

Sekali
“The Sister City”
Book 1

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Preface

Within a land veiled from the blessed light of the sun thrive a race of Elves known as the Sardakk; a people cast out by those of the Living World many ages ago. In legends, passed down from one generation to another, it is said the inhabitants of the living world banished the Sardakk to be tortured and punished by the Wastelands for crimes committed against their king. The particulars have been all but forgotten, obscured by the passing of time, tales varying by those who recite them. The Sardakk do not dwell on this history, nor debate it, for twenty ages have passed since their separation from the Living World of man. To this very day, the Sardakk have dwelt and prospered in the Wastelands they call home.

The Wastelands are a place of hardship, for almost nothing grows within its boundaries. The warm rays of the sun itself are blocked by great vapors of ash and dust which veil the entire land in a shadowy twilight. All one can distinguish between night and day is the graying of the skies in the morning, illuminating the twisted and charred earth beneath the heavens, and the pitch black of night, wherein nightmares are real.

Harsh is the life of they who dwell within the blackened Wastelands. Amidst the darker legends, spoken of in the hushed voices of the fearful within the living world, the Sardakk stand undaunted. Forever encompassed by terror, Sardakahn Citadel stands as a pinnacle of strength amidst a siege of eternal conflict and death.

Once in a great long while, one appears within the world of Utaemia; one who possesses the tender heart of flesh. And the coming of this one is not unlike a great army who, without the blade, lays siege to a mighty fortress, inevitably reducing it to dust.

And so begins this tale . . .

Sekali and six others stood motionless upon one of many pinnacles of blackened stone protruding from the earth near Sardakahn Citadel, scanning the landscape for any signs of movement. Each grimly focused their attention out into the ominous sea of creeping shadow that drifted across the twisted, wounded earth below, wary and suspicious -- ready for battle.

Of the seven, six were clad in master crafted krannik-steel platemail, stained black to match the region itself, weapons drawn as if expecting sudden attack. At the top of the pinnacle stood Mahkaia, a powerful witch who had served her people for more than twelve centuries. Her dark eyes glittered with a faint illumination as she probed the landscape before her, a staff of ash-black wood in one hand.

The ancient pinnacle of stone upon which the seven stood was fashioned ornately with a spiral stairway that snaked upwards about the large formation of rock. Seven flat surfaces with waist-high borders of rock, were sculpted within the stone at various levels as a defense for each member of The Watch. Mahkaia, who was their leader, stood upon the top-most platform, in plain view of those below her.

Leading into the pinnacle from every platform were a series of large tunnels which branched off in six directions, each leading to every other platform. Crafted in this manner, all members of the team had access to every other section of the pinnacle should any member of the team need assistance. The tunnels provided security, as well as a place to store food, water, tools and medical supplies.

The authorities of Sardakahn were in the deciding stages of constructing a tunnel between each pinnacle to a point just within the walls of Sardakahn. Such a modification would allow for an escape back into the citadel if needed. Such tunnels would also open up more areas from which an enemy could attack, should one or more Watch fail. The pinnacle he stood upon was one of many surrounding his city. Such a plan was unwise.

Sekali felt honored to perform The Watch, to protect those of his kin within the stronghold of stone his forefathers had forged from the Wastelands long ago.

There were other pinnacles encircling the entire stronghold, manned in like manner, always with one caster among six others. Those few who steeped themselves into arcanian mystery, to unveil powers to wield against the enemies of Sardakahn, proved invaluable in battle against both the creatures of the Wastelands and the relentless, unmerciful hand of nature itself, the latter of which challenged them more often than fang and talon.

There were three circles of The Watch surrounding Sardakahn Citadel: The inner, or third circle, closest to the stronghold, the second circle, and then the outer first. The first circle was manned only by those judged worthy to stand against the most terrible foes. One who consistently demonstrated stability and strength upon the third circle, would eventually be granted promotion to the second. After a time, if the second circle of The Watch was kept successfully, one would be gifted with the honor of the first. Those who manned the outermost circle were unified, and the strongest of all who aspired to the station of The Watch.

He and the others were positioned so that any time Mahkaia would move, even in the slightest, they would notice. Like living statues, the seven bent their iron wills upon the shadowy environment before them, silent as the pinnacle they stood upon.

In this land, nature was as much a danger as the horrors which threatened the security of the people. Fire could suddenly fall from the heavens above, the earth could abruptly gape open wide, swallowing those not quick enough to evacuate the area, as well as many other lethal phenomenons.

As he kept an eye upon Mahkaia, Sekali slowly ran a thumb across the edge of his blade, peering now and again out into the mists of fine ash which constantly filtered down through the stagnant air. Slowly, he raised a hand to secure the finely woven cloth mask that covered all but his eyes, making sure it was secure.

As he looked into the mists before him, Sekali's thoughts turned to Mahkaia, whom he had taken to spending time with. They had become more than the friends they once were, and their time together had been the instrument of forging a strong relationship, which he valued above all the combined treasures of the world.

He had not set his mind upon her for more than a moment, when a red glow filled the ashen sky above, giving the imminent sign of impending danger. Looking up, he witnessed hundreds of areas within the vapors above come to life, like fires springing forth, burning hot, as if a dragon had set the sky on fire. Abruptly, the distinct sound of firefall was heard hissing from overhead as streaks of red began to trail downward, plummeting like small burning comets to the earth.

Ignoring the deadly rain of fire, he stood and turned toward Sardakahn Citadel, raising the tip of his blade high as he focused his attention upon the pinnacle of the Second Watch, barely visible through the mists, upon which he could see seven others signaling likewise in the direction of the Third Watch, veiled from his vision. Elemental Magicians within Sardakahn Citadel would soon cast powerful wards to shield all within the city, giving people the needed time to retreat into prepared places of safety.

As he heard the soft chant of Mahkaia's voice, Sekali knew they would be shielded from the uncanny storm soon to strike the area with searing effects.

Blazing ash falling from the skies was not the only danger firefall created, for with nearly every occurrence, unsheltered creatures would be forced to scramble for cover, or perish. As alarming as this was, creatures fleeing for cover were not the highest of his concerns. The native predators of the Wastelands, ones which were not affected by firefall, the most deadly of all predators, would suddenly be on the move -- they would instinctively hunt and scavenge the carcasses of the unlucky.

He scanned the area before him, his heart increasing in pace, feeling the effects of adrenaline begin to course through him. As he suspected, this time was no exception, for as streams of burning ash hissed down from the heavens, striking the conjured spell-shield above, Mahkaia pointed outward in silence, signaling a danger.

Shifting his gaze in the direction she pointed, Sekali witnessed a long snakelike form moving in great haste directly toward them, yet half obscured within the mists. As it neared, he began to see it more clearly, noticing its

intentions were only to secure shelter from the storm.

It was an Ashen Serpent, one of the more common predators, but deadly nonetheless. If the rending jaws of this reptile fiend did not kill its prey quickly, its venom well could, for its kiss would claim the life of a creature ten times again its mass within a short time if not quickly treated by a skilled Healer.

As one, they quickly sheathed their blades and readied their bows, each knocking an arrow, waiting until the creature was close enough to gain the best shot. As it neared the base of the pinnacle, they loosed their arrows, all of which penetrated deep into the reptile's scaly hide, striking true. As the arrows struck their target, Mahkaia threw out a hand, fingers spread wide, even as the Ashen Serpent recoiled back in shock, screaming in sudden pain and rage.

"Shrakka!" Mahkaia cried, her voice filled with sudden wrath. With a blinding flash, lightning instantly leapt from her palm, creating a jagged arc through the trails of firefall, ripping into the Ashen Serpent's scaly hide, an instant crack of deafening thunder following.

Sekali staggered, bracing himself as the air about the pinnacle shook with the harnessed energy of the elements Mahkaia wielded. As the thunder rolled away, he heard the witch chanting. Throwing her a quick glance, to make sure she was safe, Sekali witnessed the dark witch's eyes, glittering like two emeralds filled with a power he did not understand.

Gripping the stone before him with one hand, he secured his balance, just before a shock-wave tore away from the base of the pinnacle in all directions, violently flinging the large serpent into a cluster of jagged stones not far out, a number of its bones loudly snapping upon impact. Spastically, the Ashen Serpent began thrashing about in the throes of death as firefall cascaded down upon it, quickly ending the conflict.

Knocking another arrow, Sekali scanned for more danger as Mahkaia staggered slightly. Sprinting up the steps of the pinnacle, the nearest Warrior leapt to her side, offering a welcomed arm. As the seven focused on the area about them, Sekali could hear the serpent exhale its last quivering breath, and saw

Mahkaia peering out into the storm, her jaded eyes glinting with a power all the witches of Sardakahn harbor. Even so, as powerful as Mahkaia was, the exertion of the spell, combined with the intense heat of the storm, taxed her energy more quickly than usual. After a moment of tense waiting, Mahkaia removed her hand, throwing her Warrior a look of gratitude, nodding slightly.

As he hastily returned to his station, Mahkaia began moving her fingers in intricate patterns and whispering strange, yet familiar words. Though Sekali did not know the exact meaning of each word uttered, he did know what would follow when they ceased. Being exposed to uttered spells time and time again did give him the advantage of knowing what would ensue once the chanting ceased.

Sekali listened to the unnatural tone, mingling within her voice that, even after being exposed to for so long, still unnerved him. The way she spoke, so usually calm and enchanting, would abruptly change in times like these, evolving into something strange and hair-raising. Then, just as quickly, Mahkaia would diminish, becoming her charming self once again. Strange, the Witches of Sardakahn . . . so very strange.

Within moments, a welcomed coolness settled down upon them, bringing relief from the oppressive heat of the storm pounding down upon the spell-shield above. The serpent was dead, and this time, like few others, no other dangers approached the pinnacle.

However, off to his right, a heavy tremor shook the ground, signifying another Watch was yet being put to the test. As Sekali continued observing the area, he kept his attention upon Mahkaia, in case she gave the command to aid them. At times the dangers encountered were terrible, compelling one Watch to call upon another for assistance. After a few moments, Mahkaia shook her head once, a silent indication that they would hold their position. It seemed the other seven had their situation under control.

Waiting for the fiery storm to pass, they continued scanning the area in silence as molten ash impacted the spell-shield, creating an impressive display above them. After a time, the storm diminished and then ceased altogether, leaving

the Wasteland floor gleaming with the embers of its passing.

After their time on the Watch came to an end, the seven surrendered the pinnacle to the next team of seven in silence. Before leaving the area, Sekali and his brothers bound the charred remains of the serpent in strong cords, crafted from the cured and woven intestines of previously-fallen creatures. Once secured, they dragged the carcass into the citadel and left it in the hands of others who would take it to be skinned and prepared. Nothing edible was ever wasted, for in this land food was sparse. By the slaying of the Ashen Serpent, many mouths would be fed that day.

Sekali watched as the master butcher expertly removed seven of the largest fangs from the serpent's mouth, then cleaned and folded them in thin leather wraps. In silence, he handed one to each of the seven, Mahkaia first.

"The skin is no good, but to create small leather items. Of course, if leather is your trade, I can have the hide scaled and tanned in three days," the butcher stated. Vorishal, one of the seven, raised a hand.

"I would like a share in the leather," he said, looking at Sekali and the others. Sekali waved a hand.

"My share is yours," he said. Mahkaia and the other five also relinquished their share to him. Mahkaia took the wrapped tooth and bowed to the butcher.

"Thank you Sahmul." The butcher bowed, seeming very pleased to have caught the attention of Mahkaia, who was fast becoming a legend among her people. She bowed in return.

Turning away from the remains of their trophy, Sekali saluted his fellow warriors respectfully, then unclasped the buckles which secured his plated helm. Pulling it free from his head, Sekali, wiped sweat from his brow. This armor, forged specifically for him, was protective and strong, but it was warm and confining. For a moment, he looked at the helm, examining it for flaws, or signs of wear, of which there were none.

Satisfied, he looked about the area, wondering where Mahkaia had gone. As he set his mind upon her, Mahkaia's hand slipped into his from behind and

squeezed, provoking him to smile. Turning, he gave back her affection with a firm grip as she drew close and looked up, charming him with a grin, her eyes glittering like two jewels.

“We did well on this Watch, Sekali.” He nodded, his heart lightened by her presence. He loved the shape of her almond eyes, as green as the gems they seemed to be crafted from, of her voice, so smooth and calm. He always felt at a loss when they would part. Truly, he found himself falling deeply in love with her.

“Shall we have dinner tonight? I wish to speak to you about something. I want your opinion,” he inquired, looking down at her, admiring her beauty. She nodded enthusiastically and brushed some ash from his shoulder.

“Where should we go? We have not The Watch duty for seven days. Also, if you like, we could go out and do a search for our benefit.” Sekali knew full well she meant go out and hunt the wastes on their own. They would have to request leave from their master, the Mystic of Sardakahn, and gain his approval in order to leave the protection of the stronghold. Most requests of this nature were denied for their own protection.

Hand in hand, both followed the main road, taking familiar turns here and there until coming to a familiar path just wide enough for the two to walk side by side. At the end of this path they stopped before Sekali’s personal dwelling, which was, as all structures, carved from the stone of the Wastelands.

Entering in, they followed a small winding tunnel that led into a large and comfortable chamber, strewn with the cured skins of reptilian beasts neatly covering the stone floor. Mahkaia took notice of the black reptilian head of a basilisk hanging on the wall of the cave.

The basilisk was feared and avoided, if at all possible, for its breath had the effects of turning flesh to stone, just as the Medusa's gaze held the power of turning one to stone with its eyes. Sekali had taken this one down the week before with a single strike. It was a flawless kill by which he won the right to its skin and head. He was proud of it, and enjoyed the effect it had on his private dwelling.

Mahkaia slowly let go of Sekali’s hand, taking interest in the collection of

trophies he had won during his many years of service upon The Watch. Impressed, Mahkaia smiled, turning to him.

“You have acquired an impressive collection. Congratulations on your winnings.” Sekali narrowed his eyes at her, attempting to shake off the natural charm which threatened him every time she looked his way.

“Mahkaia, thank you for the compliment - you are kind - but your collection is ten times my own.” She smiled shortly, teasing him with a playful wink, then turned her attention back to his winnings, seeming very interested in something. As she scanned across a mixed collection of hides, horns and teeth, she made casual conversation.

“What do you wish to speak to me about? Ask and I shall divulge my superior and divine knowledge upon the subject,” she jested, picking up a fang taken from a creature known as the Dahkur, a cat-like creature of the Underworld. Frowning at it, she put it back, biting her lip.

Sekali approached Mahkaia, placed a hand upon her shoulder and gently turned her to face him. As she turned, he quickly wove the fourth braid in a series of small braids to the left side of his temple. After completing it, he wrapped its end back through his hair securing it.

Braids are part of the Sardakk Elf culture, and are used for silent communication in hopes of avoiding the attention of predators. Over the ages, communication was perfected by the skilled use of not only braids, but hand-signs.

One braid meant a male wished to become a personal friend with a female. If she braided the same into her own hair, she was in agreement. If the male braided a second, it meant he wished to get to know her more personally. If she also braided the second, he knew she approved. The third braid was the request that she be more than a close friend; that he was beginning to take a more pertinent interest in her. The third braid was the last Mahkaia had set in her hair. The fourth indicated the desire to officially court her. If she did the same, their relationship would evolve into a full courtship.

To his joy, she wove the fourth braid without hesitation.

They spent the evening at his place enjoying the company of one another. That night was the first time in the ten years he dared kiss her, which he did more than once. She had accepted him, which caused the deep feelings of happiness and belonging begin to form within his heart.

As the sky began to glow over Sardakahn Citadel, an indication that day had come, Sekali and Mahkaia set out toward the largest tower set within the city center, in hopes of gaining audience with their master. Making their way through the main streets, a single tower with jagged spires slowly came into view, looming up before them as if forbidding their approach.

Every structure was crafted expertly from the blackened stone of the Wastelands, providing not only a natural shelter from the constant threat of nature, but a sturdy defense against avian predators which would occasionally descend from the mists above.

As they passed through the outer areas of the stronghold, and then into the main part of the inner city, they saw many others going about their business. Hand in hand, the two made their way through the innermost part of the citadel, eventually coming to stand before a structure of stone that appeared as if it could resist the attack of an opposing army without the need of defenders. It was called the Monolith; the dwelling place of the ancient Mystic and ruler of Sardakahn.

Even though he had seen the Monolith often in his lifetime, he could not help but gaze upon it in awe and wonder, taking in the natural formation of rock and the crafted spires of jagged stone which ascended into the blackened mists above. At its base, a deep alcove appeared; the only entrance to the Monolith.

To gain entrance, they would have to enter in through the gaping skeletal jaws of a wasteland dragon. The two great horns of the dragon's skull rose high, running along the steep surface of the structure, giving it a dark and sinister appearance. There were no guards stationed at the entrance, for they were not needed. In all his life, Sekali had never known a single instance of disunity among his people.

As they passed into its mouth, Sekali noticed the front teeth of the bottom jaw between the larger fangs had been removed, thus creating a way for those who would enter into the Mystic's abode. Though he had seen this place many times before, it was only from without, and from a distance.

Involuntarily, Sekali stopped, peering down into the throat-like tunnel, then glanced at Mahkaia, who threw him a look that plainly stated, *are we going in, or not?* Sighing, he gripped Mahkaia's hand tightly in his own and entered into the strange tunnel. As they walked into this breathtaking structure, Sekali grew curious about the battle in which such a dragon had been brought down (there were, of course, stories, but they were never the same).

The tunnel leading into the Monolith was crafted to seem like the skeletal throat of the fallen dragon, the stone fitted together perfectly with the skeletal remains of the dragon, as if it had been fossilized into the rock of the Monolith, eternally frozen in time.

Torches burned with a violet flame within sconces lining both sides of the ghastly tunnel, catching Sekali's attention. Curiously, he drew close, eyeing the flame of one torch. In all his years, he had never seen fire like this. Not only was the flame soothing to his eyes, but the strange light it shed seemed to enhance his vision, making clear his surroundings. He raised an eyebrow, noticing the glow it emanated did not consume the wooden end of the torch.

Mahkaia's eyes glittered in amusement as she watched him, a thin smile spreading across her lips. Grinning, she took his hand and raised it up over the violet flame. Sekali flinched, pulling his hand away, but Mahkaia only laughed at him.

"It's not hot," she stated, now more amused than before. Curiously, Sekali relaxed and lifted his hand over it. He marveled at the magical fire, glancing at Mahkaia in astonishment.

"Enchantment?" he inquired. She nodded and moved closer to him, taking his hand once again. Mahkaia was considered among the most gifted witches of her time, for where she walked, there also walked power. And with that power, she labored relentlessly to keep safe her people, boosting the moral and hopes in others fortunate enough to make her acquaintance. Mahkaia was a terrible foe, and a loving person, balanced with unpretentious grace.

As Sekali raised both hands to the side of her face, he gently tilted her head

up, noticing something wonderful in this peculiar light. He noted the beauty of her perfectly slanted eyes, the flawless contours of her face, and her smooth skin of onyx hue were enhanced within the light of the torch. For a time, Sekali stood speechless, savoring the moment.

“Ita sevor min, (I love you),” he whispered, gently caressing the side of her face, causing her emerald eyes to suddenly brighten. She smiled and affectionately tilted her head into his hand, closing her eyes. Softly, Mahkaia whispered the same in return. For a time they forgot the world, or the reason they had come into the very sanctuary of their master. Rarely did they have such moments, for the Wastelands were harsh and deadly, demanding they be constantly on guard.

“I trust you have not come to merely fancy each other within my hall.” The question, but a whisper of sentimentality, shattered the enchantment of the moment, causing them both to jump and turn their attention down the tunnel. Mahkaia and Sekali quickly placed an open hand over their heart, bowing their heads slightly – the Sardakk salute of respect.

“Master,” Mahkaia ventured respectfully, “we have come to request a leave of absence. We wish to hunt the wastes.” To the inquiry, a deep silence followed, leaving them to wait for an answer.

Few had ever seen the master; none Sekali knew ever had. Some claimed he was a spirit, others thought him the embodiment of all the Sardakk Elves who passed on after parting from this world. It was widely believed that those who had been given a Sending, became one with the master, joining the power of their spirits with his after departing this life. In so doing, the deceased continued to strengthen and protect their people through him.

In one legend, their master had come forth to aid his people in battle against the dreaded Shagga Vahkrin, a fiend of the Underworld, and a foe beyond any, save a few of his people who had risen to great power. Sekali did not know if this was truth, or inflated stories passed on from one generation to the next. One thing he did know, his master loved his people, and were ever within his dreams and thoughts and visions.

“No. Your request is denied,” came the answer at last. “I foresee your deaths if you should go. I must deny it for your own good.” Sekali’s lips parted in a slight smile.

“Thank you master,” they stated in unison, formally saluting. Without hesitation, Sekali took Mahkaia’s hand in his and began walking back the way they had come. As they departed, Mahkaia playfully ran her hand through the flame of each magical torch, which amused him. Once outside he turned to her.

“We have six more days before The Watch. We cannot leave. What . . .” Sekali went silent, noticing a weight in Mahkaia's countenance. Something was bothering her. "What is it?" He inquired. She looked up at him in doubt, biting her lip, then sighed.

“Sekali, there is a task that needs to be done. It is a dangerous thing, and I dare not do it alone. I know you can aid me in this -" "I will help you with anything," he cut in. "Besides, it would give me more time to spend with you, which would be to my advantage.” Mahkaia grinned, genuinely flattered. Before the moment escaped her, Mahkaia quickly stole a kiss from him. Of course, Sekali did not resist.

“Come, I will tell you more when we arrive at my place.” Grabbing his hand, she led him to her home, which was not far from the Monolith, even as the burden of an unknown charge began to weigh upon him. It was not unlike the feelings he would experience as he prepared for The Watch every seven days.

As they made their way through the blackened avenues of Sardakahn, his mind reflected on the woman he loved; the woman who had just recruited him. He knew Mahkaia all too well, and this is what worried him. She was a witch of great power. Any task she had, he knew, could not be treated lightly. This would be a formidable undertaking, whatever it was, for her grip tightened steadily as they neared her place of residence.

For the first time ever, Sekali entered into Mahkaia’s personal living quarters through a long ornately fashioned tunnel. She guided him in to the center of a large chamber, which was easily ten times the size of his entire dwelling.

Astonished at the staggering collection of trophies all about him brought back the compliment she had given him the evening before. Each piece neatly lined every wall of the large chamber, both weapons of war, armors and the significant remains of creatures taken down.

Drawn to a cloth draped over one particular item, set upon a pedestal of pure white, in a remote area of her collection, Sekali became curious. Letting go Mahkaia's hand, he made his way over to it and gently rested a hand upon the cloth, instantly feeling a slight movement beneath. Glancing over his shoulder, he looked at Mahkaia, curiosity almost getting the better of him.

"What is this?" Sekali asked, fascinated by the writhing movement beneath the cloth.

"Medusa head," she stated casually, though he noticed her attention was riveted to his hand. Quickly Sekali withdrew from it and took a step back, no longer interested in seeing it. Mahkaia laughed in such a way that caused chills to creep up the back of his neck.

She shrugged at the look he gave her and knelt at the edge of a very large and thick leather skin rolled out neatly at the center of the chamber. The entire skin of leather was etched with intricate glyphs and runes, dyed silver and white. Quickly she unsheathed two daggers and knelt at one end. Relaxing, she looked up at him in silence. It was obvious, she was wasting no time with formalities. As he neared, she raised a hand, beckoning him with a finger.

"Draw your blade and protect me. I am going to summon a creature from the deep shadows of the Underworld. I have been needing to confront a certain individual who has been making himself known to me in my dreams. What he wants is forbidden. Just in case this little meeting goes badly, I wish to be ready."

Without question, nor hesitation, Sekali drew his blade. Mahkaia motioned him to the opposite end of the leather skin, signifying the position she needed him in. Kneeling, he faced the witch in silence, focusing his attention upon her.

Closing his eyes, he took in a deep breath through his nose and held it, focusing on letting go of every feeling within. When his lungs began to burn,

Sekali exhaled fully through his mouth, opened his eyes, throwing all unnecessary thoughts out from his waking mind.

“I am your blade,” he stated emotionlessly. He did not care what she was about to do. He loved her more than his own life, and would never have agreed to her doing this without him.

Nodding once, she took in a deep breath and closed her eyes. Sekali watched her carefully, noticing her lips beginning to move in silence. Soon, the distinct sounds of echoing whispers filled the chamber, as if unseen others were attempting to speak to them from some distant, far away, place. Softly, Mahkaia spoke words he did not understand. As her lips moved, he could see the muscles in her neck and jaw tense, as if she was attempting to lift a heavy weight. Moisture began to form upon her brow as she struggled to speak, her teeth grinding loudly.

Readying himself, Sekali shook off an uneasiness, even as Mahkaia’s hair abruptly flew back as if a sudden current of air had struck the area. A presence filled the chamber, accompanied by a discord of whispers, painful to hear. Mahkaia began to visibly tremble, which alarmed Sekali. Doubt began to fill his mind as the sudden temptation to flee whispered within his mind. Against his better judgement, he held his position, focusing upon the woman he loved, unable to betray her.

Mahkaia’s eyes shot wide open, as if she had received a sudden wound. A growl filled the chamber, startling Sekali, who leapt to his feet and looked around, ready for battle as he peered into the midst of Mahkaia’s trophies, expecting to see an enemy among them. As the rumbling growl of the unseen creature ended, Sekali turned this way and that, feverishly searching for the intruder, sweat beginning to cascade down his entire body as the chaotic whisperings intensified to a painful crescendo.

Again, he heard the growl, but this time it was directly from behind. Spinning about, Sekali raised his blade to strike an enemy which had somehow gotten between he and Mahkaia, yet he could only see the two of them. Confused, he continued to search, until, after a few moments, it became clear that Mahkaia

was the source of the growl.

Bearing her teeth, she snarled viciously, her once beautiful countenance changing to something Sekali barely recognized. She continued chanting, her eyes suddenly losing all shade and color, leaving only a solid whiteness. The whisperings intensified, mingling and varying in their tones, growing louder and louder, until the chamber was filled with the strain and discord of utter chaos. Mahkaia snarled again, a sinister grin spreading across her lips as her attention fell to the area between the two of them.

The sound of splitting rock abruptly filled the air. Alarming him greatly, the chamber shuddered heavily once, even as the chaos of whispers faded to silence. Mahkaia sighed heavily and caught her breath, pointing in silence to the floor between them, signifying it was not over. Gathering his senses, Sekali hastily wiped the sweat from his face with a forearm and focused his attention to the area between he and Mahkaia. Lowering himself back into kneeling position, he became still.

Without sound, the leather skin and floor between them abruptly faded to a darkness deeper than black.

Astonished, Sekali beheld a strange mirror of blackness between them, reflecting Mahkaia's image. He looked up at Mahkaia who lowered her hands to either side, not quite touching the surface of the chamber floor as she chanted. Steadily, she began to raise her hands, struggling as if lifting some unseen burden.

Sekali's attention was suddenly drawn to the blackness before him as multiple lengths of serrated, razor-sharp horns steadily raised up from the obsidian-like pool of night before him. As the horns extended upward, Sekali fought against the sudden dread that seemed to take hold of his physical body, attempting to paralyze him. As the head of the creature appeared, a second chant hatefully flooded the chamber with rage and fury, straining in vain against Mahkaia's spell.

Sekali knew the exertion of Mahkaia's chant weighed heavily upon her. In silence he watched her, waiting for that familiar sign she would give when he was needed. Riveting his attention to her hands, he readied himself, watching her fingers without blinking. If she briefly extended the smallest finger on either hand toward her enemy, he would attack.

As its thick shoulders rose up from the dark portal, it ceased its chant and focused its attention upon Mahkaia, who was suddenly quiet and still. As she blinked, her eyes colored back to emerald in an instant. Neither she nor the creature moved or looked away from each other.

Sekali recognized it for what it was, a Gorolith Vahkrin, also known in dark legend as an Eater of Souls. The white serrated horns and spines which covered the entirety of its body were coated with an oily toxin, and would quickly infect a victim who was unlucky enough to be wounded by even the smallest scratch. Few lived to tell the tale of an encounter with this dreaded nightmare, whose most terrifying ability was to instantly leech the power of its fallen victim, absorbing its life force to wield for its own.

A deep loathing filled Sekali's heart at the sight of such a being of filth. Gritting his teeth, Sekali forced himself to breath evenly. It seemed the creature was ignorant of his presence, giving him the advantage as well as courage and

hope.

The Gorolith spread its wings wide and shook its head, shaking its mane of poisonous spines as it narrowly looked down upon Mahkaia, attempting to intimidate her. In a deep, rumble, it broke the silence.

"Have you accepted my offer, witch?" Its deep voice echoed unnaturally through the chamber. Unblinking, Mahkaia stared at it, seemingly void of emotion as it waited for a response. As the Gorolith waited for her reply, it noticed the daggers Mahkaia held, suddenly understanding why she had forced its presence. Menacingly, it looked at her and snarled.

"You would try," it challenged, its deep voice rumbling and echoing unnaturally through the chamber.

Hardly daring to breath, lest this terrible foe take notice of his presence, Sekali waited like a cat, ready to spring, focusing intently upon Mahkaia. He recalled her saying she wished to confront this being, but he still did not know her full intentions at this point. After a time, Mahkaia bowed slightly. Apparently she wished to parley with it.

"Speak, Elf. Why have you forced my presence?" Mahkaia shrugged and smiled, a light, like the embers of a fire, beginning to glow deep within her eyes.

"I have not brought you here to bandy useless words. I brought you here to end this invasive trespass," she hissed, anger, quickly turning to rage. "How dare you defile my people's domain, filth!" A sudden wave of energy washed through the chamber as the glow deep within Mahkaia's eyes surfaced, changing to a fiery gleam. She briefly extend the smallest finger of each hand toward the Gorolith, giving the attack signal.

Negotiations were ended.

Hissing vehemently, hatred and malice twisting into its hideous face, the body of their enemy ignited with a blood-red fire.

"So be it," the Gorolith seethed. Like a scorpion, it raised its tail to strike as the end opened, revealing a deadly blade of ooze-covered, serrated bone, instantly

filling the air with an almost unbearable stench. Lashing out, it attempted to drive its blade through Mahkaia's face as it advanced upon her. Anticipating its attack, she leapt to the side, avoiding the deadly strike, countering with both daggers, instantly severing the end of its tail. Shrieking in pain, the Eater of Souls recoiled in surprise as Mahkaia backed a pace, readying herself defensively.

Sekali noted her position, seeing her bait the enemy so as to give him the element of surprise. Avoiding contact with the conjuration point, Sekali leapt forward into the back of the Gorolith, sinking the tip of his blade deep between the back of its right wing and its spine. The entire length of the blade vanished and emerged out through his enemy's chest with a bone-splintering sound. Without hesitation, he wrenched his blade to the side, opening up a terrible wound in its back, half severing the base of its right wing. Instantly the handle of his sword became searing hot, forcing him to let go. Crying out, he launched from its back, disarmed by the unexpected retribution.

In disbelief and shock, the enemy turned and leapt back from between them, distancing itself instinctively as it stumbled backward over its now useless wing that dragged the floor. Hateful desperation burned within its eyes as it looked at the both of them, hesitating.

"You are going to die, you know that," Mahkaia stated calmly. The Gorolith snapped at her as it moved back into the trophies, stumbling over its wing again. Reaching back, it caught its balance by resting a hand upon the covered head of the Medusa.

"You may end my life, witch, but the final victory will be mine!" It screamed at her hatefully as Sekali froze, suddenly realizing the danger. Mahkaia also noticed the peril, but instantly broke into mocking laughter as she pointed at it.

"Your words are an empty threat. I also have a portal to your personal domain. I will go and take all you possess. I will keep it all!" She turned halfway to the portal and glanced down into it, as if she were about to leap in.

Instantly, the Eater of Souls lurched forward, breaking contact with the one thing it could have instantly defeat them with. The stand upon which rested the

Medusa's severed head rocked dangerously as the cloth slid halfway from it, nearly exposing its face. Sekali lunged for the deadly trophy, even as the Gorolith moved forward, centering its attention upon Mahkaia, who moved dangerously close to the edge of the portal, positioning herself as if she were about to jump.

Sekali placed his hand upon the cloth in time to keep it from sliding off as their enemy stalked toward Mahkaia. Ignoring the Gorolith Vahkrin, he quickly adjusted the trophy's covering back into position and gripped the stand, steadying it.

Breaking into a crazed rage, the Gorolith pointed at Mahkaia, spitting out the words of a powerful curse.

“Soul`Reaper take you into everlasting madness!” It shrieked in misery as it jerked its now useless wing out from under its right cloven hoof, stumbling. The air about them surged to life with a terrible energy as Mahkaia was suddenly thrown back into the wall of the chamber, violently slamming into the stone, scattering a number of trophies across the floor. Fire erupted from the Vahkrin as it screamed at her in hatred.

“Die witch!” It seethed, and staggered forward, intent on her as Sekali eyed the glowing hilt of his blade still protruding from its back. If he could get hold of the hilt, he could end this conflict, though he knew he would pay dearly for the deed. He was already badly burnt.

As the Gorolith reached out to take her, Mahkaia rolled to the side, chanting a quick spell. Before her enemy could turn, she leapt to her feet, throwing her arms wide.

“Shiahna ish Asiah (power of flight),” she shouted as the Gorolith turned and lunged. Instantly, Mahkaia ascended upward, barely evading its deadly embrace as a terrible power suddenly radiated from her being, causing Sekali to unexpectedly falter.

In the past, Sekali had witnessed Mahkaia throw down powerful foes, one after the other. But in all the time he had known her, those displays of power were nothing in comparison to now. In her wrath, Sekali found himself unable, or

unwilling, to move toward her. All he could do was watch as Mahkaia's enemy met her head on. In a blur, he witnessed the two slashing and hacking at one another in a fury of talons and daggers.

Never before had he seen Mahkaia fight hand-to-hand. Truly, she was a foe not to be underestimated. Her moves were direct and swift, though not as powerful as the Gorolith's attacks.

As the battle raged on, Sekali forced himself under control. He wanted to flee, get out of Mahkaia's home, run to the other side of the citadel, hide where he knew he would be safe from . . . her! Startled at his own thoughts, Sekali felt a sudden shame and rage explode within him as Mahkaia called out for assistance.

Breaking the shackles of fear which held him bound, he rushed forward and leapt over the conjuration point, landing directly into the Vahkrin's back and gripped the handle of his blade. The impact caused the Gorolith to stagger forward, even as Sekali tore the blade free with all his might, his hands instantly searing to the hilt. Screaming in pain, he staggered back, nearly falling into the void of blackness. As the Gorolith caught its balance, Mahkaia leapt back and pointed at it, casting another spell, filling the cavern with words, painful to bear.

“Vitika ish morgel (attack of death)”, she shouted, then screamed in the voice of thunder, as if something unnatural was coming to life within her that wished to get out. After casting the spell, Mahkaia looked at Sekali and spoke his name. As his name fell from her lips, he cried out, as if suddenly awakened from a terrible nightmare during the hours of the dark. The sound of her voice paralyzed him with dread as he stared at her in disbelief, unable to tear his eyes away.

As if she was suddenly freed from possession, a phantom-like apparition, in the form of a dragon rose up from Mahkaia, expanding and growing as it struck out, rending deep their enemy's flesh many times, forcing it to its knees as it desperately struck out at her, severely weakened.

In the blink of an eye, the dragon-like apparition leapt upon Sekali, snatched him up into its claws. Dread filled Sekali as it gripped him within its inescapable clutches. His heart throbbed painfully within his chest as he tore his gaze from

Mahkaia and looked into the phantom dragon's slanted eyes.

"Sekali," Mahkaia whispered again, this time in her own voice. Instantly Sekali was gently set down upon his feet as the Gorolith Vahkrin gagged and convulsed upon the ground. Like a rush of sudden wind, Mahkaia's spell passed over Sekali and vanished through the stone wall of the chamber behind him, leaving him terribly shaken, yet unharmed.

As it departed, Sekali looked upon the dying Gorolith, narrowing his eyes in sudden hatred for such creatures. Without hesitation, Sekali's wrath was kindled. He leapt in and let his blade fall upon the neck of their enemy, ending the conflict with a sure stroke.

Staggering back, Sekali retreated, dropping the searing blade as their defeated enemy struck out in one last desperate attempt to kill, catching Sekali in the right side with the serrated point of its left wing, flinging him back to the stone floor. Even though his armor had turned most of the damage, Sekali felt a terrible pain. He tried to stand, but failed, falling to his knees as he held his right side, unable to take in more than short breaths.

"Mahkaia!" He called out desperately as the chamber began to fade. He struggled in vain to stand as he tried with all his might to fight back the engulfing darkness that now threatened to take him. But it was no use; his wounds were too much, even for a seasoned Warrior such as he.

Resigning himself to his fate, Sekali closed his eyes and let himself fall, bending his mind upon that place where he knew pain could not touch him; a place all Sardakk Elves had the ability to go. It was his own refuge of peace within, and he leapt into it willingly, feeling the throes of his wounds left behind. He welcomed the darkness as if greeting an old trusted friend.

Hope kindled as she saw him attempt to rise, then shattered as he fell to his knees. She sprinted around the conjuration area as Sekali struggled to stand again, calling for her, the sound of his voice filling her heart with fear. As he fell, she caught him in her shaking arms and quickly dragged him further apart from their still thrashing enemy. It was unnatural to witness it yet struggling for life as she pulled Sekali away to a safe distance.

Against the cold stone wall, she held him, ignoring her own wounds, which burned like flame, tending to him with every care as she began to sob, kissing him and wrapping her arms about him.

“No, no, stay with me Sekali,” she begged. Closing her eyes, she chanted the words of healing that would mend his wounds and burns, tears streaming her blood-soaked face. As she finished the spell, a bluish aura engulfed him for a few moments, then faded away. It was done. Placing an ear to his mouth, she sighed in relief to feel his breath upon her.

“I’m sorry Sekali,” she mourned in deep regret, “I should have prepared you for this. I’m so sorry.” She held him close, her wounds beginning to torment her as the Gorolith’s poison came into full effect. Exhausted, and in pain, Mahkaia also found her place within blackness, and slipped into it.

After a time, the conjuration point expanded once, as if taking a breath, then plummeted downward in silence, leaving the floor as it was before.

As if slain, both lay motionless upon the floor of Mahkaia’s home for hours before Sekali slowly opened his eyes, blinking in confusion as he focused upon the wrecked chamber, wondering where he was. When his eyes fell upon Mahkaia, the memory of the battle returned. Quickly, he took her up into his arms in sudden panic, mingled with the terrible thought of her being dead. Placing an ear to her mouth, he felt her breath upon him.

She was alive!

He faithfully held her in his arms until Mahkaia came to. Locking eyes with him, she threw him a pain-filled smile.

“Welcome back.” he whispered, trying to sound positive as he helped her sit up. Gritting her teeth, Mahkaia began sobbing and threw her arms about him, burying her face in his neck, her body involuntarily convulsing.

“I’m so sorry, Sekali. I nearly killed you. Forgive me.” Sekali tightened his arms about her, kissing the top of her head.

“There is nothing to forgive. I am honored to stand with you. I am more than honored to fall defending you,” he whispered, thinking it was over. But to his dismay, he felt her convulse. Parting from her, he gave her a look of fear and concern. “Mahkaia, I need to get you to a Healer.” Shaking her head, she pointed to her nearby bedding.

“Look for the small wooden chest under the blankets, there,” she pointed at her bed, her arm suddenly rebelling. “Bring me the chest,” she stated through clenched teeth as her jaw muscles constricted. “Hurry,” she choked.

Sekali jumped to his feet, ran to Mahkaia’s bedding, which consisted of four cured and softened leather hides. Quickly peeling back the neatly arranged coverings, he spotted a white hand-sized box with silver hinges. At the front of it hung a black lock securing its lid. Snatching it up, he hastily returned to her, glancing at the Gorolith Vahkrin apprehensively as he passed it by, feeling as though it was still a threat. It was then Sekali remembered his wounds. He was healed; Mahkaia must have tended to him while he was unconscious. *Then why not heal herself?* he wondered as he knelt beside her, turning the front of the box toward her.

With great effort, Mahkaia tried to retrieve something from about her neck, but the terrible effects of the poison now hindered her muscle coordination. She groaned and then coughed, trying to clear her throat.

“Sekali, the chain.” She forced the words out with considerable effort as he watched on, feeling helpless. He reached about her neck, feeling a thin chain which he hastily pulled over her head. As the necklace came free, he beheld a single, tiny golden key. As he took the key between his fingers, Mahkaia gripped

the box with a trembling hand and caught her breath as if suddenly choking. As she struggled for breath, Mahkaia closed her eyes and leaned her head back against the wall, focusing all her strength on breathing.

Sekali forced the small box from her grip, placed it on the stone floor and smoothly slid the key into the lock, twisting it. Time was short for Mahkaia, but to panic at this point would only hinder the chance of obtaining what she needed. Snap, went the lock. He opened the small chest to reveal a number of chains, rings and other oddities piled up within.

“Which one?” he quickly asked, a fear rising in his voice.

“Ruby,” was all she could force from between clenched teeth. Sekali fingered through each piece in haste as his heart began to beat quickly. Mahkaia was dying!

It was a ring he found with a ruby set within a thin band of black-gold. Quickly he took it out, slipped it onto her smallest finger, then took her into his arms as she struggled for breath. As he did so, she closed a trembling hand about the ring, making a tight fist.

Instantly a red glow escaped through her clenched fist, emanating from between her fingers. It lasted but a brief moment and then slowly began to fade. As the red light diminished, Mahkaia relaxed, and her breathing returned to normal. Taking a deep breath, she weakly sighed.

“I am in your debt,” she whispered quietly, looking up and throwing him a brief smile.

“No,” he whispered, relieved to see her convulsions and tremors cease. She rested her head against him, her eyes taking in their defeated foe.

“Sekali, I need to rest,” she whispered. Sekali stood, taking Mahkaia up into his arms, and carried her to her bed, placing her upon the soft, cured-leather blankets, a sense of relief flooding his mind as he smoothed the leathers out from beneath her.

“You know, for being such a powerful witch, you are very light.” The comment made her smirk, even as she fell into a deep and peaceful slumber. For a

long while Mahkaia slept as Sekali cleaned up the chamber, putting everything back in order as it had been. He took the body of the Vahkrin and moved it out into the tunnel, then returned to her side and sat down, removing his gauntlets and taking her hand.

After a few hours, Mahkaia opened her eyes and stretched. Looking at Sekali, she smiled and sat up. After a moment, she reached out and hooked the top of his chest-plate with a her forefinger and pulled him close. Grimacing, she shook her head.

“You are filthy, and I stink,” she whispered. Sekali looked at Mahkaia’s hair and grinned.

“I know,” he stated flatly, not knowing what else to say. Her eyes glittered playfully and she snaked her arms up about his neck and embraced him tight. He returned her embrace in silence, grateful she was safe. This time it had worked out for the best . . . this time.

"Thank you," she whispered.

“Any time,” he replied, stroking her hair, his eyes changing from relief to deep concern. Mahkaia was as intense as firefall, as lethal as a raging dragon. He recalled the unleashed power demonstrated not long ago; that terrible fear by which she nearly broke his mind. Truly this deadly witch was beyond what he considered her to be, and the most lovely creature he had ever set eyes upon. To him, Mahkaia was more desirable than all the flawless jewels of the earth; she was his heart that kept hope for his future alive.

“You amaze me, Mahkaia,” he stated solemnly as they parted.

