. It was almost as if the memory had waited for just such a moment as this.

Hope swelled inside. He could use that blade, if it was still there, and if he had strength enough to wield it. He went quickly to the chest and lifted the lid, peering inside as he did so. He frowned. The chest seemed strangely larger within than it did without. How odd was that? But he had no time for such fancies now, as he needed the black sword.

He saw it almost immediately, a thick black blade with a thick black hilt, lying on a bed of scrolls. It was smaller than memory had made it, strangely compressed and oddly shrunken, but then he reminded himself that he also had been smaller when he had first seen it. Memory could play strange tricks, especially when they came from such an early age.

He looked down at the sword. It was so unlike any that he had ever seen before. Like the chest in which it lay, there seemed to be far more to it than met the eye. Korfax suddenly had the odd impression that the black sword had not been forged at all but rather carved from a single block of metal.

He gazed at it in wonder. It seemed all of a piece as it slept in its chest, like a seed deep in its singular dream of resurrection whilst around it the litter of its past lay like old leaves, a curious collection of discoloured scrolls, each impatient for their eventual unfurling.

Korfax blinked. He was dreaming again. He must wake up. He reached for the black sword and his hand fell into limitless depths. He gasped. How far must he go to reach the hilt? He reached downwards, his arm lengthening, his grasp extending. He closed his eyes and tried to ignore the illusion. He wanted the blade, he needed the blade and he would allow nothing else to distract him. He heard a crashing sound, he heard his mother speak, but it was a distant thing, of little concern. He touched the sword. It felt warm. He closed his hand about the hilt. Darkness filled him.

The door cracked from its top to its bottom and fell inwards with a crash. The dust of its demise billowed into the room, but the demons did not follow. Tazocho

frowned. What was this now? Were they playing with their prey? Then the strange sucking sound came again.

It was appalling, and for a moment she wished she could stop up her ears, but it did not last long. She wondered what it portended, wondered what new horror the demons were preparing, but then they came into view, stepping slowly through the settling dust as if already victorious, tongues a-flicker as they tasted the air.

Tazocho curled her lips in disgust. Up until this moment it had all been a rush of fighting and fleeing, with the demons things of grey shadow, suggestions of bone and flesh and the grin of wicked teeth. But now, as they advanced slowly, she had time enough to see them in all their grisly splendour. It was almost as if they were displaying themselves to her, that they understood her horror and took delight from it.

At first she thought them the resurrected dead, what with their folded, ulcerous flesh, their withered breasts, jutting bones and famished bodies, but then she saw her error. They were not old, but young, almost unfinished even, as though they had fallen too early or too eagerly from the womb.

Hugely out-sized joints dominated their limbs: knobbed, pitted and seeping. Their legs seemed sturdy enough, built for speed with long taloned feet, but the arms were stranger by far. Each left arm was a shield, a great curling mass of bone that erupted from the flesh like a growth, a clenched fist hidden behind it, wicked with claws. On the right arm, though, there was no hand at all, just a pulsing knot of flesh wrapped around a sword of bone, a jagged sweep of curves that gleamed as though wet with venom.

Hunched over an emaciated belly, each wedge-shaped torso twisted under the dominion of a demented spine that seemingly went where it would. At its base there flexed a tail of sorts, a restless worm of bone, descending from its root as though from rotted gristle.

But the worst thing, the very worst of all, was the absence of a head, for the spine that writhed its way up each crooked back, searching for consummation, ended at the neck as if betrayed. Instead, from the folds of skin that hung between each shouldered pylon of bone, there rose a hump of flesh, a truncated mound broken only by a great wound of a mouth, a grin of teeth like a nest of knives.

Seeing them now, seeing them in all their ways, Tazocho understood the malice of their making: birth as death, creation as cruelty. Thrust into the world in some appalling act of violence, it was all that they knew. Arm wrestled with shoulder, leg collided with groin, tail clashed with spine. Flesh as a battlefield, for ever making war upon itself, and a hunger without end.

They moved towards her – slowly, deliberately – blades and shields lofted and ready. She could feel their anticipation. What had happened before had been quick, a rush of moments and the clash of forces. What would happen now would be slow, the long burning fire of a lust indulged.

The leader of the three extended its mouth and its teeth rolled past each other,

riding their rows in a curl of unfurling blades. A hiss, a laugh perhaps, gurgled its way out like slow vomit.

Tazocho gave the leader her full attention and put everything else out of her mind. This was it. She had come to the moment, so she waited, ready, holding her lance down so that its tip was level with the demon's chest, poised for the killing stroke.

"At least I will stop you, slime of the abyss," she told it. But then a shadow filled the room, sucking away the light, and there was something behind her, something dark.

Korfox lifted the fat, black blade up from its resting place in the chest, holding it up before him like some swollen flame. If it had surprised him before, it amazed him now.