“How so?” She asked, the tone of her voice sounding much stronger. Sekali shook his head and shrugged, his eyes brightening.

“I don’t think I would have time to explain before the next Watch, so you will have to trust me when I say you are truly amazing.” Sekali watched Mahkaia smile.

“I concede sir; you are right. I am amazing -- at choosing the best man in the world.” Mahkaia slowly arose. “I’m going to clean up. I’ll set some towels out

for you to use when I'm finished. We both smell like Wurm drool." Sekali arose as her face twisted in disgust. She then vanished through an alcove a few paces beyond her bedding, leaving him staring after her, a look plastered into his face that would have provoked harassment from the others on his team had they witnessed it.

A short time later Mahkaia returned, wearing a purple, floor-length, silk dress with intricate designs and fancy details embroidered about all the seams. The most eye-catching feature of the garment was the appearance of vipers dropping from her hips, twisting about her waistline and falling to just above the hem.

Speechless, he found himself irresistibly drawn to her as she strolled out into the main chamber as graceful and beautiful as a dryad. Unaware he was gawking, his mouth slowly opened. He wanted to say something, anything, but for some reason his mouth refused to work. Throwing him a warm smile did nothing to help the situation.

Offering an arm to her, Mahkaia raised an eyebrow and simply looked at him, a bit surprised. Gathering his senses, he let his arm drop, realizing she was clean, and he wreaked of Gorolith stench. Looking him up and down, she wrinkled her nose in disgust and gestured toward the wash area.

“I filled a large basin of fresh water for you.” Without a moment's hesitation, he made his way toward the tunnel leading into the wash room. As he passed her, she threw him a disgusted look, poking fun at him. Ignoring her, he walked away, snatching up his gauntlets.

“Oh, I placed a few clean towels on a small table to the side of the basin,” she called after him, laughing. Sekali entered through the archway that led into a small hallway lit by two very large candles, one set at each side of the tunnel. Passing between them, he found himself in a small chamber in which set a pearl-white basin half filled with clean, warm water set upon a beautifully hand-carved cabinet of auburn wood.

Stripping off his armor and clothes, he washed himself and then his clothing. After dressing, he scrubbed down all fourteen sections of his armor, then detailed his blade, making sure it was in perfect condition.

Tediously strapping his armor back on, he sheathed his blade and returned to the main chamber to see Mahkaia cutting the flesh from their fallen enemy's body. Her hair was tied back and she had a lengthy, long-sleeved apron tied about her.

The gloves she wore matched the apron and tied just above the elbows. She wore a facial mask that only allowed her eyes to be seen. Sekali noticed the boot coverings she had put on over her common boots. Walking over to her, he swallowed hard, feeling a lump in his throat as he eyed the dead monster.

“What are you going to do with it?” he inquired in disgust, stopping a pace from where she worked. Mahkaia gripped the end of a now exposed bone, protruding from its arm and twisted hard, grunting from the effort. With a snap, it came loose, and with a suction, popping sound, the bone slid out from the center of its forearm. Revolted, Sekali stared at the scene doing his best to hide the instant fist gripping and twisting at his gut.

“I’m going to extract the entire skeletal structure from its body,” she stated nonchalantly as she tediously wrapped the bone in a cloth. Setting it aside, she turned back to the corpse and gripped the upper part of the arm. Using her shoulder as leverage, she pushed with all her might to snap the joint of its shoulder. Mahkaia threw Sekali a triumphant look.

"I bet the Gorolith was so steeped in its own insolence and pride, it never thought I would be removing all the bones from its body," she stated with a laugh that invaded his entire body, like ten-thousand ants creeping over his skin. "What do you think?" Sekali shrugged and licked his lips, feeling a bit pale. Shrugging, Mahkaia continued her grizzly work.

In morbid reluctance, he continued watching as she swiftly extracted every last bone, carefully wrapping each in a piece of cloth and discarding the flesh into a large urn to the side of the table.

If not for his unyielding devotion for her, he would have walked away from this macabre scene in a heartbeat. The encounter had not been pleasant, and seeing her work the bones free turned his stomach. One thing he learned about Mahkaia; she was expert at it, as if she had done this a thousand times. With the upper bone of its shoulder in hand, Mahkaia turned to Sekali.

“I’m being thoughtless. Do you want any of this? You actually killed it,” she stated. Shaking his head, Sekali declined.

“Yours,” he stated flatly, feeling that fist in his gut tighten all the more. Not sure how much longer he could endure this, he took a deep breath and quietly exhaled a steady breath. Mahkaia noticed his discomfort. Somewhat concerned, she paused her work.

“Are you alright?” she inquired. Without answering, Sekali nodded, refusing to gag. Smirking, she turned back to the body, increasing in speed as he patiently stood at her side. Never before had he seen her work in this manner. The sight of it brought up many questions, which he kept to himself, as she speedily extracted bone after bone, wrapping them in haste.

To Sekali’s relief, Mahkaia finished quickly. After placing a seal upon the urn, she turned her attention to the pile of Gorolith bones. One by one, she unwrapped every bone, flattening each blood-stained cloth in a neat pile to the side of the skeleton as she laid out its skeletal frame upon an open area of the main chamber.

Mahkaia picked up the stack of blood-stained cloths and placed them out of the way. Upon her return, she stopped observing her own handiwork with a critical eye. Finally, she put her hands together, almost touching her mask.

“Magnificent,” she whispered in awe. In silence, Sekali looked at the corpse, at Mahkaia and her bloodstained gloves, then back at the corpse.

“It’s going to take up a bit of room here. Where are you going to put it?” She chuckled, making him feel rather uncomfortable. Holding up a finger, Mahkaia turned and vanished back through the archway, no doubt to clean up.

Turning his attention upon his defeated enemy, he observed the remains in open disgust, grimacing. The smell was awful, and the sealed contents within the urn kindled the temptation to never eat meat again. Lost in thought, Sekali looked upon their fallen enemy, questioning the reason it had contacted Mahkaia, how it had located her, and what was to be done about it. Were there more of its kind trespassing Sardakahn territory? If so, this had to be stopped, or -

“Will you help me carry it to the Monolith?” she asked, breaking him out of dark thoughts, startling him. Turning, he took in a quick breath, then let it out.

She was now the beauty he knew so well.

“A little jumpy, aren’t you?” Without answering, Sekali walked over to the container and gripped one of the thick handles, more than willing to get this over with. Joining him, Mahkaia took hold of the opposite handle. Together, they strained hard and lifted it slightly off the ground.

“Okay, put it down,” she grunted, straining against the weight. Carefully, they set the urn back onto the floor. Mahkaia turned and raised a hand over the container, focusing on it.

"Athelam eis iah Nuarta (light as a feather)", she whispered. “Okay, let’s take it out now, but lift it gently, or you will throw it to the ceiling.” Again, they both lifted. To Sekali’s amazement, the urn felt as light as a simple hand-sized rock. Amused by his reaction, she pointed toward the exit tunnel.

“Shall we?” Nodding, he exited Mahkaia's home.

Together, they carried the urn out into the busy city streets, eventually entering back in through the gaping entrance of the Monolith. Once within, they carefully made their way down into the depths of the structure.

Their master received them with many questions, which Mahkaia answered. Sekali was relieved to be rid of the remains of the urn, though disappointed that his master had yet remained unseen.

After departing, they returned, eventually reaching the main avenue that led to Mahkaia’s home, Sekali felt Mahkaia’s hand slip into his as they stopped in front of the tunnel entrance. As he looked at her, he was met with a playful wink, which manipulated a smile from him.

“Mahkaia?” he stated, rather distracted.

“Yes?” she returned almost eagerly, squeezing his hand tight. Sekali turned and fixed the fifth braid into his hair. Life was much too short to live without belonging. To his growing happiness, Mahkaia instantly set the fifth braid at the left side of her head, signifying their official betrothal, then embraced him happily. Again, as he wrapped his arms about her, he realized things could have gone badly. He also realized she had placed the security of the citadel in jeopardy, for such a

powerful foe could well have wreaked havoc within Sardakahn, had it overpowered them both.

“I was afraid. For a moment, I thought I was going to lose you, Mahkaia.” She looked up at him, seemingly startled by his words.

“Sekali, come, I want to show you my second-most prize possession.” Slipping from his embrace, she led him back to her home. Once inside, she stopped, letting go his hand.

“Stay here.” Without waiting for an answer, she made her way back through the large chamber, vanishing into another tunnel, well concealed behind a number of trophies.

Finding himself alone, his attention was drawn to the skeletal remains of the Vahkrin, which were now exposed, lying upon a rather large leather skin, stained with drying blood, filling the chamber with an odor that turned his stomach. The skeleton was laid out perfectly, giving Sekali the impression that tiny creatures, which had only the appetite for flesh, had instantly devoured it. Peering into its empty eye sockets, he wondered if it still held any spark of life, recalling a tale of terrible creatures which could be slain only if the body were completely destroyed. Mahkaia had reconstructed the skeletal remains so well, he half expected the creature’s eyes to illuminate, or its claws to curl. The sight was truly unnerving.

In a short while, Mahkaia returned, once again startling him as she laid a gentle hand upon his shoulder from behind. Taking in a quick breath, he turned, his hand shooting to the hilt of his sword. Breathing a sigh of relief, he relaxed.

“Oh, it’s you,” he stated anxiously, noticing a long flat metal box in her hand.

“You are on edge today,” she teased. Sekali shook his head, as if he were about to deny it, then nodded, looking back at the skeleton.

“Yes. This thing is evil. I feel its threat even in death.” Mahkaia looked at it, biting her lip.

“I agree. But properly managed it will soon serve me faithfully.” Sekali blinked at Mahkaia in surprise.

“Serve?” She nodded, as if she expected the question. Dramatically, she drew close, snapping her teeth at his chin.

“Yes, serve. Sekali, not only have I studied the arts of the elemental magician, conjurer and healer, but also the foreboding magic of necromancy,” she whispered mysteriously, “a power few can weave without the madness taking them.” Feeling a chill creep down each side of his neck, he stared at the witch for a moment, then stole a kiss from her. In mock surprise, she pulled away.

“I see you have also taken on the path of Thief.” Unblinking, he held the witch's green eyes, not willing to give in to her game. It was a challenge to stay on top when Mahkaia slipped into her darker moods, but he accepted it, knowing he had won by stealing the kiss. After a few moments, she gave in and grinned, her demeanor softening as she continued her dark lecture.

“I find it rather intriguing, though dark and very mysterious, animating the dead. It's not my usual practice, but, well, here it is.” She motioned to the skeleton. Sekali was a bit confused, and, from the look she gave him, it must have been obvious. He was a Warrior; that was his path, and ever had been. Turning, he stared at the remains of the perfect arrangement of bones before him. She smiled, a dark gleam emanating within her beautiful eyes.

“I’m going to raise it to fight for us. This one will be very strong, or I am no judge of the art.” Still confused, Sekali turned his attention to what she held in her hands.

“What is that?” he inquired, wanting to forget the skeleton. She carefully opened the lid that consisted of the top half of the box. Within lay a golden chain of woven links that held a round pendant, fashioned into the form of a silver acorn shell. Secured within its hollow was what appeared to be a dried and withered heart, no larger than Sekali’s thumb.

As she opened it, a powerful influence washed over them both, at which he marveled. Mahkaia slowly knelt to the floor, placing the box between them. Sekali followed her lead, kneeling down before her, gazing at the relic in wonder.

“Sekali, nearly two-hundred years before your birth, I won the right of claim

over this, the only relic I possess. After that terrible battle, I cut it from the chest of the fabled Glyph Imp. Fourteen of The Watch from five pinnacles were slain the day I won this prize.” As she spoke, Sekali witnessed her entire body become rigid and tense. As though she were suddenly embraced in the arms of hoarfrost, Mahkaia shivered, her eyes of wonder quickly filling with fear. He could see she was re-living the battle, taken back through the centuries to a time when many of The Watch had perished to keep safe their city. Reluctantly, he watched her teeth clench tight, and the muscles in her neck and jaw flex, as she stared in pain at the Glyph Imp heart.

Like being startled to consciousness from a dream in which one suddenly falls, Mahkaia snapped out of her memories, involuntarily arching her back with a quick jerk. Flames of green began to illuminate and swirl within her eyes, a black flame igniting in the palms of her hands, instantly causing Sekali much concern. As he began to move away, Mahkaia reached out with blinding speed and gripped Sekali by the wrist, halting his retreat as the dark flames extinguished.

"Stay, Sekali," she whispered, composing herself and throwing him a fragile smile. She closed the box with a trembling hand.

“I was put to the test that fate-filled encounter. But I won the prize, and it is mine,” she whispered bitterly, her eyes glistening with tears.

“What is the purpose of the heart?” Sekali inquired. Mahkaia's dark eyes suddenly glittered with energy as she looked up at him, forcing herself to smile.

“This is the legendary Rebirth Amulet. If I put it on and chant the words which will bring its power to life, I will, if ever slain, be reborn. I would cheat death, escaping the inescapable. It would empower me to do the impossible . . . live again.” Sekali moved back a little from before Mahkaia, suddenly apprehensive as a terrible fear washed through him.

“Sekali,” she whispered in a haunted voice, as if a terrible fear had suddenly gripped her, “I fear the words of that curse uttered by our fallen enemy.” She looked over at the bones of the Vahkrin, drawing his eyes to it as well, and shuddered.

“What words, Mahkaia?” She trembled, and then whispered faintly, her voice shaking.

“Soul`Reaper take you into everlasting madness,” she uttered, beginning to tremble.

“Sekali, a Vahkrin’s curse is a powerful retribution. I thought if I could kill it, maybe I would be free of its binding spell. I misjudged, and because of that, the dreaded curse of darkness burns within my mind. I now feel . . .” she hesitated and swallowed, “watched.” A chill washed over Sekali as she spoke.

“But you slew it; we killed it,” he hastily interjected. Mahkaia nodded distantly, then shook her head.

“A curse cannot be broken by the slaying of the one who binds it upon another. I fear dire consequences will follow my error.” Sekali’s heart began to beat rapidly. Things had been set into motion which he did not comprehend; things he did not wish to understand. He glanced down at the box between them.

“Mahkaia, put on the amulet; wear it and invoke its power for yourself!” He reached down and began to open the box, but Mahkaia stopped him with a gentle hand.

“Sekali, there is something about this relic you should know. If I do this, and I am slain, I could rise again into life as anything. Even then, there is a high chance that my former power would eventually return to me. If I rose as an enemy of my people, it would bode ill for them . . . for you.” There was a disturbing fear in her eyes.

In all his years, he had never seen Mahkaia afraid. He thought about it for a moment, then desperately Sekali pushed her hands away and opened the box. He withdrew the amulet and quickly placed it about Mahkaia’s neck. With his hands at either side of her neck, he caressed her face gently with his thumbs, a pleading look in his eyes.

“Please, Mahkaia, just speak the words.” Taken back by his sudden, desperate tone, she rested her hands upon his, gazing into his panic-stricken eyes for a time, a sentimental smile slowly playing across her lips. At length she sighed

and leaned her head into one of his hands.

“I am Sardakk Elf. Anything other than what I am is unacceptable. Do you not see the consequences if I came back as an enemy of my own people? Do you not see the danger in using this amulet?” Sekali reluctantly lowered his hands, breathing heavily, his eyes moistening.

“We will defeat the power of this curse together. Nothing is predestined, Mahkaia, nothing,” he whispered, emotion beginning to overcome him. Slowly she removed the relic from about her neck. Mahkaia held it up dangling between them, genuine curiosity playing across the flawless features of her face.

“How does the Glyph Imp harbor so much power?” Touching the withered heart, Mahkaia sighed. “And how does something that no longer beats, yet retain such life?” There was no hesitation in Sekali’s reply.

“You being alive, is the only difference between my heart and the one hanging on the end of that chain.” Stunned by his words, Mahkaia lowered it back into the box and shut the lid. As the lock snapped shut, Sekali felt a terrible feeling of anxiety well up within him. He watched her quietly rise and turn away. As Mahkaia slowly walked out of the large chamber, he looked after her in earnest, a desperate feeling threatening to overpower him.

Shortly, Mahkaia came back and stood before him. As she closed the distance between them, Sekali stood. Without a word she embraced him, resting her chin against his chest and looking up at him.

A feeling of despair threatened his will to accept her decision. He wrapped his arms about her, the thought crossing his mind to make her use the amulet. Such a thought forced him to cynically chuckle. Forcing Mahkaia do something against her will, would be as foolish as putting a simple leash upon a wild, fully grown dragon and making it heel.

“What,” she inquired, half humored by his sudden mirth.

“Nothing,” he grinned.

“Liar,” the witch retorted. Sekali shrugged at the accusation, dismissing it, and gave up the debate.

“I love you,” he whispered, changing the subject.

“I love you more,” she sentimentally countered, beginning a new debate as she placed her forehead against his. Looking into his eyes, she smirked.

“By the way, love, trying to teach a dragon to heel like that would prove disastrous.” Shocked, Sekali set her down in sudden protest.

“How did you know what I was thinking?” She laughed.

“If I told you all my secrets, there would be no more surprises, now would there?” Sekali suddenly grinned at Mahkaia.

"Now that's not fair, miss-read-my-mind." Openly, she scoffed at him.

"The one with the power calls the shots. You of all people should know that well." He shook his head in amazement, throwing her a serious look. Backing off, she grabbed his hand and squeezed. In return, he placed his hand gently on the side of her head, smiled, then pushed her off balance. Breaking out in laughter, Mahkaia caught hold of his tunic, pulled herself back into him, running her nails through his hair.

“Mahkaia, sometimes you scare me, you know that?” She threw a questioning look at him.

“Good, I know how men can be. Sekali, do you think I actually learned power to defend my people? No, indeed. I’ve worked very hard so that, one day, the man I marry can be controlled.” She bared and snapped her teeth at him, lightening the mood even the more. He couldn't help but grin like he never grinned before.

"You make me so happy," he whispered. “So, who is this man you plan on marrying? I want to meet him just once.” Mahkaia feigned a look of surprise.

“I better not introduce you to him. He’s pretty tough, you know. I’d hate to see you get hurt.” Sekali’s eyes sparkled with delight.

In the late hours of the night, Sekali departed from Mahkaia’s place, slowly making his way home. As he lay on his bed that night, thoughts of the amulet plagued his mind until a half-sleep finally overtook him.

The next morning Sekali arose to the haunting thoughts of the Glyph Imp heart and the curse he and Mahkaia had discussed. As he strapped each armor piece into place, testing its range of motion, he began to feel more and more desperate. After a few minor adjustments, he snatched up his blade and scabbard and departed, unable to think of anything but her.

In a great rush, he made his way to her home and stopped at the entrance. Clapping twice, he waited until she came out. As soon as he laid eyes upon her, he bowed formally, returning the pleasant grin she gifted him with. Without a moment to lose, he braided the sixth braid into his hair and waited. With a broad smile, Mahkaia did likewise, again without any hesitation.

"It's about time," she whispered happily. It thrilled Sekali to see that she had fully accepted him as her husband. After tucking the braid carefully back into her hair, Sekali pulled her to him and looked into her eyes in silence, taking in her every feature, inhaling her every breath. As deadly powerful as she was, she was his heart and soul now. Not only would he live for her, he would gladly give his life to shield her.

"Are you reading my thoughts now?" he asked. Shaking her head, she laid a hand on his chest.

"Last night was the only time I have ever done so . . . when not on The Watch with you. I promise."

"Ita sevor min riev ehn matse kaiah matikoi ish kaiah djahrahn (I love you more than all the treasures of the earth)," he whispered. Smiling with tears welling up in her eyes, she melted against him.

"You are a good man, Sekali. You are truly a gift in my life. Bending down, he kissed the six braids at the side of her head.

"This is a good way to start out a day together."

"I agree," she said happily wiping her eyes. Taking her hand, Sekali lead her out into the streets of Sardakahn, where they wandered in no certain direction through all the main avenues of the city, keeping the Monolith well within eyeshot.

As the two wished to be joined by the Shaman of Sardakahn, the personal apprentice and servant of the Mystic of Sardakahn, it was customary to wander in this manner, to show all of their decision to be joined. As they wandered amidst a growing number of his brothers and sisters, who quickly noticed their design, word spread quickly. Sekali knew the shaman would soon be notified, and would come to them.

Not long after departing Mahkaia's home, they found themselves walking directly into the path of the Shaman, who stood silent in the distance before them, half shrouded in the dark mists of the Wasteland.

Sekali's heart began to beat rapidly, and felt Mahkaia squeeze his hand tight, a sure sign that her feelings were mutual. He knew others had gone to inform both their parents, and so waited quietly next to Mahkaia, facing the Shaman in silence until they arrived.

Unblinking, unmoving, the Shaman looked upon them both, his presence reminding Sekali of the warmth of the sun that once escaped down through the mists above while he preformed The Watch long ago. This man's presence harbored an energy that bolstered his peoples courage and moral within this land of death.

It would have been odd, maybe even disturbing, for any other race to have parents who seemed as young and vibrant as their children, but as Sekali watched his mother and father approach, no such thoughts entered his mind.

Stopping before the Shaman, both saluted, bowing in silent respect. The Shaman returned the same greeting. Mahkaia's parents soon appeared, greeting all in the same manner. After formal introductions were given, Mahkaia's mother embraced Sekali warmly.

"Take good care of my daughter, son." Sekali embraced her sentimentally, noticing just how similar she and Mahkaia looked. He recalled a time when he could not distinguish between the two until one of them spoke. Now, it was not so difficult to tell them apart.

"I will, mother. I am honored to be called your son." Both he and

Mahkaia's father exchanged nods in silence. Sekali's mother embraced Mahkaia.

"He should have tied the sixth braid long ago. I am happy to gain a daughter," she whispered loud enough for all to hear. Mahkaia could not keep the tears from flowing as she kissed her new mother on the cheek.

"I agree, mother. Thank you for trusting me with your son. I truly love him with all my soul." Sekali's mother smiled pleasantly, her eyes clouding. Turning to her fiance's father, she embraced him tight, but kept silent, as was the custom.

When the pleasantries ended, the six turned to the Shaman of Sardakahn, giving him silence and all their attention, Mahkaia positioned herself to the left of Sekali as he held out his right hand to receive the back of her left, signifying their willingness to share the rest of their lives together.

Nodding in approval, the Shaman retrieved a lengthy white cloth from within his robes and gently wrapped it about both their hands. There were no words; just the binding together of their hands, signifying their betrothal. All present saluted in respectful silence and simply went back to their business as before. Both parents saluted their son and daughter, then departed, escorting the Shaman back to the Monolith, as was also the custom.

Untying the cloth, Sekali tucked it neatly into his sword belt and took Mahkaia's hand, smiling happily, admiring his new bride. Before heading home, they walked the streets of Sardakahn, lost in the enjoyment of the moment. As they wandered, many stopped, turned and placed three fingers to their forehead, bowing slightly; silent congratulations for the happy couple.

As they reached Mahkaia's home now his new home - they entered into their new life together that wonderful day. Silently, he thanked Vannar for Mahkaia and prayed for the curse to be lifted from her, or somehow avoided.

That night, as they slept, Sekali dreamed he and Mahkaia were upon The Watch battling against a terrible foe, appearing as a visage of obsidian night, wielding terrible and dark powers.

Sekali abruptly sat up, crying out in horror and desperation, startling Mahkaia out of a deep sleep. Instantly a dagger appeared in her hand as she leapt to her feet.

“What is it!” she hissed, grabbing his shoulder and looking about the area, her eyes instantly filled with a glow, like that of embers in a fire. Sekali flinched at her touch, then shuddered, coming to his senses.

“Nightmare; only a dream,” he whispered hoarsely, forcing himself calm. Mahkaia sighed in relief and sheathed the dagger. Quickly, she began dressing, as if preparing for The Watch. As she slipped into long black robes, Sekali arose and followed her example.

“Where are we going?” he solemnly inquired. Mahkaia shrugged.

“Out of the city. When I cast the spell on the skeleton of the Gorolith, should it go badly, I don’t want any innocents harmed. Not all within the safety of Sardakahn are trained to deal with such things.”

Sekali quickly slipped into a light pair of long cotton stockings, tailored to fit tightly about the top of each knee, followed by breeches and a lengthy, long-sleeve tunic of similar material, woven to gently hug the neck. Wearing only a leather underlining, no matter how finely made, was asking for an instant temperature increase, which led to sweating, discomfort, then chafing. The cloth lining kept the soft leather underlay of the armor off his skin, keeping him as cool as possible.

Mahkaia was always attentive of her warriors needs, so overheating had never been a problem for long. The thought crossed his mind to ask her if she could cast a spell on his armor to permanently keep him at just the right temperature. After checking himself from head to foot in the convenience of a full length mirror, he turned to Mahkaia.

“What are you smiling about?” Mahkaia inquired, rolling her eyes at him. Sekali shrugged, raising his hands as if surrendering to her.

“I have plenty to smile about. But to keep permanently cool, fully armored,

would be a nice wedding gift.” Mahkaia walked over to him and gave him a look that earned a kiss.

“That you no longer need armor up solo is my gift to you,” she teased as he stepped into his plated boots. She knelt down and began fastening the straps and buckles as he grabbed one of his plated greaves and began securing it to his left leg.

As Mahkaia finished with the boots, he took the other greave and began fastening it to his right leg. In turn, Mahkaia began the final adjustments to the leg armoring as Sekali snatched up the hip-guard and overlapped it securely about the top of his greaves.

As Mahkaia moved about him, securing his armor, he grabbed the abdomen-guard and fit it against his lower mid-section. Wearing a full set of plate armor hindered his movement to some degree. Still, he was grateful for the protection his platemail shielded him with, so there was never a complaint. His armor was of the finest crafted in Sardakahn Citadel, and it only cost him the risking of his life. It struck him funny that he would always be paying for the armor, the predators of the Wastelands being the collectors of that payment.

Sekali admired the few who clad themselves in leather armor as they served upon The Watch. Of course, as he well knew, their training was much different than his. While he was considered a “meat shield” by many, there was the Assassin and the Thief, rarely seen among their team, except during combat.

Those who followed the martial path of the Shintar or Vekkarian Monk were skilled in close-quarter fighting. Sekali was genuinely impressed by their combat skills, which, at times, seemed unreal, especially among the veteran monks.

After witnessing Master Djurin flawlessly solo a wasteland Minotaur, Sekali secretly desired to study under him. But Master Djurin gained new students by invitation only. Still, Sekali hoped one day he would be noticed, and an invitation would be extended. For the time being, Sekali would continue training in the path of the Warrior, where he was most comfortable.

Last year, the master of arms had knighted him with his twenty-eighth

promotion, opening him up to new techniques and knowledge. Biding his time in patience was not an issue, as it was within the societies of most other races, whose life spans were far less than his. Out here in the Wastelands, the counter balance to living an average of seven ages (seven-thousand years), was the fact that ones life could be cut short in a mere heartbeat.

Mahkaia fit the solid back-piece against Sekali as he held the breast-plate against his chest. It was odd having her help. Then again it was different being with her, as he had lived for over two centuries by himself. All-in-all, he liked not being alone; she was a perfect fit in his life.

Mahkaia began securing the front and back pieces together as he placed the neck-guard at the base of his skull, wrapped it about both sides of his head and latched just under his chin. Tediously, he secured a number of clasps which anchored it to the circle created by the back and chest plates as they fit together. This was the one piece of his armor that needed special attention, as it guarded the most critical area of his body. Looking up, down and side to side, Sekali tested his range of motion.

“I don’t like this piece,” he mumbled. Mahkaia finished encasing him between the two most protective parts of Sekali’s armor and shrugged.

“It’s better than being decapitated,” she casually replied.

“True.” There was no arguing with that fact. After securing and adjusting both arm-guards, Sekali grabbed his steel-mesh belt, upon which hung his scabbard, and fastened it about his waist. After adjusting the scabbard to his left hip, he slipped on a pair of thick leather gloves, fully covered in scale-like metal plates.

Mahkaia casually walked over where his helmet hung upon a hook and picked it up, giving it a critical look. Turning, she looked Sekali up and down in approval, and yielded up the helm to him as he closed in on her. Taking the helm, he flipped it around and looked into its face.

“You know, this armor was not only master crafted, but measured to perfectly fit my body alone. No where else in all of Utaemia can you find such

craftsmanship. It is altogether unique.” Mahkaia playfully scoffed at him, tilting her head to one side, giving him a know-it-all look.

“You need to get out more,” she teased.

“There are others outside the Wastelands with the skill to forge such armor?” Nodding, she took the helm and turned it to face her.

“There are those who can craft much better. Bring your handsome head down a bit,” she stated, smiling at him.

“But that would defeat the purpose,” he countered.

“Purpose?” she curiously inquired. Sekali nodded, grinning mischievously. Narrowing her eyes, she hesitated, instantly distrusting him. The only sign of his intention was the sly look he gave her, which caused her to hesitate. Happily, Sekali waited, eager for Mahkaia to make the first move. A long moment passed in silence as they froze in a standoff that suddenly ended. As fast as she could, Mahkaia raised up on her toes and lifted the helm up, barely tall enough to set it on the top of his head. At the same time, Sekali wrapped his arms about her waist and tried to steal a kiss, but was countered as she forced the helmet down in one swift motion. For the victory, she received a metal kiss.

Cheerfully, Mahkaia struck the top of his helm with an open hand, pushed his head back and fastened the wide soft-leather strap. After securing it, she threw her arms about his neck, squeezed as hard as she could, kissed him on the mouthpiece of his helmet, laughing at his exclamation of disappointment. Looking into his eyes through the slits of the helm, Mahkaia mouthed the words, *I love you*, then slipped out of his arms.

“See if the fit is acceptable,” she said. Testing his range of motion, Sekali was satisfied to feel a perfect fit.

“Mahkaia, you are good at this.”

“Thank you milord.” Smiling sentimentally, she walked over to a large leather satchel and began placing the bones of their victim into it. When she finished, Sekali took it from her and slipped the strap over his head. Adjusting the bulk of the load to his back, he nodded once.

“Shall we, milady?” He felt his heart skip a beat as she turned and gracefully headed out into the tunnel. The way she walked nearly caused him to forget to follow. Coming to his senses, he shook his head, and caught up with her.

As they exited their home, his thoughts turned to the last few years of their courtship. He had enjoyed every moment of their time together. He took her hand, distracted by her presence more than usual, and failed to notice a mass of ominous mists beginning to gather directly above the center of the citadel. Noticing his distraction, Mahkaia shook her head, rolled her eyes and pointed up, drawing his focus from her to the strange phenomenon above.

Startled, he quickly pulled Mahkaia into the safety of a nearby shelter, constructed of four massive slabs of stone in which a dozen others waited in grim silence. Glancing at her, he could not help but notice her amusement at, no doubt, his being caught off guard. She grinned up at him and squinted, silently informing him she knew the reason for his distraction.

Even with the threat of potential danger, Sekali found it difficult to pay attention to something that might wish to kill him, or destroy Sardakahn, when he had a new bride to admire. Sadly enough, he had to know what was going on, and so focused his attention upward, waiting. As he and the others watched the sky, a number of revolving shadowy tendrils suddenly extended out from the mass of blackness overhead, twisting and bending down through the mists on a course directly toward the zenith of the Monolith. As one, the tendrils grasped the highest point of the massive tower, wherein dwelled their master. Visibly startled, Mahkaia quickly pulled her hand free of Sekali’s and darted out into the open, throwing her arms high.

“Ita mahduin min (I banish you)!” she cried, pointing at the main body of blackness, from which extended the tentacles. Sekali unshouldered the satchel, dropping it to the earth. As the satchel landed upon the blackened surface of the street, the ground instantly heaved to and fro, throwing Sekali and the others hard to the ground. As quickly as he struck the earth, Sekali sprang to his feet and rushed to Mahkaia’s side, drawing his blade.

As if in response to her spell, which seemed to do nothing against their shrouded foe, a single tentacle broke away from the tower, making its way swiftly toward them. Bracing himself firmly between Mahkaia and the enemy, Sekali readied himself to meet this overwhelming attacker head on in the hopes of shielding her.

Behind him, he could hear Mahkaia chanting, followed by an intense feeling of strength as a rush of wind and debris whipped through the area, preceding the advance of their snake-like foe.

As Sekali bent his will upon the approaching tentacle, an unnatural strength and power burned within his entire being. Leaping forward, he cut down upon the snake-like arm, his blade striking true, severing it. In that same moment, it struck, throwing him effortlessly back through a thick wall of solid wasteland stone, shattering it. Its attack was so overwhelming and powerful, Sekali was hurled violently back, and passed through the walls of a number of structures, leveling them with his own body. Through the last wall of stone he hurtled, the inside wall stopping him as it held, throwing him face-first onto the ground. Disoriented, he groaned and shook his head, even as the building cracked and shuddered all about him, teetering on the brink of collapse.

An unbearable ringing screamed within his ears as he struggled to get to his feet. Slapping the side of his crushed helm three times, he desperately tried to shake out the sound with no success. A cloud of black dust nearly obscured his vision as he staggered toward the hole in the side of the structure.

Unsteadily, he made his way toward the opening. As he made his way over broken rubble, he slipped on something softer than stone, causing him to fall to his hands and knees. Horrified, he beheld a small child, who lay struggling for breath beneath him as she choked on the thick dust of the wreckage.

"No, no, no," he cried out and snatched her up. Cradling her small body against his chest, he shielded her with his arms as sudden images invaded his vision, as if he were in a dream turned nightmare.

In the time it took him to inhale and exhale a single breath, he pictured he

and Mahkaia upon the pinnacle of The Watch, the battle within her personal dwelling, a white cloth binding their hands together, his hand within a purple flame, her eyes, her laughter, and many other scenes, all of which flashed before his eyes, playing out in one short moment.

As his head cleared, he heard the distinct sound of the stone all about him giving in, and realized the imminent collapse of the structure all about him. A deep splitting of stone, followed by a grinding all about him told him the remaining walls and roof of the building were giving in.

Half bowing, Sekali shielded the child with his body as the ground beneath his feet heaved, nearly unbalancing him. As the first of the roof section struck the ground, he staggered forward. With all his will and might, Sekali dove out of the building just as it came down. Cradling the child, he twisted, landing on his back outside the falling structure shielding her from the fall. Yet, even as he slid to a stop, he looked up to see a large section of the stone wall toppling over him. In a last effort to save the child, he threw her out into the street, aiming her for the smoothest area just as the wall stuck him, breaking to pieces over him as it mercilessly crushed him into the earth.

Blackness engulfed him as an incredible weight piled down upon him, pressing and pinning him down. Screaming in frustration and pain, he managed to force his way up from the rubble, just as the remainder of the building buried him in a decimated heap. It was as if the will of the Wastelands had trespassed into Sardakahn in the hopes of killing him, and the time he could be spending with his new bride. Mahkaia needed him, and nothing would stop him from protecting her!

Screaming in frustration and fury, he tried to get free, hearing the voice of the Gorolith echo through his mind, reciting the curse over and over and over again, as if it had won. The despair of the curse, torturing his mind and heart, quickly turned to desperation, throwing him into a rage as he began screaming in fury. With all his might, Sekali struggled against the rubble piled upon him as thick dust choked and blinded him. Fighting like a madman, Sekali desperately began worming his way out from under the ruins of the building piece by piece, his

armor taking the brunt of the struggle. Slowly, the weight of the stone began to yield, giving way.

As he saw the mists through the yielding pile of stone, the chilling scream of a woman split the air, paralyzing him with horror. Fear, unlike any he had ever felt, stabbed at his heart. Renewing his efforts, he shoved and pushed and kicked his way free of the prison of rocks, eventually finding himself free, and unsteadily staggered to his feet.

What remained of his armor hung in shredded tatters over less than half his body. His sword was nowhere to be seen. Stumbling over to the child, he snatched her up and began running back where he had last seen Mahkaia.

"Hold on," he begged the child, whose breathing came in ragged gasps. Halfway back, there was a sudden change in the air about him, as if everything had lost all meaning and sound. Confused, he slowed to a stop and looked about the area, feeling as if all was no longer real; as if nothing mattered anymore.

A sudden wave of intense energy ripped through the entire area, throwing him onto his back. Without hesitating, Sekali struggled to his feet, still cradling the girl protectively as he observed a counter attack that appeared as if the sun had broke through the Wasteland mists to shine upon the highest tower of the Mystic's abode. A white radiance burst forth in blinding glory, bathing the tentacles in brilliant splendor, forcing Sekali to avert his eyes, so intense was the light.

An unearthly, deafening, cry filled the heavens above the citadel as the great tentacles shuddered and spasmed. All in wonder, Sekali witnessed the attacker recoil from the tower, shudder spastically, as if in terrible agony, then disintegrate into a massive cloud of dark fragments which began to rain down like firefall upon the entire city. Instantly a massive wind stuck the burning fragments of the defeated assailant, blowing them like ash out into the wastes.

The mists parted for a few moments to reveal the body of a gargantuan creature, the likes of which Sekali had never seen, nor heard of. Its terrible cry ended as it struggled to flee, desperately making its way out into the wastes. Then, it was gone. Shortly after parting, a great tremor shook the earth, after which all

was quiet. In the silence that followed, the normal blanket of dark mists moved in to take the place of an attacker that lay somewhere out upon the landscape, defeated by the Mystic, and the defenders of Sardakahn.

In a panic, and with all the speed he dared, for fear of harming the child, Sekali began to make his way back to the spot where he had last seen Mahkaia, desperately hoping she was safe. As he entered the area, his eyes fell upon a terrible scene of death and suffering. The cries of the wounded filled the air amidst the torn and mutilated bodies of many. In a haze, he saw others tending to the needs of the survivors, among which were Healers, who cast spells to mend both flesh and bone, reversing the damage first among the more critically wounded.

A robed woman ran to him and placed a hand upon the head of the girl he carried. Closing her eyes, she chanted. As she spoke arcane words of healing, a bluish haze overshadowed the child.

"She will live, thanks to you sir. Do you need healing?" He quickly waved away the offered assistance, surrendering the child over to her.

"Thank you. I am unharmed," he stated emotionally, then wasted no time in frantically searching through the area, beginning among the toppled buildings and ruined streets in search of his wife, feeling as though he was walking in a living nightmare.

Calling for her, Sekali worked his way over to a pile of rubble, and entered into a building with only two walls yet standing. As he entered, he caught sight of black robes pinned to the ground beneath a large slab of collapsed wall. Freezing, he fell to his knees in silence, disbelieving his own eyes. Suddenly, he felt like his insides were being ripped out through a gaping hole in his chest as he looked down at a deep puddle of crimson liquid pooled up against the edge of the stone. She had saved his life, but at a terrible price.

As the tears began to flow, he thought he heard someone call out his name. Confused, he staggered to his feet, made his way unsteadily out of the building. Again he heard someone call his name, though the ringing in his head was too loud to discern who it was. The spark of extinguished hope instantly fanned to life as he

saw her emerge from one of the damaged structures.

“Sekali!” she called out, her voice filled with fear and emotion. In surprise, his eyes widened. She was alive! As the feelings of loss and despair washed away, an exhaustion filled him, weighing down his mind and body.

Without a word he began to walk toward Mahkaia, approaching her from behind. As he closed the distance, he grabbed Mahkaia by the arm, turned her about and wrapped her in his arms. Crying out for joy, she flung her arms about his neck with an exclamation of relief.

“I thought I lost you,” she wept. Kissing her blood-soaked brow, he felt the last of that terrible pain in his chest melt away, even though his heart felt heavy. Many people lay dead all about the area.

“Mahkaia, are you hurt?” Shaking her head slowly, she lifted a trembling hand to his face.

“No, just drained. I healed as many as I could.” In one smooth motion, he lifted her up into his arms.

“You saved my life. Thank you,” he stated with gratitude.

“Always,” she whispered. Exhausted, she curled up against him, lay her head to his chest and closed her eyes.

“Your armor,” she mumbled, then fell unconscious.

Sekali returned home and laid Mahkaia down in the comfort of their bed. Quietly, he stripped the last of his mangled armor from him, then collapsed down beside her, closing his eyes, exhausted beyond measure. It seemed but a moment before Mahkaia's voice brought Sekali out of a deep sleep.

“Sekali, come on, let’s go get changed. We still have a bit of business to do.” Mahkaia stopped suddenly, looking around. “Sekali, where is the satchel?” Sekali sat up, his thoughts slowly focusing.

“I dropped it in the shelter. I’m sure it's still there.” Mahkaia grimaced.

“We better go get it. We must go see our master before we can do this. Your blade is there,” she waved a hand over by where he lay, “and your armor pieces will be salvaged into another set of platemail.” Apparently, Mahkaia had been up for some time and busy.

“Thank you. I am grateful.” Steadying his thoughts, Sekali jumped up, grabbed a new set of clothing and headed into the side chamber to wash up.

As he scrubbed his face, images of the carnage flashed in his mind. Slowly, he dried his face, sadness piercing his heart. He had seen men and women die on The Watch, witnessed the slaughter of a battalion of well-trained warriors and ran his blade through many foes, witnessing their spirits depart from this mortal plane. With his bare hands, he had broken the necks of foes and watched them fade into death. That, he could handle. In all his battles, the one thing that haunted him worse than anything, was witnessing the slaughter of the innocents he fought so hard to protect.

The images of their broken and torn bodies, strewn about the streets like rag-dolls, mingled with the horrified weeping of their loved ones, was now permanently burned into his soul; a haunting trophy to remind him of his failure.

Mirrors were beginning to plague him with each and every new failure to save a mother, a child, a husband. Shaking his head, Sekali closed his eyes, stood up straight and sighed, his breath quivering with emotion. Taking a deep breath, he tried to banish the images from his mind.

“These murders would not be happening if those of the Living World were honorable. But now we rot in these wasted lands, while those of the Living World take their freedom for granted. Once again, you have failed them,” Sekali whispered, glaring at himself in the mirror.

In anger, Sekali turned to leave, and found Mahkaia standing behind him in silence, a look of pain twisted into her face. He froze, realizing she had overheard everything. Ashamed of his actions, he lowered his head, not knowing what to say. He expected her to reprimand him for his words, but she merely drew close and gently embraced him, running her fingers through his hair and caressing the back of his neck.

In silence, she held onto him, until he slowly wrapped his arms about her, as if by doing so, he could gain strength from her. In vain, he resisted the tears which began to stream his face; a contagious emotion that Mahkaia quickly fell victim to as well. For a long while they held each other, the only sound to break the silence of the moment was the overflowing of emotion. Finally, Mahkaia broke the stillness of the moment with emotional, yet gentle, loving words.

“Sekali, what happened was not your fault.” She gripped him tight, then parted from him, brushing away his tears with a gentle hand. “The service you render to this people has saved thousands of lives. How can you possibly believe you have failed them by devoting your life to their protection? Remember this: You cannot save them all.” Mahkaia counseled him in earnest.

Fresh tears streamed his face as he caught his breath. Lovingly, she smiled and brushed them away again. Sekali closed his eyes briefly, trying to gain some control. He wanted to bring them back; never let anything happen to them. The desire burned within his mind to see them all living in peace and happiness. He yearned to say something, anything, but did not know how to reply. She was right, yet, still, the pain of loss burned within his heart. Mahkaia gripped the hair on both sides of his head, forcing his full attention upon her. Her next words shook him to the core of his soul, stripped him of a belief system he judged himself by.

“Sekali, the time you have in mortality, every moment, depicts the course of

not only your life, but the lives of those around you. Do not waste that time accusing yourself of events which you cannot control. Live, Sekali, live. And in living, you will continually do more good. If you truly love your people, protect the ones who yet live and breath . . . they need you. I need you.”

Gently embracing him, Mahkaia slowly tightened her grip on him, causing him to wince in pain. Then, without another word, she released him, turned and walked away, leaving him alone. As he watched her go, he could not help but admire her strength and conviction; her passion in everything she did. Finding himself alone again, he continued readying himself as he pondered her words.

After donning himself in a fresh set of plate armor, they departed, retrieved the satchel of bones and headed for the Monolith.

A short time later, they approached the Mystic’s dwelling and entered as before, slowly approaching the central area in the base of the massive structure. The strange torches still burned, but Sekali’s thoughts were bent upon Mahkaia, and their task at hand. As they neared the same area as before, a faint whisper stopped them in their tracks.

“My apprentice informs me you were joined. Congratulations to you both. I am pleased you have found happiness in this, the dark of your home. In doing so, you are mastering the future.” Both saluted respectfully. Sekali bowed, being the first to speak.

“Thank you master. Master, we seek permission to leave the citadel for a short time. Mahkaia has prepared the skeleton of a Vahkrin to be . . . raised.” Immediately, he knew he should have let Mahkaia inquire. By the look she gave him, he was right. Cringing, he fell silent, stepping back one pace, signifying she would lead the conversation. Mahkaia bowed shortly.

“Master, I would raise the Vahkrin skeleton to serve our people. I believe it would be a good study, and an effective shield to protect The Watch, if only for a season.” Kneeling, she waited patiently for a reply that came all too quickly, and was not the response she had anticipated.

“The future of your life is clouded, Mahkaia; I see all our people, and their

future to some degree, but yours is shrouded, locked away in a place I cannot go, nor perceive.” Sekali saw Mahkaia flinch at their master’s words. With difficulty, she composed herself and explained.

“The Vahkrin cursed me, master. I made a mistake in not preparing more fully for the conjuring. What can be done?” An awkward silence fell upon Sekali's ears as he anticipated the next words of the Mystic of Sardakahn.

“Come to my personal chambers. No, Sekali, you must wait until she returns. We shall not be long.” Sekali formally knelt, feeling helpless as his wife continued on without him. This was serious, for the master never bid another enter his personal chamber lest it was of dire importance.

Time instantly slowed to a crawl, each moment dragging on as if reluctant to keep its normal pace. When he and his wife were together, time passed more quickly than this, even as they served on The Watch. This was, by far, the worst situation he had ever experienced. Every passing moment challenged his patience. He needed to know that Mahkaia would be alright, that everything would turn out fine.

Sekali felt dread begin to creep within his mind as though a thousand spiders had instantly hatched within his skull, enmeshing his thoughts within chaotic webs of fear and doubt. The dark siege of the Wastelands had and would forever challenge them, whether by the hand of nature, or the terrors which stalked this land of woe. None were immune to the diverse encounters of the Wastelands, least of all Mahkaia, who harbored great power. Trials faced overshadowed all as pervasively as the mists which obscured the sun’s light.

“No! We will win, we will!” he growled, and closed his eyes, meditating on patience and calm.

For a long while, he focused on the tunnel before him, rejecting the persistent feeling of there being no hope or victory for Mahkaia's situation. The joy of being Mahkaia’s husband was now overshadowed and subdued by the power of another they had slain. What would happen? Could his master help Mahkaia? If not, could he and his wife overcome the power of the Gorolith’s

curse? Too many questions - too many fears - played out in his mind, taunting him.

Finally, Mahkaia came into view, slowly walking toward him down through the throat-like tunnel. Upon sighting her, Sekali instantly stood, relieved. As she approached, Mahkaia held out a hand, which he took, and continued up the tunnel, leading him in a dark, haunting silence.

Once outside, Mahkaia turned to him with no discernable expression, holding Sekali's eye in silence. Gently, he took her other hand, searching her expression for any glimmer of hope. Not knowing what to say, Sekali fell into a void of mind-numbing silence as his stomach began to tighten. It was plain to him, this silence spoke the words she was reluctant to say. Wrapping her in his arms, he held her for a long while. He could feel her trembling. For the second time in all the long years he had known her, he watched her emotions spill in the form of tears as she collapsed within his embrace.

"Mahkaia," he gently prodded, "tell me what happened." Slowly, Mahkaia composed herself, hesitated, then shook her head.

"No, I just made a mistake," she stated regretfully. "If this were to happen on The Watch, I could have let us all down; I could have caused the deaths of many." He noticed how she struggled for words at one point, briefly, and gave her a look that meant he didn't fully believe her. But Sardakk Elves never lie, and so he let it go, assuming her choice of words held a greater meaning – an understanding he could not fathom.

Hand in hand, they slowly walked in silence to the east gate of Sardakahn; one of only two entrances to the citadel. Coming to a halt before a team of eight men and women known as the Gate Guardians, Mahkaia and Sekali respectfully saluted them, and were saluted warmly in return.

The Gate Guardians were an elite team who wore the black, silver-runed, robes of the Guardian class. This was their eternal station, posted at the gates as a last defense, should The Watches fail.

Early in his years, Sekali had taken an interest in the history of his people. Within the Shaklith Library, which stands near the center of the citadel, he recalled

reading through many passages within the Tomes of Neuron, a history kept by the Order of The Recorders since his people first arrived in the Wastelands.

Sekali recalled one particular history involving the Gate Guardians, which spoke of a time when all three circles of The Watch had been overwhelmed and driven from the pinnacles, their numbers reduced to less than half as a fierce enemy steadily drove them back. Upon reaching the gates of Sardakahn, to their astonishment, the enemy found them unbarred and open wide, as if to receive them. Just as the first of their offense began to enter Sardakahn, the Gate Guardians met the enemy in the power of their wrath. Like dragons, they cut through the ranks of their foes in a terrible display of might, their swords shining like the sun and burning with heat, equal to the hottest forge.

Through the strongest ranks of their enemy they drove, scattering them deep into the mists from whence they came. With unearthly focus the Gate Guardians struck their foes, who fell before the wrath of a mere eight men and women who had ascended to a greater power than most all upon The Watch. They did not allow their enemy to escape, but pursued them deep into the deadly regions of the Wastelands, where few dare venture. Though all eight Gate Guardians received many wounds, not one fell. To the present day, this same foe had never come up against Sardakahn Citadel again.

As the two approached, one of the Gate Guardians stepped forward and saluted Mahkaia respectfully.

“Peace ever flow from the power of your enchantments,” he called to her with a brightening smile. He then turned to Sekali, saluting in the same manner. “Peace ever flow from the stroke of your blade.” Sekali saluted him, feeling a sense of pride instantly burning within him. Mahkaia smiled brightly.

“May the Essence of Eternity forever empower you.” The Gate Guardian drew near, a childlike grin spreading across his lips.

“Thank you sister, thank you brother. What brings you to the gate, my friends?” Mahkaia motioned Sekali to open the satchel. Quickly, he did so, showing him the skeletal remains.

“I have been given leave to animate these remains outside the city.” The Gate Guardian raised an eyebrow and nodded.

“So be it. May Vannar go before you.” Turning, he made a quick hand motion. Instantly, the stone gate swung outward on its own, grinding upon massive hinges. Turning back to Mahkaia, he smiled.

“Be careful enchantress. It would be a blow to the defenses of our people, should you fall.” Mahkaia nodded soberly, then led the way out into the thick flowing sea of mists which Sekali suspected were waiting for them.

As the gates slowly closed behind, Sekali felt suddenly tense, realizing he and his wife were outside the protection of the citadel. Turning, they both scaled the massive walls with their eyes. From the outside, the citadel had always reminded Sekali of monstrous, serrated claws, piercing up through the charred surface of the earth, grasping up at the blackened mists as though defying them.

“You know, most races would have been wiped out,” she whispered. “This is a site to behold.” She looked over and laid a gentle hand on his shoulder, the corner of her mouth showing a hint of a smile, tinged with regret. “We should go. The master foresaw our deaths, had we gone on a hunt. We are not hunting, but there is still that danger. Come.”

Sekali looked down at her in silence for a moment, his face hard as stone. Mahkaia’s hand slipped off his shoulder, catching his hand in a firm grip as she turned to lead him out into the mists. Quietly, he drew his blade and pulled her against him, sheltering her with his other arm.

They passed by the first, then second Watch in silence as the scream of some creature echoed distantly to the east. As they passed the outer watch, they were saluted by a Warlock amidst six Warriors fully plated in finely crafted armors, swords unsheathed.

“Hail, Mahkaia.” Whispered the man at the center and top of the pinnacle. “Where are you going?” Mahkaia smiled and saluted him.

“To raise the bones of a Vahkrin my husband and I slew not long ago.” The man’s eyes brightened at her words.

“So you have finally married him?” She nodded soberly and smiled. “It's about time. I wish you both the best.” Instantly the smile faded from his face, which became hard as stone. “A Vahkrin? Mahkaia, beware. I suspect the soul of such a being does not fully rest unless its body is wholly destroyed. It could prove traitorous.” Saluting, he turned his attention back to his duties. “I wish you both enduring happiness through many ages,” he whispered, his darker-than-night eyes glinting as he studied the mists.

“Thank you, Jerstel, and may your Watch be fruitful.” Sekali and Mahkaia then continued on, soon vanishing from the sight of anyone who could possibly aid them, should they need it.

Sekali felt as though they were stepping into some dreaded lair as they silently made their way through the mists and vapors, which, like shadowy phantoms, flowed about them . . . some following not far behind.

Traveling for a while, Sekali felt his heart begin to beat more quickly as they moved between two large mounds of smouldering earth, giving him the distinct impression of walking within a dragon's lair.

Being well out of earshot from Jerstel and his warriors, Sekali knew they were truly alone.

Cautiously, they made their way into the midst of a large ring of jagged rocks jutting out from the earth over three times Sekali's height. At a silent gesture from Mahkaia, he surrendered the satchel to her, then began searching about the stones, half expecting some horror to fly out from the rocks and attack. To his relief, there were no dangers present. Only he and Mahkaia shared the area, for now.

Returning to Mahkaia, Sekali stopped directly behind her, eyeing out every open area between the massive shards of rock, which looked as if they had been hurled against the surface of the ground from within the depths of the earth, piercing, but not quite escaping, the surface.

Even as used to it as he was, this land was strange, unnatural. Sekali suspected the Wastelands were cursed. He had always thought some evil magic was at work, twisting and torturing this region beyond inhabitable for all but his people. It was obvious the Wastelands attracted terrors into its borders, and maybe the purpose of its existence was to keep the outside inhabitants safe. If such terrors dwelled in this land, the living world would remain more free of them.

It was when Mahkaia was half finished laying out the Gorolith bones, that Sekali saw a shadow pass by outside the boundary of stones. For the first time in his life, Sekali felt alone and exposed in the land where he had grown up. A tinge of fear shot through him as he suddenly recalled the words of the curse. A terrible image of an unimaginable evil, suddenly aware of their presence, entered his mind.

Banishing the thought, he glanced over at Mahkaia, who had neatly assembled the legs and hip bones of the fiend they had slain. Mahkaia seemed to be in debate as to the positioning of a bone, and held it, tapping it in the palm of her hand as she stared at the completed part of the skeleton.

Again, Sekali saw a shadow pass by. His blood chilled within him as he heard the distinct sound of sniffing, and the soft padding of feet not far off in the mists. Relying his blade, he made a silent motion, warning Mahkaia. She silently placed the bone upon the ground and came to Sekali's side, also seeing the

obscure silhouette of something just outside the ring of stones. Raising her hands, she made an intricate pattern in the air with her fingers.

“Vaneighoi Ahmura (wind current),” she faintly whispered. Reaching up, she pulled her face-cloth down as she took in a deep breath. Ever so gently, she exhaled in the direction of the intruder. A gentle wind began to move against the mists from outside the ring of stones, sending shreds of dark shadow streaming past them. Her eyes narrowed dangerously in the direction of the intruder, shading to silvery-gray.

In frozen silence, they waited as she pulled the cloth back up over her mouth, eyes riveted on the area just outside the stone circle. Sekali realized she had caused an upwind effect in the area, providing concealment from a creature that would no doubt find them by way of its oral senses. However, if they were surrounded, they would be in for a fight.

Both waited in silence, still as stone, their attention bent on the moment past the stones, nothing else. For a time, the sound of sniffing continued, then began to fade as they watched the creature’s silhouette vanish. After the danger was past, Mahkaia again spoke the words of the same spell. Instantly the breeze ceased, and the flow of wasteland mists once again steadily crept back into its unnatural course. Placing a hand upon Sekali’s arm, she nodded, then withdrew to finish her work, her eyes losing that silvery hue.

Once again Sekali began to keep an eye out for danger, marveling at how in control Mahkaia was. She always portrayed that confidence wherever she was, especially on The Watch. He thought about her being his wife. For the first time in his life, smiled while outside the protection of the citadel.

As he briefly spied out the area through a small opening between two twisted stones which looked as though they struggled against one another for the same space, he realized the Wastelands were not so forlorn as before. Together they would master this land of twilight. The thought gave him courage.

Soon, the soft chanting of Mahkaia’s voice drew his eye. She had finished assembling the bones and was casting the spell to animate it. He did not fully

understand what that meant until the chanting ceased. In one fluid motion the structure of bones raised from the ground and stood silently before Mahkaia, who stepped back and motioned for Sekali to come near.

A chill clawed its way over his shoulders and into his face as he slowly took the first step toward her. Instantly, the Gorolith skeleton turned its attention his way, a green illumination blazing to life within its empty eye sockets, even as Mahkaia continued to motion him to her. An unearthly rumble echoed through the area as it stalked between he and Mahkaia, half crouching, spreading its fleshless wings out as it prepared to fight.

Sekali was deeply startled, his mind flashing back to when he had beheaded it. Raising his blade, he prepared for its attack, thinking it had broken loose from the enchantment that should have securely bound it. Mahkaia quickly lowered her hands parallel to the ground, palms and fingers flat. As she did, her animation instantly stepped aside, lowering its defenses and became still. It then dawned on him what it truly meant; what she had been telling him.

“Impressive,” he whispered in awe. She nodded, motioning for him to follow as she picked up the satchel and warily headed out from the ring of jagged stones.

“Let’s get back while our good fortune holds.” Sekali fully agreed, but said nothing as he scanned the area for danger, taking the satchel from the Witch he loved. If their presence had not given them away to some wandering predator, the odor of Mahkaia’s undead skeleton would. His suspicion of it attracting unwanted attention was confirmed soon after.

As the three made their way back, a deep and sinister howl split the silence directly before them. Sekali stopped, taking up a defensive stance as he peered into the mists ahead. In silence he waited as Mahkaia moved one pace to the right, placing a hand on his shoulder to let him know her exact position.

Ahead of them, they began to hear the steady rhythm of deep breaths as something neared. After a few tense moments, they were no longer required to strain their eyes to see what approached. Sekali pointed at the obscure figure of a

rather large creature loping directly towards them through the mists.

Moving between the approaching creature and Mahkaia, Sekali took up a defensive stance as he heard her begin to chant. Readying himself, he waited.

It was quadruped, wolf-like in appearance with lengthy jaws and ears, giving the distinct characteristics of a Kemplan Wolf, the natural assassin of the Wastelands. Kemplan never traveled alone. Either this one was the soul-survivor of a fallen pack, a scout, a forerunner, or a lure. He had never encountered just one, nor heard of one to scout solo. Something wasn't right.

Spotting them, it stopped and raised up on its hind legs in perfect balance, its long tail sliding back and forth in a snake-like pattern, stirring up black dust behind it. After raising its nose, and sniffing three times, a deep rumble filled the air. Lowering its menacing attention to Sekali, its lips curling back, exposing two rows of hand-length, razor-sharp, fangs.

Sekali recognized it for what it was. This was no Kemplan Wolf! Now he knew that returning back to the safety of the citadel alive, or unaltered, would be a sign that Vannar was indeed watching over them, guiding them with his unyielding hand of safety. Never on The Watch had he seen one of these creatures. When he was a child, his father recited a legend of a vicious shifter that prowled the Wastelands, attacking those unfortunate enough to cross its path. Not daring to take his eyes off this monster of insanity, he turned slightly to Mahkaia, swallowing hard.

"Night`Shade Werewolf," he whispered. Mahkaia instantly focused on it, eyes igniting with a Darkfire. Her countenance changed drastically as she snapped her teeth at the Werewolf, her voice sounding like nothing he had ever heard.

"Ita eim kaia shura (I am the threat)," she growled, instantly forcing its attention upon her.

Bracing himself mentally, he turned his full attention on his foe and bent his knees slightly, exhaling evenly through his mouth, centering his thoughts on the battle with one of his childhood fears.

Sekali knew that if its saliva mingled within a wound, no matter how minor,

he would fall victim to the Night`Shade's curse, quickly transforming to one of its kind. The problem with this type of shifter, was, once bitten, the change would happen so quickly, he would end up fighting as its ally against Mahkaia.

As a child, his father had told him the terrifying story of how this vicious killer came to be. When he was in his youth, ever since he learned this legend, a profound fear had settled in the back of his mind, tormenting his childhood with the coming of every nightfall.

His fear had eased with his ascension to The Watch, but the darkness of the Wastelands always reminded him of the story. In his adult years, Sekali found it hard to believe such a curse existed, for there had never been a sighting reported until seventy years ago, when one of The Watch was infected and had to be slain by her own team. It was alarming how a single creature could so quickly cause such terror within this realm of constant death.

The Werewolf snarled hatefully and crouched, sinuous leg muscles tensing for only an instant before it sprang forwards. In one swift motion, the undead Gorolith leapt in front of Sekali, blocking its path, a ghastly flame of pale green igniting upon the surface of every bone, spine, tooth and claw.

The Night`Shade instantly skidded to a stop, taken off guard by the sudden fiery display of the burning remains now facing it. Spreading its blazing wings wide, Mahkaia's undead champion screamed out a ghastly challenge, that unnatural sound-reflection it had carried in life echoing all about the area, as if a host of forever-ensnared souls were crying out in unison from some unseen dimension.

Their foe backed a pace, shook its head furiously, then howled in rage and hate, giving Mahkaia enough time to finish a second chant. The skeleton jerked, as if suddenly struck from behind, causing it to stagger one step forward. The sudden movement made their enemy leap back and snap viciously at the undead as its hackles raised in a frightening display.

“Kill it, slave!” Mahkaia screamed, as if frustrated and instantly angered. Without hesitation, her skeletal servant lurched forward into action, again filling the air with that ghastly, echoing scream.

Without hesitation, the Werewolf met the challenge with a snarl as it leapt forward. Both horrors clashed against one another in a sudden fury of hacking and slashing. Sekali retreated back two steps, watching the two, now locked in combat, each furiously attempting to rip the other to pieces.

Looking around, Sekali gave Mahkaia a distressed glance. There was too much noise; this was going to attract other predators. It had to end quickly, or there would be more adversaries added to the fray. He had seen it happen before. In this land, predators were instinctively attracted to the sound of battle, for the winner was most always weakened by the struggle, which made it an easier target. Sekali had just decided to join the fight when Mahkaia gripped his shoulder tight.

“Don’t,” she whispered. Reluctantly, he held his ground and watched as the two rolled upon the ground, thrashing, biting and clawing at one another in a shower of flying hair, blood and bone. As they struggled to overtake each other, Sekali kept an eye on the surrounding area, watching for any other creatures which might be attracted by the raging din of unearthly screams and snarling. The battle had to end now!

Against Mahkaia’s command, Sekali charged into the fray. Using his blade like a spear, he focused his mind upon his enemy, plunging his blade deep into the Werewolf, not caring that his attack might stray against the undead. With every thrust, he moved in, then quickly out, making it difficult for his foe to land a retributive strike, should it turn on him. In silence, he speared the thick hide of his enemy, desperate to end the conflict.

Mahkaia ordered him more than once to stand down, screaming in panic at him. For the first time in his life, he ignored her command as he desperately stabbed and thrust his blade into the body of the Werewolf again and again. Mahkaia’s wrath might follow his actions, but it was her he worried for, not what she might do to him after the fight.

The words of the curse, now raging through his mind, spurred him on to defy her. To him, losing Mahkaia would be like embracing death itself. As Sekali feared, before the conflict ended, he heard a fierce cry somewhere in the mists

behind them. It was too late!

Growling, Sekali backed off three paces as he turned his blade point down, as if holding a dagger. Anticipating its movements, he charged into the shifter, driving his left shoulder into its neck with all his might as it ducked under the grasp of the undead. The impact was enough to knock it off balance, giving him the split second he needed to wrap his left arm about its blood-soaked neck. Pulling it to his chest with all his strength, he raised his blade and waited for it to turn on him.

Mahkaia's undead hesitated, then leapt to its back-side to gain a more clear advantage. At the brief relief of the skeleton's onslaught, the horror of Sekali's childhood turned upon him, attempting to bite him in the face, just as he hoped it would.

With all his might, Sekali thrust the point of his blade into its eye, delivering a penetrating strike that was stopped by the cross-handle of his blade. Instinctively, the shifter jerked back as Sekali let it go and kicked it in the chest with all his strength, creating a quick distance between he and his enemy. Staggering back, he quickly drew two daggers from sheaths strapped to each forearm as that deep cry, now much closer, split the air behind them a second time. Whatever was approaching was swift.

As the Werewolf struggled to tear Sekali's blade out, the burning undead leapt upon it, driving it down under its weight as it clamped its jaws about the base of its neck and pinning it to the ground. With terrible strength, it shook its head back and forth, instantly snapping its neck and nearly tearing the shifter's head from its body. When their enemy had gone limp, Mahkaia's skeletal animation released it, dropping the now lifeless terror to the earth. Mahkaia's creation instantly turned its attention upon the new intruder, which appeared out of the mists and stopped, surveying the scene.

“Dragon!” Mahkaia warned, throwing Sekali a severe look. Sheathing his two daggers, Sekali leapt forward, ripped his blade from the eye socket of the shifter and rushed to defend Mahkaia, distressed by this turn of events. As he

stopped at her side, the dragon folded its wings back and challenged them with a deep roar.

This was a normal course of events which occurred with almost every battle on The Watch. Being out in the more wild area, it would have shocked him if they had only encountered the Werewolf. It was no surprise to be faced by yet another foe, but a dragon? Could things get any worse? In the Wastelands, yes.

Sekali was relieved to recognize the breed as not within the family of breathers, such as a fire dragon. This one was a hunter, and a young one at that. Being about forty feet in length and about three times his height gave him hope, due to Mahkaia's presence. If he had been found alone by this beast, he most likely would have had the opportunity to blend his spirit with that of his master. A dragon, no matter how young, was a deadly encounter, even for his team, and he wished they were here now.

As it stopped and smelled the air with its tongue, there was simply nothing else to do but attack. Taking a deep breath, Sekali sprinted towards the Hunter Dragon, knowing Mahkaia would back him; she had never let him down. If he attacked quickly, he might be able to put it on the defensive and get lucky enough to drive the point of his blade up through the scales just over the left side of its chest and pierce its heart. What a plan!

As he advanced, the dragon instantly lowered to the ground and dug its front claws deep into the rock, waiting, its tail snaking back and forth as it eagerly anticipated the confrontation, its cat-like, gray eyes narrowing almost playfully at him as it bared its deadly teeth.

Once again, Mahkaia's undead preceded Sekali, leaping past him, trails of green flame flowing behind it like some unnatural comet. Launching itself at their enemy, it slammed headlong into the dragon's face, viciously biting and clawing into both scale and flesh, forcing the dragon to abandon its attention on Sekali.

"Sekali, back down!" Mahkaia commanded, openly aggravated with him. Without hesitation, he backed away, not daring to take his eyes off the beast as it scooped up the skeleton in two powerful claws and clamped its powerful jaws over

it, shredding fragments of bone from Mahkaia's undead slave.

Even in its youth, Sekali did not care to fight a dragon. Most likely, the skeleton would be destroyed; it was only a matter of time. If it fell, there would be nothing to stop it from attacking her, except it go through him first.

From behind, Mahkaia gripped Sekali by the plated neck piece, wrenching him back with astonishing strength for her stature as she extended her other hand outward, fingers spread wide. Instantly, he froze in place for fear of disrupting her spell.

“Kahdjarune (Shielding),” she growled, pronouncing the spell through clenched teeth. He noticed her alarm, which highly concerned him. If she was unsure of the outcome of this conflict, he knew they were in trouble.

Turning his attention to the area about them, he began watching for other incoming danger. As for now, the dragon seemed to be the only adversary, and Mahkaia’s undead was holding it at bay for now. Glancing at her, Sekali caught a look from her, which plainly warned him not to do anything stupid. She was right, and that suited him perfectly. He did not wish to fight this overgrown lizard anyway.

For the first time, he was glad she had created that abomination. And though he distrusted it, it was holding off the dragon fairly well. Also, after Mahkaia had cast the shielding spell on her nightmarish slave, it seemed much less effected by the dragon’s physical attacks. The dragon was taking deep wounds from the undead's onslaught; evidence of the formidable nature a Gorolith Vahkrin evolved into a faithful slave.

Sekali watched the skeleton break loose from the powerful grip of the dragon and continue its onslaught. Turning sideways, the Hunter Dragon beat down upon the burning horror, delivering the full impact of a powerful tail-strike that could well have killed multiple armored warriors, yet Mahkaia's animation continued to fight, undaunted by the power of the dragon. Against the skeleton’s relentless attacks, the Hunter Dragon began to retreated, suffering deep lacerations to its face and neck.

Keeping an eye out, he scanned the area about them, not trusting this would be the last enemy to be attracted by the raging screams of a dragon and Mahkaia's macabre servant. While he stood as watch, Mahkaia observed the fray with growing interest. Her actions did not surprise Sekali in the least, nor did he question the reason she wasn't helping to finish off the dragon. He knew she had to see how well this *thing* could hold up against a formidable enemy.

Coming out here to raise the skeleton was the reason for the chance they were now taking. Sekali reluctantly held his tongue, distracted by the possibilities of attracting a greater enemy than what they had encountered so far. Dividing his attention on the surrounding mists and the dragon, he watched his wife's back, wondering how long she would allow this to continue. Mahkaia had transformed the remains of a once deadly threat into a horrifying champion. The animated corpse, coupled with the power of Mahkaia's magic, bolstered this undead slave well against a superior foe. Unhindered by the dragon's attacks, Mahkaia's undead pressed its attack, undaunted by the dragon's fury.

Observing the fight for a time, Mahkaia smiled, obviously pleased. Sekali watched her, suddenly realizing his wife had been worried about him, not her own ability to deal with this situation. He had simply misread her expression. In one motion, she threw a hand out towards the dragon, fingers extended wide. As she did, Sekali averted his eyes and covered his ears in the attempt to ward off the side effects of a spell he had witnessed her cast before.

"Shrakka! (Lightning)" she called out in a loud voice. A sudden burst of heat flashed like a shockwave over him as lightning arced between Mahkaia's palm and the dragon's forehead, followed by an instant clap of thunder. A sudden ring split the air, as though a colossal hammer had struck a huge anvil. At that instant, the protective shield about the skeleton exploded, hurling it out into the mists. Though he could no longer see it, Sekali heard the impact of its skeletal frame as it struck something. The magical fragments of the destroyed shield formed a sudden sparkling cloud of glass-like shards which fell as ash to the charred earth to fade away.

The dragon grunted and dropped to the ground, its legs and tail stiffening as its eyes bulged in sudden agony. Kicking wildly, the dragon fought in vain to suck in a breath as it clawed and tore at the ground. After a few moments, it relaxed, kicked feebly at nothing, then exhaled its final breath.

For the first time since they encountered the Night`Shade Werewolf, they could only hear the common noises of the Wastelands, with the exception of a strange and distant cry.

Looking over at the dragon, Sekali shook his head. A dragon, no matter how young, was a prize kill. The slaying of such a beast meant an empty den, which most always contained the treasure of its victims. The problem was, they were far too few in number to risk tracking it back to its cave; it might have siblings.

The undead came into view as it stalked back through the mists towards Mahkaia, that green flame now a fading haze of eerie luminescence within its skeletal structure. As it neared, it stopped between the body of the dragon and Mahkaia, shook itself vigorously, then froze, awaiting her next command.

Sekali reluctantly looked to Mahkaia, who raised an eyebrow at him, obviously upset. In an instant, Sekali noticed he had something more important to deal with. Mahkaia was glaring at him, and he knew exactly the reason. Turning, Sekali pointed at her.

“Mahkaia, I can’t lose you,” he stated flatly, knowing he was in peril of her wrath, even if she was his wife. She glared at him, unblinking for a time, as he held her eyes, undaunted by her dangerous mood. After realizing he was not going to give in, Mahkaia took in a deep breath and sighed heavily. She stepped close to him, forcing herself to smile; it was not convincing him. Resting her hands upon his chest, she shook her head.

“Please, Sekali, don’t do that again.” Feeling the deepest loyalty for this woman, one of Sardakahn's most powerful witches, he reached up and brushed a lock of loose hair from her face, smoothing it back.

“Mahkaia, I swear I will never disobey your command upon The Watch. Remember the curse.” At his words, she visibly flinched, as if he had just declared

he no longer loved her. Paling, she glanced about the area and slowly nodded.

“Alright, let’s get back.” As they approached the first Watch, Mahkaia stopped and turned to Sekali.

“Wait here for a moment.” He nodded and turned about, watching for danger as Mahkaia left both him and her slave together. Sekali turned to the undead, eyeing it with sudden hatred.

“If you still live within your own corpse, know this: If you attempt any harm against Mahkaia, I will deal with you myself.” Sekali struck it in the skull with the back of his armored fist, half expecting it to retaliate --- it did not. Rather disappointed, he waited and watched, until he saw Mahkaia turn away from Jerstel and began walking back to him.

“Sekali, we can move in to the presence of The Watch; they have been informed of our new slave.” Motioning him to follow, she turned and walked back towards the seven stationed at their posts, who watched the undead with great interest.

Sekali followed Mahkaia to the pinnacle, giving the undead once last warning glance. Yes, it had been useful, but he still did not trust it. As they approached the spire of hewn rock, Mahkaia turned and made a motion with her hand, commanding her undead to stop. Instantly it obeyed, turned away, facing outward, its back to them. Mahkaia then turned and bowed.

“Thank you, Jerstel. I am in your debt. Will you tell me how it fights? I am curious to know the level of its power. Against two creatures, it did well, but I wish to know how it fares against something more powerful than a Night` Shade Werewolf and a young Hunter Dragon.”

Her words brought a murmur from Jerstel’s six warriors, which he silenced with a sharp glance. Turning back to her, the Warlock grinned, shaking his head, obviously impressed.

“I will give you a full report, Mahkaia. Congratulations on a nice catch. I believe this one will do very well.” Mahkaia bowed.

“Thank you sir, but it smells bad; the only set-back I foresee. I apologize if

this causes you and your team any problems. Call on me if it poses a problem, and I will be rid of it.” Jerstel smirked and waved her on, a playful gleam in his eye.

“Yes, but a bath can be taken, if he is trained properly.” Jerstel replied, then smiled, motioning them to the gate of the citadel. Mahkaia placed a hand over her mouth, hiding a sudden grin. Sekali ignored the two of them. Falling in beside her, Sekali felt her hand slip into his as they walked.

The Gate Guardians opened the gate, immediately allowing the two entrance to the citadel. After giving them a full report, four of the eight Gate Guardians mounted up on large reptilian steeds and headed out to retrieve the bodies of the Night`Shade Werewolf and the Hunter Dragon, informing Mahkaia and Sekali they would do a quick search for the lair.

“If we find a treasure stash, you both will be contacted upon our return. Well done.” Saluting, they slipped through the gate and departed in great haste.

The two made their way to Sekali’s old home, where they packed up his belongings and moved them to Mahkaia’s home . . . now his as well. That evening, as they placed the last of their trophies neatly together, Sekali turned and embraced Mahkaia affectionately.

“Mahkaia, you make me happy.” Mahkaia wrapped her arms about him and squeezed as hard as she could.

“Sekali, I truly love you, even though you are caked with dried Werewolf blood.” Letting go of her, he stared at Mahkaia in all seriousness. After a minute, the Witch looked about the area, beginning to wonder why.

“What is it, Sekali?” Ever so slightly, he smirked, the corner of his mouth raising just enough to see.

“I am going to go take a bath now.” Giving her a incredulous look, he turned and left the chamber. Mahkaia laughed, calling after him.

“Sekali, Jerstel was only teasing! Do you want me to sick my pet on him?”

“Mahkaia!” he swiftly reprimanded, glancing back in surprise, his eyes sparkling playfully. Raising both hands, she amended her offer.

“With hugs, that's all.”

While he took his “bath”, he did not talk to her again; his payback to make the score even.

That evening, they enjoyed one another’s company. As the night wore on, it felt as though the heavy cares of their life had been washed away, the blessing of no longer facing every day alone made all the troubles of their dark lives brighter and easier to bear.

Sekali awoke to the unmistakable assault of firefall raining down on the city; he did not have to open his eyes to know what it was. Each comet of ash hissed softly as it descended and landed with a soft thud upon the stone roof above and within the streets of the city.

There was an energy in the air; he could feel it. Opening his eyes, he noticed Mahkaia standing by the Medusa's head, her hand upon the cloth that shielded the effects of its still deadly eyes.

"Sekali," she whispered distantly, "Do you suppose the power of the dead can affect an unliving foe?" Sekali arose and walked to her side, combing his fingers through her unbraided hair, his eyes falling to the trophy she was resting her hand upon. Her hand gripped the cloth, as if she were about to tear it way.

"Mahkaia, I do not understand." She looked up at him and smiled.

"When I was young, I craved to be left alone; live a simple life. Then my father was brutally attacked by a creature upon The Watch. That day, I almost lost my father, and it changed my way of thinking. I became angry and began to desire, of all things, power. Power in our people is what keeps us thriving in the Wastelands. And now, since the curse has been set upon me, I feel awakened once more to a new and deeper threat." Growling softly, she let the cloth go. "I despise being controlled by an enemy, especially one we have thrown down. For this reason, I will begin a search for a power, far greater than my own." The way she looked at him, made Sekali's heart reach out to her.

"I will overcome this madness," she whispered. Sekali turned Mahkaia to him and wrapped his arms about her. She was trembling.

"Mahkaia, we will overcome this together . . . we. But, what is to be done?" She shrugged.

"I will speak with our master; maybe he can help me to open a door that will lead to victory over this trial. He is both wise and powerful." Sekali looked down into her eyes, tightening his grip on her.

"Mahkaia, what was the purpose of conjuring that thing?" Instantly, a look

of great concern overshadowed her face. She did not hesitate in her answer.

“One fortnight ago, I saw the Gorolith in a vision as I slept. I perceived it was the leader of a large following. I saw that it was in the attitude of creating a portal, which had runes about the surface of its structure. As I watched it, I bent my mind upon it, and perceived it knew how to set the portal into action. Sekali, I could read those runes, and they described the Earthen Plane we now live on. I also read other runes upon the surface of that gate which signified the Zurkel Mainland, our homeland. At night, when all was more quiet, and I was less likely to be disturbed by a wandering Warrior who always seemed to crave my company, I spied on the Vahkrin and its followers, prying into their secret meetings. Slowly, I began to understand their plans.” Sekali’s eyes narrowed.

“What plans?”

“They were amassing a scouting force to invade Sardakahn. The Wastelands are avoided by the other races of Utaemia. I’m sure they thought here was the best place to set up a base of operations, and then scout the lands out from the shrouded seclusion of our home. In this, they could remain concealed, as well as recruit the horrors of this region. I do not know what their ultimate purpose in coming here was; I never found that out, for they detected me, and tried to seize upon me with their arcanists and most powerful sorcerers. Barely, I eluded them, safely hidden within the shielding of my own enchantments until I awoke. But, soon, I realized I had been pursued by a dream chaser, from whom I hardly escaped.”

Sekali had no idea what a dream chaser was, but by the tinge of fear in Mahkaia’s eyes, it must have been a close shave.

“Mahkaia, have you ever heard of one reaching into another’s dream, let alone through the barrier of a Plane?” She shook her head.

“No.” Sekali thought for a minute.

“That would not only demand a deep knowledge, but an incredible power. Wouldn’t one need to know about you personally?” Mahkaia raised an eyebrow at his statement.

“I’m not sure. That’s a good point, which must be looked into. If I was

being spied on, how did our enemy find me initially, and also pinpoint our home as a base to begin their design?" Mahkaia fell into silent thought for a while, then shrugged.

"The Vahkrin we slew contacted me three times since I evaded capture. It began tempting me with riches and dominion under its own rule, should I help to establish a Plane Gate between our worlds." Mahkaia scoffed aloud, almost spitting. "That is the reason I conjured it; that is the reason it is now mine to command. We do not yield to lesser species unless it be in the best interest of the High King. And the king of this land, Nishane Asmond, is the sovereign we follow." Sekali looked confused.

"I thought the Mystic was our only -" Sekali fell silent as she shook her head.

"Sekali, now that you know how to bathe, you need to visit the library more often and read, which would clear your mind of much ignorance. There is power in knowledge . . . true and real power. Books and histories do not merely hold words on a page to recite near a warm fire in the comfort of our lives. Knowledge is a far greater power than any spell." Mahkaia affectionately ran her hands through Sekali's hair.

"Our master is our leader, even our king, if that is what you want to call him. But within the capital city of Gaunten sits one upon a throne that rightly claims himself as high ruler of the Zurkel Mainland, our continent and home. For thousands of years, we have lacked significant contact with the outside world. But, even so, the history of our people serves us as a reminder that one day the king will call us forth from our homeland to fight alongside him in a most dark hour."

Her words began to inspire him. Sekali loved it when she started talking like this. Not interrupting, he took her hand and waited for her to continue. Looking down at their joined hands, she continued.

"That Vahkrin would have thwarted, or ruined, that – it had to die. We must be prepared, if the call should come, to leave the Wastelands, to serve our true king. Sekali, visit the library often. Study all the histories. If you do not, you will

remain in ignorance as to why our people are here in this terrible land.” Sekali now understood more.

“You are noble, Mahkaia, faithful to our people and to our king. I find it a great honor and blessing to be your husband.” She lowered her eyes and smiled.

“Sekali, whatever happens in the near future, remember this: I will always love you. Remember to protect and serve this people until you draw in your last breath. Never give in to despair, which emotion leads to failure, then death.”

“Do not speak so,” he mildly rebuked her. “My brothers and I will never let you fall, nor will we fail in keeping our homeland secure. Even as that thing fell before you, so too shall its feeble curse.” Mahkaia looked up, a sudden hope burning in her eyes. Lovingly, she embraced him. Returning her affection, he held her close, wishing for some way to remove this great burden weighing upon her. He would find a way . . . and he silently challenged the powers of darkness to stop him.

They spent the remaining days walking the citadel and enjoying one another. Sekali was quite taken with Mahkaia, and she with him. But their time together grew short, and then expired altogether as the morning came when they would serve three days upon The Watch.

In the early hours of the morning, just before their duty would begin, Sekali awoke from a dream wherein all he perceived was blackness and shadow. Not wishing to disturb Mahkaia's slumber, he lay beside her, eyes closed, thinking of the curse that now plagued his mind and harrowed up his entire being to the point of exhaustion.

He constantly meditated on it, and how he could rid her of it. How he loved her; how he wished she could be free of this heavy weight. Sekali had become suspicious of every hidden corner, every darkened place within the citadel.

After a time, Mahkaia arose and dressed, wearing the robes she always wore for The Watch. But today, an expression of worry and concern dominated her as she looked at Sekali. He was armed and ready, looking as if he was going to war, so grim was his countenance.

"Sekali, have you slept lately?"

"No," he quietly replied, not daring to lie. She shook her head and opened the little white box he had brought to her; the same that held the ruby ring that had saved her life. Reaching within, she removed a delicate, silver necklace. Slipping it over her head, she tucking it inside the neck of her robes. Slipping on both a silver and a copper ring, one on each hand, she stared at him, an expression of pity in her eyes.

"Sekali, will you be alright today? I need you fully in the here and the now. I can get a replacement for you, if you need to rest. You can join us after you rest a bit. Nothing should distract you from your duty, do you understand?" Sekali stiffened and saluted her formally.

"I am ready," he flatly stated, then lovingly embraced her. "I will follow your lead without question." She returned with a tight embrace and sighed,

wanting nothing more than to come home with Sekali on the eve of the third day. Three days and two nights, and then another seven days to rest until the next watch.

“Sekali, when this watch ends, we should take a leave of absence and enjoy some time together. What do you think?” He nodded and kissed her on the forehead.

“Let’s do. Maybe a little time would help settle some things. You could speak further to our master about this dilemma.” She secretly cringed. She had already told everything to her master, but he could do nothing for her by way of removing the curse. Had she brought the Gorolith Vahkrin to him alive, it would have been different. She knew Sekali, and it was apparent he cared more than deeply for her than she ever realized. She pulled back and smiled up at him cheerfully.

“Well, milord, let us go and keep safe the borders of our grand city, and then, after a successful Watch, let us organize this here collective mess we call home. We’ll fix it up nicely, and then celebrate with some fine drink I have been saving just for the occasion.” She bit her lip, “If I can find it.” Sekali ran his hand along the six braids on the left side of her head.

“Thank you, Mahkaia.” She looked at him quizzically.

“For what?” Sekali ran his fingers along her slender jaw line.

“For you.” He placed his forehead against hers and closed his eyes, enjoying her. She had never seen him sentimental like this, and she liked it. Mahkaia fully regretted conjuring that accursed Vahkrin without more preparation, and realized she had made the biggest mistake of her life, and it was effecting her husband ten-fold more than she. Well, what was done was done. There was no going back. Still, she could feel the acute energy of worry in his touch, in his aura. Bluntly put, Sekali was a mess.

“We better get going,” she whispered. He nodded and kissed her, as if he would never see her again. He parted just before she thought she would have to end the kiss. Taking a few breaths, she waited a moment, catching her breath, then

gripped him about the back of his plated neck.

“Do that again when we return, please.” Nodding, Sekali took her by the hand and departed with his wife, making their way to the eastern gate. Mahkaia was never on time, and so they were early. Soon, five men, clad in dark-steel plated armor approached the gate and saluted Mahkaia and Sekali. Both Sekali and Mahkaia saluted their five teammates, greeting them as though they were blood-kin family.

The next scene was like a nightmarish dream to Sekali. All he saw was the gate opening, the Gate Guardians passing before his eyes, the closing of the massive gates, and his team approaching the third watch. As they passed, the seven upon the pinnacle greeted the seven respectfully, saluting them.

Something was amiss this morning. Sekali felt like a ghost, floating along in limbo. Quickly, he removed the shield from his back and drew his blade. Five other warriors instantly followed his example. As they did, Mahkaia looked at him in sudden concern and alarm. He met her stare without emotion.

Chills cascaded his shoulders as the seven approached the Second Watch. Those upon the pinnacle greeted he and his team warmly as they passed. As they continued past the seven, a darkness began to weigh heavy within Sekali’s heart.

As the first Watch came into view, Sekali’s heart began to beat faster and faster. A deep anxiety clawed at his mind, causing him to scan the area about the pinnacle for hidden enemies. As they approached their destination, they were met with weary, yet proud salutes from seven who had seen much battle for the past three days. They looked truly exhausted. The sorcerer atop the pinnacle sighed heavily as Mahkaia joined him.

“Good hunting, and good night Mahkaia,” she stated wearily. “We have been hard pressed this last night. I don’t know what it is, but your skeletal servant seems to attract attention. Encounters have doubled. I think it may be the stench of bone in the air that has attracted undue attention.” Mahkaia looked suddenly worried.