When he had first laid his hand upon it, it had felt inordinately heavy, solid and weighty, a weapon that only the very strongest could wield, perhaps. But now that he had dragged it up from its resting place it felt astonishingly light – a mere feather in his hand, almost as if it had been made to rest there. He stared up at it and it darkened the air about him, black upon black, the darkest of fires flickering over its impenetrable surface and beyond.

The sword grew in his hand until it was vast, larger than the largest kansehna, but Korfox did not care. Though it might grow to the size of a mountain he could still wield it, for the sword was a part of him now, another limb, muscled for the act of bloodshed. He turned to his enemies and extended the black sword towards them like a threat, even as the black flames waxed upon its blade. Then the sword began to sing.

The song caught him, a song like no other he had ever heard in his life. It was a song of victory, a melody of blood, and it took him beyond himself and on to another place entirely.

He stood within red mists that curled and drifted whilst the echoes of battles long gone, long forgotten, circled him like distant thunder. He felt himself become mighty, his body reinvented, even as the sword became a fabulous shape in his hand, its surface rippling and flowing as it became both blade and shield.

No sick flesh this; stems and leaves of living metal filled the air about him, darker than midnight, harder than stone. Then either he wielded it or it wielded him, for he suddenly moved and his great black blade moved with him, guiding – or guided by – his willing hand. The one became three, three blades piercing his enemies with liquid ease, drinking deep of their marrow and consuming them in fire before crumbling them to ash.

It was over almost before it had begun, and he suddenly found himself upon the other side, standing over their ruin like some new-born god, smiling down upon them with all a youth's radiance. He raised his sword in the air above him and rejoiced, and the world about him stopped so that it could honour his victory.

Exultant, caught upon the eternal threshold, caught within it, he remained where he was until, from somewhere else, a lifetime's distance, he heard a voice. It was his mother calling to him from some paltry place, her voice intruding on the dream, vying with the song of the sword.

"Korfax!" she called. "Hear me! Hear my voice! Come back to me! Come back! Please come back to me, Korfax! Please come back!"

Come back? He did not want to. Here were miracles. Here lay his heart's desire. No enemy could touch him whilst he stood in this place. But even as he heard his mother's voice, he knew that it was already over. Her desperation touched him, and the moment, fleeting and fragile, moved on.

He stepped reluctantly back out of his dream and found himself beside the ruin of the door. At his feet lay three small piles of ash, and his mother, wide-eyed and gasping, was staring at him from the other side of the room, a long lance clutched in her hands as though to fend something off.

He looked back at her and frowned slightly. Was that fear in her eyes? Was she afraid of him? Surely not! But something was not right here. He felt immersed in cloud, enfolded by impenetrable fogs. He shook his head to dislodge them, but they would not leave.

"Korfax!" she said. "Speak to me, tell me that you are still here."

Korfax deepened his frown. What a strange thing to ask!

"Of course I am here," he said. "Whatever do you mean?"

He glanced again at the ash piles at his feet. Where had they come from? And where were the demons? He looked back at her.

"What happened to the demons?" he asked. "Where are they?"

But his mother did not move. All she did was stare at him.

"Don't you remember?" she asked him in return, her eyes wide.

Korfax felt himself cut adrift. What was happening here? There had been a strange place of red mist, but what was that? Was it a dream? Was it real? He did not know. Did his mother? He looked at her and waited for answers, answers that would make some kind of sense and would anchor him again.

"You killed them," she told him. "You killed the last of them. You saved us both."

Who had he killed? The demons? What was this? Another dream? He gazed at the piles of ash at his feet. Nothing made any sense at all. He looked back at his mother.

"I killed them?"

He shook his head again. His mind had become unruly. He could not think clearly at all.

"I thought there was a dream of red mists," he said, "but I didn't think that I was really there. Then there was a song..."

He looked down and saw the sword still in his grasp, but it was no longer the vast and wondrous shape from his dream; now it was just a great black blade, suddenly incongruous in his hands.

Sounds came from outside. It seemed almost miraculous, but even as they both turned about, Sazaaim and Baschim raced through the door like saviours.

Sazaaim caught sight of them both all in a moment, almost as if they were one and the same, and his expression of uncontrollable rage changed instantly to one of uncontainable joy. He all but sagged in relief as he reached out for them.

"Thank The Creator you are here. I thought you both dead," he said.

Tazocho dropped her lance and went to him. They held each other tight. Korfax though remained where he was, caught between places, caught by his confusion. He lowered the black sword to the floor and let it rest there, a dangle of darkness from his left hand.

Sazaaim turned to his son with tears in his eyes. Though Korfax did not look up, his father looked down at his son and clasped him tight.

"I thought I had lost you!" he said.