“I’m sorry, Nethsira. Will you forgive me?” She chuckled cynically.

“The wastes challenged Jerstel the same before we changed the guard. As he, and his team, we’ve gotten some resource out of it. So this has turned out well.” She began to leave, then turned back, placing a hand upon Mahkaia’s arm.

“Beware, Mahkaia. There is a feeling in the air I cannot describe. Be on your highest guard this Watch. Bring yourself and your company safely back to us.” Nethsira began to depart, then turned again, adding, “Your slave fights well.” With that, she descended the steps, signaling her team to yield positions to their replacements.

Sekali overheard their conversation. It caused the already present feeling of danger to hatch into intense foreboding doom. Each took their place and began their three days of service, just as they had done for years. Soon they were alone. Sekali looked back towards Sardakahn Citadel, spying out the Second Watch through the mists. Shifting his stance, he peered down at Mahkaia’s horror standing silently, facing outward to the more wild area of the wastes. As he looked down upon the symbol of Mahkaia’s curse, he felt a sudden pressure in his ears, as if he had been suddenly thrust into deep water. Something was wrong. Looking over, he saw the others shifting nervously, looking about the area; they felt it as well.

Shadows gathered, thickening just within the veil of mist beyond the abomination at the base of the pinnacle. As it solidified, a vapor of darkness slowly, steadily, crept in past Mahkaia’s undead. That nightmarish sense of dread deepened within Sekali’s heart as thick strands of darkness crept in great shreds of tentacles across the blistered and charred earth. His five brothers groaned in pain as the Vahkrin skeleton simply fell to pieces not far from the pinnacle's base, the dark magic of its binding unraveling in an instant.

Mahkaia turned, making eye contact with Sekali, her eyes filled with the unmistakable expression of regret. Reaching up, she touched the six braids on the left side of her head and mouthed the words, “I love you.” His heart abruptly leapt and pounded in his chest as a terrible feeling washed over him, binding his limbs

so that it was difficult to move. Gritting his teeth, he forced himself to no longer care.

Out of the mists it came, flowing like a blackened steam, great lengths of darkness spreading out and probing the ground before it. It was Mahkaia who gathered her senses first and threw out a hand, fingers spread wide.

“Nuatcha Shrakka (fire lightning)!,” she screamed, sudden wrath blazing to life within her eyes, manifesting as a blood-red flame. Red lightning seared forth from the palm of her hand, directly into the approaching enemy, burning into the very fabric of its darkened shadow. A howl of pain and rage split the air as a phantom-like shadow shifted, rising up, forming into a robe which seemed to flow in a wind not of this world. A blackened scythe appeared in skeletal hands as it advanced into six warriors who leapt in unison from the pinnacle, wielding enchanted blades with skill and deadly accuracy.

Sekali was the first to make contact with the enemy, followed by his brothers. The words of the curse ripped through his mind as he ducked under the arc of the scythe meant to decapitate him. He thrust his blade into the darkness of its mid section and ripped it out sideways as he fell to one knee and spun to the backside of his foe. He knew their blades would follow his, one directly after the other, and so positioned himself to give them every chance for a best strike.

Their unified tactics were flawlessly executed, cutting into this apparition of horror with great impact . . . yet it was not enough. In an instant one of his brothers fell beneath the ghastly, silent fury of their enemy, pierced by its blade that drew no blood. The instant the scythe touched his brother, he shrieked in agony and horror, reeling back two steps, his face quickly fading. Sekali witnessed his brother's body vanish. His platemail fell to the charred earth, along with his sword and shield as the last of a terrible cry filled the air, fading away into agony. He was gone!

Spells began to fall upon her warriors as Mahkaia bolstered them with every spell she knew. Then, to her dismay, she witnessed one of her brother's fall, his

unnatural cry piecing her soul. She knew he was now cursed.

Despairing, Mahkaia closed her eyes, reaching deep into the wells of her own forged power and began casting a spell, as her team - her husband - fought for their lives. At the completion of her spell, Mahkaia felt the change begin.

Initially, she felt panic set in, but they needed her to live. She no longer mattered.

Accepting the physical change, she relaxed, only to feel herself suddenly stretch and tear as every joint in her body suddenly separated from each other. Like lightning, unbearable pain shot through her entire body. Like thunder, she screamed, her body beginning to change and shift and grow.

In the same moment, a voice of a man split the air from the topmost precipice of the Monolith, catching the attention of the Gate Guardians, who, without hesitation leapt into a formation. Seven of them created a wall, drawing both sword and shield as the eighth fell in behind them and looked up to see a brilliant stream of luminescence exit the topmost point of the Monolith. A single strand of light streaked across the sky, unhindered by the concealing mists above. The eyes of one Gate Guardian widened in disbelief as she watched on.

“Oh no, Mahkaia,” she whispered, raising her hands high as her eyes instantly blazed with a golden energy. “Erithereal (transport)!” she cried out, working her hands in a quick and complex motion. Within seconds, the Gate Guardians vanished as a large number of men and women, with weapons drawn, raced from the opened gates with all do haste.

All the nearby watches broke away from their posts as the gates of the citadel were thrust open, releasing a flood of seasoned Sardakks who rushed in great haste toward Mahkaia and her team. All other watches about Sardakahn Citadel but a few abandoned their posts, bent on assisting their kin.

Mahkaia felt her skull crack and split forming horns which rose up from the back of her head, her scream was that of an enraged dragon. The flesh, sinew and bone of her arms and legs quickly expanded, causing her to reel in shock. The

unbearable pain of her shifting abruptly ended, changing pain and suffering to energy and a sense of power as her warriors desperately held off a dark horror. As she leapt from the pinnacle, her arms expanded, evolving into two great wings of a great, fiery dragon.

“Senth enja, senth enja (Back down, back down)!,” she screamed in great wrath. Immediately, they did as commanded. Sekali waited for his four brothers to break away. As they did, he pierced the apparition three times before, spinning to evade its deadly scythe, then followed, not taking his attention from this terrible foe.

As the five withdrew, she assumed it would continue its attack upon them. She was wrong. As they backed away, it turned upon her, wailing in fury and hatred as she beat her wings once to propel herself directly into the phantom-like apparition, not giving it time to ready its attack.

The impact of her attack drove it deep into the ground, forcing the earth to shatter into countless earthen debris, forcing a gaping crevice to open wide as she violently forced it down through earth and stone. Making contact, the touch of this terrible foe instantly revealed its nature. As if she had placed her hand upon a hot stove, Mahkaia leapt back, retreating in three great strides, nearly trampling Sekali.

“Soul`Reaper!” she screamed as an obsidian flame burst to life from the rent earth before them, shooting upwards into the darkened, swirling mists. Instantly, Mahkaia inhaled deeply, even as it rose up from the wounded earth.

Sekali watched on in horror as the rising obsidian flames formed the shape of the Black`Fire Phoenix, a legendary creature of great power, and one he had never encountered. Taking the form of the Black`Fire Phoenix empowered the Soul`Reaper to mimic its terrible ability, engulfing many foes in a single burst of flame that did not burn its victims, but drained them of life in the form of years. With a terrible cry, it leapt at Mitcheio, only to be met with an intense blast of dragon-fire that seared and wounded it, keeping it at bay by the power of her fire. As the phoenix was hurled backward, Sekali's attention was drawn by a flash of light to his left. Another attack? No, the Gate Guardians had arrived, and just in

time!

Without hesitation, they leapt into action, swords igniting with a white fire as they leapt forward in shield-wall formation, their eyes blazing with a golden flame of pure essence, aiding Mahkaia and her team. Mahkaia's fiery breath flowed against their now shrieking foe until just before the Gate Guardians stepped into harms way. Raising her head, she began to chant, fire yet flowing from her mouth and nostrils.

The seven Portal Guardians rushed the Black`Fire Phoenix, unhindered and unharmed by the oven-like heat searing the area. The eighth raised her arms above, clapping them together.

“Mitiasha (ruin)!” she called to the dark specter, commanding its attention. An instant force of silver energy shot out from between her hands, striking their foe as it screamed and thrashed about the area on fire. As the image of the phoenix faded, the black-cloaked image of the Soul`Reaper was once again revealed, yet withered and bent. Crying out, it floated upward, turning its attention upon the seven Guardians, who fell upon it, blades flashing like stars, piercing it time and time again.

Catching the attention of his remaining companions, he signaled them to his side, keeping an eye out for the possibility of added threats as many Sardakk Elves began to flood into the area, forming a living parameter about the enemy as the eight pressed their attack.

In a single lunge, Mahkaia leapt over the Gate Guardians, landing behind the enemy and snapped down upon it, ripping and shredding its body of unliving shadow. Just as quickly as she had bitten down upon their foe, she let go, recoiling from the possible retribution of its scythe.

Howling in rage, a darkness flowed from the Soul`Reaper, catching six of the seven Gate Guardians within an obsidian blackness that clung and solidified about their legs and feet. The one who evaded its attack continued the assault, undaunted that her six companions were frozen, as if time had suddenly stood still for only them.

Mahkaia stood her ground and shrieked another incantation in which she grew to thrice her height. Mage-fire burst forth from between every scale. As if a burning star had been released within her, Mahkaia's eyes combusted with the blistering power of the sun.

Arcs of lightning and bolts of energy rained down from the mists above as a dozen Sardakk Elf casters released their magic upon the greatest enemy known to attack a Watch in this age of the world.

In its purity, the free Gate Guardian's blade danced within the shadow of the Soul Reaper, shredding both shadow and darkness as the other six began to break free of their obsidian bonds.

Mahkaia raised up onto her hind legs, hesitated just long enough to get a clear strike, then came down upon her enemy, smashing it deep into the earth as another wave of energy ripped through the area, stripping all shadow and darkness that still clung to the six entrapped.

To Sekali, it seemed their combined effort was working, for it began to dissipate as spells tore into and burst upon it. A hail of many rune-etched arrows streaked past Mahkaia, piercing their enemy. Sekali's hope kindled, even as their enemy began to falter. They were winning this conflict! A host of his brothers and sisters were on the move as one, banning together in flawless unity to take this horror down.

Issuing forth an unearthly cry, their nemesis desperately struggled toward Mahkaia, its scream filling the air, its scythe slashing in vain against her.

Enraged by the attack on his wife, Sekali broke away from the living border of Elves, focusing his attention upon the worst enemy he had ever been tested against. Amidst a continual hail of arrows, he sprinted in and drove his blade into the dark hollow of its head, his brothers following in after him in perfect unity, driving their blades into its shredding phantom-like body. Instantly, all five were thrown back, their blades shattering like glass as they struck the living barrier of Sardakk defenders.

The blackened specter shrieked as dragon-fire seared down upon it.

Following Mahkaia's flame attack, a bolt of clear energy struck it to the earth from above, driving it mercilessly to the wasteland floor.

Leaping to his feet, Sekali drew a long sword from a nearby archer and turned, rushing back into the fray, astonished to see it rise from the broken earth, struggling toward his wife. How could any enemy yet live after being beaten down so mercilessly?

Mahkaia threw all she could at the Soul`Reaper, aided by three warlocks and another Witch of great power, who had not yet fallen to spell-exhaustion. Elemental spells of air, earth, fire and water pounded down upon their foe with unspeakable retribution, ripping through the area with the impact of a dozen terrible storms, smiting it to the dust.

Crumpling and twisting unnaturally, the Soul`Reaper slowly fell to the earth, its blackened scythe slipping past Mahkaia's defenses, grazing her right claw as it fell, unnoticed by all about her. Sekali's wife stiffened and screamed as the apparition folded in upon itself, shrieking as it faded to nothing. In agony, Mahkaia fell back and crashed to the ground. As the body of the dragon stilled, she shifted back to her natural form, then faded away, leaving only her personal effects laying upon the ground. Mahkaia was gone.

In shock and horror, Sekali staggered to the spot where she had fallen, kneeling by her personal effects, eyeing her now empty robes in disbelief as a great silence fell upon all. The survivors bowed their heads in silence to mourn the passing of two, who gave their lives to defeat this terrible foe. As a deathly quiet washed over the area, the realization of what had just happened struck Sekali to silence.

Placing a hand upon her robes, he felt something shatter within his mind. The remainder of his company stood close to him, hands upon his shoulders, quietly weeping for two of their own.

After a time, Sekali gathered up his wife's belongings and slowly stood. Holding her belongings within his arms, he was led to the gates of Sardakahn Citadel in a void of thought, guided by the now silent Gate Guardians who had

desperately fought with him.

He had lost. The curse had been fulfilled. There was nothing left for Sekali now . . . nothing.

Within the Wastelands there fell an absolute and total, lengthy, silence. For three full days there were no challenges to Sardakahn, or any watch. It was as if even the horrors which hunted the Wastelands were paying their respects to the fallen.

That evening, in the silence of their new home, Sekali lay upon his bed in mental anguish and pain. He did not arise the next morning, or the next. His will to carry on had been extinguished. He did not see his, nor Mahkaia's, parents come and tend him with all the tenderness of loving parents; he did not care. Over the next few days, they fed him. He ate and drank, but very little.

The days crawled slowly into the twelfth week. At his request, he was allowed back upon The Watch. Each Watch went by, one after the other, as if it were in a dream – a nightmare that never seemed to end.

The weeks turned into months, which transformed into years of loneliness and solitude. Over the next three decades, Sekali became fierce and defiant of all enemies who opposed his people. By the third year after the fall of his love, he lost the will to speak, except for the needed communication of The Watch. He became more and more reckless, charging into battle where a full team would fear to tread.

Still, Sekali could not find death.

One day Sekali was relieved of duty while in the second day of The Watch. A lone Sardakk Warrior came out to the pinnacle, solemnly handing him a scroll without making eye contact. Opening it, he found it to be a summons . . . by his king and Mystic master. His orders were to report to the Monolith immediately.

Soon he found himself in that same hallway with the same burning torches lit by that same magical fire. As he stared at one of the flames, he recalled Mahkaia taking her hand and running it through the flame after being denied exit from the city.

Bitterly, his mind caught upon the words of his master that day. They had not been allowed to exit the city, for he had foreseen their death in such a venture. Then why had he not seen what was to become of Mahkaia not a few days later? Why?

“I do not see all things, Sekali,” a voice filled with sadness floated down through the torch-lit hall. Instantly, Sekali saluted, but said nothing. “Sekali, at the peril of your own life you defend this people, but it is not enough. Within you, there must be instilled a deeper meaning of why you are alive, and what your purpose is. Therefore, with my personal blessing, I send you into the Living World to be my eyes and ears. You will know when the time has come to return. When you do, bring me news of the outside world.

Sekali reeled in sudden shock. The realization of his reckless ways striking

him to the core of his soul. A sudden desperation and dread filled his entire being. After a long period of silence, he sighed heavily.

“Master, I do not know the way,” he replied, his voice heavy and trembling.

“I am not sending you to your death, son of Sardakahn. I hope you trust my word, when I say, my heart aches at the pain you feel.” Tears began to stream his face as he desperately looked about the tunnel, as if he could somehow find a way out of this situation. Yet, deep inside, Sekali knew there was only one path, and it was through this unexpected trial. Simply, there was nothing to be done, but submit to the will of the master. Closing his eyes, he placed a hand over his heart and bowed his head in silent submission.

“Sekali, I know your heart is pure. Therefore, I send you to the northern part of the Zurkel Mainland to begin collecting intelligence to aid us in our future struggles.” Sekali lowered to one knee, holding out his hands.

“Master, it would be a miracle to survive a day’s travel through the wastes. Of course, I would do anything you ask of me, even dwell with strangers within the Living World. I beg your forgiveness for endangering our people. I know your reasons are just and true. I will head out and travel in the direction you tell me.” Sekali fell silent, hoping his master would show him mercy. Inside, what he really saw was the end . . . finally. With conviction, he now accepted his fate. In a calm, sentimental tone, his leige countered him.

“You will not fall prey to the horrors of this land. I will send you by my way, thus you need not challenge the creatures of the wastes as you travel, for you would most likely perish in the attempt.” A sudden, growing shimmer opened up before Sekali as an energy filled the air in the form of a brilliantly lit portal that filled the hallway before him. Peering within, he noticed a large backpack laying upon a blanket of wide bladed grass.

“Go, Sekali. Pass through and keep on straight, which is northwest. One day, you will return to me with information of the Living World. All you can offer by way of knowledge will be added to our strength. I feel a change coming on. Be my eyes and ears. Go now, and return when you have significant information by

which to benefit our people.”

The portal began to shimmer, indicating it was about to collapse. Without thinking twice, Sekali nervously leapt into it, landing upon fertile soil, completely covered in a blanket of green grasses and other plant life. Snatching up the backpack, he shouldered it and watched as his one way back shrink into a pinpoint of starlight that blinked twice, then faded away altogether. For the first time in his life, he found himself alone, a stranger in a strange land of unparalleled beauty.

Back in the depths of the Monolith, a female’s voice was heard to say, “Do you think he will be alright?” The tone of her voice suggested the full course of her life weighed heavily upon aged shoulders. In response to her question, a male's voice, filled with the deepest tone of sympathy and respect, responded.

“My dear, his destiny, and the forging of a new life, will be according to his own workings. His love is gone. As innocent and unintentional as it was, he has become a danger to us; to the stability of Sardakahn and its people. Unless he can somehow find meaning in his life, he can never return to Sardakahn. Simply, he puts many at great risk.” The woman sighed heavily, sorrow filling the quiet air.

“There now, my dearest, he is a survivor. But he needs this experience to heal; that much I do know -- if he can survive it. We now have the greater good to tend to.”

Raising to his full height, Sekali looked to the horizon, taking in all possible landmarks in the direction he faced. Not knowing where he should go, or what his next course of choices would be, he fixed his pack securely as he placed one reluctant foot in front of the other, slipping into dark and troubled thoughts. Spotting and memorizing every landmark in sight, he walked, highly disturbed by this sudden change in his life. He felt abandoned, cast off from his own . . . forsaken. He wanted to scream. Ignoring the distractions of the lush environment all about him, he continued to familiarize himself with everything he could, no matter how insignificant.

Once Sekali felt comfortable at which was the way his master had informed him to go, he looked about, taking in a view he had only heard of in tales. The air was heavy with the poignant smell of a green world that instantly flooded his senses, making him dizzy. Within a short while he was vomiting, his head reeling from the overwhelming scents attacking his senses.

Sekali lay with his head up against his backpack as his head slowly cleared. After his senses ceased torturing him, he stood, shouldered his pack and began heading in a north, north-west direction. Placing one foot in front of the other, he began walking, not knowing where he was going, or if he would survive to see his people again. As he traveled, he came upon a stream and fell to his knees before it. After drinking his fill, he submersed his head in the water. It helped to cool down, even if his heart weighed like stone within.

Sitting up, he wiped his face off and looked about, taking notice of all the diversity of plants. A host of strange insects flew about, landing on all the vegetation, and upon the surface of the water. Some of them preyed on others, capturing and devouring them, or spinning them up into webs of silk and then feeding from them. Never, in well over two-hundred seasons, had he seen anything like this. The most astonishing thing to him was the sun in the sky. Though blinding and hot, he had to admit it was beautiful beyond description.

Regaining his feet, Sekali shouldered his pack and began to walk, stopping

here and there to study the various organic life which blanketed the land. As he studied the many plants, he wondered if they had any practical use, what was edible, which were poisonous and which might be of medicinal value.

Now he realized why it was called the living world; it was the opposite of the Wastelands.

Pursuing the frequent streams of water which gracefully snaked their way through the grasslands all about him, he followed those that led more or less in the direction he needed to go. Of these, he drank from often, relishing in the natural resource, so rare in the wastes of his home -- his once home. The only spring of water in the Wastelands was underground within Sardakahn Citadel, where the entire populace filled their containers on a weekly basis. The massive expanse of green grass, gently rolling hills and trees, were things he had only heard of. He wished Mahkaia was here to explore it with him.

As he traveled, he thought about the others, unlike himself, living in these lands. His concern was not about being accepted, or offered into circles of friendship. He suspected the differences between his and other races would undoubtedly create a problem. *So be it*, he grimly thought. If there would be a confrontation, he would make as many of them as possible pay for his people's banishment in the land of death.

Recalling back to his childhood years, sekali remembered it being mandatory to learn the Human language. At the time taken to learn a language he hardly ever used was a mystery to him. Well, it was perfectly clear now. With a heavy heart, he sighed. After gathering sufficient knowledge, he would return and report his discoveries as sanctioned by his master, if he dared try. Getting back to Sardakahn Citadel would be a feat worthy of a tale indeed!

The one thing he lacked at this point was the ability to truly care. After that filth Vahkrin had murdered his heart and soul, the purpose of his life had lost all meaning.

Three weeks dragged on as he placed one foot after another. One afternoon as he labored to move forward, the ever-so-slight, yet unmistakable, scent of salt filled the air. Salt was a rare thing to possess in his homeland, and so he began to seek out the source.

At the end of a full day's travel, Sekali crested the top of a gently rolling hill to behold a scene that shocked him greatly. A great body of water, as far as his eyes could see, stretched out into the horizon, dazzling him, as if he had just discovered a sea of magnificent diamonds, lit up by the noonday sun.

Sekali noticed a large and thriving city with ships dotting the shoreline. If he traveled in a straight course for half a day, he might reach the city before nightfall. Sitting down with his back against a tree, he opened his pack and pulled out a lunch consisting of roots and a few herbs. As he ate, he stared at the scene painted upon the horizon. He thought about the feelings he used to have . . . feelings of wonder and excitement, of life and happiness. It used to be different.

After finishing his meal, he quenched his thirst within a small stream at the bottom of the grassy hill, then made for the city. After a while, he began to walk more slowly, eyeing the terrain constantly for any sign of ambush or attack. After all, those of the Living World were savages.

Hiking up a gentle embankment, up onto a well traveled road, Sekali thought of how he would surely stand out among the people of this land. Well, there was no avoiding it. Standing on the road, leading toward the city, he closed his eyes for a moment and meditated, forcing himself to breathe evenly in the attempt to subdue a sudden anxiety that tempted him to leave, to avoid contact with these strangers.

They had to have a military system that would be the first and greatest obstacle to get past. He thought of the horrors of the wastes, and shook his head at the thought how easy it would be to take down one of their soldiers. These people would make for easy targets, considering there were not more than twenty, or forty, if unorganized.

As a gentle breeze caressed his face, he thought of what his people would

do, should one of their soldiers suddenly appear before The Watch. Initially, there would be great respect given. Then he or she would be highly questioned by the Captain of the Gate Guardians, whose all-seeing mind and eye would determine whether or not to allow passage into the citadel. To his knowledge, it had never happened.

At a safe distance, the walls and structures of this city seemed to have poor defenses. He was sure they would not find it an accomplishment for him to make it to their city. Even from half a league out, he could plainly see the walls to the city by the sea; they were low to the earth, allowing him to see directly into the heart of their stronghold. Thinking about their pathetic fortification, it came to mind that few enemies in this land brought them concern.

Reluctantly, Sekali descended the last rolling hillside, making his way down toward a stretch of road that lead directly into the front gates of this strange place. Even though there were gates to this civilization, they were flung wide open. His curiosity began to peek as he reached the road and turned due north toward a destination he did not wish to go.

As he was yet some distance from the entrance, a lone wagon rolled out onto the road from the gates, steadily making its way directly toward him. Straining his eyes, Sekali wondered at the races which inhabited this area of the Living World. To his right, not far off the road, was a small ravine. To the left, he spotted a crop of trees which might give him a little shelter, though not as much as he would like should he be surrounded. Far off to the west of this city, he noticed a dark patch of green. The knee-deep grasses would be excellent coverage as well. This was only one wagon, and there was no way enough warriors could fit within it to cause him much concern, and so he decided to continue on and hope for the best.

Eyeing the driver as the wagon closed in on him, Sekali perceived a man - a Human - driving a team of impressive creatures. Moving off the road, he watched in sudden wonder, as the driver calmly spurred his animals onward, seemingly taking no more notice of him than to nod his way as their eyes met. Sekali exchanged an awkward pleasantly, nearly saluting the Human. Next to the driver,

a Human female lowered her head, as if minding her own business. As their paths crossed, Sekali watched, drawn to a team of four, thick-boned horses.

Magnificent, he thought as the team slowly traveled by. As the coach began to rumble past him, he caught movement off to the right side of the wagon, even as the horses came to an abrupt stop and snorted fiercely. Curious to know the cause, Sekali jogged about the wagon, noting the Humans nervous demeanor. After a moment, it continued on. Cautiously, Sekali looked up into the wagon as it passed and spotted a fair-skinned Human child leaning across the back of the man driving the wagon, her back-length blonde hair flowing like silk in the gentle breeze of the day. Her eyes were the deepest of blue, like the great body of water beyond the city. Taken off guard by her appearance, he stumbled and nearly fell as the wagon moved on down the road. Sekali heard the child giggle and looked back to get just one more look at her before they were out of clear eyeshot, only to see the child pointing at him. Quickly, the woman reached over and pulled the small child to her. After the wagon had passed, Sekali turned and made his way up to the entrance to the city.

Upon reaching the city gates, which loomed up in a pathetic gesture of defiance, as if a half-hearted attack was expected, he stopped and scanned the entirety of the outer walls. The structure was weak and frail, like an old brittle bone. The sudden impression of this city having more to it than he was perceiving sparked a deep curiosity in him.

Passing beneath a large stone arch that housed the open city gates, his second view of people from the Living World came into sight. Lining the streets were vendors selling strange vegetables and meats. There was one woman folding up a bolt of red cloth as two other women pointed at a blue.

Down the wide cobblestone road not twenty paces, a few well-dressed, important looking, men were standing off to the side, chatting and laughing loudly as a few horsemen tethered up their steeds to a post in front of a building with a sign that read, The Cellar. The thing that highly intrigued and astonished Sekali was the skin color of this people. While his was very dark, and seemed to stand out in contrast to all others, they were fair and more white than he. He did notice the attention he was suddenly receiving was only curiosity; not hostility.

All too soon, the hustle and bustle of this strange place fully drew his attention. The well tended street cut directly down through many vendors and structures, ending at three massive docks where two ships were being loaded and unloaded with seemingly countless goods.

One thing he did like about the Living World, was the unobstructed view. While in the Wastelands, his vision was ever veiled by the darkened mists of the land. In this land, there were no mists, allowing him to see clearly for quite a distance.

Curious and highly distracted by the sea, where many other ships were anchored not far from the docks, Sekali decided to explore that area first. No sooner had he passed beyond the gates, than four gate-wardens approached him from the side, calling to him.

“Master traveler, we would see who we invite into City’Port Navan. We

would detain you only for a moment's time.” Sekali immediately stepped toward them. Quickly finding the most concealed spot -- which was no shelter at all; but it was the best he could do -- and slowly pulled his hood back, revealing himself. He expected a shout and a ring of steel, questioning and interrogation. Instead, to his surprise, they looked at each other and shook their heads. Bowing in respect, the guards waved him in.

“Good man, our apologies for halting you. Vannar be with you as you visit this, the City`Port Navan.” Placing his hand upon his chest over his heart, Sekali bowed his head slightly, then hooded himself and continued into the city. Before passing out of earshot of the guards, he distinctly heard one speak.

“Listen up, you newcomers . . . the one we're keeping an eye out for is shorter, black hair, brown eyes; not Elf. He's Human, and -” As Sekali wandered toward the center of the city, the guard's voice faded into the drone of the crowd all about him.

He looked at all the buildings in amazement. Never before had he set eyes upon architecture such as this. Even though the craftsmanship was masterful, it seemed a single dragon, even in its youth, could take out much of this city before being taken down. *Give one-hundred of my kindred one year and we would show them a city*, he mused as he continued on through the crowds of seemingly friendly people. His chief interest was the source of the water beyond. It was ever present in his mind and drove him to it.

Past the many inns and stables he quickly pressed, astonished at the diversity of races which traversed the seemingly endless cobblestone routes of this place. There was no quarreling, no animosity, no fighting or bickering among any of them that he could see or hear. It impressed him how such a diversity of cultures could get along with one another without war erupting. In any case, Humans were the dominant race here, outnumbering all the other races at least ten to one. Thoughts and questions swarmed like firefall in Sekali's mind as he quickly decided this would be a good place to begin his mission.

Casually, yet warily, he slowly made his way down the incline of the wide

cobblestone road that ran down to a slightly smaller road running perpendicular to the shoreline where three great wooden docks stretched far out into the water.

Two ships anchored off the end of two of the three docks were bridged with large, thick, wide wooden planks. Many goods were being unloaded from one ship and broken up into neatly organized stacks nearby.

To either side of him were men and women selling their wares. One dealt in metals and wood. Another was selling strange creatures with fins for legs, which he thought rather odd. One Human girl, no more than twenty seasons, he guessed, was selling breads of different colors and shapes. She was offering bite-sized pieces to everyone that walked by. She seemed to be enjoying her trade. As he neared, she caught his eye and smiled warm as the sun on his back.

“Sir, would you like to try a piece of cinnamon bread, or carrot cake?” He stopped before her and looked at what she offered, just as his hood was blown back from his head. With a hardened look, he met her eye, half expecting her to back away. Instead, she grinned brightly.

“I absolutely love your hair,” she stated. “I wish I could do braids like those.” Taken back by her words, and the compliment, instantly softened his mood.

Reaching out, he took up a piece of the cinnamon bread and smelled it. Nibbling on it, he tested its flavor, then ate the bite-sized piece. Removing his flask, he unstopped it. After swallowing he lifted the flask to his mouth and washed it down with the last of his water, then returned it to his side.

Reluctantly, Sekali made a decision to cautiously open up to the Human. He was sent to get information. To do that, he needed to communicate. Why, of all things, did he have to speak with them? Why could he not receive orders to go spy on a dragon, or kill imps? Looking at the woman in front of him, he noticed she was watching him in expectation. Sighing, he forced himself to say something . . . anything.

“Thank you, Human. It was delicious,” he forced himself to say.

“You are welcome. My name is Naria, sir.” Bowing in respect, Sekali

looked at the bread she held.

“I would trade you some braiding techniques for another . . . sample.” He pointed at the cake she held, and waited. Cringing, she held them up.

“Go ahead, I don't mind.” Taking another, Sekali first looked at it, then her.

“It is more delicious than any bread I have ever tasted.” Flattered, the Human seemed suddenly happy.

“I will give you an entire loaf if you teach me three braids . . . of course, if I am not asking too much of you. Maybe you are busy.” Sekali shook his head.

“I have time,” he stated, eating the bread sample. She quickly handed him another, then turned her attention toward the back of her booth.

“Tamith, could you come help me out?” Instantly, a small girl, not half her height, came out from the back of the booth, smiling as brightly at the older female. Upon seeing Sekali, she stopped, her smile instantly vanishing as she lowered her head.

“Tamith, this is a gentleman who is expert in braiding hair. He is going to teach me how to do three braids.” Not wishing to scare the child, he quickly introduced himself.

“My name is Sekali,” he said, glancing at the older girl. “My apologies for being informal.” Un-shouldering his pack, Sekali knelt down before Tamith. “Tamith, can you keep a secret?” The small girl slowly looked up at him and nodded, curiosity getting the best of her.

“Yes sir,” she stated, as if subdued.

“I am not from this land. I traveled here to learn everything I can. You know what I've learned just now?” Tamith shook her head.

“No sir, what?” she replied, a bit curious.

“Just like your mother, you are beautiful.” Tamith smirked.

“That's my sister. I don't have a momma, or a papa,” she stated as a matter-of-fact. Looking up at Naria, Sekali could not help notice a sudden pain in the older girl's eyes. Secretly, Sekali's heart stabbed him in the chest at the memory of his own loss thirty years ago. Not knowing why, he removed his gauntlet and

glove and held out a hand, offering it to the child. Tamith looked up at her sister, who nodded with a smile. Ever so slowly, Tamith rested her small hand in his. Gently, Sekali wrapped his fingers about her delicate hand and sighed. This was so unexpected; so unlooked for.

“Can I tell you something I have not shared with anyone in thirty years?” Tamith looked up at him and nodded, trusting Sekali because of her sister.

“Yes sir,” she whispered. Taking a deep breath, Sekali forced his emotions to leave him alone, locking them away in a place where they were invisible, even to him, he opened up to the most unlikely person, surprising himself.

“Thirty years ago, I married a beautiful woman who died a few days after we were joined. I have a mother and father, but I don't think I will be seeing them for a very long time. The good thing is, you have a sister that looks after you, and you look after her, and that is very important. You both stick together, okay?” The lock he had set to keep his emotions far away began to open as a sadness began to show in his eyes. Noticing, she threw him a broken smile.

“Really?” Squeezing her little hand sentimentally, Sekali took in a deep breath, then sighed.

“Really,” he whispered. He suddenly loved this child, as if she were his own, he knew not why. The scene of the child he had saved so long ago began to play out in his mind. “Would you like to know another secret?” Tamith wiped her eyes dry, and then reached up and touched the side of Sekali's face.

“Yes sir.”

“I have been traveling for a long time in the wilderness. I am dirty and smelly. I am going to find a place to bathe, then return and show you and your sister three braids, but only if you want to learn them. Do we have a deal?” Sekali looked up at the older girl, who raised her eyebrows and grinned enthusiastically. Tamith giggled happily and looked up at her sister.

“Naria, can we learn some braids, oh, please?” Naria laughed.

“Of course we can. We are here every day. Here, take a few more of these.” She took two of each samples of a few various breads, wrapped them up and

handed them over to Sekali.

Letting go Tamith's hand, Sekali opened his pack, spotting a pouch that held some coin. Opening it within his pack, so as to conceal what he was doing, Sekali fished out two electrum coins. After retying the pouch, he secured his pack, still hiding the coins. Standing, he took Naria's hand and slipped the money into it, placing a finger to his mouth.

“These are for you. I hope this helps you and your sister out. I will return shortly to teach you the braids.” Naria curtsied.

“Thank you sir,” she stated as she secretly opened her hand. Instantly, her eyes widened in disbelief. “Thank you so much,” she whispered. Sekali placed a hand over his heart and bowed shortly. Fitting his leather glove and gauntlet back on, he looked around.

“Where would be the best place to bathe quickly? I do not wish to draw any attention,” he stated, pulling his leather hood up, concealing his face once again. Naria pointed down toward the ships.

“Once you reach the docks, turn left,” she pointed, “and continue on for half a mile. There is a place Tamith and I go every night after we close up shop. Along the beach there is a grove of trees. It is seldom explored.” Tamith suddenly brightened up.

“But you can go into our secret hideout anytime,” she whispered. We know a special place there that nobody else knows about. It's at the center of the trees, behind a large rock. We cover it so no one finds it. That is where we live.” Naria rolled her eyes.

“Well, you just gave it away, Tamith. I was going to tell him about the stream, not our hole in the ground.” Sekali placed a gentle hand on Naria's arm.

“Your secret is safe with me, I swear it.” Naria sighed, then nodded.

“Thank you sir. Within our once secret place, you will find water and clean linen. Use what you will. I will clean up after you. I hope to see you soon,” she stated. Tamith reached up and touched Sekali's braids with enthusiasm.

“Wow, you are beautiful,” Tamith exclaimed. “I wish I had a daddy just like

you.” Stunned by her words, Sekali slowly stood, keeping his composure. Coming into the Living World was not at all what he expected.

“I will return shortly. Thank you both.” Bowing, he walked away, adjusting his hood to cover the instant longing he felt. At a distance, he secretly stopped and watched the two girls for a time, making sure they had not been observed by unwanted company. After a while, seeing them safe, he moved on, avoiding the docks.

Once out of sight, he began running to make up for the time he had spent watching Naria and Tamith. The sun would be setting soon, and darkness would shortly replace the daylight in a blanket of night. Although the night did not hinder his vision, it would the girls.

After exploring a bit, he found the crop of trees Tamith had so innocently told him about and slipped into the cover of the wooded area. The shade and evening breeze were welcome as he searched quickly for the place Tamith had spoken of.

Finding a large, moss-covered boulder, he walked around it, instantly spying out a covered entrance that lead into the ground. But as he neared it, he heard laughter coming from within the hole. He recalled the girls saying it was a secret place. Quietly, he climbed up on to the top of the boulder, unshouldered his pack, and knelt, listening quietly to what he figured was no less than four men.

“When they come back, we'll surprise em`. They are young, and will be easy to subdue. The ship leaves tomorrow, so don't be late if you go a drinken`. The Captain will leave us all. Tomorrow, we'll be clear and free.” There was a pause.

“I get the older girl, that's our deal. I paid you well in advance. We have a deal, right?”

“Of course we do. I get the young one. Give her a few years and she will make a good -” The talking stopped for a few moments.

“Did you hear that?”

“Yes. I believe they are returning, though early. Maybe they sold their

wares early.”

“Is our Assassin out and about?”

“She is nearby.”

“Why did you hire an Assassin? They are killers. Why not just a common thief? They stalk better.” As Sekali listened, a woman's voice whispered directly from behind him.

“So, I capture the two, and you are the paymaster, correct?” Sekali found a dagger at his throat. At first, he wondered if he was about to be bled out. Assassins were no joke, and, like a fool, he had just walked into a trap. He simply nodded and opened his pack. Pulling out his pouch of coin, he handed it over his shoulder without looking back, and waited. As the pouch was taken, he waited until the female's blade was removed from his neck.

“You pay well. I'll make you a deal. You kill the men, I keep the money, and you get the girls for yourself. Deal?” Nodding once, Sekali agreed. Focusing his communication in the Human dialect, he focused on leaving behind his Sardakk accent.

“That's only half payment. When I have the girls for my own, I will give you another,” he whispered in a deep voice.

“Really. Why are they worth so much to you?” came a smooth reply. Turning slightly, Sekali looked at a dark-skinned Elf, not of Sardakahn. She was Mirellian Elf, the sworn enemy of the Sardakk, his kin. He was thankful for the hood concealing his face. Had it been down, he was sure the shiv she held to his neck would have been the last thing he had ever learned in the Living World.

“They are of noble blood. I can ransom them for a hundred times what I will pay you. They are worth the risk.” Sheathing her blade, the woman gave Sekali a wicked grin.

“Then I want half,” she began. Quickly, before she had time to say another word, he pointed a finger down through the boulder.

“I'll give you thirty percent, no more.” She chuckled cynically.

“Forty-five,” she bargained.

“Thirty-five,” he countered.

“Forty.”

“Deal, Assassin,” Sekali stated darkly. But I want no witnesses, and the girls are mine, so no other dealing. This is final. The men down there need to be taken down. I want them alive.” Throwing him an odd look, she shrugged.

“Why?”

“Information.”

“Half, I want an even split for this, or no deal.” Sekali frowned, then sighed quietly.

“Agreed, half. If you can take them down without injury, I will give you the fifty percent. I can make up the loss with those four, as long as they are not harmed.”

“How so?” she persisted from behind.

“They have assets and a ship. I want it all.” Raising an eyebrow at him, she thought about it.

“A ship is worth quite a bit. I want some of the spoils on board.” Shaking his head, Sekali denied the demand.

“No. Fifty percent is generous enough. In the end, I still have to kill them, and I'm a fool if that ship doesn't have at least a crew of thirty. I need them all alive – until they are of no use to me.” Waving a hand out in no certain direction, the Assassin's eyes became cold, filled with malice.

“I have a back-up nearby. I can help you with that. Take my assistance in this, or it may bode ill for you.” Sekali's anger instantly flared to life, though he subdued his feelings, masking them.

“Are you threatening me?” Sekali hissed. Shaking her head, the Assassin denied it.

“No, not in the least. You have the money, we will help you. You pay more, so you have my loyalty for this one job.” Nodding once, he turned back toward the opening below, as if preoccupied.

Sekali had the ability to slip into darkness, wherein he knew no pain. It was

his place of comfort. On the other hand, the Mirellian could actually shift into shadow, providing there were shadows to blend with. A Mirellian Elf Assassin was a deadly foe, and he knew it. If there was another, he was in for a death match. If she knew he was Sardakk Elf, she would attack, and he would be hard-pressed to win this conflict.

“Okay, I'll go down and incapacitate them. Follow me after a few moments.” Sekali continued his attention toward the opening, feeling suddenly ill and angry. He knew full well what Naria and Tamith would be used for, and it began to make him sick inside.

“Do not kill them.” Agreeing, the Mirellian nimbly jumped off the boulder and landed without sound. Quickly, she entered down in through the hole.

He waited for a while, then placed a hand on the top of his hood, grabbed his pack and jumped down. If he went back now, either he would be followed, or attacked. It was too risky to simply fetch the girls and leave the area. No, now he was committed to a task he had performed many times before. There was one difference; he was alone.

Turning, he ducked down and entered into a rather large dirt cave. Upon entering, he stood, surveying the Assassin's handy work. Four men lay up against the wall, as if they had fallen asleep. Walking over to them, he checked them for breathing. They were alive.

“You are skilled,” he complimented, keeping his accent concealed.

“It's what I do, master Warrior.” Sekali opened his pack and brought out a flask. Setting it aside, he pointed to the middle of the cave.

“I need a small fire built, there.” Pulling out a dagger, he ran his thumb across its edge. “Just a small flame, sufficient to heat my blade.” Without hesitation, the woman in black leathers exited the cave.

“I'll get some wood.” After she departed, Sekali grabbed one of the men by the neck and lifted him off the ground. Walking over to the entrance, he set him down with his back against the earthen wall. Another, he placed at the back of the cave, facing the man at the entrance. He then placed the other two on either side,

opposite each other. He then stood back and looked at their positioning. All four were spaced apart. This would do.

Casually he retrieved two more flasks from within his pack and poured the contents of each of the three flasks evenly onto the legs of the four unconscious men. He then drew a circle at the center of the chamber and surrounded it with hand-sized rocks, signifying where he wanted the fire lit.

Looking about the girls make-shift home, he located a blanket. Grabbing his dagger, he cut the blanket into strips and tied up the four men, then gagged them with no gentleness. He then cut more strips and blindfolded them. After blindfolding the last one, Sekali dug the middle knuckle of his index finger into one of the men's upper lip, just below the nose. It was easily enough to wake him. As the would-be abductor came to, he instantly panicked.

“Do not struggle, or I will set your legs on fire, understand?” Nodding in sudden terror, the man stiffened. “Be still, and listen to the other three. When you have listened to them, I will allow you to speak. If you resist, you will burn.” Sekali stood and turned, seeing the Assassin, who had returned without his notice, watching him. Motioning with a hand, he pointed at the center of the floor.

“Will you do me the honor of building a flame . . . hand-sized, small. I don't want to choke the oxygen out of here, defeating my own self.” Snickering, she nodded and broke up a small, lengthy branch.

“I hope I learn something new here,” she whispered, eagerly pulling out a tinderbox. Laughing quietly, Sekali looked at her, wondering where the other Assassin was. Patience . . .

“If I do show you something new, will you have dinner with me tonight?” Smiling, she shrugged.

“Are you paying?” she inquired, sounding pleased at his invitation.

“It would be my pleasure. I've traveled in the wilds for far too long, I need something warm to fill my belly. And, if you would be merciful, something warm to fill my bed.” Sekali felt sick to his stomach at the words he spoke.

“I like my steak rare,” the Mirellian Elf said, looking him up and down.

Laughing softly, Sekali felt revolted at the proposition he had landed on his enemy. Her presence sickened him. It didn't matter. He was at ease; the Wastelands had forged him well. Feeling neither tense, or uneasy, he smirked.

“Unlike you, well done suits me fine.” A fire began to glow within the wood. Leaning down, the Mirellian Elf gently blew it to life until there was a very small fire crackling. Warming her hands over it, she shivered.

“It's getting cold, and I'm getting hungry.”

“Then, let's get on with the fun.” Giving him a strange look, she nodded.

“Don't tell me this is your first time,” Sekali stated flatly. Smiling without showing her teeth, she shook her head.

“Oh, no. I've done this many times. It all ends the same -- warm and cozy at a fine inn. That's the happy ending to our relationship. Then we part, probably never to see each other again.”

“That's the best way . . . no ties,” Sekali agreed. Smiling pleasantly, she looked at the fire, adding a few small pieces to it.

“No ties, master Warrior. What is your name?” Sekali shook his head, keeping his name to himself. Shrugging, she watched him, as if suddenly a predator, and he, her prey. Walking over to the fire, he knelt down, facing her, though keeping his face concealed, an instinctive warning beginning to burn within his entire being. She was no mere Mirellian Assassin. This woman was more than what met the eye, or he was a fool.

Sekali grabbed his dagger and held it over the flame, heating it. As he did, he sparked a casual, if not revolting, conversation.

“Has anyone ever told you, you are beautiful?” Flattered, she relaxed and lowered her head.

“Sometimes. I don't think I am. I mean, I'm not ugly. But I just can't see myself as beautiful when I look into a mirror.” As if she had just made a joke, she laughed. Sekali shook his head, watching his blade begin to char over the small flame.

“Well, you are. I look forward to having you for dinner tonight.” She

laughed.

“What a choice of words,” she teased.

“You know what I mean.” Taking up a stick from the fire, Sekali walked over to the unconscious man at the entrance to the cave. casually, he set his legs on fire. Without hesitation, he stood and smiled, as the kerosine slowly began to burn.

Turning, he walked over to the next two and caught them on fire as well, as the Assassin watched in fascination. Throwing the flaming stick onto the lap of the last, Sekali turned and threw the heated dagger into the chest of the second Assassin who suddenly appeared, shimmering into view as the fire banished the deeper shadows all about the chamber. Straight to her heart his dagger plunged, even as he ripped a second blade from its sheath as she collapsed face first to the dirt floor of the cave.

In an instant, a chorus of screams filled his ears, their cries and struggling a sickening display to behold as the stench of hair and skin began to permeate the area.

In shock, the Mirellian Elf he had made the deal with spun on him in silence, facing Sekali, staring at him in fear and disbelief. Blocking the entrance, Sekali pulled his hood back, revealing himself to her.

“Give me your name!” he yelled above the screams of the four, a serious gleam in his eyes that meant business. Backing away from him, she snarled, bearing fangs. Shrugging, Sekali frowned. “I’m not impressed! Is there a message you would have me deliver your next of kin?” Not being able to back up further, she began to tremble.

“I should have killed you!” In open scorn, Sekali shook his head.

“You made two mistakes, Vampire! One, you were born Mirellian! The other, you gave up what shred of humanity you had, and combined it with the stench of the dead!” Looking around, she panicked.

“I did not make that choice! It was forced upon me! And I am not Mirellian!” Sekali growled at her like an animal, suddenly filled with rage.

“Then what are you!” Sekali screamed, competing with the struggling men thrashing about, their cries changing to moans and gasps of horror. He did not take his eyes off her. “Tell me now!”

“I am Sardakk Elf, come to scout out the Living World, just like you! We can still save these men!” Sekali looked at her in disbelief.

“Prove it now, or I end this!” The woman quickly braided six perfect braids to the left of her head, tucking them into her long, black hair.

“Ita jihin mien shishin, jijin (I am your sister, brother).” Sekali's eyes widened, the mistake of what he had just committed showing openly. Quickly, he sheathed his blade. As he did, she launched at him with incredible speed, slamming him into the wall next to the entrance as she snapped her teeth onto his neck with great force. As he had gambled, the impact, and damage, was absorbed by his full plate armoring.

With a cry, the Vampire pulled away, her eyes widening in disbelief. Gripping her head, he forced her to look into his eyes and he witnessed her pupils begin to expand.

“I . . . I -” ”Do not speak, but mourn your own passing!” he yelled, cutting her off, his eyes narrowing like some terrible predator. Letting her go, she staggered back, looking down at the hilt of a dagger protruding from her chest, just over her heart. Stepping to the side, Sekali shook his head in disapproval as she gripped the hilt of his dagger. Unsheathing his blade with adept swiftness, he beheaded the undead Mirellian in one smooth motion.

Without emotion, he walked over to the other vampire and did likewise, then dispatched the four men in the same manner as the decaying corpses of both vampires disintegrated into a whirlwind of dust. It was fascinating how the bones of their skeletal remains cracked and splintered, collapsing to the dirt floor of the cave, as the hand of atrophy gripped them at an astonishing pace. In a few short moment's time, a full century of decay disintegrated their remains to ash, leaving two silhouettes of their skeletal frames upon the dirt as a tell-tale sign of their passing.

After cleaning his sword and both daggers, he sheathed them. Gathering up his money pouch, and everything else of possible value, Sekali silently hooded himself and departed Naria and Tamith's decimated home, heading directly out to the water beyond the wooded area.

Looking around, and finding himself alone, he stripped and bathed, keeping a lookout for the girls. In great haste, he washed his cloak and clothing, followed by his armoring. Last of all, he washed his hair and braided it quickly. Without letting any of his clothing, armor or hair dry, he headed back in haste to find the girls packing up their goods. As he approached them, a look of sympathy etched into the features of his face. Pausing, he took a deep breath, then neared.

“I apologize for being late. Will you forgive me?” Startled, Naria turned and greeted him with a broad smile.

“Hello, of course. We we are just closing up for the evening. I'm not sure about how Tamith feels, but I forgive you.” Tamith looked up from the last knot she was securing and waved.

“Hello,” she laughed, throwing a know-it-all glance at her sister, “I knew you would make it.” She then turned her attention back to securing the last corner of the canvas covering the booth.

Sekali looked at the both the girls, suddenly feeling responsible for them. What would happen to them now? They had no home, if that's what they had called it. No, they had nothing to go back to. All their possessions were ruined. The only belongings which remained were the ones they were now double-checking. As he watched them, the gruesome part of it all began to fade away into relief.

“Tell me, Naria, do you have any family anywhere?” She gave him a strange look, then nodded.

“Yes, but they live in Gaunten, which is a very long way from here. Why?” Sekali walked up to her and took her hands in his.

“If I bought passage for you both to get to Gaunten, would you want to go there?” Naria's eyes brightened, as well as Tamith's.

“More than you know sir. Why do you ask such questions, and, more yet, why would you offer such? You don't know us.” There was no hesitation in his answer.

“Because I know what it is like to feel alone.” Leaning forward, he whispered quietly, so Tamith would not hear. “I went to your home. There were four men within. I spied on them. They were going to capture you both and take you on a ship. They were going to keep you as slaves.” Horrified, Naria shot a look back at Tamith, who was tying a quadruple knot. Looking back at him, she shook her head ever-so-slight.

“What now, sir?” she said, pulling both hands free of his. Trembling, she looked up and then folded her arms to keep her little sister from noticing her fear. Naria was scared, and Sekali could not blame her in the least.

“Let's get you two into an inn. You are not sleeping in the streets. Will your belongings be safe here for tonight?” She nodded.

“There has never been a problem. But all of this will be confiscated if I am not here to sell by tomorrow, just before noon.” Sekali thought for a moment, then looked toward the sea, a thought coming to mind.

“I have an idea that just might work. Come with me.” Turning to Tamith, Naria smiled and held out a hand, her face masking any fear she felt. It impressed Sekali just how suddenly calm and reassuring Naria was. Both girls followed Sekali down to the docks. As they walked, Tamith began to lag behind, obviously getting tired. Noticing, Sekali turned and picked her up, cradling her in his arms, giving her a warm grin, then continued on.

Never in all his days, would Sekali have fathomed how his first day in a Living World civilization would end. Yet, here he was, standing as a champion of a race he had, until this day, hated, despised and suspected of the evil atrocities toward his people. Looking down at Tamith, his heart softened as she threw him a fading smile. At the time she closed her eyes, Sekali, hardened Warrior of The Watch, knew there would be no other path to sway him out of the course of seeing these two safe. No, not before his life was ended. He would not leave them until

he knew they would be safe in Gaunten.

Stopping at the end of the cobblestone road that led down onto the docks, he spied out each ship, one of which was yet being loaded. Fixing his gaze upon it, he whispered.

“Come with me. Let's go find out where this ship is headed.” Sekali saw Naria hesitate. Understanding, he turned to her.

“If you like,” he whispered, “I will spend the entire voyage with you. I will personally escort you both to Gaunten, and into the presence and safety of your loved ones. I swear an oath, I will do everything in my power to get you to your extended family safe. If you need proof of my words, we can go to your secret place. Then you can see the truth for yourself. One thing though, they spoke of a ship in the area they were to take you to. Very soon, they will know something has gone wrong. Naria, you and your sister have been watched for some time now, or I am a fool.” He waited for her response, willing to do whatever she wished. Naria looked at the ship being loaded, then to Sekali.

“Would you mind if we go to our hideout and see?” Naria had doubts. She did not know him, and so needed an anchor of trust. Still, to ask him to show her, was to place some faith in him. Frankly, he knew she had no other choice. He suspected she and her sister were desperate and out of options. Without hesitation, he guided Naria west to the edge of the great dock. Looking down, he hesitated only long enough to hand Naria one of his daggers, handle first.

“Conceal this and follow, keeping to my right,” he whispered above the constant noise of the surf. “Keep the blade hidden, Naria, and do not cut yourself, even a scratch. It is enchanted to do more damage than a master crafted blade with the keenest edge. Keep it concealed, as the element of surprise is always critical in any situation. Can you do that?” Taking the dagger, she folded it in her dress, nodding.

Down a winding path of sand, held in place by thick clusters of strange vegetation, they descended out onto the beach. Moving toward the shoreline, where the sand was moist from the coming and going of the tide, Sekali took the

lead, keeping a keen eye out for others in the area who might be confederate with those he put down.

In one of the few times in his life, he felt nervous, even frightened, but not for himself. Feeling this fragile child in his arms, his thoughts strayed. He could have had a daughter. She would have been close to thirty seasons by now. If he had a daughter, he would do anything to ensure her safety. He could have had a daughter as old as Naria. If so, and had men conspired to take her, he would have ended them, as well as any who were confederate with such evil designs. For these two, this was a desperate situation, and, at this point in time, he their only shield.

As they approached the wooded area, he carefully lead Naria into the grove of trees, straining both eye and ear for danger. As far as he could tell, they were alone. Reaching the entrance, Sekali smelled the burnt bodies and stench of the dead, mingled with an unpleasant odor he recognized as the disintegration of the two undead. Naria stopped and looked at Sekali in sudden trepidation.

“Naria, please don't go in,” he stated, keeping his voice low. For a moment, she seemed undecided. Then, setting her jaw firm, she entered. Carefully, Sekali followed after Naria, protectively cradling Tamith from the foliage and falling soil at the entrance. As he entered, he saw Naria, who stood within, a sickened look twisted into her face as she held her sleeve to her face. He should have disposed of the bodies. The stench of burnt flesh was heavy in the air, mingled with stagnant smoke. Walking over to Naria, Sekali handed Tamith to her.

“Here, take her. I have torches in my pack.” Naria took Tamith, who stirred, but did not awaken. Hastily, Sekali retrieved a torch and a vile of liquid wax from his pack. After a few moments, he readied the torch to be lit.

“Last chance Naria. We can simply leave now. What you are about to see will forever be etched and burnt into your memory. It will leave you with nightmares. What do you want to do?”

“Light it, please,” she whispered, gagging. Reluctantly, Sekali struck two flint rocks into the head of the torch once; enough to ignite a small flame that quickly burned brighter over a few seconds. As it did, he kept a careful eye on

Naria. Deep horror washed over the features of her beautiful face, yet she did not scream, nor run. Looking around, she looked down upon the carnage of the scene in silence for a time.

“You did this?” Reluctantly, Sekali nodded.

“They were going to take you and your sister. I heard them talking. It was their plan to sell you as slaves. Naria, as beautiful as you and Tamith are, the slaves you would have become would have ruined you forever. Life as you know it now, no matter how difficult, would have been desirable compared to what would have been in store for you. I'm sorry I had to show you this . . . but I am not sorry about saving you from a fate worse than death.” Naria handed Tamith back to Sekali in morbid silence and took the torch. Making her way around the decimated Vampire corpse, she walked over to the far end of the cave and knelt down, ignoring the body close by. Stabbing the torch into the soil, she began to dig, using the dagger she held.

Sekali walked over and watched her, keeping an eye and ear out for intruders as Naria unearthed a wooden box and pulled up out of the dirt. With shaking hands, she opened the top of the box and pulled out a brush, a comb, some twine and a small cloth pouch, into which she always placed her earnings. Though she did not have many possessions, this was all she had. Grabbing the torch, she stood and turned, tears beginning to stream her face.

“I have to be brave for Tamith. Please, let's get out of here. We'll take our chances on one of the departing ships. Sekali, thank you. You saved our lives.” Turning, Sekali led her back out into the grove. He felt Naria grab his cloak as she followed him with the burning torch. “I'm scared,” she whispered as they exited the hole in the ground. Sekali listened for intruders, eyeing the area all about him.

“To fear is to be cautious. But never let fear keep you from your goal. If you give into fear, Naria, it becomes your most deadly enemy. Let it help you make wise choices. Let it be your compass for the direction you will follow, but do not let it rule you.” Naria wiped her eyes and pulled close to him. Looking down at Tamith with a look of concern, she forced a half-smile.

“I can't lose her. I reject fear. I accept you.” Leaning up, she embraced Sekali. Shocked, Sekali froze, not knowing what to do. “Can we go to the ship now?” Gathering his senses, Sekali nodded and looked down at Tamith.

“Yes. Let's go see where this ship is headed. Do you need to go back and gather some things?” Vehemently, Naria shook her head.

“I feel watched. Please, can you take us to the ship?” Sekali nodded.

“I cannot promise you it is heading in the direction you need, but yes. Let's go find out.” With that, he wrapped a protective arm about her shoulders and escorted her back to the docks.

He did not see a lone figure watching them from the edge of the grove of trees as they departed.

Arriving back, Sekali did not hesitate to lead them up the wooden plank and up onto the deck of the ship.

“I need to speak to the Captain of this vessel please!” he called out in a firm voice. A large man emerged from behind a stack of barrels and stalked over to the three, taking in everything about them, especially Sekali.

“I am the Captain of this vessel. What do you want?” He asked in a deep voice.

“Where is this ship headed, and can you take on three passengers willing to pay?” Raising a hand to his chin, he looked Naria, Tamith and then Sekali, scrutinizing him with a steady eye.

“We head west, following the coastline until we reach Westwood. From there, we return to here. This is my usual route.”

“I need to get these sisters out of here. They need to be safe. I will escort them from Westwood, wherever that may be.”

“What is there destination?” The Captain inquired, suddenly curious.

“Gaunten.” The man raised an eyebrow.

“You are Sardakk,” he stated knowingly. Sekali nodded. “You and I need to

talk, alone, now,” the Captain stated in all seriousness. Sekali shook his head.

“I have sworn to keep them safe. I will not leave them.” The Captain took a step toward Sekali.

“I swear an oath, they will not be taken, nor harmed. I have spoken.” The Captain’s last words came as a surprise to him. Handing Tamith to Naria, Sekali nodded, intrigued by this man's choice of words. Naria looked at Sekali in fear.

“You will be safe, and I will not be long, I promise. Is this acceptable to you?” Naria looked scared out of her wits.

“We will wait here, sir,” her voice quivered, tears spilling down her delicate face. The Captain looked at her.

“You are brave. I respect that. Please, sit down over there.” He pointed at a few barrels. “Not the most comfortable of arrangements, but at least you can rest a bit. I promise, we won't be long. My men will see to your every need, and keep you safe. Is this acceptable to you?” Naria looked at Sekali, then nodded.

“Yes sir.” Pleased, the large, burly man motioned Sekali to follow him, leading him to the other side of the ship, yet remaining in visual sight of the girls. Stopping, he turned and snapped his fingers. Instantly, lanterns were lit all about Sekali, who suddenly understood the Captain's precautions.

“I am Sekali, Sardakk Elf, from Sardakahn Citadel. What do I need to do to convince you of this?” The Captain snapped his fingers loudly.

“A little test will do nicely. If you say you are from Sardakahn Citadel, then tell me this. Who is your greatest enemy.

“Those who oppose King Nishane Asmond,” came his answer, and quick.

“Is there a race that you consider -” “Mirellian,” Sekali cut in, narrowing his eyes dangerously. The Captain chuckled.

“Sekali, why are you in these lands? If you lie to me, I will take the girls to Westwood, but throw your body to the sharks.” Sekali was confused.

“What are sharks?” Shaking his head, Sekali held up a hand. “Forget that question. I am in these, the living lands at the command of my master, the Mystic of Sardakahn, the keeper of the Monolith.”

“And what undead mixes its body with the Monolith?”

“None that I know of, but a Wasteland Dragon does, it's gaping jaws form the entrance.” Not yet satisfied, the Captain continued to question Sekali.

“The tunnel that spirals upward into the top of the Monolith are lit by what type of candles?”

“The tunnel slopes downward, and they are not candles, but enchanted torches. I believe them to be ultra-violet flames, ever-burning, but never consuming the wood they burn upon, sir.”

“Last question, Sekali. There was a terrible battle there three decades ago. In that battle, who participated, and who of significance perished last of all?” Sekali looked at the Captain, instantly shocked and horrified. Tears welled up in his eyes as he stared at his questioner.

“How do you know about that?” Sekali hoarsely choked. Eyes hardening like stone, the Captain stared unblinking at him, waiting. “I did, with a host of defenders, among who were the Gate Guardians. Please do not make me tell you more.” The Captain was not moved.

“Throw him overboard,” the Captain commanded. Sekali pulled his blade free and readied to kill them all, instant anger blazing like a dragon's wrath. The Captain looked him up and down, not a spark of fear in his demeanor.

“You cannot save the girls,” the Captain stated in an even voice, holding up a hand to stay his crew, who had drawn their weapons. Sekali looked over to Naria and Tamith, who was still sleeping, and shuddered.

“Mahkaia was the last to fall!” Undaunted by Sekali's change in appearance, the large man persisted.

“And who was she to you?” Sekali dropped his blade, collapsing to the deck, pounding the wood three times with a fist.

“My wife!” He looked up at the Captain and screamed, suddenly hating the man. Grabbing his blade, he stood.

“Let's get this over with!” Holding up both hands, the Captains demeanor changed, softening.

“We are done here. Sekali, I had to be sure you were who you said you were. I will take the two girls to Gaunten personally. You need not escort them. They will be perfectly safe.” Bewildered, Sekali looked at the leader of the vessel, running an arm over his eyes.

“How do you know all that? How did you know who I was?” The Captain waved his men away. When they were gone back to their duties, he shook his head.

“I get around, and legend is my speciality. I have gotten word there are two Mirellian Elves in the area. I had to be sure you were not one of them.”

“They are no more,” Sekali stated. “I killed them earlier this evening in an underground that way,” Sekali pointed, “in a grove of trees where sets a large boulder, beneath which lies a hollow. These girls were supposed to have been taken by them and sold as slaves. There is a ship about the area they were supposed to be taken to. The ship is still out there, somewhere. Both Mirellians were Vampire. The four ship hands who were to take them to the ship are dead along with the two undead filth.” Sekali waited for the Captain's reply, which came as an outburst of laughter. Looking over to one of his crew members, he nodded. Instantly the man bolted from the ship, sprinting down the gangplank.

“I hope you don't mind if I verify your story.” Sekali shook his head, sheathing his blade.

“I will pay you for taking the girls to Gaunten.” Holding up a hand, the Captain denied.

“Keep your money. I'm sure I'll receive payment enough by delivering the girls to the king myself. Is there any message you wish to give the king? I will deliver it for you personally.” Sekali thought for a moment, shook his head, then looked at the two girls.

“Please keep them safe. They are special; I can feel it.” The Captain nodded. After a long while, the runner returned, stopping before his Captain, quickly catching his breath.

“His story is true.” He then walked away, returning to his duties. The large

man grinned, as if pleased.

“Would to Vannar, we had your entire team here in this area. It's been trying as of late with these accursed pirates and all.” Shrugging, he quickly changed the subject.

“Now, Sekali, you need not worry about the girls. I give you my word, on my life, they are safe here with me. They will be escorted directly into Gaunten, as I promised.” Sekali felt a great sense of relief flood through him as the Captain continued. “This ship will be setting sail tomorrow morning. Go, speak with them; see what they need. Then do what seems good to you. Sekali, I am sorry about causing you so much pain. It had to be done.” The Captain held out a hand, which Sekali took.

“Thank you,” Sekali whispered, then turned away and walked over to Naria, who was cradling Tamith against her. Gently, he took her up into his arms. Sitting beside Naria, he looked at her.

“How are you holding up?” Warily, she leaned her head against Sekali's shoulder.

“Exhausted, but good. Thank you for all you are doing for us. I feel safe now. I am in your debt sir. I also heard every word. She looked up at him sympathetically, to which he threw her a quick smile.

“Sounds like we have some things in common. I will go with you to Gaunten; see you safely there,” he stated with resolution. Naria shook her head.

“Sekali, from what I just heard, I believe you need to be here, now, in this area.” He looked into Naria's eyes, seeing in her a wisdom beyond her years. After an awkward silence, Naria rested a gentle hand upon his arm.

“Sekali, if you ever make it to Gaunten, will you please look us up?” Fighting against a sting forming in his heart, he looked down at her hand.

“Of course I will. It would be my pleasure to see you and Tamith again.” Pleased, Naria looked down at the child he held.

“Tamith stirred why you were talking with the Captain. You know what she mumbled?” Sekali brushed back the child's hair.

“What did she say?” Naria quietly stood, turned and unbuckled Sekali's helm with difficulty, working it free of his head. Grunting, she finally pulled it free and set it respectfully down at his feet.

“She said, 'where's my new daddy?’” Sekali, thought about it, genuinely flattered. After a long moment of silence, Naria began to fidget uncomfortably.

“Will you teach me those braids now? And will you teach me some of your customs and language before you go?” she whispered. Sekali stood, handed Tamith over to her sister. Walking over to his pack, he fished out his bedroll and laid it down. Tamith mumbled something incoherent as the Captain approached.

“Thank you, Captain.”

“Call me Slate, Slate Broadblade.” Placing a hand over his heart, Sekali bowed his head, giving Slate a formal salute.

“Honor, sir. Thank you for your assistance.” Slate, bowed his head slightly, returning the same.

“Honor and victory to your people at all times, Sekali. May the stroke of your blade forever forge peace in this great land.” Sekali raised a hand to the child's head, brushing hair out of her face, then motioned Naria toward the bedroll. As she walked away, Sekali watched.

“I wish she was mine.” Slate grinned.

“Oh, I believe you are in great danger of that becoming a reality, sir. They are very attached to you. More deeply, Naria.” Sekali frowned.

“They are going away. There is a chance I may never seeing them again.” Slate laughed softly.

“Sekali, Son of Sardakahn, you know not what the future holds. But, I believe great things are coming. I perceive heavy trials ahead of you.” The way the Captain said it, instantly intrigued Sekali.

“Slate, who are you?” he asked as Naria gently laid Tamith down and covered her up.

“I am of The Watch, only not of the Wastelands. Sekali, we are brothers. In the future, you may learn many things. Until then, trust only those you know you

can. Be on your highest guard, and swift to deal the blade out to those who oppose and seek the destruction of this land. My crew and I fight for the king, as do you and your people. We all do our part.” Sekali instantly saluted Captain Slate Broadblade with honor and pride.

“Forever live Nishane Asmond,” Sekali stated with conviction. Slate grinned, as if in the presence of a long and trusted friend, returning the same salute, pride burning like fire within his eyes.

“In the future, seek these two young ladies in the Healers Guild. I believe you will find them there.” Slate turned and walked away. He wanted to know more about this man, but that would have to wait. As of yet, he had more pressing matters to attend to. Turning to Naria, Sekali beckoned to her. As she neared, she threw him a delicate smile.

“Why don't you go lay down with your sister and get some rest. I would like to speak with the Captain for a time. When you both wake up, go and wash your hair and get ready for a Sardakk Elf lesson in culture. It would do you both no good to be weary while I teach you. Naria, in return, will you please teach me some Human customs? All I know is your language.”

“Yes sir, she stated with a short curtsy. Sekali watched her go lay down and cover up in his bedroll with Tamith, pleased at this turn of events.

Slate was a mystery that needed to stay a mystery. Even though Sekali desired the know the history of this man, who patrolled the seas in the service of the same king he and his people were loyal to, it was best to know no more about him. The less he knew, the better, should he be captured and questioned. As his Mahkaia had once demonstrated, thoughts could be read.

Sekali had been relieved of duty by a direct summons from the Mystic of Sardakahn. Upon that day, when the portal had been opened, giving him safe access into the Living World, had he foreseen the events of only this day, Sekali would have leapt through in all haste.

Things were beginning to take root in his life. Though he missed his family, his people and his home, he would not go back now, even if given the choice. A

conviction was beginning to solidify within him to, not only fulfill his master's bidding, but to satisfy a steadily growing curiosity to know more about a people he was beginning to no longer think of as betrayers. How could it possibly be that all Humans were traitorous? What he had learned, at least a portion of it, had to be a mistake.

While the girls slept, Sekali inspected, cleaned, then polished his gear. When they awoke, Slate made sure they were bathed and fed. Once this was done, Sekali led them to a more or less private location on deck.

"Are you still interested in learning some braids?" Both girls grinned eagerly. As he commenced teaching them not only braids, but what they meant, Sekali found his time with them to be the shortest hours he had ever experienced in over three decades.

At a quiet command from Slate, one of the ship hand's began hastily sketching and recording everything into a book of blank pages. When the sun had climbed well over the horizon, Slate gave Sekali a few hand signs, signaling the ship was ready for departure. Slowly, Sekali stood and snatched up a five year old child with far too many braids in her hair.

"You take good care of your sister, okay?"

"I will," she whispered in his ear, then kissed it. "When will you come and see us?" Before putting her down, he gently hugged her.

"Tamith, I have many things to do, but I promise to come and visit as many times as I can, and as soon as I can." Laughing for joy, she squeezed him as hard as she could, then pulled back, grinning happily.

"I'm going to draw you a picture."

"I would like that." Slipping down, she looked up at her sister.

"He's waiting," she said, then walked off to look overboard at the water. Naria was looking at the deck of the ship, her arms folded.

"Take care of your little sister. She is going to need you." Naria laughed emotionally.

"It's funny, she's always taking care of me. She's the nit-picky one." Naria

went quiet for a minute, then looked up at Sekali. "I'm glad you came along. You really did save us. Katcha min (Thank you)," Naria whispered. Sekali bowed.

"Ita ish teiahk (You are welcome)," he replied. "It was my pleasure to kill a couple vampires for you. Should you ever need another dispatched, just call on me." She laughed, losing her composure, and began to weep.

"I will." Wrapping her arms about his neck, she squeezed Sekali tight.

"I hope you do come see us, soon." Sekali touched the braids in her hair.

"Practice the braids a lot and never wear them in an area where Mirellian Elf scum might be. It would not bode well for you. Understand?" She buried her face in his neck and nodded.

"I won't forget . . . you." With that, she released him.

"I will come visit when I can. Naria, when I came here, my heart was so hardened. You have softened it, even if only a little. I only perceived there was darkness in the world. You and your sister have proven me wrong." Her eyes brightened.

"Thank you sir." Sekali sighed, gently placing his weathered hand on the side of her face.

"Naria, you would make an adept healer. You should give it a try." Tears continued to stream her face as she looked at him.

"Then it will be the first thing I look into when we arrive in Gaunten." Nodding, Sekali embraced her again.

"Ita sevor min," he stated sentimentally. She grinned and wiped her eyes.

"Ita sevor min, Sekali." Slowly, she let go, and as she did, he pulled her to him and whispered something in her ear. Blushing, she threw a glance at the young man who had recorded everything for them to remember.

"Please come and visit us." Sekali winked.

"I will. Seek happiness in your life Naria. I hope to see you in the near future. Be safe." With that, Sekali stepped back and formally saluted her. As Sekali nodded to the Captain, he thanked him with a hand-sign. Slate smiled.

"Let's get this ship moving!" he called out as Sekali strapped on his helm,

secured his gauntlets and grabbed his pack. Descending the gangplank, he walked out onto the dock and turned, holding up a hand to the girls, who waved as the gangplank was pulled up onto the ship. Slowly the sails lifted, catching a wind that propelled them out of the harbor and out to sea.

As he watched the ship vanish from sight, he reached up to feel two indents upon his neck-guard; fang bites. He should have had his team there for that fight. It didn't matter; he had no team. The vampires were no more. Not feeling like going back into Navan, he walked out into the night, skirting the city. He needed some quiet time to think and set his mind in order.

He spent the next three days and nights out in the grasslands by himself. On the fourth day, he re-entered the city, as before, pulling his hood back as he approached the guards at the front gate, so they could see his face. Nodding, they stepped aside and let him through.

Again, down the same, wide, cobblestone road, Sekali made his way down toward the docks, noting that Naria and Tamith's vending booth was gone. Moving along, he looked out over the beauty of an ocean he still wished to experience.

As he casually walked along, he noticed a row of fish markets on his left, and vegetable and meat wagons on the right. All the vendors were in an attitude of hustle and bustle, wheeling and dealing. He took express interest in a stout looking Dwarf and a boy bartering with a man over a salted pork slab. The Dwarf didn't seem to be talking very much; only grunts and comments of, "Good drink to be had at the Golden Feather", and, "We waste our time with food pressed upon us daily", and, "Do you sell Kohakk? Then let us go, Shallant!" Taking no more notice of the two, Sekali walked on, pondering the unity among the people in this city.

Sekali came out of his thoughts as, once again, he focused upon the sea before him. Again, he was overwhelmed by the beauty of the breathtaking scene before him as it stretched out into the horizon of a setting sun that seemed to magically set a golden, shimmering, fire upon its surface.

Walking past a group of men loading and unloading their cargo from great

ships harbored at the massive docks, Sekali ignored their stares. He knew he was different from any others here, and so took no offense as they watched him stroll out to the end of an unused dock to sit down, taking in the overwhelming scene before him.

Catching his attention was a group of large fish, not five feet below, swimming in circles and jumping out of the water now and then as they hunted for insects that skimmed the water. He watched them as the light of day faded and night came on. As darkness nestled in upon the land, filling every alley, back street and avenue, Sekali became weary, and hungry.

Before heading back into the city, he left the dock and came to the water's edge where he filled his flask and capped it. Kneeling down, he cupped water in his hands and drank deeply of its cool liquid -- and choked. It was salted! He blanched and recoiled from the water's edge, spitting and choking on the vile liquid. It was salted!! He drew out his flask, emptied it and headed back, his thirst continuing to grow, as well as his disdain for the sea.

Deep in thought, he walked back, not paying attention to those few left in the streets. So consumed by the waste of so much water, he did not see a man come upon him from behind. The moment he heard the footsteps, it was too late, and he knew he had made a fatal mistake.

“Good sir, good sir! Are you seeking a place of refuge this evening?” Sekali spun about, drawing a dagger from a hidden sheath within the sleeve of his right forearm. A rather overweight man fell back, his arms rising up before him, genuine hospitality instantly replaced with fear and panic.

“No, no, I didn't mean . . . please, don't kill me!” As quickly as the dagger had been drawn, it was sheathed. He had let down his guard, and had gotten lucky. It would not happen again. He stepped back two paces and bowed in the custom of the humans.

“Human, I have traveled the wilds for many days. This makes one quick to . . . I regret startling you. What is your name?” The man, recovering from his shock, stuttered and bumbled for a few seconds and then, taking a deep quavering

breath, calmed a bit.

“My name is Thomias. I am the host of the Golden Feather; the inn which you see here.” Thomias pointed a trembling finger at a large inn to his right and bowed politely. “Good master, we have rooms to spare, if you seek a place to stay for the night.” Sekali looked over at the inn for a moment in silence, then nodded to the round man before him.

“Lead on, Thomias.” The host of the Golden Feather led Sekali to the inn's front door, and opened it for his guest, a look of relief in his eyes. As Sekali stepped inside, many things caught his eye. There were paintings on every wall, sculptures upon perfectly sculpted logs, set upright, and many other decorations which made this inn instantly likeable. The masterful craftsmanship of the structure was enhanced by the smell of food and the drone of voices coming from the many patrons within.

He peered through a smokey haze that seemed to hang permanently in the air, like a mild wasteland mist released indoors. At the center of the large common room, stood a great, stone hearth, a healthy fire dancing among the stacked logs within. Around the hearth were tables and chairs, neatly arranged and properly maintained. Taking in the warmth of both the inn and its host, he decided to stay.

Thomias hooked both his thumbs through a perfectly stain-free, white apron and nodded at a table in the far corner.

“I suspect you would like a corner seat, out of the way, where you can keep not one, but two walls to your back?” Sekali nodded, impressed at the man’s perception. He followed Thomias to a table at the far corner of the large room and waited as the inn’s host pulled the extra chairs away from the table. As he did so, two young boys appeared, snatched them up, then vanished through two large swinging doors at the back of the large common room, leaving him one seat and ample room to stretch his legs in comfort.

“Now, a waitress will be with you shortly to get you what you need. It was a pleasure to meet you sir.” With that, Thomias bowed and departed to the other side of the room to help a man who simply raised his mug. Within moments, Sekali was greeted by a pleasant, slender woman with long brown hair. Her eyes were of the deepest blue, and her voice was soothing and calm.

“What would you like to drink sir?” A warm smile breaking across her face.

“Water, please. Fresh water.” She nodded and wrote something down on a black slate with a white rock as he unshouldered his pack and sat down.

“And to eat?” Sekali remembered the vegetables being sold earlier on the street.

“I’m not familiar with the names of foods here. As I entered the city, I saw some vegetables I would like to try. Could you give me a variety to taste?” The waitress grinned and nodded as she scribbled something down.

“Did you want it boiled, fried, or raw?”

“Please give me a variety of all, if you would be so kind.” She scribbled on the slate again.

“I’ll get you some water while you wait for your dinner. I’ll be back shortly.” Quickly the woman brought him a large pitcher of water with a mug. Setting the mug down on the table, she filled it with a steady hand, then set the pitcher down on the wood.

“I’ll bring your dinner as soon as it’s ready, sir.” She curtsied to him. Arising quickly, he placed a hand over his heart, briefly lowering his head.

“Thank you, Human. You are generously kind. She smiled, lowered her head as she turned, then hurried off toward the kitchen. Sekali looked over all the patrons, curious to know their background. Each, like him, no doubt, had a tale to tell. Within a short time, the waitress brought a plate of vegetables and set it down before him.

“The one on the right is not cooked. The middle is steamed, and the one of the left is boiled soft. She smiled and waited. Looking down, he saw five various vegetables on the plate. The first to catch his eye was orange and long. He picked it up and smelled it.

“This smells sweat,” he thought out loud. The woman nodded.

“Carrots are my favorite. Try it,” she said eagerly. Biting off the end, Sekali chewed slowly, then swallowed it.

“I like this one.” Looking up at her, he put down the carrot. She instantly backed up.

“Oh, I’m hovering. My apologies, sir. I’ll go-” “No, stay. Would you join me for dinner, if your master can spare you? I am curious about the Living World, and since you are an inhabitant of it, I desire to ask you some questions, if you would be so kind.” Humored, the waitress grinned.

“Let me go ask my . . . *master*. I will be right back.” She walked away grinning. Sekali thought her a pleasant enough woman, and rather attractive - what was he thinking? Shaking his head, as if wasteland dust had blown into it, he banished such a notion and turned his attention back to the carrot, studied it for a short moment, then took another bite, savoring the taste. The juice of this vegetable was exquisite. The roots in his pack easily paled in comparison. Setting it down, he looked at the steamed carrot, then picked it up. It was warm, making him wonder what it would taste like. Biting the end off, he chewed and swallowed. It was excellent. Placing it back on the plate, he picked up the boiled carrot, which bent in his fingers, as if bowing.

Tilting it back and forth, Sekali watched it bend this way and that, amused, when the Human girl returned. She stopped at the table, no longer in her apron, and watched him play with his food. Sekali looked up at her, still playing with it.

“Hot water makes carrots bend.” With a twinkle in her eyes, she tucked the left side of her hair behind her ear and snickered.

“Yes it does. My *master* told me I can eat with you.” Sekali put the carrot down and quickly stood. Grabbing his chair, he set it to the other side of the table for her. As she sat down, he pushed it in slightly, making her comfortable.

“Thank you, sir.” Turning away from the table, he scanned the room for an empty chair. Spotting one, he walked over and retrieved it. As he was coming back to the table, he noticed her watching him. Placing the chair down, he sat and turned his attention back to the carrot. Picking it up, he took a bite, chewed for a moment, then swallowed. Entertained, she watched him study his food.

“Where do you come from, sir?” she asked.

“Sekali,” he answered without hesitation.

“I’ve never heard of it. Is it far away?” He swallowed, then took a drink of water.

“Sekali is my name. I come from Sardakahn Citadel. What is your name?” The woman slowly nodded, becoming as curious about his land as he was about her’s.

“Renia. This is the City-Port Navan. It is the northern-most trade hub of the Zurkel Mainland.” Sekali looked at his plate for a moment, then chose another type of vegetable, which was white. As they ate, Renia gave him the names of the other four, which were tomato, broccoli, cauliflower, and beets. As they talked, he tasted and enjoyed them all.

Soon, Renia was brought a bowl of chicken soup, which she let him taste. He liked it more than the vegetables. After asking her many questions, most of which were on the subject of etiquette, she stood.

“I need to get back to work, sir . . . Sekali.” Sekali stood.

“Thank you, Renia.” He bowed shortly and paid for the food and his stay.

After the arrangements for his stay were made, Renia bid him goodnight. Placing his hand over his heart, he lowered his head.

“Goodnight, and thank you again.” She turned him over to a hostess, who escorted him to his room. Curiously, she looked at the make of the pack, drawing the attention of the innkeeper, who grimaced. With a loud snap of his fingers, a boy appeared out of nowhere and offered to take his gear to be cleaned. Sekali stopped and looked down at the boy, silently shaking his head. Backing away from him, the boy slowly turned and walked away, as if startled.

“Sir, this way,” the hostess said, and led Sekali through the crowded room. As he passed through the many patrons, all in the attitude of telling stories and gossiping, they quieted for moment, staring at him, quietly whispering things he could not hear.

He followed the hostess to the upper floor, ascending a massive, circular staircase, carved from the great logs of once-living trees. On the way to his room, he studied the architecture and solidity of the Golden Feather, impressed at the architecture. The humans seemed to have skill in crafting after all, though not in defending from enemies.

Stone-faced and silent, he followed the woman halfway down a wide hallway, stopping before a door. Producing a key, she slid it into the keyhole and turned until the latch clicked. He watched her turn the knob and gently push the door. Silently, it swung inward.

Stepping back, the hostess politely motioned him to enter. Sekali entered the room, noticing a large metal container in the middle of a stone-laid floor, screened on two sides by a series of straight wooden branches, all connected together. The container's craftsmanship was of a curious nature.

“What is that?” He asked. She laughed rather merrily, thinking he had concocted a joke. The seriousness of his demeanor indicated he was not amused, killing her smile instantly. Clearing her throat, she soberly walked over to the basin and ran a hand along its edge.

“Sir, this is known as a bath. After it has been filled with warm water, you

strip yourself of all clothing and sit in.” The hostess watched him grimace, nearly causing her to laugh.

She walked to the door and clapped loudly three times. Soon two Human boys came noisily up the stairs, ran down the hall and skidded to a stop in front of her, elbowing each other. She gave them orders to go and prepare water, to which they turned, sped through the hall, and vanished down the stairs.

Sekali stared hard at the -- bath. Usually a bath was much smaller, with towels at one side. This was rather odd. What was it that could be so grand about sitting in a large basin of warm water, he could not guess. But if they were willing to fill it with water, he would venture. After all, he did come here to learn. He frowned, not taking his eyes off it. Noticing his expression, she came over and stood beside Sekali, biting her lip.

“You've never seen one before.” Sekali shook his head and looked at her.

“Not like that, but I know the term, bath. In my homeland, we bathe, standing up, using a small basin or bowl of water.” He scowled at it. She could plainly see something was troubling him.

“Ah, here we call that washing up, or a sponge bath. Sir, what's the matter?”

“Do you use the same water in that,” he pointed at the basin, “that comes from the sea? I drank it, and I will never drink such awful water again.” The woman's eyes instantly sparkled, and she laughed.

“No, sir. Sea water is not to drink, but for fishing and sailing, when one fancies. At times, people swim in the ocean, but I never have. No, we bathe in fresh water at all times, and I assure you we drink the same.” That being said, she began the preparations for his bath. Sekali watched her intently the entire time, how she moved, how she acted, the way she prepared the bath. He watched as the two boys helped her pour buckets of steaming water into the basin, until the last bucket was brought up.

Soon all was prepared. Steam arose from the water, fogging a large mirror set before it. The mists reminded him of his homeland, where his people and family dwelt. Slowly he walked over and looked down into the basin.

“Is there anything you need from the kitchen? Perhaps a drink?” Sekali nodded.

“I wish to have some water please.” She nodded and politely left the room. After the woman was gone, Sekali's gaze shifted again to the large metal basin. He touched the water and found it warm and comfortable. Undressing, he carefully slipped in to find it highly pleasing. Soon, he found himself enjoying it thoroughly.

At the side of the basin, he noticed a white square and picked it up. Studying it, Sekali wondered what it was for. Shortly after smelling it, he gagged, quickly replacing it. Whatever that was for, he did not like it.

Soon, Sekali was relaxed as he lay back against the incline of the large basin and closed his eyes. He was weary, but he did not allow himself to fall into slumber. In the time he had been in the Living World, he slept little. Besides, the woman would be back with his drink, and he needed to be awake to receive it. He thought of his experiences so far. He was learning about the Living World, and it seemed to him there was going to be a lot to take in. He relaxed, closing his eyes without allowing himself to fall asleep.

Sekali opened his ash-black eyes when he heard a soft knock at the door.

“Come,” he stated. The door opened and in walked the Human woman, he had eaten dinner with, a mug in hand.

“Ah, I see you are enjoying the evening?” She walked over behind the screen, and stopped, making Sekali nervous. Reaching around, she handed him the mug of water.

“I promise it is not sea water,” she teased. Sekali smirked dryly at the mug.

“Thank you Renia.”

“You are welcome, Sekali. There is a tassel on a cord hanging by you. If you need me for anything, pull it. It will ring a bell and I will return.” She then departed.

After cleaning his clothes and armor, Sekali emptied half the mug and set it down on the edge of the basin, then laid back. Turning his attention to the mirror,

Sekali watched the moisture gather and spill in riderless down the length of its surface. Relaxing, he closed his eyes . . . and fell headlong into nightmare.

He dreamed he was back home on guard duty; the first time he'd ever been given the honor of The Watch. The night had gone by without talk, without whispers. All communications were hand signals and signs. He remembered the feeling of gratitude as he silently gazed out into the mists of the Wastelands; of his father's nod to him as he wearily, proudly, entered back into Sardakahn after the changing of The Watch.

Many times he was given the honor of The Watch, and many times he had been the first to relay the signal of an approaching threat. Fierce he became, and fearless. In the first 3 moons, he had participated and won in seventy and two battles in the defense of his loved ones within Sardakahn Citadel, earning great respect.