Baschim watched the reunion with less joy than he might have. He already knew that his own homecoming would be darker by far than that of his master. He had seen how others had died this day and he feared the worst. But he held himself in place and endured what had to be endured. For the sake of his master he held his duty paramount, so that he could see the world around him as Sazaaim could not. He had already noticed the black sword in Korfax's hand and the three ash heaps upon the floor, so he at least understood something of what had happened. He closed his eyes for a moment in fear, fearing to break his master's joy, but then he hardened his heart so that he could place the hand of warning upon his master's shoulder.

"Enay!" he said. "There is ash upon the floor and your son holds the black sword! Have you not seen?"

Sazaaim half turned to Baschim and frowned.

"What?"

Baschim pointed. Sazaaim looked. Sazaaim looked again. Then he saw it, the ash heaps and the black blade still nestling in his son's hand. He stepped back, eyes darkening by the moment, even as he released his son from his embrace. Baschim turned away and walked to the outer door. His duty was almost done. Now all he had to do was shield the room from others. Sazaaim, meanwhile, had eyes only for his son.

"Korfax?" he said. "Did you do this? Did you wield that blade?"

Tazocho came forward and placed her hand against his lips.

"Is it not enough to know that he saved us both with it?" she asked. "If he had not slain the last of the demons, you would be grieving this day."

Sazaaim held her hand for a moment, kissing it briefly, caressing it, but then he pushed it aside as relief and rage fought for possession of his face.

"But how could he have even known that it was there?" he cried.

"Now is not the time for such questions," she returned. "We are both alive and

that is all that matters.”

She drew herself up and took a deep breath.

“Now tell me! Who has lived, who has died?”

Sazaaim closed his eyes and shivered.

“The others are looking,” he murmured. “I should go and help.”

He opened his eyes again.

“As should I,” Tazocho agreed. “But our son needs us also. Someone must ward him now. Someone must care for him.”

Sazaaim looked at Korfax and his face became hard.

“Yes,” he said. “Indeed, someone must attend to Korfax.”

Sazaaim pointed at the sword.

“Korfax, put that sword back where you found it!”

The command was almost a demand, but Korfax did not move. Instead he gazed up at his father. Confusion still had him. Surely his father would be pleased by what he had done? He had slain demons, hadn't he? He had slain them with a sword, hadn't he? Wasn't that what he was supposed to do? He had saved his own life and that of his mother. But it had all happened so fast.

Sazaaim's eyes widened as Korfax remained where he was. Was his son defying him? Was his very own son defying him? It was too much. Inconsiderate fury possessed him.

“KORFAX!” he roared.

Korfax jumped back and all but shrank to the floor, his eyes wide as he stared back. His father had suddenly become a storm in his sky, heading in fast, face dark, eyes darker, all filled with the threat of lightning.

“Do as I tell you!” Sazaaim ordered. “Do it now!”

But Korfax could not move. He was terrified. He could not have moved even if he had wanted to. Then his mother stepped between them both and held up her right hand in denial.

“Enough!” she exclaimed. “That is more than enough! Cage your power! Look beyond this moment and think carefully. Consider the innocence of your son!”

Sazaaim backed away from her as though she had struck him. He looked down at the floor, blinking furiously. Tazocho remained where she was for a moment, arm upraised like a shield, but then she turned about again and came to Korfax, her voice altogether gentle, so wonderfully gentle.

“Korfax,” she said, “listen to my voice, hear me once more. Do as your father commands and all will be well, you will see.”

Korfax could not move. It was all too much. His father had suddenly become terror personified and his mother was now a bright shield of comfort, gentler and warmer than she had been in a long, long while.

“Put the sword back,” she said. “Put it back where you found it. Do it, my son, do it for me.”

She did not command him, she asked, though it was almost a plea, a hope that

all would be well again. Korfax stared down at the black sword in his hand, the strange and shrunken black sword.

He looked up at her and she smiled back at him, a wonderful smile. That was the turning point. He would do it. He would do it for that smile.

He made his way back to the chest. With every step that he took the sword seemed to shrink even further, whilst its weight strangely grew as though it was reluctant to be hidden away again, and by the time he had reached the chest it was all that he could do just to put it back inside. But his mother did not help him and neither did his father. They just watched, carefully, as if this was a task only he could perform. They both followed him with their eyes, his father's dark and bruised, his mother's bright and gleaming as if by hiding the sword away again he did the very best thing he could in all the world. Korfax closed the lid of the chest and looked back at them both. What did it all mean?

Almost as the lid closed his mother came to him, taking him in her arms, holding him tight, enfolding him with her love. She clasped him to her for a moment, and then, without another glance at his father, she took him from the room.

Outside, Baschim still waited, his face carved in stone. He bowed to her briefly but then turned aside again, returning to the side of his master. Without a glance or even a bow of acknowledgement, Tazocho took Korfax swiftly away.

Here ends the first four chapters of

LAND OF THE FIRST
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