The post he served from was carved from a single pinnacle of rock, jutting up from the floor of the Wastelands. Upon its precipice, at its center, was set a Magician. He and six others, at their posts, were stationed lower around the spell-caster. This was one of many Watches, crafted from the charred stone of the Wasteland, created for the sole purpose of defending his city.

Once, long ago, after earning his way to the outer-most watch, he had beheld . . . Death!

Sekali jolted out of an all-to-familiar nightmare. His sudden movement caused the bath water to slosh over the sides of the basin as his hand shot into the water to his hip. His sword was gone! Eyes wide, he scanned the room, searching for an enemy he could never escape.

As full consciousness came to him, that terrible pit inside gripped his heart and squeezed mercilessly as a feeling of indescribable regret tortured him. Remembering where he was, his expression eased. He took a deep quavering breath and forced himself to relax. That was long ago . . . it was over . . . over . . .

Even though it yet burned fresh in his mind, the pain of that encounter, that day, was yet a vivid memory. Most memories would fade, he knew, except for this one. Every time sleep took him, or when he stared into flames, a single memory would play out before him. It always ended the same; with the death of his bride. This was his portion of the curse, and it was terrible to bear. Even as cruel as it was, now and then, Sekali would sleep just to see her once again.

Banishing the past from his present thoughts, Sekali removed himself from the water, dried off with a towel, dressed and armored up. Snatching up his blade, he buckled it to his side. Picking up the now empty mug, he headed down to the common room to drink. He was thirsty.

It was noisy and smokey as he entered. For the second time, he immediately noticed the Dwarf and the boy in the room; they were arm wrestling and had gathered half the room in a circle about them. The Dwarf had a mug of drink in his left hand as each pitted their strength against the other. The boy was laughing and making wisecracks to all those around him.

“I wager one white-gold piece against anyone who thinks they can beat . . .” he looked at the Dwarf and pointed toward himself, “. . . me!” With that he slammed the back of the Dwarf’s hand down on the table so hard the wood cracked.

The Dwarf bellowed out in rage as half the contents of his mug escaped out onto the floor. The common room erupted in a great cheer. Amidst the many

compliments, the boy laughed and slapped the Dwarf on the back, making him spill his brew all the more.

“Come, Uther, let me buy you kohakk with your own money tonight.”

Uther grumped at him, his expression changing to half appreciation, half desire. Gruffly, Uther seated himself at the nearest empty table, waiting. He glared at the boy, as if he were a waitress who came around only once in a great while.

“Well? Do you fill the air with fair promises and never deliver, or shall we drink?” Laughing merrily, the boy got up, reached into his pocket and pull out a number of coins.

“We drink, Uther. We drink! Waitress, two kohakks for my friend and I, making that a total of four!” A heavy set waitress gave Uther a worried look and scurried across the room, amidst the hustle and bustle and bumping of shoulders, determined to speedily fill the order. It was evident she knew the impatience of Dwarves, and that to ignore his thirst was to invite trouble -- especially when kohakk, the one and only Kithrin Dwarf signature dink, had been mentioned.

He watched the two with interest. The Shallant was always laughing and cracking jokes, all the while his eyes searching and probing everything. The Dwarf constantly grumbled and challenged everyone who caught his eye. Sekali studied them for the evening as he sat in a corner table at the back of the hazy common room. It interested him greatly to see the two converse; each never expressing anything of importance, and never really listening to what the other had to say.

Throughout the evening Sekali witnessed everything, coming to a conclusion: These folk were barbarians and liars. None of them were worthy of any further notice to him. He would leave and find another city -- he regretted not going to Gaunten. If nothing changed, he would explore the wilds to see what he could discover.

As he stood and began to leave the room, Uther's small friend quickly stood and smiled toward Sekali, catching his attention. As he altered his course to go about the small Human, the boy stepped in front of Sekali, still smiling. Stopping,

Sekali rested a hand on the pocket in which he still had a few coins, staring down at the boy with a cynical eye, giving him his full attention, somewhat intrigued. Taking in a deep breath, the boy looked at the hand Sekali had placed in his pocket. Smiling all the more, he waved a hand toward the table he and the Dwarf were sitting at.

“Good sir, would you join us for a drink?” Without waiting for an answer, he sat back down at the table and called for three mugs of dark ale. With nothing better to do at this point, Sekali accepted the invitation and took an empty seat across from them, watching the two in silence. After a long moment, Uther grunted impatiently.

“Well? Do you have a tongue by which to speak, or do you understand me at all, Elf?” The Dwarf raised an oversized mug to his lips and drank noisily, spilling part of his drink down each corner of his mouth. Then, slamming it down upon the table, he belched long and loud.

“Ahhhhhh, that is good! But what I crave is more kohakk to fill my needs and wants!” Uther glared at the boy, who Sekali realized was no boy at all, and then at Sekali. When it was evident that neither would offer, the Dwarf slammed his fist upon the table and became silent; almost sullen.

“So, do you have a name, sir? Mine is Finyat, and this is my traveling companion, Uther. We are in need of the keen vision of one such as yourself, if you would be willing. We need adventure, high adventure. Would you come with us, into the dangers of the wilds and partake in a share of the spoils of our victories?” Finyat smiled eagerly at him as Uther perked up, hearing the words spoils, and victory.

“Yes, Elf, we need someone like you to clean our cooking gear, and to pack our supplies with the rising of every sun as we venture forth. You would be good for the job.” Uther laughed heartily and punched the table a second time.

Sekali was repulsed. He quickly began to dislike these fools, who seemed so bent on talking and hearing themselves. The Dwarf especially annoyed him, and it crossed his mind to lay him in his grave. Quietly, he banished such a thought. He

had not been raised to slaughter; merely to be victorious over those who would challenge his freedom. His homelands had been a perfect tutor. Without excusing himself, he stood and turned, silently leaving them to their vanity and pride.

Stepping out onto the front porch of the inn, he looked up to see a half-moon. Admiring the moon for a time, he breathed in the fresh, night air, focusing on calmness. After a few moments, he subdued all his violent thoughts and walked out into the street. He wandered the roads of Navan for an for a while, and then returned to the inn.

There were not half so many people at the inn, as when he returned. To him, everyone's behavior was reckless and inattentive, and more so now as the evening moved on. This form of conduct, if displayed in the Wastelands, would be the death of them within a very short period of time.

Making his way through the crowd, Sekali ascended the stairs and turned down the hallway leading to his room. Once there, he opened a window and pulled up a chair next to it and sat down, staring out into the night. He wondered if this was what the majority of the Living World had to offer. From his experience, he knew it was not, but it seemed revelry was the predominant attitude of these people. Of course, he knew of two exceptions, and it made him think. He missed Naria and Tamith. A part of him wanted to get on a ship and sail after them; make sure they would remain safe. No, the two girls were in good hands now. Soon enough, Sekali would find out more; he had time. In fact, time was all there was at this point in his wanderings.

He relaxed, yearning to see Mahkaia again, even if the cost was a piece of his heart dying. It was only a memory, and so it would not kill him to think of her, dream of her. Sekali stared out the open window into the deep of night, a fresh breeze lulling him into the midst of a living nightmare . . .

. . . still and silent as stone they watched on. They felt a heaviness as they stood upon the pinnacle. The mists seemed unusually thick and menacing. Their eyes, more black than night, sought to penetrate the murky vapors, to expose any enemy that might challenge them.

Then it came.

The Witch slowly turned toward him, fixing him with a look of deep regret. *There she was, he yearned to take her to safety, but he could not . . . he was only watching, frozen in time . . . still, there she was . . . and she was his.*

. . . looking out the window of his room, Sekali shuddered, unblinking, as his hand

snaked across his mid-section, clutching the hilt of his sword . . .

. . . a blackness that increased in its own darkness rose up before the pinnacle. The night mists about The Watch choked on themselves and churned wildly at its approach, as if the non-living vapors of the Wastelands themselves suffered from the presence of the enemy. The earth trembled slightly, yet still he and his brothers, and his wife, stood as unmoving as the rocks about them. Then the earth and rocks all around them seemed to fall into ruin, decaying before their eyes.

Before he knew what the enemy truly was, she was casting her magic. The most significant thing he remembered about that accursed day was the fear in the Witch's voice. Bolts of red lightning shot past him and his brothers, blasting rock and earth to charred and blackened ash . . . and still it came, unhindered by the power being thrown at it. In one motion, his brothers drew their weapons and followed Sekali, engaging . . . Death!

Sekali sprang from his chair, knocking it over, gasping, eyes wide with shock and horror, sword unsheathed and ready; the dream would not let him awaken! The apparition advanced, as if floating upon an unseen wind of its own making. Darkness flooded his world, and as it did, the vision slowly faded, until he found himself within his lonely room of the inn. He withdrew from his fighting stance and sheathed his blade, sweat pouring down his temples, neck and back as his body violently trembled.

At least I saw her . . .

A knock at the door caught him off guard, startling him greatly. Unsheathing his blade, he spun, then, as quickly as his sword was drawn, it was sheathed as he went to the door and opened it to see Uther and Finyat standing before him. Uther spoke first.

“Greetings, Elf!” Sekali coldly stared at the both of them as Finyat gave Uther an irritated glance, then turned back to Sekali, bowing.

“Sir, my companion and I are on our way out tomorrow to see what there is

to see, hear what there is to hear, and to experience the outside world at our own leisure. We wish you to join us, that our journeys may be successful and,” he pointed a finger upward, “I might add, fruitful. If you wish to join my friend and I, we will be leaving at sunrise tomorrow.” Without waiting for an answer, the two, almost jovial, headed off down the hall toward the common room. Before the door closed, his mind had already been made up; he would rather be dead. Sekali had plans of his own, and those plans did not include them.

Sometimes plans change.

As he reached the common room the next morning, the maid woman just happened across his path.

“Sir, it’s good to see you this morning.” She smiled and curtsied gracefully, and then was on her way with business to attend to. Sekali bowed respectfully, then entered the dining area. To his disappointment, the Shallant and the Dwarf were there, eating, drinking and talking; always talking and saying nothing. He decided to leave without breakfast. He ignored the, “Hail, Elf,” from Uther, and the pointless, “Let's get rich, Elf,” that came from Finyat's stuffed mouth.

Once outside, he began to feel less trapped. This was his second day among the people of the Living World, and he would make the best of it. He headed straight for a large building, directly across the way, where he purchased provisions necessary for a long excursion in the wilds.

On his way out of the city, he felt as though he was being followed. He did not doubt his senses. He knew who it was and it irritated him. Once outside, he would give them a surprise. Passing through the gates, Sekali immediately cut left up a path, hiking up a rolling hill of blanketing green. Before descending down the other side, he turned and stared at the Navarian sea. It was absolutely breathtaking. Its glistening surface, magnified in the radiant morning sun, made him stand in awe.

Turning, Sekali vanished down the other side of the knoll. As soon as he knew he was out of sight, he doubled back around the hill and sought for his followers. To his satisfaction, he beheld Uther following after him, over the same hill he had just recently traversed. Without a sound, he trailed up behind the Dwarf. Not five paces behind him, Sekali hailed him.

“Dwarf, I could have slit your throat where you now stand. Why do you follow me?” Uther jumped, spinning around, battle-axe suddenly in hand. Sekali quickly drew forth his long sword and froze, not daring to take his attention from his opponent.

“I should cleave your legs out from under you – Elf! Sneak!” Uther

advanced. Yet before he took three steps, Finyat rose up from the grass between them, holding out his hands to them both.

“Let not the blood of friends be spilt by the blood of friends.” Finyat eyed Sekali warily, though with a broadening smile. All three froze, the tension mounting. Then, without a word, Sekali sheathed his blade. He looked at the small boy-like man between himself and the Dwarf, respecting his stealth; the ability to make himself unseen.

Sekali began to scan the area around him. He did this for no reason, other than to ease Uther's tension. Finyat turned to Uther and began speaking to him. It took a long while for Finyat to help Uther find its resting place once again. Sekali admired the bravery of the Dwarf, though not his witlessness. Still, Uther might be good with the axe; he certainly looked stout. He came to the quick decision to endure them for a time. If it was not going well, he could always leave their company.

As he turned and walked on, the two fell in beside him. For nearly three leagues, Uther stared at Sekali suspiciously, always staying out of weapon's reach, while Finyat discussed ancient, hidden treasures of riches, and the wealth of dragons.

It was near dusk when Finyat yelled out a warning that they were not alone, and pointed ahead. As loud as he warned them, Sekali was sure it, whatever it was, now knew they were there. Yet, the fact that Finyat had warned them of a possible danger, before he himself had sighted it, reinforced the idea that he had a keen vision and excellent awareness.

The Dwarf cursed and pulled forth his battle-axe as Finyat pulled a bow slowly from his shoulder and nocked an arrow. Sekali froze, scanning the terrain for any signs of movement. Then he saw what Finyat had seen. There in the grasses, down from them, in between two rolling mounds of green, sat a cloaked figure, sitting erect and cross-legged, staring out in the direction of the rising sun.

Finyat began slowly stalking toward the mysterious stranger. Grabbing Finyat's shoulder, Sekali shook his head. By the Great Flame! Was Finyat going to attack without cause? If so, he had made a terrible mistake of joining company with them. Disappointment flooded the Shallant's face.

“Fine!” he yelled at Sekali. “You go and talk to him, and I'll watch you get the flesh consumed from your black bones!” Uther nodded, backing Finyat. “Uther, let's watch the Elf try to communicate with our “friend” down yonder.” Uther scoffed at Sekali, who stared at them both in open disbelief.

“Well,” Uther stated as if it were a matter of fact, “go! Let us see how you do things where you come from.” Sekali knew the cloaked figure was within hearing range. These two would be dead within no time in the Wastelands. Shrugging, he descended the hillside, breaking into a jog. He wanted to pass this person up and leave, get away, disappear. He was so tired of the nonsense of their bantering. Before doing so, he felt honor-bound to warn the stranger. Jogging up beside the lone figure, he paused for only a moment.

“Beware to two behind me,” he whispered, throwing out a quiet warning as he turned away. But, as Sekali turned in his course, a intense feeling came upon him to stay. The feeling was so persistent, he could not shake the invitation out of his head. He could not explain why, but he slowed to a stop, turned and cautiously

approached the stranger. As he neared, Sekali walked to the right side of him, just without striking range and froze, still as stone as he caught the first glimpse of the figure's facial features.

An Elf; and not Sardakk! The daydream of a tale he had heard instantly came to him:

Long ago, before the Wastelands were as they are now, there were many races of Elves that lived together in unity, in harmony, much as we live now with each other in this, the Wastelands we call home. Over the ages, greed and lust for power festered within many of their hearts. They lifted up their petitions to be rid of us. They simply wanted us gone.

This was only a small part of what the maggot-skinned Elves had done to his people. "Traitors!" Sekali thought as he clenched and ground his teeth. Traitors and thieves! Murderers and liars!

The figure made no movement, no sign of offense as Sekali warily gripped and unsheathed his blade. At the sliding of steel against his scabbard, *she* turned and looked at him. Never, in all his years, had he been in the presence of a female Aldarian Elf. He stared at her, unable to look away. Unwilling to break eye contact, he suspected he was in great danger, and so focused upon her, his dark eyes narrowing in suspicion. She then spoke to him in the Human tongue, obviously nervous.

"Why do you draw your blade?" Sekali's blood ran cold as he heard her speak. Then, curse her traitorous soul, she smiled at him. Sekali was at a loss; an experience he had not been in until now. What was to be done with a non-hostile, non-threatening, enemy? Watching her with great care, he relaxed his grip on the hilt of his sword, lowering the tip.

After a few moments, her smile faded, and she again turned toward the western sky, openly admiring the setting sun. Sekali relaxed a bit, and then slowly advanced and knelt on the grass, out of arm's reach, ready and waiting, but no

longer intent on a confrontation. Briefly glancing at him, she smiled, the soft gentleness of her eyes taking him. Unmoving, she continued to watch the setting of the sun.

Standing, he bowed, not knowing what else to do, then turned to leave. Before leaving, he became curious about this silent woman. Eager to know more about her, and maybe learn of her culture, he decided to stay with her and watch the remainder of the sun set.

When the last golden rays of the sun had passed beyond the hills, there remained a darkening land of green all about them, set alight by an orange glow in the horizon. Silently he caught his breath and was lost in a display of nature he had never really taken the time to enjoy. His thoughts turned to his home; a land void of such scenes. Watching the horizon, he suddenly longed for his mother and father to share this with him.

“Isn't it magnificent?” the Aldarian Elf whispered. Sekali nodded in silence, unwilling to take his eyes from the growing lights in the sky.

“From whence do you come, Sardakk?”

“Sekali.” She looked at him, giving him her full attention.

“I have never heard of such a place.”

“My name is Sekali, and I come from Sardakahn Citadel within the Wastelands to the south-east.” The woman slowly raised a hand and drew back the hood of her forest-green, weather-stained cloak. Sekali stared at her, unable to pull his eyes from hers.

“My name is Mabuhi,” she whispered, fighting back sudden emotion, which Sekali thought rather odd.

“Are you lost, or hurt. Did someone abandon you? If so, can I be of assistance?” he offered, then regretted putting himself at her service. It was obvious, she was no threat. Smiling sadly, Mabuhi turned and watched the remaining light in the horizon flee from the oncoming night. As the darkness settled in, she spoke again.

“I come from many wanderings, and, at long last, I can now claim my

forested home.” With those last words she fell silent and looked deeply, intensely, into his eyes, studying them. Sekali felt a strange feeling in the presence of this woman. From the time she had taken him into her gaze, he knew she was no danger to him, and certainly no threat. How he knew this, he could not say; he just knew. As if both Elves had been turned to stone, they looked into each other’s eyes, unmoving. If this was a trick to mesmerize him, it did not cross his mind.

When Uther and Finyat noisily arrived, they broke eye contact with each other. The Dwarf filled the air with insults, as was his custom, and Finyat filled in the remaining silence with fair words that meant nothing.

They both arose, and as they did, Mabuhi turned to Finyat and Uther, greeting them cordially. The Shallant, upon seeing Mabuhi's face, blushed deeply and lowered his eyes to his boots. As she introduced herself to Uther, the Dwarf sneered.

“Do you enjoy a good drink, woman? Or do you tiptoe across the Grasslands in search of flowers and other Elves to stare at?” Mabuhi's smile warmed, her eyes glistening like stars. She shook her head at the Dwarf and said nothing. Sekali stared in hatred at the Dwarf, wondering how such a fool had survived birth; how his parents had endured him.

Mabuhi looked at Sekali and shook her head, smiling. He knew just why she looked at him like that, and he felt a tinge of shame for falling into company with his two companions. Diverting her thoughts, Sekali sighed, ignoring the Dwarf he was tempted to backhand.

“Mabuhi, what did you mean when you said you come to claim your forested home?” She looked at him a moment, as if silently weighing him, judging him, then shrugged.

“I have long since finished my apprenticeship. It is now time for me to become the caretaker of a forest not far from here. This forest will become my permanent home.” She bowed to each of them, picked up a white staff at her feet, then turned and walked away. Feeling a sudden urge to follow, Sekali set off after her, falling into step beside her, keeping pace, curious to know and see what she

was talking about.

“These lands could be dangerous. I offer myself as an escort, if you will have me.” Glancing at him, she tilted her head sideways, looking at him.

“I would enjoy your company, sir. But I must be on my way.” The Dwarf called out from behind; something vulgar, to which Sekali shot him a dark glance that would have blunted a dagger's edge. Noticing the look he gave the Dwarf, Mabuhi smirked in silence, then thought upon his offer. After a few short moments, she nodded.

“I may need someone with a shield. But I do not wish one to be my escort who thinks only of bloodshed; I detest it. Are you willing to make an oath not to kill another . . . under any circumstance, unless I say? Can you keep such a promise?” Sekali nodded instantly.

“I swear to you, Mabuhi, your destination will be surely reached, without my killing another. I have spoken.” Mabuhi stopped and turned, looking at him in earnest, as if weighing her next decision. Meeting her gaze without blinking, he waited for her acceptance, or rejection, willing to accept her decision. If she accepted, he would see her safely to the forest. If she rejected, he would be on his way. For some strange reason, he feared her rejection. He wanted to know more about her and her people.

“I accept your offer Sekali of the Wastelands. You shall be my entourage.” She turned to walk on, then stopped, turning back to him.

“Your friends may follow, if they will agree to the same oath that you have bound yourself by.” He shot a look at them, his face twisting in frustration at the word “friends”, which stung his pride, biting into his darker side. The thought that these other two could be his friends, exacting any form of loyalty and respect from him, ground at his patience. He bowed, then fell into step to the right and behind her as she turned and traveled on.

“Forgive me for the debate, but they are only acquaintances.” She raised an eyebrow at him.

“Fair enough, Sekali.” she said, ending the conversation. She had spoken of

claiming a forested home. Forest? He began to muse on what she meant, but he did not ask.

Seven days and nights passed as the four traveled toward their destination. It baffled Sekali how the stretches of green seemed never to end. The living world was exactly the opposite of his world. He admired the Grasslands, plant life and animals, often asking Mabuhi permission to study them. Mabuhi encouraged his fascination of all these things, teaching him about everything he asked, naming all the insects and birds, teaching him much.

At times, as they traveled, birds in great number would take sudden flight at their approach. At first, Sekali watched on in amazement at these small creatures. He had seen them as he journeyed previously toward the City-Port Navan, yet their numbers increased significantly with each day's travel. He especially liked the ones which ran along the ground, and took flight only when the four ventured too close to them. He noted a specific type of bird that flew within a multitude of others of the same kind, swarming just above the grasses, and then up into the air. They rarely landed, but would fly on until out of sight. Sekali especially took a fancy to the long-tailed ones which would fly up directly in front of him, shooting up into the sky at an angle. Once airborne, these birds would glide far away, disappearing into the lush vegetation, thus hidden again.

Most of all, he took a liking to the mornings, when a mist of gray would enshroud the company, leaving them hidden to all eyes further than about a hundred paces. It reminded him of the mists and vapors of his homelands which veiled his people from horrors always on the hunt.

At night, Sekali would sit cross-legged upon his bedroll, keeping watch over his charge. Through all this, he did not sleep. One night, as he sat staring into the fire's light, lost in his own thoughts about the Living World, he thought about the pros and cons of living here permanently.

This world is new and wondrous. Yet it softens the soul, and this cannot be good. Yet, it would have its strong points if my people came and dwelt here.

He did not miss the Wastelands. In fact, he had to admit, the longer he dwelt in this living world, the more difficult it would be to go back. Here in this peaceful land, it was easy to live from day to day.

Cradling his blade, Sekali lay down, facing Mabuhi. She smiled at him warmly, to which he looked into the fire, watching the dancing flames. She made him nervous when she watched him. As he gazed into the fire, a weariness crept over him, and he closed his eyes, falling into slumber, dreaming the undesirable:

. . . As his brother fell before the Soul`Reaper's scythe, his deafening scream grew to an ear-splitting crescendo, then quickly faded to silence as if he had been hurled down into a bottomless well.

Sekali flinched in his sleep. Mabuhi watched him, a look of worry and apprehension etching into the beautiful features of her face.

. . . Out of the darkness it came, more black than the starless, nighttime heaven. Raising a skeletal finger, its spoke to him before taking its next victim:

Desperation and yearning, your soul suffers, wandering Sardakk. A stranger in a strange land you will roam until you bitterly exhale your last breath. Your blade is not forgotten, nor the curse by which you also be tainted. Where I

hold her in eternal chains, there also will I receive you.

The darkness emanated, growing so intense, so hateful, so bitter, Sekali screamed without sound in his sleep as he was forced to relive the suffering of the last thirty years of his life in a single waking-dream.

Finyat nudged Uther and pointed at Sekali, chuckling. Uther smirked loudly and laughed.

“He is, no doubt, having a dream about dancing with the fairies,” Uther jested. They did not see the look of aggravation Mabuhi threw them. Having their fun, they laughed for a time, then became bored, laid down and went to sleep.

After a time, Sekali suddenly leapt from his bedroll with a cry of despair, taking up his sword. Staggering, he stepped directly into the center of the fire. The disturbance had Uther and Finyat on their feet in an instant, weapons ready. Uther was swearing most offensively. Mabuhi watched on, eyes wide, staring at Sekali who seemed undaunted by the flames dancing dangerously about his legs.

“Ech shrakkeen thresk Morgel! (Begone, foul Death),” Sekali screamed in fury and hatred, swinging his blade a number of times at an unseen foe before him. Finyat froze in fear. After a moment of witnessing Sekali's outburst, he suddenly began laughing. Uther instantly joined in, pointing at Sekali. A shocked look of disbelief etched into Mabuhi's face as she watched on, highly disturbed.

Sekali froze, sword pointing outward. As he slowly came to, he looked down, his eyes focusing on the fire he stood within. Growling in frustration, he stepped out of the campfire and watched the hem of his cloak smolder, flames slowly rising up from its border. Kneeling to one knee, he placed his sword on the ground, reached around and gathered his cloak before him. Shaking his head, he smothered the flames with his hands as both Finyat and Uther roared with delight, wiping tears from their eyes. Slowly standing, he clenched his fists, attempting to control a terrible rage about to erupt within him. He felt he was losing control, and so turned and headed out into the darkness, avoiding Mabuhi's eye, as the two

mocked and laughed.

Finyat shrugged at the Aldarian Elf's look of disapproval as Uther fell back onto his bedroll roaring with glee. Grinning sheepishly at Mabuhi, Finyat stood and walked over to the fire where Sekali's sword lay, and looked at it for a minute. He then returned to his bedroll and lay down, chuckling to himself.

Mabuhi turned her attention out into the darkness after Sekali, troubled. Waiting until Uther and Finyat were asleep, she quietly stood and followed after Sekali, finding him not far out, sitting upon a large, round, half-sunken boulder in a sea of green grass.

"Sekali", she called softly to him. Looking up at the stars, he sighed heavily.

"I do not wish to explain myself. There is no need. Some things are better left unsaid." She nodded, agreeing.

"Even so, I would have my escort close by, should I need him. Even the Grasslands hold dangers." Realizing his mistake, Sekali sprang from the rock and came to her side.

"Forgive me," he begged, his voice cracking with emotion, "I failed my post." With a look of great compassion, Mabuhi looked down at Sekali's hands, seeing they were slightly burned.

"I understand your native tongue, Sekali. What you said chills my soul." She placed a gentle hand on his forearm and looked up into his coal-black eyes, so hard, so stone-like. Slowly, he pulled back, breaking contact with her.

"I'm sorry," she whispered. Sekali attempted a smile, but could not.

"No one should be left alone," he whispered. Mabuhi stared at Sekali, as if he had just slapped her across the face.

"Sekali, I need to ask you something." The look she gave him was intense, and it caught his full attention.

"Ask, please." With a trembling hand, Sekali motioned the way back to camp. As the two slowly walked back, she rested a hand upon his arm, taking it in the common escort style.

“Do you hate my race?” Thinking about it, Sekali shook his head.

“The things I have heard about why my people are in the Wastelands contradict what I've learned from you these past few days. I don't know what to think anymore.” Looking at the ground, she nodded.

“I have studied many languages and cultures – yours in depth. As you learn more, I promise you, Sekali, we are not enemies. I hope you understand that by the truths you will learn. I need . . . I want to . . .” Shaking her head, she guided his arm up so that it was perfectly level with the ground, as well as the correct height. She then rested her hand upon his forearm again.

“I would like a proper Sardakk Elf Warrior's escort from now on. You make me feel safe. Will you do this for me?” Sekali looked down at her hand, pain slowly twisting into his face.

“Yes,” he whispered, seeing the forms of Finyat and Uther up ahead. As they walked, Mabuhi seemed highly worried. Entering back into camp, Sekali retrieved his sword. Using an unburnt section of his cloak, he began polishing the blade, erasing every hint of dust and ash from its surface, before sheathing it. Mabuhi watched him.

“You take good care of your sword.” Sekali stared into the fire. The Aldarian Elf held out her hands to the fire, warming them, and sighed.

“What did you mean by what you said?” With an expression of alarm, he looked at her, then lowered his gaze into the dancing flames, clenching his teeth. His jaw muscles twitched as he thought of that accursed day on The Watch. He did not want to speak of an incident ever present in his dreams, and in his waking thoughts.

“I don't -” “Ech shrakkeen thresk Morgel,” she whispered, looking at him. Startled by her words, Sekali froze, his blood chilling within his veins. In silence, he stared into the flames. How they danced and writhed before him. His vision blurred, taking him back to the Wastelands, back to where he once stood upon the pinnacle. His shaking hand snaked over to the hilt of his sword, as he spoke in a dull, almost lifeless, tone.

“I was honored to perform The Watch for my people. It is a deadly task, yet most profitable at times. The need to protect the borders of Sardakahn, the citadel of my people, is not merely an honor, it is necessary. Those who perform this duty are protecting the lives of others. On the first day of The Watch, I and my brothers were standing sentinel upon the top. I . . . I . . . by the fires that rage!” Sekali stiffened and his voice stilled in horror and revulsion.

Mabuhi found herself caught up in the horror, unable to speak. Sekali's tone chilled her. She edged closer to the fire in silence, watching him intensely, as if she was living the description of his nightmare.

“The darkness crept upon us . . . unnatural. She unleashed the fullness of her sorcery, but it was not enough. Terrible . . . and now, in my dreams, I hear her words every time I sleep. In my dreams, my nightmares, I still see her.” Sekali's body convulsed, as if he was choking, but Mabuhi did not raise a hand to steady him. She wanted to know more. Suddenly, he stiffened. His body seemed to straighten to the point of snapping. In a low chant, he spoke, forcing out words through tightly clenched teeth, freezing Mabuhi's heart. It was almost as if he were on his deathbed, speaking the last words of the living after receiving some terrible wound in battle.

“Desperation and yearning, your soul suffers, wandering Sardakk. A stranger in a strange land you will roam until you bitterly exhale your last breath. Your blade is not forgotten, nor the curse by which you also be tainted. Where I hold her in eternal chains, there also will I receive you.”

As if talking to himself, Sekali whispered faintly, “I do not know what it means.” He fell silent. Mabuhi pulled her cloak tightly around her thin frame. Gently she raised her hand up and brushed back a few strands of his long black hair, tears welling up in her eyes. She said nothing, suddenly lost in deep in concern. After a long moment, Sekali turned to her and broke the silence.

“For decades, this is all I have dreamt; mostly what I think and meditate

upon. It is my food and my water; punishment for my weaknesses.” He placed his hands very near the flames, as she watched him. His eyes widened with the conception of a thought: *Mabuhi, Aldarian Elf; she is the opposite of my nightmare.* Sekali looked at her, noticing tears streaking her face as she wept in silence.

“Mabuhi, speak not of this thing. It is full of pain and misery. You know, and it is enough.” She nodded sympathetically. She was strangely comforting to him. It secretly angered him to think he, Sekali of The Watch, born and raised in the Wastelands, should need her help; the help of an Aldarian. But his anger was extinguished by her nonetheless. *She is kindness,* he thought to himself, as he looked into her emerald-green eyes.

“Aldarian, I am your attendant only. I ask forgiveness for my behavior; I will not leave you again. In my land, I would have been brought before judgment for my crime . . . banishment would have been dealt out swiftly, had I no excuse for my departure.” His words trailed off like the smoke of the fire, rising up into the night air, vanishing into the darkness of the sky. He turned to the fire, feeling himself being pulled back to the time when it had happened. Shaking his head, he looked away, out into the darkness.

Out in the night, a wolf howled, though he knew not what it was. He had never heard the sound of a simple wolf in all his life. It seemed sad to him; forlorn, making him curious. Looking at Mabuhi, he noticed she was staring at him intensely, studying him again. Without blinking, he returned her gaze.

The two froze, as if time stood still, as the moon slid up over the horizon, into the night's sky. Still, they sat, unmoving, unblinking. She was a creature different from what he had ever imagined; not cold and heartless, but sincere and real. He noted the slender curves of her facial features, and the slant of her eyes. Her eyes seemed to be crafted from flawless emeralds.

Even being an Aldarian Elf, she was beautiful. Surely this could not be of the line of traitors that had driven them into the Wastelands. Certainly she, Mabuhi, the gentle, would not, could not, conceive of such a thing. She seemed to

be ever giving, never taking. Of course, time and time again, history had proved it was always people such as this who could cause the most damage. Looks could be deceiving, like Werewolves in Human clothing.

As she held his attention, his vision blurred and he found himself somewhere else.

He found himself standing at the center of a large clearing blanketed in a healthy field of green grass. A variety of shrubs and bushes dotted the glade, each surrounded by a colorful array of flowers. A thick forest of trees surrounded the entire glade, like a natural wall.

Mabuhi stood next to him, her attention focused on the trees, which she scanned in earnest, as if expecting something. Within the forest, a wolf howled long and deep. Turning, she stared at him, holding his gaze as if by the sheer power of her will. Instantly, all went dark, as if he had been struck blind. Within the darkness there was a flash of light. Again, he stood within the same clearing.

Looking up, he witnessed the sun move slowly across the sky, followed by the moon. As the day turned quickly to night, and then day again, the cycle of the sun and moon continued in a never-ending course, fascinating him. Walking to the edge of the glade, he placed a hand upon a large tree, feeling it, studying it with great interest for a long while, enthralled by its majestic beauty.

The thought occurred to climb one and see what there was to see. Closing his eyes, he leaned to it and inhaled its scent. It was pleasing, but different. When he opened his eyes again, the day had been replaced with night. The stars shone radiantly in their resting places in the black expanse above. He marveled at the immensity of space, which reminded him sharply of how small he truly was within the scheme of things. He watched two falling stars streak over the horizon above, diminishing into two mere fading stretches of fire that quickly burned out.

To his left, within the forest, the noise of panting caught his attention. Curiously, Sekali looked over in time to see a great black wolf enter the clearing, head held as high and proud as a majestic Wasteland Morgel Lion. Sekali did not fear the wolf as it came to him, stopping not ten paces from where he stood. He stared at the wolf, noting every curve of its magnificent structure. He was especially taken by its sky-blue eyes. As the moon rose over the tops of the trees, it backed a few steps and raised its eerie voice. Sekali listened to its sad and lonely howls as it sang to the white globe rising. After a while, the wolf ceased its

uncanny song, and came to Sekali, who knelt, removed both his gauntlets and held out a hand for the animal to smell. The wolf sniffed and nuzzled his hand, then licked it. He raised his other hand to its head and coursed his fingers through its ears and fur, instantly falling in love with it.

“Would you be my traveling companion? I am lonely.” He was not surprised at the wolf's lack of response. He continued massaging its ears and neck, enjoying the animal immensely. “Maybe you and I can -” The wolf suddenly turned and departed in haste, leaving Sekali with a feeling of longing and regret. Soon after, beyond the tree line, he heard it cry somewhere out in the night.

As if by magic, Sekali was taken back to find Mabuhi's eyes fixed upon him. He did not move. Again, he felt the strange sensation of searching for something lost; something almost remembered. The distance between the two narrowed. She was so close . . . too close. Sekali pulled back slightly, releasing a quivering breath, as Mabuhi continued gazing at him, watching as he breathed deeply, unable to take his dark eyes from hers. She was something other than . . .

“Who are you?” he whispered. Unblinking, Mabuhi smiled warmly at Sekali, making him nervous.

“I am Mabuhi, and I come to claim my forest.” She took his hand in hers. “And all my labors have not been in vain.” She continued to hold Sekali's full attention, and his hand. Another long moment passed before she broke the silence again. “I wish to go now. We are very near, and I have many friends anxiously awaiting my arrival.” Slowly letting go his hand, she left the campfire to begin preparations for the day's journey. Sekali reached up to fix a few strands of his hair, and as he did, he could smell the scent of wolf upon his hands, which surprised him. Startled by the scent, he looked at her.

“Mabuhi.” She looked at him, noticing he held his hand to his nose. Smiling happily, she raised her eyebrows at him.

“He likes you, and would go with you, but he is mine, and I am his. Maybe, one day, you may also have one of your own.” Walking to him, she took up his hand and smelled it. “Yes, he likes you.” Sekali gripped her hand, keeping her

attention.

“Thank you,” he whispered. “I don't feel so alone in this strange world now. Thank you.” She looked down without expression. Slowly a slight grin played across her lips. She reached up and smoothed back his hair, tucking it behind his ear, then looked again at their joined hands.

“You are most welcome, sir. Now, my escort, can we go?” Realizing he was gripping her hand in his, Sekali let go and stepped back. She threw him a warm look with her eyes, then turned away.

“Yes milady,” he whispered, realizing he now looked upon her with a changed opinion. Her smile his way, and the way she had just spoken to him, confused and actually challenged his beliefs. Shocked by his feelings toward her, he shook his head and slowly helped pack up camp. Deep in thought, Sekali buried the fire.

“Ready?” he asked. Nodding, she looked at the two still sleeping.

“I'll get them up,” he stated, hardening his heart.

It was still dark when the four broke camp. As they began their travel, Mabuhi helped him fasten on his gauntlets, throwing him a grin the entire time.

“What,” he inquired, curious at what she thought was so humorous. She did not answer him. That day, as they traveled, Sekali could do nothing but meditate upon Mabuhi, and the things he had seen and heard. After a while, his thoughts became annoying, so he simply banished them.

That day, as they traveled, a venturing group of eight goblins came into view. They rounded a bend in one of the gracefully rolling hillsides, not noticing them initially. At the sight of them, Uther sneered and loosed his battle-ax, grinning from ear to ear. It was probably the only time Sekali had ever seen him smile (except when his mouth twisted up around the top of a mug of kohakk as he guzzled it). Sekali knew they could not find cover before they were spotted. In fact it was already too late; they were noticed.

Instantly, Uther began snarling curses most profanely. Finyat glanced at Sekali and Mabuhi; a look on his face that plainly stated, "Oh goody," and pulled his bow from his shoulder, knocking an arrow. In fear, Mabuhi looked at the enemy, then glanced at Sekali, noting his stone-hard countenance as he probed the band of brutes, taking courage in his stern confidence.

More goblins kept coming into view until there were, in all, approximately two score. Uther began taunting them and spitting in their direction, egging the goblins into a rage. They began milling and weaving in and out among each other until it was plain what their intentions were; order.

Sekali noted, to his disappointment, they were intelligent enough to keep out of bow-shot. The enemy was grouping for an attack, arguing loudly, obviously about how best to take the four. He critically watched the pathetic looking creatures; how they were half-bowed to the earth, carrying weapons bent and cruel. Some of them looked half-human, others half-pig, or half-dog. Some were indescribable, grotesque and twisted.

Reaching for his sword, he gripped the hilt, then recalled his oath. Slowly, he released the handle, pulled his shield from his back, and positioned himself to defend Mabuhi as she stood forth and cried aloud.

"I have set the terms! No killing!" Uther, who, hearing her directive, broke out in alarming rage, challenging all the goblins to dance with his axe, defying Mabuhi openly. In reaction to Uther's threats, the goblins stormed forward as one, bent on killing and torture, and other terrible things.

“Back-to-back!” Sekali called out. “Stand back-to-back!” He wrapped his free arm about Mabuhi's waist, pulling her to his side and waited for the enemy to break upon them. He felt the fever of battle upon him, and yearned for its bloody hand; he feared not this enemy.

As the goblins advanced, salivating and shrieking, as if they had already won the contest, he inwardly made a promise to himself: *Never again will I swear an oath such as this!* He watched as Uther howled and broke away from the group, streaking out into the path of the enemy, chanting dark and terrible words.

Before the enemy closed three quarters of the distance between them, Uther broke into their ranks, scattering them like leaves before a strong wind, his axe dancing and chopping among them with fatal impact.

Taken off guard by his attack, they began to hesitate, and then fear him. Half of them, not wanting to confront Uther, turned their attention on the other three, leaping and bounding toward them, tongues lolling out of their filthy mouths, heads wagging and eyes rolling in fury and hatred.

Finyat let his arrows fly against them, felling eight before being forced to drop his bow and draw two short swords. The first to reach him was beheaded, but he was instantly overwhelmed and outmatched by his assailants. As they surrounded him, he fell to defending himself.

He was not the only one with earnest problems: Surrounded by his foes, Sekali fought to protect Mabuhi as the goblins rushed upon Finyat, quickly beginning to overpower him. Sekali attempted to lend aid to Finyat, but it was all he could do to keep the ones upon him from getting to Mabuhi. He could not defend them both.

With his shield, he bashed one goblin in the face with a quick entering motion that sent it sprawling back and unconscious to the ground as another's blade caught him in the mid-section and ripped sideways. Without hesitation, Sekali thrust the edge of his shield in its throat for its attempt to gut him. Dropping its blade, it gripped its neck and staggered back, gagging for air.

“Sekali!” Mabuhi cried out, assuming he was wounded. Glancing at his

ward, he grinned and kicked another Goblin in the mid-section, breaking a number of its ribs. Sekali had made the vow not to take a life, but she did not say he could not maim them. They would eventually heal . . . if Uther let them.

Another leapt a great distance at Mabuhi, who sidestepped and positioned herself at Sekali's side. Landing, it snarled, turned and leapt at her again. Stepping between them, Sekali caught it by the throat in mid-leap, gripping its neck tight as it clubbed him across the face. Hearing that familiar gong in his ears, gifted him by his helmet, he growled and squeezed its throat, cutting off its breath. Again it struck him in the side of the head with a club riddled with long spikes. Stepping forward, he slammed it to the ground on the back of its head, instantly rendering it unconscious.

Turning back to Mabuhi, he stepped close to her. For the moment, she was not being attacked, which gave him a moment to survey the situation of the Shallant, who was being mobbed. Even so, Finyat was impressively quick, dodging most of their weapons. Sekali knew there was no way to evade eight goblins forever. Even though the leather armor he wore was protecting him, it was a pathetic defense that would soon give way to the beating he was taking.

Pulling his shield back behind him, he launched it into the back of one goblin raising a blade behind Finyat, landing a perfect strike, even as he grabbed Mabuhi and spun her behind him, taking a large club to his neck and head. Letting her go, he raised both arms up, crossing them as the club impacted him again. Sliding his hands to each end of the club, he gripped it hard, turning, and ripped it from his enemy's hands. Quickly he broke it in half against his plate helm.

Without hesitation, he gripped the goblin by the neck as it continuously pounded on his head with its fists, desperately trying to take him down. Within a few seconds, the goblin began to falter for lack of oxygen. Just as its knees began to buckle, Sekali grabbed it with both hands, raised it above his head, turned, and launched it into the goblins overwhelming Finyat, knocking a few down and unbalancing four more, giving the Shallant enough space to move and impale two of them through the mid-section at once. Sheathing one blade, he rolled and took

up Sekali's shield, grunting at the weight.

Almost instantly, they were all over the Shallant again, biting, scratching, kicking, clawing, striking out with all the strength they could throw at him. Finyat shielded himself the best he could against his attackers with the shield, yet it seemed hopeless for him. Sekali thought to abandon his oath and save Finyat, yet the memory of the Shallant laughing at him the night before helped him keep his word to Mabuhi.

Three goblins were set against him, attempting to hack him down with curved and twisted blades. Yet he defended himself and Mabuhi without err, using his arm-plates to meet each of their blades in a manner that disarmed two of them. He knew if he broke off from the Aldarian Elf to aid Finyat, Mabuhi would probably fall. He could not allow that, and so accepted the idea that the Shallant would probably die.

Uther suddenly appeared at Finyat's side, exacting a terrible price with every blow of his red-soaked battle axe, decreasing their numbers with every devastating swing. Each time an enemy fell, Uther emphasized a word within his Dwarven war chant, a crazed gleam in his dark eyes. This way and that Uther stalked, striking down foe after foe, causing his quarry to reel back before his onslaught. Truly, this Kithrin Dwarf was a force to be reckoned with. If he had not seen Uther before this battle had begun, Sekali would not have recognize the blood-spattered madman who came to Finyat's rescue.

Sekali wondered what an army of such folk would do to the horrors of the Wastelands. One goblin's head was detached with a great sweep of Uther's axe, landing at Mabuhi's feet, eyes bulging, mouth gaping and clenching spastically, as if it was attempting to speak. Blood spattered the Aldarian Elf as Sekali witnessed the enraged Dwarf cleave another's mid-section, sundering it just so blood and gore would be spattered toward he and the Mabuhi.

Two attempted to jump upon Mabuhi, but she nimbly knelt, rolled and stood, turning back towards them. Sekali was impressed by her evasive maneuvers which always left their enemy in a position of vulnerability for Sekali. Gripping the two,

Sekali wrapped his strong arms about their necks and squeezed just enough to cut off the blood-flow to their heads, knowing they would soon lose consciousness. As he held them, he felt a blade strike him from behind, but, again, felt no bite of steel upon his flesh. Ignoring the rear attacker, he waited until the two he held collapsed, during which time he was hit six more times by a blade that snapped at the hilt.

Dropping the two, he turned about and head butted the goblin in the chest, knocking it onto its back. Stepping on its chest, he glanced quickly at Mabuhi, who had no attackers, and pressed his weight down on the fledgling monster until it went limp for lack of breath.

The few remaining, joined in number against Uther, trying with one last desperate attempt to surround and conquer him. On the battle raged, as another and then another goblin dropped to the earth, until only one remained. Limping, it looked about the area, then threw its twisted spear to the blood-stained grass and fell upon its knees, instantly begging for mercy in its guttural language.

Without hesitation, Uther sheered its left arm off. In shock and terrible agony, it dropped onto its back as the Dwarf laughed darkly, advancing upon it, pinning it down with a heavy foot. Spitting in its face, he raised and dropped his axe, severing its other arm from its body, sending it into convulsions. After detaching its legs, Uther hopped up on its weakly squirming body and turned to Mabuhi.

“Gusto nako gipatyon karon!” He raised his axe high, and let it fall upon the sputtering goblin, ending its life. His eyes burned with fury and lust for the fray. Even though he had been wounded in the hip twice, it did not daunt him.

None of the enemy remained standing, yet some lived. Uther leaned upon his axe, surveyed the suffering of his enemies with burning satisfaction. Furiously, he began laughing.

Turning his attention to Mabuhi, Sekali removed his gauntlets, pulled a water flask from his pack, uncapped the stopper and began pouring water over the crown of her head. Instantly she gasped in shock as the cold water poured down

through her blood-stained hair. She tried to pull away, but Sekali grabbed her shoulder, stopping her.

“Hold still, and do not open your mouth. Look at the ground,” he gently commanded. Sputtering, she did as he said. Sekali began to clean the blood from her hair, then her face and neck. With half a flask of water remaining, he did the best he could to rinse off her robes, beginning at her shoulders, then working his way down her arms. He poured what remained onto her back and chest, up by the neckline, but no longer used his hands to get as much of the blood out of her clothing as possible. She would have to find a stream to do that herself.

As water ran down her robes, he took her staff and wiped it clean with his cloak, then returned it to her, all the while contemplating what he had seen. Dwarves were, to him, fierce opponents to be reckoned with.

He watched Uther end most of the Goblins lives, all the while singing. Sekali had to admit, this Kithrin was a seasoned fighter, and fearless. Still, Sekali despised Uther's mannerisms, and wished to be out of his company.

Before killing them, Uther observed their petitions to him with a fierce grin, letting them finish begging, before ending their torment. With each life ended, Uther would turn to Mabuhi and growl something horrible.

As the sole remaining goblin expelled its last breath of life, the Dwarf yanked his bloody axe free, turned and stalked up to Mabuhi. Standing before her, he glared at the Aldarian Elf. Sekali readied himself to intercept Uther, should he attempt to harm her. For a tense moment, Sekali eyed him emotionlessly, waiting for the slightest offensive move, as Mabuhi shivered, staring at him in dead silence. Growling, Uther raised his battle-axe up between them, so she could plainly see it.

“Ha!” he bellowed, shaking great droplets of blood and gore from his weapon, then abruptly turned, leaving her with a stunned look, as if he had just reviled and declared war against her people.

Sekali wrapped a strong arm about her shoulders, steadying her as the Dwarf stalked away. Bending to her ear, he whispered things only she could hear. After a moment, she glanced up at him, threw him a delicate smile, then nodded. She

placed a hand on Sekali's arm and continued on, leaving the other two behind.

Uther marched over to Finyat, who had not aided him in the final defeat of the goblins. The Shallant was propping himself up on one elbow, gaping at the scene before him, fear in his eyes. Uther grabbed him by the back of the neck and hauled the trembling Shallant to his feet.

“Hurt?!” Uther bellowed, glaring at his friend, who looked down at himself, all scratched and bruised. Fingering his tattered and shredded leather clothing, he looked up at the Dwarf and shook his head.

“No, no, I’m alright.”

“You owe me a round of ten kohakks,” Uther bellowed, grinning. Finyat staggered a bit, looked around, then turned to his best friend.

“And bear steak and potatoes.” Sekali looked back to see Uther steady Finyat with a gentleness he had never displayed. Nodding emphatically, Uther slapped Finyat hard on the back.

“Good, now let's collect the wealth of dragons you yap so much about!” Uther swept his bloody hand over the scene. “This will be a good start.” Finyat agreed, eyes suddenly burning with insatiable greed at the prospect. Before he began checking the bodies, he ran up to Sekali and returned his shield.

“Thank you,” he whispered, then ran back to join Uther by the first victim. The Dwarf began collecting what valuables a goblin had on its corpse, then stalked over to the next one. Eagerly, Finyat began feverishly scavenging what he could find as well.

Mabuhi stayed as far from Uther as possible as they continued their journey. She spoke little, and then only in hushed whispers to Sekali. As the light of day began to fade, Sekali noticed a city far in the distance and pointed, drawing Finyat and Uther's attention to it. Finyat's eyes flared with delight at the prospect. Uther grunted.

“Now we come to the moral of this story. This is what we have been waiting for, eh black skin?” Uther spat and smiled cynically at Sekali, who wanted nothing more than to gag the Dwarf's rudeness with his fist. Instead, he ignored him. Finyat began jogging up ahead.

“We are escorts, then adventurers,” Sekali called after him. Uther cursed at Sekali, turned and followed Finyat. Sekali watched them go. After they were out of ear-shot he turned to Mabuhi.

“I will take you to your forest; let them get lost.” She shifted her gaze from the two ahead, then back to Sekali.

“You have not traveled with them for long, have you?” Sekali shook his head, exasperated.

“Nor do I wish to. I am not here to rummage through ruins and offend all those I may. I do not believe his comments about my skin-color are based on prejudice. He travels with another, not of his race. He doesn't think before he talks, and everything he says is meant to aggravate. I believe it is his nature to be defiant.” She looked at him, suddenly smiling.

“I believe you are right.”

“Again, Mabuhi, I was wrong leave you the other night. Will you forgive me? It will never happen again.” Mabuhi eyed Sekali with a new look, the corner of her mouth curving into a slight smile, tinged with a sadness -- and what appeared to him as an expression of hope. She nodded.

“Of course I forgive you, sir. Please think no more about it. It is forgotten.” With that, Sekali held out his hand toward their destination, offering her a proper escort arm. Throwing him a charming smile, she laid her hand upon the back of

his arm and began walking.

“Thank you,” he replied. Looking at her he tried to smile, this time making a bit more progress. Practice helped, though it seemed unnatural. “I am grateful to be your escort,” he stated in all sincerity.

“I am more grateful,” she countered.

“Mabuhi, the first day I came into the City`Port Navan, I met two girls, who I fell in love with. It was unexpected . . . unlooked for.” Mabuhi stopped and turned, a worried expression on her face.

“Then why are you here, and not with them?” Sekali laughed softly.

“I promised to go see them in Gaunten when I had the chance. I look forward to seeing Tamith. Mabuhi, she is so incredible, so beautiful, even for a Human.” Sekali's eyes brightened as he recalled her face. Mabuhi blinked in surprise, not knowing what to say. After a moment, the Aldarian Elf stopped, turned, and knelt down before Sekali. Sekali followed her lead, pleased with her company.

“A Human and a Sardakk Elf. Sekali, you know what heartbreak that will forge in the future? Are you sure you wish to pursue her?”

“Without question,” he answered. Mabuhi looked around, her eyes fogging up with emotion, which confused him.

“I was beginning to enjoy your company, Sekali. But I see there is a boundary now. You are my escort, and friend from this day forward.” Sekali looked confused, but then continued.

“She is only nine seasons. Her mother and father are dead.” Mabuhi looked at Sekali.

“Oh, I see. You would have to wait at least seven to eight years to begin developing a relationship with her.” Sekali gave Mabuhi a strange look, then smiled.

“She asked me to be her father, and I gladly accepted,” he whispered, suddenly understanding how she was taking him.

“Oh, I'm sorry. I misunderstood you, sir. I thought you were speaking of

eventual betrothal.” Shaking his head, Sekali tried to smile again, but failed. He would keep trying, not give up.

“No, I apologize for my miss communication. That would be Naria, her sister of nineteen years. You know, I spent the last thirty years trying to find death . . .” Sekali's face shaded over, as if suddenly haunted. “We should go, now.” Sekali began to stand, but Mabuhi placed a hand upon his arm.

“Wait, I beg you. Tell me of her sister, will you?” Sekali relaxed and took a deep breath, sighing sentimentally.

“When I first arrived, I was working my way down to the docks when I met them selling, what was that bread called? It's sweet and has granulated pieces in it. There is a brown mixed into it as well.” Mabuhi nervously smiled.

“Cinnamon bread?” she guessed, biting her bottom lip.

“Yes, that's it! She gave me samples. We talked for a while. The wind blew my hood back, which started it all. I offered to teach them braids in exchange for some samples of that delicious bread. They agreed. In less than a single day's time, Tamith and Naria hooked my heart so deeply, that I booked them passage to Gaunten, which is where they have family.” Sekali then told Mabuhi about the plot against the girls, and how he had dispatched four men and two Mirellian Elf Vampires. At the mention of Mirellian Elf, Mabuhi flinched, as if she had just been bitten by a spider.

“Mirellians, here?” Sekali nodded.

“Not any more. They are now dust. I could not let harm come to Tamith and Naria. Naria wants me to come to her in Gaunten.” Mabuhi's face fell into disappointment.

“Did you fancy her?” Sekali focused on Mabuhi.

“I like her very much. Mabuhi, I am Sardakk, and any other than my own race, or an equal to my race, like you said, would end up in sadness and tragedy.” Mabuhi sighed.

“I understand that completely,” she whispered, lamenting. Sadness filled Sekali's heart.

“Oh, I see, I see,” he repented. “I am very sorry for your loss. I did not mean to open any wounds.” Gripping his arm, Mabuhi wiped fresh tears from her eyes.

“Sometimes it's good to talk about it; gets it out into the open. I don't mind sharing it with you, sir. How about you? Have you ever had a woman?” Mabuhi knew full well he had; she had been listening to him talk in his sleep. He even told her about losing his love before. Still she waited for his answer. Stunned by her question, he nodded.

“You know I have.”

“But, doesn't it help to confide in someone you trust? Do you find that talking about it helps . . . heals?” Slowly, he nodded gazing into her emerald eyes which were in stark contrast to his own.

“Talking to you, it does.”

“I hope I am not offending you, sir.” This was against his culture; the way he was raised. But, he was removed from that. Now he was in the Living World. Things were different here, and what harm could be done by such a conversation? Honor remained between them both. In silence, Mabuhi smiled as Sekali stared at her, not knowing what to think. Standing, he helped her to her feet.

“Sekali, I travel all over this land, and into others as well. I have even been to the borders of the Wastelands, even though I steered clear of that death region. Though you did not see me, I observed you at the edge of the grove as you took those girls to the ship.” She smiled. “I have seen nothing but honor in you. It is an uncommon quality in many these days, and you possess it. Sekali, is it wrong for an Aldarian Elf, and a Sardakk Elf, to be attracted to each other?” Sekali thought about it, then slowly shook his head.

“Good. Would you endure a kiss from an Elf that caused your people's banishment into the Wastelands?” Giving her a wry look, he nodded, taking her hand, his heart lifting. She then kissed him.

Before the sun set, Uther and Finyat caught up with them, both in a foul mood.

That evening, as they set up camp, Mabuhi came over to Sekali as he was preparing his bedroll. She inquired of his homeland, culture, ritualistic ceremonies, and many other things. As they spoke, Uther became disgusted and dragged Finyat away from camp to explore. Finding themselves alone, Mabuhi sat next to Sekali as he warmed himself by the fire.

“Will you explain to me how one Sardakk Elf is married to another?” Taken back by her interest in such a custom, he did not know exactly how to begin.

“Mabuhi, it has been so long since I've thought about it. Since I lost her, I never gave such a thing a second thought, though there were two other women who . . . well, they gave up very quickly.” Mabuhi turned to Sekali, placed a gentle hand upon his arm, a look of deep sympathy in her expression.

“Sekali, I am so sorry for your loss. How you continued, I cannot fathom. You must be very strong.” Looking at her hair, he sighed heavily, feeling a tinge of fear growing within him. He thought about walking away, but the breaking of his oath would dishonor him. He liked her very much, but, simply put, if this worked into a relationship of marriage, he might lose her, as he lost Mahkaia. A second loss would be too much to bear. Looking around, he thought about it as Mabuhi watched him, her smile beginning to fade. Noticing her beginning to distance, he abruptly took in a deep breath, then let it out.

“I will begin with the braids, which are used for signs and communication.” He then explained to her the meaning of each braid, beginning with the first. As he did so, he took her hair and wove the first braid, showing her by example. After explaining what it signified, he continued with the second braid, then the third, and so on until the sixth braid was set into her hair. When he finished the sixth braid, Sekali ran the back of his hand down them.

“There, that was the fastest courtship and marriage proposal in history. We are now engaged and wait for the Shaman of the tribe to come join us.” Sekali bent toward Mabuhi. “So you know, this might end up a very long wait,” he whispered in all confidentiality, giving her a very serious look. She suddenly

laughed.

“I love this custom,” she mused, touching the braids on the side of her head. Touching each braid, she silently counted, then grinned at him. Sekali shook his head, trying to avoid eye contact with her. Mabuhi was charming, he had to admit, but no one would ever replace the woman he had lost . . . no one. Giving him a serious look, the Druid rested a gentle hand on his.

“Sekali, the way you speak about the woman you lost, I doubt you will ever replace her . . . not ever.” Shocked, Sekali looked at her, as if alarmed. “What, did I say something wrong?” He shook his head at her inquire.

“No, no, it's alright. Is there anything else you wish to know?” Eyes sparkling, in the dancing flames of the fire, she shook her head in silence.

“No, thank you for sharing with me. I'm having a good time.” He enjoyed the time he shared with her, sitting next to the warm fire, out in the open Grasslands. He found himself wishing it would never end. But, at last, she stood, walked over to her bedroll and knelt down, preparing to sleep. As she smoothed out her bedding, Sekali found himself at a loss for her company.

He remained by the fire throughout the night. Occasionally, he would look over to where she lay, only to find her watching him with those captivating, emerald eyes, glinting in the fire's light. He would willingly put himself into danger's path for her, and not because he had made an oath to do so.

Looking back into the fire, he let the dancing flames lull him into a trance. Shuddering at an unwanted memory, he tore his gaze from the flames and stared at the Shallant and the Dwarf, who had just returned. With confused thoughts, his attention fell, again, to the Aldarian Elf not three paces from him. She was still watching him.

As the night wore on, and his two companions had fallen asleep, she came and sat at the fire with him.

“I couldn't sleep, do you mind?” Sekali shook his head and waved his hand to his left, but did not face her. As she knelt by him, she also gazed into the dancing flames.

“You are soon relieved as my escort. Within two days, I come to my final destination. Thank you, Sekali.” She looked at him in silence, until he returned her stare.

“It has been a privilege, Mabuhi. Yet if I have been of any service to you, will you count on me again if ever the need arises?” She nodded without hesitation.

“You are worthy company. I have met few with your skills. I mean that.” Sekali retrieved a nearby stick and stirred the glowing embers at the base of the fire.

“I will pack our supplies so we can start early.” Mabuhi smiled. He watched her as she stood. He knew little of who she was, but maybe once her destination was reached, she would teach him more. He was curious . . . more than just curious. Was she the reason he had come to this strange and foreign land?

As Sekali packed up their belongings, Mabuhi fished some eggs out of her pack. Soon the smell of breakfast floated on the wind, making his stomach growl. He walked over to the two yet sleeping.

“Be up,” he said firmly. “We depart before dawn. Be up!” Finyat and Uther, grumped, not pleased to be traveling so early. Ignoring him, they both covered their ears. Mabuhi called to them reluctantly, as if she was making an effort to be civil.

“The eggs will be wasted on the ravens and vultures, lest you rise from the dead and come eat.” Finyat instantly jumped up, the Dwarf sluggishly following after, grumbling about wasted sleep being worse than wasted food. After a hearty breakfast, the four set out across the lush grasslands before the sun began its daily tradition of chasing the night into hiding.

Travel went smoothly and without incident for the next two days. By nightfall on the second day, they stopped their march not too far from the edge of a grand forest. There they set up camp. Uther built a small fire as bedrolls were laid out. There they would sleep one more night before entering the distant tree-line. That evening Mabuhi was silent, staring in the direction of the forest. Sekali's work was complete, and with its completion came a weary fatigue. Mabuhi was home. For the first time, he laid down and closed his eyes.

As they camped, all about them many wolves began to howl, their phantomlike songs echoing from deep within the confines of the forest. Sekali stirred in his sleep. Uther arose and started toward him as if to wake him. With a click of her tongue, Mabuhi caught Uther's attention. As he looked to her, she shook her head.

"Let him dream in peace for once, and draw not your weapons," she whispered. Uther caught a glance of seriousness in Mabuhi's look and complied, though he frowned at her severely. Finyat grabbed a burning stick from the flames and held it up at the edge of camp, gazing wide eyed out into the dark. Sekali remained in a restless sleep, tossing and turning lightly, eyes rolling back and forth beneath his eyelids.

"Uther", Finyat whispered, his voice filled with fear, "I have a really bad feeling about this." Uther grunted as he fell in beside Finyat.

"I'm here friend. I'm here." Finyat stole a glance at the Dwarf and smiled nervously, taking comfort in Uther's presence.

Sekali dreamed he was strolling through a wide expanse of knee-deep grasses, Mabuhi at his side. They both traveled in silence until coming to a halt before the border of a grand forest. In wonder, he looked at it, knowing he had been here before, yet couldn't remember when. As he puzzled over the familiarity of the woods, wolves began to exit the forest, raising their heads high, and straining their eerie songs up at the moon. Sekali noticed Mabuhi seemed unconcerned at the approaching wolves. Soon they appeared in great numbers all about them, yet did not advance closer than a stones' throw.

Looking at Mabuhi, he noticed her watching him. As she caught his eye, she pointed to a large black wolf, proud and majestic, pacing back and forth as it sniffed the ground. It suddenly broke from the others and strode forward toward them, causing Sekali's heart to beat faster. He noticed Mabuhi stood fearless and serene, giving him some assurance that everything was going to be alright. He watched her glittering eyes darting here and there, taking in every wolf, as if memorizing each of them.

Suddenly, she laughed aloud and leapt forward toward the large wolf, closing the distance between it and her. Reaching the magnificent animal, she knelt and threw her arms around its neck. The great wolf's tail began to wag furiously as it licked her face and neck as if it were a pup that hadn't seen its master all day. They knew each other! Mabuhi turned and threw Sekali a smile that brightened his soul and beckoned to him.

"Come, Sekali, meet one of the dearest friends in all my world." Sekali hesitated for a moment, until she beckoned to him again. She then whispered something to the wolf he did not hear. Taking courage, he approached and knelt beside her and the wolf, and froze. The wolf sniffed him and then began nuzzling Mabuhi once again.

"He has accepted you. You are now Druid ally, Sekali, and my personal guest in this, my forest." Sekali turned to her, suddenly confused.

"Mabuhi, why are you being so good to me? In reality, I am a stranger.

How is it that, in so little time, I have won such trust with you?” Taking the wolf’s ears with both hands, she gently worked them.

“Do you trust this wolf?” Removing his left gauntlet, he raised his hand to the side of its neck, coursing his fingers through its fur.

“Yes, but it is not sentient. It is a base instinct creature. I am sentient; I think, I calculate, and I can plot in secret.” She smiled brightly, looking up into his eyes.

“You are also Sardakk Elf, and that, in and of itself, earns my trust. I am not ignorant of your people, and their ways. It was one of the required studies during my ascension to Druid. I know I asked you many questions, but I already know most of the answers. Your people live in total harmony. There has never been a dissension among you.” Surprised, he shook his head.

“Then why ask?” Gripping his hand, she squeezed.

“You haven't guessed by now?” Pulling his hand away, he averted his eyes, not knowing how to react to the manner in which she touched him. Laughing softly, she reached out and hooked the neck-piece of his armor and pulled him close.

“Being more blunt, I know you are honorable and true to your word. Of course I only met you a few days ago, but if this wolf has accepted you, I trust him in his judgement. He is far more sentient than you give him credit for. He is the wolf you met in the glade.” Astonished, Sekali's eyes fell to the wolf.

“Do you accept me?” To his surprise, the wolf turned to him and raised a paw, placing it in his hand, its tail suddenly wagging.” Mabuhi pushed the wolf’s head and laughed.

“Traitor,” she teased. Sekali laughed, feeling a sudden joy he could not explain.

“Thirty years of darkness,” he whispered, taking the paw of the animal in his hand. “And who knew my supposed enemy would bring me such hope and joy.” Mabuhi smiled from ear to ear.

“You laughed, I heard it. Feels good, doesn't it?” Nodding, he let the paw

of the wolf go and turned his attention to her.

“I wish that-” Standing, he looked at the forest, then directly into her eyes. “This place is beautiful.” She stood and looked into the forest. Raising an eyebrow at him, she stood.

“Do you want to see it from the inside?” Sekali nodded.

“Yes, I do very much. But not with those two.” She took his gauntlet, slipped it back onto his hand and secured it.

“Then you shall.” Mabuhi snapped her fingers in his face. Now, wake up!”

Sekali's eyes opened slowly, reluctantly. The fire was dancing and crackling before him, holding at bay the mild chill of the night. Looking over at the woman he kept dreaming about, he found her staring at him. Glancing at Uther and Finyat, he quietly went to her and sat down, not touching her bedroll. Once settled down, he looked at her inquisitively.

“I keep having dreams about you, milady. Please hear me out before you pass judgement on me. I need to ask you a serious question,” he whispered. Seeing her eyebrows raise in response to his statement caused him to doubt. In silence she waited for him to continue. Fear gripped his heart like never before; not the fear of battle, but of being rejected. Well, there was no turning back now.

“Are you doing this? Are you causing these dreams?” Without hesitation, she simply reach out and unclasped his left gauntlet and slid it off his hand. Holding it up between them, she nodded.

“Then the wolf, he is real.” She nodded again. Looking to the forest, Sekali bit his lip and smiled as best he could, which was really no smile at all.

“I would absolutely love to see your homeland . . . without them.” Reaching out, she took his hand and fitted the gauntlet back on, fastening it.

“You, Sekali, are most welcome in my home.”

“Thank you, milady. Can I ask you another question?” She nodded, rolling her eyes.

“Ask as many questions as you like, sir.” Shifting into a kneeling position,

he gazed deep into her eyes, and for a reason. He needed to know a truth.

“Your people banishing us to the Wastelands was a lie I played for truth in my head, wasn't it?” She nodded.

“You have no idea, Sekali. Can I be blunt with you?”

“Of course, always.”

“I'm sure you have a pure heart, Sekali, shield of Sardakahn. Within the arena of history, you are incredibly naive. You really need to find a library, where true records are kept, and spend a year learning.”

“I've been told that before, but not quite like that.” She leaned so close to him, he could feel her breath on his face. His first impulse was to back away, but he forced himself not to. Truth be told, he almost failed the temptation to kiss her.

“Sekali, it does you no good to live in ignorance, no matter how honorable your intentions. If you truly wish to know what happen to your people, go to Gaunten, the capital of this continent, then seek out the library within Wardenoth Keep. It is an unspoiled, untainted library. If you spend time there, reading all the histories, starting with your own people, I know all your preconceived notions about why your people are in that land of death will vanish.” She moved closer to him, almost touching him.

“Then, your knowledge will bring forth and manifest a power within you. Is that not what you are here for? No Sardakk Elf leaves the Wastelands for no reason. Am I wrong?” Mesmerized by her, he slowly shook his head, his eyes falling to her lips. How could he possible be falling for this stranger? He had to back away from her, but lacked the will do so. As she waited for a response, it seemed she was inviting him to kiss her. Slowly, he leaned back.

“I will,” he whispered.” Grinning, she settled back.

“I believe we are being watched.” Sighing, Sekali shook his head.

“I was enjoying this.” He got up and drew his blade, walked over to the fire and began cleaning it. Uther's voice grated against the peaceful silence of the moment, shattering it.

“I thought you were going to kiss it!” Finyat snickered.

Later in the night, as Uther kept watch, he stepped to the edge of the camp, the howling of wolves angering him. With one hand gripping the shaft of his broad-bladed axe, and the other holding high a burning branch, he peered into the darkness, ready to fight. Uther was from the Iron Hills of Tremor Keep, where wolves grew unnaturally large and vicious, claiming the careless and unwary. Mostly, they stalked the livestock of his people. The Dwarf grunted and stalked over to where Sekali lay.

“Elf, get up! Wolves surround us!” Sekali rose instantly, as Mabuhi shot Uther a despairing look. Sekali turned toward the sound of the last howl, eyes wide, yet not with fear. The Druid neared his side and looked out into the night.

“What is it, Sekali?” she whispered. Without looking at her he raised a finger to his lips.

“Never have I beheld such a land.” Sekali motioned toward the western sky. “The wolves are our allies. I feel excitement in their songs, and enjoy my dreams about them.” He stood in silence, noticing her posture, the set determination, and her confidence. As in his dreams, she stood, undaunted and unafraid. Sekali came to full alert, focusing on Uther as he glared at him, thumbing his axe. It would have to be quick, Uther, then Finyat. Sekali blanched, instantly correcting his thoughts as he turned to Mabuhi.

“You walk among wolves. When I wake, my dream is true.” Sekali walked over to the fire and built it up. He then returned to her side offering her an arm, which she took.

As evening turned into the early hours of predawn, the flames of the campfire died down, leaving the glowing embers amidst the cooling ashes. Mabuhi cooked breakfast for Sekali and took it to him. Gratefully he receive it, and asked her to eat with him. She accepted and knelt beside him as he looked out into the waning night. After they ate, she set down her plate.

“Sekali, I need to go. Gather up camp and let us be gone.” Sekali took her plate, stood and left her to gather her belongings. He noticed how focused she was,

and how her hands trembled slightly. He suspected the wolves were calling to her. Approaching the other two, he stopped, eyeing them critically. As if dumbfounded, with a tinge of insolence as their only personality trait, they stared back at him.

“Be ready to travel soon,” Sekali said, trying not to sound condescending. He approached the coals of the fire, thinking about the company he traveled with. Kneeling, he placed the last of the wood onto the coals and began blowing on the embers. As the flames grew, he warmed his hands. Finyat rose to his feet in absolute silence, staring at him, distinguishable thoughts of unkindness in his eyes.

“Who in the Underworld does he think he is?” Finyat’s words passed between his teeth like a snake’s hiss. Uther shrugged and whispered so that just Finyat could hear. Mabuhi walked out of camp folding her arms about her thin waist as Uther eyed her critically.

“Should we kill them?” the Dwarf openly inquired. Voices of the wolves drifted steadily upon the gentle morning wind, helping Finyat to make a quick decision. He shook his head.

“We shall see, Uther, we shall see.” Finyat looked out into the fading darkness, then at the Dwarf still sitting on his bedroll. Uther looked unconcerned about the wolves, though his axe was in hand. He watched Sekali warming his hands.

Sekali heard their conversation, the brightening of his eyes his only reaction. He contemplated the match between himself and them. *The Dwarf first, then the Shallant; it will take no more than a few moments.* But his given oath came to mind. Again, he abandoned the thought. He grimaced at the coals. *Never before have I accepted such an oath!* At night, when he would try to sleep, he had felt the fool for trapping himself. But she was at her destination; his oath was nearly fulfilled. When Sekali overheard their conversation, he shifted his position around the fire, feigning to warm his hands where some coals were giving off more heat.

“Elf! Let’s kill the woman and be on with this adventure of yours!” Sekali

flinched and stood. In challenge, Uther stood and walked over to stand in front of him.

“What say you?” the Dwarf growled. “She is bad luck. Listen to those wolves out there. She tricked us into coming out here. Her goal is to kill us all and take everything we have.” Sekali moved close to the Dwarf and bent down into his face.

“Your words reveal your heart. Touch her not.” Sekali moved closer, his face almost touching Uther's. “Touch – her – not.” He straightened, glaring at the Dwarf. Once his oath was fulfilled, he would re-discuss this issue. Uther growled dangerously, causing Finyat to jump to his feet. The Shallant came and squeezed himself between the two. He glanced up at Sekali and smiled nervously, then turned to Uther.

“Uther, when we finish this escort, we will have all the time in the world to explore the ruins. Think about it, wealth untold!” Uther hastily glanced at Finyat, that dangerous look still in his eyes.

“I hate Elves!” he spat, then turned and stalked off, pretending to finish packing. Finyat turned and almost put a hand on Sekali's arm, then decided against it. Sekali said nothing as he watched Finyat, who whispered, “The Witch makes him nervous. You understand,” then walked away.

The three had been unaware of Mabuhi's return. She was standing at the edge of the camp, and whether she had heard everything, they did not know. There was a deep concern in her eyes as she brushed and smoothed her traveling robes. Sekali noticed her and immediately walked to her side, standing sentinel as she made sure her pack was situated acceptably. While she did so, Sekali watched the other two. He thought of Uther's adept nature with an axe as the howling of the wolves filled the air, growing louder.

They were near.

By the time the sun crested the horizon, the four had not been traveling long. Mabuhi quickened her stride so that Uther and Finyat lagged far behind. Sekali knew she did this intentionally. At midday she dropped her pack and began jogging. Sekali stopped, retrieved it, then pursued her. As they approached the forest, Mabuhi broke into a full run. Increasing his speed, Sekali attempted to overtake her, but the two packs, and the armor he wore, weighed him down. As she approached the edge of the forest, he saw her sprint in past the tree-line, quickly vanishing from sight.

Sekali came to a halt before the edge of the forest, catching his breath. Looking back, he could see no sign of Uther or Finyat. He suspected they would not catch up for quite some time. Maybe they would turn back and vanish from his life forever. Turning back to the forest, he entered, walking for a while. As he did, Sekali took in the grandest sight he ever beheld, daunted by its complexity. He took up a handful of leaves from the ground and looked at them in wonder.

“Magnificent,” he whispered. He did not see Mabuhi behind him, observing everything he was doing. She watched him for a while, seeing how he took such careful notice of things. Smiling, she moved closer as he knelt beside a small plant, studying it. The Druid watched him take his gauntlets off so he could touch it. After a long moment, she broke the silence.

“Sekali,” she whispered. Startled by her sudden appearance, he jumped up and turned to her.

“Mabuhi, bright one, peacemaker, wolf maiden, lady of the wood, I will always remember you.” Sekali bowed low, then gathered up their belongings. She grinned, amused at the titles he had just labeled her with.

“What brings such kind words to your lips, Sekali of the Wastelands?” Sekali unbuckled his sword and tossed it to the ground behind himself; the Sardakk token of utter trust and peace.

“All my life there has been death and bloodshed. I am proud to have been a part of that . . . it was just. It instilled in me the desire to, one day, bring my people

to a place like this. Mabuhi, I do not wish to leave.” He looked back toward the way they had come and sighed heavily. “But Uther and Finyat, they will come. I will go and lead them away.” He looked at her in all seriousness. “You will not have to bear them again. You will have your peace,” he stated in all soberness. She grinned happily and nodded, moving in front of him, slowly closing the distance between them.

“You are welcome here, Sekali. When you come into this place, call my name. I will find you.” Sekali took in the woods all about him, admiring its beauty.

“And if ever you need my services, small or great, I lend myself freely, gladly.” Mabuhi looked down at her hands for a while and then nodded. She reached up and pulled her hair behind her. Instantly, Sekali lifted his hand to the left side of his head and braided a single braid, then waited. Instantly, she did the same, her eyes glistening with joy.

“Come back alone. Come back and I will show you the hospitality you deserve.” Her words lightened his heart.

“Mabuhi, may I call upon you?” He waited, motionless as Mabuhi intensely studied him.

“Yes,” she finally said, smiling. “Sekali?”

“Yes?” he replied without hesitation.

“I enjoy your company. We will talk later – look.” Looking to where she pointed, he observed Finyat and Uther trudging up a small incline, obviously searching for him. What was it that they needed his company so badly for? He was about to get to the end of this ordeal. Walking over to his sword, he knelt down and retrieved it. He arose, turned and bowed to her. In return, she curtsied, a look of regret in her countenance.

“You can come back anytime you wish . . . even tomorrow, if you like. You can stay here now, if you wish to.” Looking at the two invaders, Sekali shook his head.

“You make this is a difficult decision, Mabuhi. Are you trying to keep me

here for some reason?” He walked up to her and touched her single braid.

“Are you trying to spellbind me? If so, you need no magic, or allied wolves. I am honored that you call me friend.” She grinned. He continued. “You put me in danger of forgetting to defend myself, should this become necessary. If I fall to them, it will be on your head.” Looking around, she grimaced.

“Now, I wouldn't want that.” Sekali smiled slightly.

“I will lead them away, then come back. Thank you, milady. In just a few short days, you have taught me so much.” Setting Mabuhi's belongings down beside her, he hesitated in his decision to leave. In earnest, she looked up at him.

“I want you to know, the wolf has accepted you. And because he has accepted you, so also have all the others. You, sir, are perfectly safe and welcome in my forest.” Sekali sighed heavily, growled, turned away, mourning the day he fell in company with two brigands, then quickly began the descent down the forested slope. As he neared the two, he pictured the forest floor swallowing Finyat and Uther whole in a whirlpool of soil, root and stone.

His oath was complete.

The first thing that passed from the Dwarf's mouth was, of course, his natural insolence at its finest.

“Is she gone? Can we go now? Finyat, should I lay low a few trees – leave my mark?” Without waiting for an answer, Uther raised his axe to the nearest tree. “Uther The Great was here!” he bellowed, threatening every tree he passed by as Sekali departed toward the Grasslands without speaking to them. Soon – it seemed an eternity to the Sekali – they vanished into the Grasslands. He did not look back, though the thought of her was etched firmly into his mind. He spoke to neither of them until the evening, which infuriated the Dwarf.

Three days it took them to reach the ruins. Sekali had no respite from the buffeting of the Dwarf, and this darkened his mood. His hand was always ready, resting upon the hilt of his blade, and ever sharpening it with a wet-stone when they camped. After the first night, Uther and Finyat stayed away from him, yet the Dwarf constantly spoke of killing, especially druids and trees.

At times, Sekali studied the both of them. His conclusion was that some terrible catastrophe had occurred in the history of the Dwarves, making Uther not only stupid and insensible, but also loathsome; a curse Uther was well-gifted with. Finyat spoke little. He confided with the Dwarf, mostly in secret, as if he feared the Dwarf's wrath if contradicted. He witnessed the Shallant's beady eyes always poking and prying about, as if, under every rock or bush, there might be some money.

After carefully studying them, Sekali came to the conclusion the Dwarf was a Warrior and the Shallant was Assassin, Thief or both. Even though they were a great weight to him, it made his excursion into the living world more interesting. Once they were finished at the ancient ruins, he would abandon them and return, leaving them behind forever.

They headed for an ancient, ruined site where he would see them both use their abilities. Figuring he had already seen the extent of the Dwarf's skills, there was nothing more to learn about him. He guzzled liquor like a master lush, and

wielded an axe even better. However, the Shallant posed an interesting fellow; always so secretive. He wondered what they would do if real trouble challenged them, not just a few “pups” with twisted blades. He had a feeling he had not begun to see what Finyat was capable of.

When camping for the night, Sekali meditated kneeling, sitting erect, head lowered to his chest, sword resting upon his legs, just in case. Uther seemed intensely aggravated by Sekali’s mistrust of him, and retaliated by naming one-hundred different methods to kill a Druid and destroy her forest during the last camp before they reached the ruins.

On the third day, Sekali wanted to kill the Dwarf. He was thinking of challenging him to a one-on-one duel, and was just about to hail Uther, when the ruins emerged from the tall grasses, coming into view as the three rounded a large rolling hill. Finyat whistled in awe at the sight before them. Uther turned to the Shallant and smiled broadly.

“Well? Now that our ball and chain is cut, I say we go have a peek, eh’ friend?” Finyat nodded, but did not speak. Sekali climbed a small knoll for a better look and turned to stare in wonder at the fallen city before him. At one time this place must have been a metropolis of thousands upon thousands people.

Hundreds of shattered towers dotted the Grasslands far out into the horizon. The remains of what must have been grand houses, magnificent buildings and shops, keeps and strongholds, lay dormant and quiet amidst the rubble of partially fallen buildings and towers. Streets uniformly lined the city, paralleling the avenues on either side, strewn with rock and debris, as if a great earthquake had struck long ago. The sight before him was truly staggering, even in its fallen state.

He could picture the buildings standing, people engaging in trade and commerce in their places of business. He could almost see the people of this great city, like a multitude of ants, moving to and fro, on business and pleasure. But, like the walls of the City-Port Navan, this place was not build for defense. No wonder it had fallen.

At a call from the Dwarf, Sekali descended the hillside and approached

them. The Dwarf snorted at him as Finyat smiled greedily. As the three stood at the edge of the desolated city, an archway still standing, in surprisingly good condition, beckoned them enter. Sekali studied the archway, hoping to find some inscriptions or writings which might give him a clue to the type of people who had vanished from this place. It was all a mystery to him, intriguing him to probe further into the unknown.

After Sekali studied it for some time, Uther swore impatiently and entered in under the archway, loudly challenging all who would oppose him. Sekali slid over to Finyat's side and slyly whispered, pointing to the center of the wreckage.

“The wealth of dragons.” Finyat shuddered. Sekali could not tell if it was fear or anticipation in his quivering breath, until the Shallant turned and nodded enthusiastically, suddenly grinning, a wild gleam dancing within the depths of his eyes. Two short-swords hissed out from their resting places as he looked upon the magnificent ruins before him.

“Let's do it.” With that, the Shallant plunged in after the bellowing Dwarf. Sekali silently followed, his sword yet sheathed, his eyes moving among the shadows, prying into every hiding place. They searched the wreckage for half a day before finding what they sought. Even Sekali's heart quickened at the sight of a stairway leading down into the underground, into blackness.

The stairs were wide enough for five men to march side by side down. At the bottom, down twenty-four steps of hewn stone, sat a pair of oval-shaped doors in surprisingly good condition, standing ajar. Uther and Finyat set down their packs and fished out torches, lighting them. There was no planning, no order in which they agreed to enter this mysterious place. Even against the advice of Finyat, Uther blundered his way in, making a racket that would have awakened the dead.

Sekali followed last, bearing no torch, his eyes quickly adjusting to the murky shambles of a debris-strewn tunnel that continued to angle downward. It amused him to see the two in front of him, poking around, crouching here and there, as if in pursuit of some abominable creature and treasure. The Dwarf never

stopped grumbling, yet his mutters now were directed inward, and not to others, as if talking to himself. Sekali could not hear what Uther was saying; the Dwarf's plated armor noisily drowning out the sound of his grumbling as he stalked the ruins.

When the underground passageway split into two corridors, the two halted, waiting for Sekali to join them. The Dwarf turned to him as he approached, whispering loudly.

“Well, Elf? Which way?” Sekali shrugged and looked down one tunnel, and then the other.

“It doesn't matter, as all who may reside here heard your threats as we entered.” His words dripped with sarcasm, as he made no attempt to hide his disapproval. Uther grunted; his favorite form of communication.

“Then I choose left,” he stated, pointing his axe down the left corridor. He and Finyat quickly agreed. As they proceeded down the tunnel, Sekali's heart began to beat noticeably faster, and he felt a sudden shadow growing within his mind and heart that concerned him. In the Wastelands there were creatures that could cause a man to turn to stone, liquid, or vapor. He knew anything was possible in this world.

A sense of foreboding began to clutch at his heart. Something was wrong, and the two at either side of him did not seem to notice. The deeper they penetrated into the darkness of the tunnel, the stronger the feeling assailed him. As sweat began to trickle down Sekali's face, Finyat pointed.

“There is light ahead. There, can you see?” Sekali looked where Finyat was pointing, feeling weighted down. It was getting harder to move. Uther growled and stopped.

“There is no light in the distance. It is here, growing!” The Dwarf took a step back. It was true, the light was not in the distance, but directly before them, expanding and stretching before their eyes. Soon the illumination filled the tunnel, making the torches seem mere candle flames in the noon-day sun. Within that light they beheld the form of a woman in pure-white robes, who looked upon them

emotionlessly.

Finyat fell to his knees, dropping his torch bowing in submission as Uther stood unmoving, speechless, mouth gaping wide. Sekali leaned heavily backwards, feeling the stone of the tunnel catch his balance. He knew if he fell, he would only have enough strength to crawl.

The woman's eyes burned as with a white flame as she positioned her hand upon the hilt of a magnificent sword, a katana, at her left hip. For a few moments, she watched them.

“Why interest thou this place?” There was no answer from the three. Again, she repeated the question, staring directly at Sekali. “Why interest thou this place? Art thou common thieves, come to plunder this city?” Sekali shook his head, swallowing hard, trying to gain enough control of himself to speak. Finally, under her piercing gaze, he answered her.

“Nay, lady. I am an explorer who seeks knowledge.” She shifted her eyes to Finyat, again asking the same of him. With great difficulty, Finyat shook his head, and answered her.

“We are not thieves. We are travelers seeking knowledge.” Looking at him in doubt, she shook her head, then turned to Uther, inquiring the same. Uther dropped his axe and stammered, not saying much of anything. The woman's expression hardened as she listened. Uther looked at Sekali and then at Finyat.

“I am with them. My - I will not take a single rock, I swear it. Forgive me.” Forgive me? Had Sekali heard Uther correctly? Sekali was surprised at words he would have doubted the Dwarf even knew. The glorious woman nodded, drawing a white sword. She pointed with it down the way they had come.

“The other way lies thy path. This way, I forbid thee travel. Go.” Sekali watched the two quickly stumble, retreating into the tunnel behind him. Unmoving, he stared in wonder at this beautiful woman, filled with power and splendor. He looked at the radiant power of her blade, catching hints of many runes and glyphs etched into its surface. The radiance of her blade made it impossible for him to read and discern, though he strained his vision to see.

Sheathing her blade, she looked at him, her eyebrow raising in question as to why he still remained. Her hair was as finely wrought strands of silver moon beams, her eyes filled with the blue of the clearest and brightest of skies, mingled with a touch of white fire.

Sekali felt nothing but pure admiration for this woman. His frame shook merely from being in her presence. No creatures of the Wastelands had ever done this to him. He suddenly realized what he was in the presence of.

“Mehentaon (Herald),” he whispered. Her stern expression softened as she gazed at Sekali in silence. Slowly, a smile played across her lips, and a fondness settled in her eyes.

“Sekali, thou art perceptive. Continue thy search and thou mayest discover a great mystery; a truth more valuable than mountains of treasure. Persist in the seeking of knowledge to strengthen both thyself and thy people. We shall meet again.” The light about her began to diminish, and as it did, she slowly faded away, leaving him standing alone. Hesitating long enough for his eyes to adjust, Sekali waited, then slowly made his way back to Uther and Finyat.

The three stared down the right-hand passage, but Finyat and Uther would not take the initiative and venture into the tunnel. Sekali noticed Finyat and Uther were shaken by the encounter. He also felt the effects of the Herald, but not as acutely as Uther and Finyat. Unlike he, they were not, at this time, living a life of honor and uprightness. Of course her presence would effect them more harshly.

“Uther, Finyat, follow me,” he whispered, beckoning to them. Without argument, they followed. Taking the initiative, Sekali moved foreword, the two trailed him into a tunnel that began to angle downward, causing their footing to be more precarious and challenging. Broken, and choked with centuries of fallen dust and debris, they made their way down a seemingly never-ending set of broken stairs. Sekali led them slipping on loose rocks now and then. As they moved on, ever downward, Sekali wondered about the Herald, and why was she here. There had to be something special about this city, for this was not normal amidst ancient and abandoned ruins.

He did not attempt to conceal how she had affected him. She had deeply effected them all. Uther was stone-silent, keeping to himself. Finyat was also silent, his usual care free and adventurous spirit subdued, replaced with a fevered look in his eyes, as if he was searching for something he could not find.

The Herald telling them, this way was their path, stuck in his mind, for she was a stranger to them, and they to her. He, Uther, and Finyat traveling together should not have gone this far, which made this highly disturbing. Yet, she said this was their path. She did not say, leave this place and don't come back. As he thought about it, it weighed down in him, and then weighed heavier yet.

They traversed the traitorous path she had directed them to, but the feeling of her presence did not subside. Looking at the other two, it seemed as if each had some inner thoughts relating to his own. They had been quiet for longer than he had ever witnessed; a remarkable thing in itself. After some time, Uther stopped and pointed his axe ahead.

“Something is there, see?” Sekali looked as Finyat squinted in the dim light

of the torches. Ahead, there was a dim, unmoving, figure of a person seated against the wall of the tunnel. Carefully, they moved closer. As they approached the figure, Sekali wondered if some unfortunate traveler had stumbled in from the wilds, unlucky enough to meet the Herald in her wrath. Long auburn hair hung loosely down the back and sides of the body, frozen in a chilling display of death.

As he neared, he recognized who it was. In shock and surprise, Sekali knelt by her, and found it to be the Druid. His blood froze in his veins, then began to heat as anger hatched in his mind. His mind reeled at the sight of her. He put out a hand and touched her. She was still warm!

Finyat readied his weapons, looking around hastily for the killer. Uther mumbled something about not meaning what he had said before as he knelt at Sekali's side, lowering his head. Finyat kept watch, always peering up and down the tunnel expecting to be waylaid by some monstrous fiend. Sekali's heart felt as though it was burning ice within his chest as he shook his head in utter disbelief.

"I left her but three days ago. How could she have gotten here before us? We traveled straightway to this city. How?" Something was not right here. Sekali laid a hand on hers, anger welling up like a storm within. "There are forces at work here . . . powerful influences," he growled, clenching his teeth, trying to resist breaking into a terrible rage. His eyes fell upon Finyat and Uther, glinting with such malice and hatred, both stepped away from him. "Dark forces, or I am a fool! Let us avenge her, or die, for she was a pure maiden, unlike any other!" Sekali stood and looked down upon her only for a moment before he bitterly turned and began stalking down the tunnel without waiting for his companions. As he marched, he readied his shield and positioned his blade, determined to commit vengeance.

Uther and Finyat hastily followed after him, weapons ready. Deeper into the tunnel, they descended, Sekali leading them in silent fury as he stalked foreword, no attempt at silence. They followed the tunnel for quite some time; it seemed to never end as well as Sekali's rage.

As the three advanced into the unknown portion of the city's bowels, Finyat finally broke the silence in a hushed and terrified whisper.

“Let us leave this accursed place. There are others to see and hear and feel. Let us depart Sekali. Uther, help me persuade him, or come with me,” he begged. Uther ignored Finyat and stalked forward, also bent on battle. Finyat threw Sekali a quick glance, and was met with a cold, black scrutiny that plainly stated, “Coward.” Sekali hissed loudly, not caring who or what now heard him.

“The wealth of dragons! Riches untold! Is this not what your heart desires? Go back alone, coward Shallant!” Finyat blanched at Sekali's remark and shook his head, continuing with him, saying no more. Uther grunted and raised his axe, a warning of something in the tunnel ahead.

“I see shadows moving. Maybe nothing more than recent memories playing in my head,” he grimly uttered, shuddering. Sekali peered ahead, shaking his head.

“I see nothing, Dwarf. You battle with yourself.” Uther gave Sekali a dark glance, as if warning him not to push his luck. Finyat lagged behind the two, keeping his distance just in case the two went to blows. As they stalked forth, Finyat cringed.

“You make a beacon for all enemies to see us. Be quieter!” At the same time, Sekali and Uther yelled one word in unison: “Good!” Throwing his hands in the air, Finyat let out an exasperated sigh of frustration.

After taking a left down the decaying tunnel, and descending three flights of crumbling stairs, Sekali hissed out a warning, pointing ahead. In the shadow-light of their torches stood a little, knee-high, half-sized man with strangely darkened skin. As they stared, it laughed with glee and sped toward them with such astonishing speed, they could not gain the advantage to strike, as it passed directly through their midst.

“Fools, and fools of fools! My master bids you come and join him for dinner. What say you?” Finyat launched himself at the small humanoid, but missed, tasting the stone and dust of the floor as the creature easily evaded him.

Within their torch-light, Sekali noticed it had the appearance of a small elf-like creature with forest-green skin and sharply slanted eyes. It grinned at them cheerfully. Shrugging at Finyat, it spoke again.

“What say you? Do you dine with my master, or not?” Sekali turned and stood motionless, observing that it was weaponless. He thought of the Herald being within this place, and deemed it inconsistent that Mabuhi should have fallen here. He came to a conclusion: This place was the work of Ryagg, the Jahtha of Chaos, and he hated it.

Uther snarled, breaking into a frenzy of attacks. Again and again, he swung his axe at the creature. But so sure was its balance and footing, he could not strike it. Finyat jumped in and helped, hoping the both of them might somehow take it off guard. Soon, both were leaning on the wall of the tunnel, frustrated, catching their breath. The elf-like creature looked down his nose at the both of them and snickered.

“Out of shape, eh? Well, this will have done you some good then. I wager you drink too much, which diminishes ones speed.” He held up a tiny forefinger and continued. “From the smell of you both, I bet you a river of gold you drink kohakk.” Uther snorted, and even smiled briefly, but did not speak. He was too involved in the catching of his breath. Finyat narrowed his eyes at the thing before him and spat.

“You can't get lucky forever, little fiend.” The creature laughed.

“Ha! Your life span is so short, I won't have to.” Sekali smirked, which caught the little green man's attention. Within a heartbeat, it leapt up onto his shoulder and perched there grinning.

“Something amusing, Elf?” Sekali tensed, nodded, and snatched for . . . thin air. It was much too fast to be caught by hand. He thought if they had nets . . .

“It would do you no good, Sardakk. You would tangle yourselves up, and I would have to rescue you. And to what thanks?” It made a sad face. Sekali's eyes widened in amazement. It had read his thoughts! The little, green, pointy-eared creature yawned in Sekali's ear, then waved its tiny hand into the darkness.

“Come. My master awaits you. He wishes to have you for dinner,” he snickered mischievously and looked down his nose at Sekali. Sekali sheathed his blade, giving in.

“Familiar terms Elf?” Placing his hand on the hilt of his blade, Sekali stared in shock at the little green humanoid.

“How did you know – just lead the way.” He heard the curses from his companions behind him, and ignored their warnings as he fell in behind the creature, who proceeded down the ancient tunnel in satisfaction.

“Good choice mighty adventurer! Follow me!” After a minute, Uther and Finyat grudgingly caught up to them, falling in step to either side. The creature turned, smiling gleefully. “Glad you could make it. Did you fare better at catching your breath than catching me?” Uther and Finyat ignored it, not answering.

Their strange guide led them through a maze of twists and turns, down stairs, through tunnels and down many hallways. Sekali and his companions became hopelessly lost as they followed. Finyat had a look on his face that plainly stated, *I sense a trap*, but followed nonetheless.

In time they turned down a passageway that dead-ended with a large, sturdy-looking door before them. Finyat was the first to notice their guide was missing. Uther was the first to notice a large reptilian humanoid blocking their way back out. Sekali was the first to attack.

The battle lasted only a few short, vicious, moments. Finyat was wounded, slashed across the face by the lizard-man. Uther was unharmed, as was Sekali. The Dwarf had gone berserk, as he did the time when they encountered the Goblins. In the end, the Lizardman lay under the point of Sekali’s blade, pinned to the filthy floor of the tunnel. Growling viciously, Uther stepped up beside it, raising his axe to finish it off. Sekali raised a hand, stopping the Dwarf.

“Uther, wait, don’t kill it.” He did not know why he stopped Uther, but he did, sparing its life. Uther snarled at Sekali and stomped over to Finyat who was taking his cloak and pressing it into the side of his face where his skin was torn.

As Uther tended to Finyat, Sekali dug into his pack and produced a medical kit, opened it, then tended the monster, applying healing salves and bandaging its wounds. He did not know why he helped his enemy, nor did he attempt to justify his actions. He finished the wrappings, testing them, making sure they were properly dressed.

“I don't know if you understand me, but I spared your life,” he whispered. At that instant, the little green elf creature showed up, instantly seeing what had happened. Fear quickly washed over its face.

“How have you bested my master when others have failed? Because you are the victors, I must show you to his treasure hoard, which is now yours for the taking.” With a nervous smile, it waited for their response. Of course, hearing the words, treasure, and hoard, Finyat was the first to speak.

“I thank you for your diplomacy, good sir. And I accept your offer kindly. Lead on.” Uther growled, testing the edge of his axe with a thumb, glaring at the little green man, and then at Sekali. Sekali stood and cleaned his blade upon the reptile's cloak. Before following, Sekali turned to the lizard man and pointed a finger at it.

“You will not get another chance,” he warned, then turned, pointing at the small creature. “I am no fool. You tricked this creature, and now you attempt to trick us. How many lives do you play with, wicked thing?” The tiny humanoid shrugged.

“You have played my little game, and have won. I will take you to your reward, if you will but let me.” Pointing at the door, it smugly continued. “This door holds the wealth of that thing you defeated. If you wish it, you may have it all. If not, there will be others.” Sekali's next words flowed like venom from his lips.

“Like the Druid? Curse you to death and darkness, she was pure and innocent! For her fall, I will find a way to bring these walls down upon your head. This will become your tomb, fiend, I have spoken.” The little creature suddenly grew serious, biting its lip.

“Sardakk, do you really think you can?” Sekali froze, glaring at the creature.

“I make a blood-oath now: I will succeed, or I will die.” The little creature lowered its head and mumbled something. Then, just as quickly, perked up and slapped its hands together.

“Nevertheless, you all have earned the reward within.” With that it pulled a key from its pocket, stepped up to the door and fit it in the key hole. With a click, the locking mechanism turned, and as it did, the tiny green man pushed on it, swinging it inward. As it opened, revealing what was inside the room, Finyat whistled in delightful surprise. Within lay much gold scattered over the floor of a large chamber, gleaming in the light of their torches. Armors, shields, and weapons were also scattered throughout the thick bed of wealth. With a dejected look, the little creature entered.

“It took so long to collect it all. But, you have bested me, and that is my game. It is now your right to take what you will . . . even all of it.” Finyat instantly entered, and began exploring through it all, like a child who had just receive too many presents for his birthday. Sekali refused to enter the room; he did not wish it. Uther shot Sekali a sarcastic look and entered after Finyat.

“This was earned by fair combat, Elf . . . why not take it?” Sekali leaned a hand against the doorframe, suddenly shaking in rage.

“And you both care not for the woman lying dead back there? In greed, you will carry the heaviness of these riches out, and yet not her precious body to be buried within her forest in honor? Take your wealth, glut yourselves upon it. I will bear Mabuhi to her lonely grave myself!” With that, Sekali stooped and grabbed a handful of gold coins. Screaming at the two, he flung the gold at them, then departed from the doorway, heading back to find her. He did not care how long it would take, even if it was forever.

As he began to search his way out, to his surprise, Finyat and Uther fell into step beside him, shamefaced. Uther spoke for them both.

“Let us find your maiden, Sekali of the Wastelands. We will bury her in honor within her forest. Then we will come back.” Finyat nodded, his eyes

brightening. Pacified and grateful, Sekali placed each hand on his companions shoulder, nodding.

“She was precious to me, brothers. I wish I had not left her. I am to blame.” Suddenly, the green creature was before them, no sign of mockery in its demeanor. The three stopped. Sekali sighed heavily, his eyes filling with anger and bitter desperation.

“Please show us the way back to her. I will give you everything I possess, even my freedom, if you will but aid us in burying her body in honor.” The little green man lowered its head, shaking it. To their astonishment, the creature beginning to shift and change. Light first blazed from its eyes as it grew. Its skin became white as snow, and wings stretched out from her back. She lifted from off the ground as she took the shape of the white lady they had seen earlier. As the transformation completed, she drew forth her blade.

“May we call a truce, Sekali? I know the Sardakk oath of honor, and it is broken only by its completion, or by thy death.” Sekali instantly sheathed his blade and knelt before her, shielding his eyes from her searing brilliance, that same heaviness from before weighing heavily upon him once again. His voice quivering with controlled anger, he forced words through clenched teeth.

“My lady, please forgive me. It is only the Elven maiden I would champion. Her death is a second grievous blow in my life . . . a burden I did not wish to carry. At this time, death would be better than to live on after letting my guard down to love again!” Finyat and Uther could only watch, overcome by the enchanted power of the Herald as fear gripped them, rendering them motionless. The herald nodded and sheathed her blade.

“Fear not Sekali. Let not a second curse take hold in thy heart, for she is not dead, but safely sleeps, even now, within her forest abode. Be not surprised at my words. I know thou art cursed, for I perceive such things.” Sekali shot her a look of disbelief. Nodding, she continued.

“The reptilian thou didst heal was the test of mercy. The treasure thou didst forsake was the test of greed. The Leprechaun was the test of forbearance. I have

tested thee and thy companions for a wise purpose which shall hereafter be made known, if thou wouldst be willing to learn. Twas requisite to discern the purity of thy hearts.” Sekali did not understand; this was beyond his reasoning. Whatever was happening, it had to be significant.

“Sekali, I find thee a most fascinating creature. I judge thee, and I find thy heart pure, though thou art ignorant of many things. Thou shouldst take the time to learn more.” That was the third time in his life someone had told him that. She turned her attention to the Shallant.

“Finyat, control thy lust for wealth and power, for this may someday be to thy own workings toward self ruin.” With a sigh, and a more firm glare, she took in the Dwarf with blazing eyes.

“Uther, thou dost lack proper judgement, a quality sought by many kings. Find that in thyself, and thou shalt be great, like the Dwarf heroes of old. Find it not, and thou shalt ever find thyself at the beginning -- on and on shall be thy days, unchanging until thou shalt draw thy last breath upon this earthen plane.” These were her last words before she faded into the brilliance of her own light. Then, slowly, the brilliance receded into itself and vanished.

Sekali immediately leapt to his feet and darted up the passage, disappearing into the darkness ahead, frantically turning down corridors and sprinting up ancient staircases, his mind reeling in desperate hope. Slipping on some debris, Sekali lost his footing and crashed to the floor, sliding up hard against a stone wall. As he came to a stop, he leapt to his feet and rushed onward, as Uther bellowed after him to wait.

He ignored the Dwarf as he leapt across a deep rent in the stone of a hallway, suddenly before him. Barely making the jump, he realized this was the wrong way, but continued on at a great pace. The corridors, alcoves, stairways and tunnels seemed endless. As he ran, weighted by his plate armor, Sekali’s eyes began to see only what lay before him, his thoughts fixed upon this vast maze unfolding before him. He did not wonder how, but when he would find the tunnel where this had all began. On he spurred himself, faster and faster, daring and

risking the dangers of the ruins in his search. After what seemed an eternity of running, he found what he sought; a familiar passageway. This was it. Now he would know for sure if she had spoken true.

He slowed to a walk, panting heavily, heart beating nearly out of his chest. He wiped sweat and dirt from his face as he neared the spot where Mabuhi had been. Her body was absent. On the floor, in the place where she had been, lay a scroll, wrapped with a royal-blue ribbon. For a while he stared at it, catching his breath. Again he wiped sweat from his face and picked up the scroll.

Pulling the ribbon free, he unrolled it. Upon the page he read four words, which taught him a lesson he would never forget for the rest of his life. In a flowing, golden script, he read the words: *Never doubt a Herald.*

Ashamed, he reverently rolled the parchment and re-tied the ribbon about it. In great wonder, he gently he placed the scroll into his side pouch. With conviction, he whispered, “I will never doubt you again, fair lady – I swear it.”

Kneeling, Sekali stayed where he was until, finally, he heard his companions approach. Uther was guiding the Shallant, as their torches had long since burned out. Sekali retrieved a torch from his pack and lit it, giving his companions the light they needed to see where he was. When they saw the light of his torch, they both came to where he knelt. Finyat looked soberly at Sekali.

“What say you? Let us leave this place. I yearn for the sun on my face.” Uther looked at him and frowned, but nodded.

“I agree with Finyat. There will be treasure enough elsewhere. We should depart.” Sekali studied the two intently. There was a change in them; there was a change in him. He had come into the Living World to learn and to increase his knowledge, and this was significant.

He longed to spend time with Mabuhi, his Aldarian Elf cousin. She had allowed the seed of friendship to grow between them, and ever would he do anything to secure her trust and affection.

“Yes. We should be away from this sacred place. I feel not worthy to stand upon these grounds. Come, let us -”

”Come with me.” The softness of her voice penetrated their hearts once again, yet the weight of her presence did not bind their limbs, as before. The suddenness of her appearance caused the three to whirl about, astonished. Without another word, the Lady turned and glided through many passageways and tunnels, up many flights of stairs, leading them. They followed her, mesmerized by her radiance and grace, as she led them through alcoves scribed with strange runes and glyphs. As they passed beneath these, the three felt power touch and probe them, though they were not effected adversely. Eventually, she departed from them, leaving them standing at the beginning of a labyrinth library harboring shelves filled with a thousand times a thousand books.

”Find the center,” they heard her voice echo through the great structure. They stood in wonder at what lay before them. At first they gazed in wonder at the site she had brought them to. To them, it seemed all the combined libraries in the world would not fill half the shelves before them. Sekali was the first to speak. Placing a hand on Finyat’s shoulder, he looked down at him, meeting his eye.

”Treasures and wealth untold.” Finyat cringed at Sekali.

”I don’t read much.” Sekali smirked.

”Neither do I. Maybe this is a hint.” Uther snorted.

”Quit bantering, you two, and let us explore this place. We have her permission. Let’s go!” Laughing, Finyat nodded and placed a hand on Uther’s shoulder. Instantly, the Dwarf moved foreword, taking the lead and pushing the Shallant’s hand off him.

It took them quite a bit of time to follow this great vault of knowledge to its center. As they passed among the great shelves of manuscripts, scrolls, leather-backed and strangely bound tomes, the three felt as if the sun had passed over them many times. The most astonishing feature of all the tomes, scrolls and writs, was they had absolutely no sign of aging, nor were they touched by the dilapidating hand of atrophy. Even the very dust of the earth seemed to flee this place.

Endlessly they traveled foreword, sometimes stopping to read the spine of a tome that caught their eye. For a great length of time, they moved on as they

searched for the center of the library. As they explored and searched, they fell into a trance, losing track of the present. Hunger, thirst, fatigue and sleep did not touch upon them. It was as if the laws and cares of mortality did not exist in this place.

At long last they entered into a wide-open space in which, to one side, they noticed a great hearth wherein a warm fire crackled and danced gracefully. Before the fire, in a soft and comfortable, high winged-back chair rested an elderly man with an open book across his lap. Trusting there was no danger here, Sekali quietly walked over and stood at his left side in silence. Uther and Finyat followed, stopping directly opposite the aged man, who did not look up.

The three stood by and watched in silence as the old man slowly turned page after page after page in a book laying open upon his lap. If he had noticed them enter the area, he showed no sign of it. Sekali wondered why this man, seemingly beyond his years, should be sitting alone in an ancient ruined city amidst a mass gathering of books. It was so out of place, the three were completely distracted by the scene before them. Had any danger come upon them, it would have caught them off guard, and could well have been the perfect snare to tragically end their journey. Fortunately for them, this was no trap.

Quietly they waited, the silence pressing down upon them. Uther shifted from side to side and cleared his throat, as if to gain the attention of the old man. All he managed to do was startle Finyat, who shot him a look that plainly threatened, "I'll get you for that." Every move they made became out of place, like the distraction of a single leaf as it suddenly falls from a tree one is sitting under.

In growing curiosity, Finyat looked down at the book the old man was holding in his lap, catching Sekali's attention. Sekali watched Finyat, noticing his eyes widen in open astonishment. The Shallant's brow creased as a look of fear overwhelmed him. Uther noticed Finyat's demeanor change. Stepping closer, the Dwarf warily watched the old man, tense, waiting for any trickery.

After a long while, he set his attention to the pages of the book as well, and began to read. After only a short moment, the Dwarf gasped.

"Where did you get that?" he asked in disbelief. The expression on his rugged face instantly struck Sekali with chills which cascaded down his back like a thousand swarming ants. There was strange work afoot here, but he forced himself to ignore the book in case it was a trap. Someone needed to keep a lookout for danger. Suspiciously, Sekali searched into every dark area of the vast library, half expecting something nightmarish to suddenly come upon them.

His thoughts turned to the Herald, who had guided them here, and the words on the scroll she wrote. Dropping his hand from the hilt of his sword, Sekali's attention was finally drawn to the pages of the book. As he began to read, horror

instantly hatched in his mind and soul, like the blackened egg of a Morgel Dragon. By the words of the book, he was taken back upon The Watch where Mahkaia had fallen over thirty years ago. The room about him, as well as the old man and his companions, blurred as a vision of the Wastelands spread out like a nightmare before him.

. . . Mahkaia stood in the zenith of the pinnacle for the best view and spell-casting advantage. About her, he and his five brothers stood at attention, motionless, silent, aware . . .

Sekali felt his heart begin to beat faster. His breathing became shallow and harsh. Clenching both fists, he ground his teeth loudly, the sting of great pain, loss and remorse filling him with every word he read. This was the account of his wife's last Watch:

. . . Mahkaia turned, making eye contact with Sekali, a look of regret in her eyes . . .

Sekali moaned, but could not tear his eyes from the book. He remembered the look she gave him that day, confirming the terrible fear that plagued him . . . a fear she worked fervently to help him overcome. Sekali reluctantly read on:

. . . out of the mists it came, flowing like a blackened steam, great lengths of darkness spreading out and probing the ground before it . . .

Shuddering, Sekali felt tears begin to sting his eyes. Though he had not lived this event for over three decades, he now saw it plainly before him, as if present.

. . . she screamed in the voice of a dragon . . . she needed to act quickly to

save her faithful warriors . . . protect her husband . . .

Everything, everything, Mahkaia had ever done was to build him up. She was always there for him. When he first laid eyes on her, and she him, Mahkaia was ever attentive thereafter. Why she had chosen him, he could only guess. When he stood before her, and tied the first braid in his hair, she laughed and tied the first braid in her hair with no hesitation. Mahkaia was created for him.

. . . as she leapt from the pinnacle, she shifted into a great fiery dragon . . .
“Senth enja, senth enja! (Back down, back down!),” she screamed . . .

He remembered how her voice nearly defended him. She did not call out a mere command, she demanded it, and they obeyed. She was protecting he and his brothers, one of which had fallen victim to its terrible attack, vanishing, leaving his personal effects to collapse to the ground. His death was a heavy blow to Sekali. To this day, he yet mourned his brother's loss.

. . . it turned upon her, wailing in fury and hatred . . .

With no hesitation, Mahkaia had drawn this terrible foe off he and his surviving brothers. In the beginning, he did not know why she wanted them away from that dark horror. But, soon, she gave him the reason.

. . . “Soul`Reaper!” She screamed . . .

This was a foe beyond even her. Now, as he read within the pages of this old man's book, he realized Mahkaia had bought them the precious time it took until others could arrive and balance, then tip the odds of this horrific contest in their favor. Many came to their aid without hesitation as his wife threw the full extent of her power at the Soul`Reaper.

. . . the Soul`Reaper slowly fell to the earth, its blackened scythe slipping past Mahkaia`s defenses, grazing a claw on her right hand . . . Mahkaia, in the form of the ancient fire dragon, fell back, crashed to the ground, shifted back to her natural form, then faded away . . .

Like a thousand merciless arrows, memories of Mahkaia pierced him. He could see her smile and hear her laughter, like music in the air. He recalled her sense of humor, and how spooky she could be. Looking down, he saw her hand rest upon his arm. Raising his hand, he gently touched the six braids at the side of her head. As he did, she smiled and laughed for joy. For a few short days, he shared everything with her; they were truly happy.

Then, before his eyes, blurred by tears, Mahkaia changed to a visage of bones. That terrible, familiar, wound that had plagued him now for thirty years, lanced him in the chest, piercing his heart like a blade just pulled from the forge. The horror of her loss exploded within Sekali, causing him to stagger and reel as the room spun about him. Gripping the top of the chair, he steadied himself, sucking in each breath in ragged gasps. He never should have come to this place!

It is said the mere prick of a Soul`Reaper's scythe delivers up one's spirit into the realm of death, wherein no rest can be found. Sekali discovered the truth of that legend on Mahkaia 's last Watch. On that dark day, part of his mind had forever shattered, leaving his soul with terrible scars. Every time he slept, that murderous apparition was there to remind him of where she was, and that it beckoned him to join her. Sekali shut his eyes and felt his knees impact the marble floor beneath him.

The old man closed the book slowly and looked up, yet not at them. He gazed into the flames of the fire as if attempting to see beyond it. Silently, Finyat and Uther stared at the closed book, also struck by what each of them had read; the experiences they had to relive.

Sekali reeled back from the memory, pushing it as far back into the darkness of his mind as possible. He wanted to forget. Moisture ran down his cheeks unchecked as he silently wept at the memory of Mahkaia's smile the day they had been joined as husband and wife. Doubling over on the floor, he sobbed aloud, hammering his fists upon the marble with all his might, screaming.

He willed himself to darkness; into nothingness where the pain could not reach. The wound was so deep, he dared not face it again. Darkness did take him, giving him peace, yet only for a time.

He awoke to the old man speaking, as if he were far away. At first, what he was saying, he could not tell, but as he listened, his mind cleared, and he began to understand. Finyat was asking many questions of the old man. Uther, however, asked few questions, and mostly listened.

The old man spoke of the origin of the Dwarf species, both the Sha`Qual and the Kithrin. He spoke of the separation of the once single and great nation of the Dwarves as if it were yet fresh in his mind, as if he had been there himself. He spoke of the Kithrin, and how they mine below the surface of the ground, and of the Sha`Qual who delve deep down into the roots of the earth, driven by great curiosity.

Sekali fell into a great sleep and dreamed the old man's words as if he himself had witnessed the dwarven rift of old. Then the dream concluded, leaving him in silence and darkness. Again Sekali awakened to the smell of fruits, vegetables, honey and fresh-cooked bread, which delicacies struck him with a voracious hunger.

Opening his eyes, he saw the three sitting in comfortable chairs eating from a food-laden platters. Mahkaia's image focused in his mind, once again germinating that profound sadness he had tried for so long to lock away. She was everything to him. She still was, more now than ever before. One day, he hoped to follow and join her in the next world. Slowly, he raised himself to his feet and walked over to the others, finding an empty chair. The old man politely stood and motioned him to sit.

"Please, eat. You are no doubt hungry, Sekali. You have rested long." Sekali looked at the food, deciding which delicacy to enjoy first. Usually he shared his mind and spirit with darkness for only a day or two, but that book had brought him to relive his last Watch with Mahkaia, causing him to flee for a much longer duration this time. In sadness, he sighed, hesitating, a single tear rolling down his face as he looked at his hands.

"Is there water to wash with, sir? I am not fit to touch this food or dine with

you at this point.” The old man nodded and pointed to a basin of water over by the fire. There was a towel folded neatly beside it.

After he had cleaned his hands, he took up the bowl of water and the towel. After grabbing his pack, he left the area and found a private spot, away from the others, between two great shelves of books and scrolls. There, he stripped down and washed. Putting on clean traveling clothes, he combed out and braided his long hair. After making himself presentable, he cleaned his shield, sword and armor, which he did not put back on.

Returning, he replaced everything where it was and silently walked over to the three. Sitting down, he looked at the food before him, feeling more than hungry. Slowly, he ate. Of all the types of drinks he was offered by his unusual host, only water did he accept. Finyat accepted some fine wine to drink as Uther enjoyed kohakk, which brightened his mood.

The old man ate with them in silence for some time. It seemed strange to be eating and drinking with this stranger. Time seemed to stand still. At one point in this endless meal, the old man spoke without words, as his lips never moved but to chew the food he ate. He told them of this city, the City of Knowledge, they were now in, and how they had only been in a mere fraction of the halls, glimpsing only a small portion of the library before them. This city was once a thriving, living city of trade, industry and growth. All races from every land were welcome here.

Even when a question about the city would surface within the minds of the three, the old man delivered them a detailed, yet not lengthy discourse on that very subject.

The tale went on to tell of the Sister City, an ancient civilization far to the uttermost reaches of the north beyond the Navarian Sea. It was equal to the splendor and might of these now-hallowed, silent, remains of a once-thriving civilization. Finyat grimaced in confusion and bent all his thought on what was being said. Uther drank deeply from his mug and frowned. Sekali thought of the legend and wondered about the inhabitants of each city; where could they have gone in all this time?

Ages would pass and decay would eventually reduce each city to dust. He looked up at the old man to find him intensely staring his way, eyes glittering like two small stars, as if a bright light had been set within his soul. The old man stood and spoke to them as one man speaks to another, his lips now moving as he spoke.

“I am the Knowledge Master. In my lifetime, I have read all books within this great library. I know the courses of mankind, the plots and schemes of many kingdoms. I know war and peace. You have been sent to me by the white lady, for she has requested my aid in solving a great mystery from a past age of this world: What has happened to the Sister City? I would investigate this myself, yet, alas, I cannot leave this place. I am compelled to stay and guard this library. It has been long since the last and final struggle. But you have come to me and may be of use in this matter, if you be willing.”

Finyat, Uther and Sekali looked at each other and nodded without hesitation. Uther cleared his throat and drew forth his axe, gliding his coarse thumb across the blade. Finyat piped in quickly, without hesitation.

“We might be of some help.” The Knowledge Master nodded, seeing the what’s-in-it-for-us look in Finyat’s eyes. He stood, swallowing the last bit of his drink. With a sigh, and an unpleased look at his now empty cup, he simply walked away without a word. The three looked at each other and sat there in silence. Finyat shrugged, as if to say, “what did I do?” Within the myriad of shelves where the old man had disappeared, they heard him call to them.

“Leave your weapons and armors and follow me. I have gone ahead a few pages and read your histories past this point. Thus, I have prepared something for you.” All three glanced back, their eyes falling on the tome laying on the table. It was before the chair the Knowledge Master had been sitting in. So it was not merely a book of their past and present. The old man had read into their future. Finyat became curious as he looked it at.

“Finyat, only I can see the future pages of one’s life; something I have rarely done. It is a dangerous business to search the future.” They could hear the Knowledge Master sigh heavily.

“Living your life without the knowledge of what will surely be, preserves hope for the future - remember that. Hope is what carries us all to our end . . . whatever end that may be.” Finyat nodded regretfully.

They followed the sound of his voice, through corridors of numberless books and scroll-lined walls until they came to a halt before a large door, crafted from the most exquisite wood Uther had ever beheld. It was of the purest white, like newly fallen snow. In wonder and curiosity, the Dwarf placed a hand on its surface, feeling the make of the wood, admiring it. The old man watched Uther for a moment, then stepped up beside him.

“It is ivory wood, imported long ago by the people of this city. This type of wood holds its strength for many an age if cured properly.” Uther looked up at him, his mouth forming a rare smile.

“Give me an Ivory Wood forest, ten years, ten of my kin, and I would build a mansion, the likes of which has never been seen. Are these trees rare? Where would I find them?” He inquired in earnest. Throwing the Dwarf a smile, the knowledge master pulled out a tiny silver key and fit it into the lock. Before opening the door, he looked at Uther.

“That I know of, there are no ivory wood forests. These trees mingle themselves with the timber of many forests, and are uncommon to find.” With that, he turned the key and pushed the door open, revealing a long, wide chamber neatly set with armors, weapons, shields, and items of a curious workmanship (rings, bracelets, earrings, amulets, and many other objects).

Finyat's eyes bulged, and his jaw dropped in wonder and unveiled treasure-lust. Sekali also looked in wonder at it all, his eyes taking in every item within. For only a moment, Uther looked inside the chamber, gripping his beard. But, it was plain to see where his heart truly was, for in the next moment his attention was back to the door. He lovingly ran a hand over the wood, studying it.

“Do not touch anything within this room,” their host said. Giving the knowledge master a look of despair, Finyat fidgeted impatiently, causing the old man to chuckle.

“I am sympathetic of the plight of the Shallant race, my friend,” he stated. Finyat furrowed his brows, confused.

“What plight?” the Shallant inquired. The aged librarian's demeanor brightened.

“Greed, Finyat, greed.” Finyat shrugged and looked into the room, an almost fevered look etched into his face, similar to Uther's demeanor anytime he set eyes upon a mug of kohakk.

“That's a lot of treasure in there,” he whispered. Sekali thought the Shallant might soon begin to drool, if something wasn't done. Their host looked upon Finyat and shook his head.

“Some things are forever consistent in this vast world; a true rarity.” Finyat absently nodded, still gazing into the treasure room. The Knowledge Master seemed moved to pity, and so entered the chamber.

“Follow me, but touch nothing,” he reminded them. He picked out a set of hardened and cured leather armor of remarkable workmanship, two short blades, deeply etched with flowing runes, a dark cloak and a ring for Finyat to wear.

“Hold these, but do not put them on until I have enlightened you on their properties, my young acquaintance.” Finyat nodded, eagerly holding the bundle, slightly pacified.

For Uther, he picked out a set of plate armor, blackened in color, an axe of workmanship equal to Finyat's blades, and a set of black skin-like armor to fit under his platemail. He also gave Uther a ring and a small blackened-steel shield to place upon his back, with the same instruction to not use them as of yet.

As items were being picked for his comrades, Sekali caught sight of a particular set of chain mail in the far corner of the chamber, and made for it. As he neared, he caught his breath in disbelief. Each and every link of this armor was set with a unique and different rune. Intrigued, he poured over the armor, link by link, examining each rune, amazed to find that some held the written letters of the Sardakk Elf language, while others were of the Human dialect. Some he knew to be Shallant. He supposed that all the symbols constituting the languages of all the

races were etched into this one set of exquisite chain mail. Many runes were faded, but not unreadable. Some runes were severed or deeply marred by battle.

Like a shadow, a great weariness fell over him as he looked over the armor. Ten links studied, turned to hundreds, as he worked his way over the entire set. In time, he finished, and stepped back, turning to see the old man watching him.

“Where did you get this? What does it do? What are all the symbols, runes, and curious markings for? What is the history behind such a creation? Who wore this armor and when -” The old man held up his hands.

“Hold, hold, hold! Your enquiries are as a volley of arrows upon me. I am pleased you like it. I made that armor myself and only I have ever worn it. It is crafted by my own skills and I placed special care and a great many years of my life finishing it. One who wears this armor can not only understand but speak the languages of all the races of Utaemia. I also included many hundreds of creatures in the making. Now I hope you are satisfied at my answer. But this armor is not for you. Here.” Sekali accepted a set of plated armor, blackened just as Uther’s. It was subtly crested with symbols and runes; runes which could be seen only if he looked at each one directly. He was also given a long sword and scabbard. Last of all, a ring of white gold, with leaves etched into its entire surface.

“Unsheathe the blade, Sekali. Go ahead. I need to tell you about it.” Sekali held the scabbard firmly in one hand, and gripped the sword's hilt with the other. As he pulled it free, he noticed it was light and perfectly balanced. The steel of the blade was crafted of a curious metal, dark-blue in color.

“What form of steel is this, master? Or is it steel at all?” The old man smiled.

“It is called mystical steel; the best formed metal known to common mankind. There is better, but it is nigh impossible to find, let alone find a master-of-masters blacksmith, and an equally powerful Witch, to forge it. This blade is fairly resistant to enchantment and magic cast upon it – not upon the wielder, mind you remember that bit of information. I dare say, my lad, if you had pierced your enemy with this blade it would not have broken.” Sekali sheathed the blade.

“I hate that memory,” he whispered despairingly. “Please, I beg you never to mention it again.” Sekali bowed to him, showing he meant no disrespect. The Knowledge Master's demeanor instantly changed, replaced by a sudden sadness, evident in his eyes.

“I am deeply sorry for the loss of Mahkaia,” he whispered solemnly, tears pooling within his aged eyes. “She was an asset to your entire nation. Her loss even reached my attention long ago. You do not know this, Sekali, but I knew her well, as did many other people outside the Wastelands.” The Knowledge Master's eyes spilled tears down his cheeks, and he hushed for a few moments, struggling for emotional control. Surprised by his words, Sekali's eyes widened. He had no idea how far his wife's influence had reached, but, apparently, her fame was not merely among his people.

“Her loss was a grievous blow to many, you most of all, Sekali.” Stunned, Sekali staggered, feeling slightly dizzy. Placing the tip of the scabbard upon the stone floor, he balanced himself. As shocked as he was, Sekali's heart softened as he felt part of a great and terrible burdened shared. His pain was not lifted, but somehow lessened, making it lighter, easier. Still, he was not in his home; an outcast who now had to wander the lands.

“I am empty, sir. What more is there now? I think of her in my waking hours, and am plagued by the Soul`Reaper when I fail to remain awake.” Stepping forward, the old man placed a hand firmly on Sekali's shoulder.

“I also miss her very much. If I told you the relationship she and I shared, you would consider me family, as I do you.” Sekali wiped fresh tears from his face and sobbed.

“What am I supposed to do now? I am here, in the Living World, due to my recklessness upon The Watch. In seeking to follow Mahkaia into the next world, I endangered my people, and it shamed me. Of all the qualities Mahkaia had, I admired her wisdom most of all. But, now what? Am I being selfish? I hope not. I feel desperate.” The knowledge master embraced Sekali, shedding tears of sympathy and sorrow with him.

“Oh, child, this world holds many wonders. You have lost the greatest wonder of them all. But please remember, there are great things in the vastness of Utaemia. These things are yet unknown to you, but they are there. I promise, you have a future out there to be discovered. Sekali, be brave enough to seek that future out, and honorable enough to never give in, never give up. Nothing will ever take the memory of Mahkaia from you, but you must live, Sekali, live.” Parting from him, they both wiped the tears dry, composing themselves.

“Thank you sir. I will do my best,” he managed to say as he bested his emotions with great effort. “How did you meet her?” Smiling brightly, the old man winked at Sekali.

“I traveled to Sardakahn Citadel, alone, and personally delivered her as a baby.” Shocked, Sekali looked at him in sudden wonder.

“You made it to the citadel. Astounding.” Standing suddenly upright and proud, Sekali saluted him in honor. In return, the knowledge master returned the salute.

“Ita sevara shi mena te evora (I loved her like a father),” the aged man whispered. The old man’s words caused Sekali to smile.

“Mehah emil vura (well met sir)”. For a long while, the two talked about Sekali's homeland, the people he knew, and about Mahkaia. Though it did not lessen the pain, Sekali drew strength from the Knowledge Master, and silently committed to do his very best from that time on, even if he suffered.

This man had singlehandedly triumphed over the horrors of the Wastelands, living to tell the tale. If he could do that, Sekali would do his best to conquer a wasteland that tortured him from within. This man gave him hope.

“Hope is what keeps our efforts and struggles alive, son.” Sekali nodded.

“Thank you, master. Thank you for sharing this with me. Thank you.” Smiling brightly, the Knowledge Master modestly lowered his head for a moment.

“You are more welcome than you know. If you continue in honor, I predict great things in your future. Stay true to the code of honor you were born to. Stay true to your way of life. You never know . . .”

“I will, sir.” Nodding in satisfaction, he beckoned Sekali to follow him over to a shield. Pointing at it, he grinned.

“Here, pick up that shield as well, it will match the armoring you will need for your journey. We have a bit more to discuss before you and your companions take your leave.” Obediently, Sekali gratefully took up the shield, then followed the Knowledge Master out of the chamber.

They sat and ate as the Knowledge Master fiddled with a few things in his hands, mumbling to himself.

“Let’s see, how did this go? One, two, three. Hmm, there are five here.” He laid out five amulets on a table in front of him, scrutinizing them. After staring at them for a while, he picked out two and placed them back within his robes.

“There we are . . . three. These are the correct amulets for the occasion, I believe. Here.” Without explaining, he handed Sekali, Uther and Finyat each an amulet.

“Go ahead and put on the items from the treasury.” As they did so, he disclosed the magical and enchanted properties of each armor, shield, weapon and ring.

“Crafted by the great blacksmiths of old, and empowered by enchanters, the armors and shields hold an enchantment, magically forging them far more durable than any master smith could. They also have the favorable quality to mend themselves if damaged. I know that sounds as if they are alive . . . they are not.” Uther grunted in satisfaction, while Finyat’s eyes widened like a child who had just been surprised with a bag of diamonds.

“The swords and axe are enchanted with an extraordinarily keen edge, gifted to bite much deeper than their normal steel alloy.” With their armors donned, the three looked like something out of old legend. They did not know it, but these items had been created during the Age of War, about four-thousand years after Sekali's people were established in the Wastelands.

“The items are not yet yours, but you can earn them by accepting a mission of great importance.” Uther and Finyat instantly agreed to the task, whatever it was, for they coveted the items. Sekali agreed to the mission, whatever it was, not only because of his conversation with the Knowledge Master, but because the white herald had brought them to him, signifying the validity of his request.

“Okay, you each have a ring. Finyat, the enchantment of your ring will increase your abilities as a Thief and Assassin.” Finyat instantly feigned

indignance.

“You give my secrets away sir!” The Knowledge Master laughed and continued.

“My apologies master Thief. Now, even though the ring will increase the success chance of your abilities, it will be minimal. Finyat, forget you have it on, and you will do just fine.” Finyat grinned and held up his hand, admiring the black band upon his pointing finger.

“Thank you,” he said, and bowed happily.

“You are welcome. I believe that is the first time in an age a Shallant has said thank you to me.” Laughing softly, the Knowledge Master continued.

“Complete this mission, successfully, and these items are yours. That goes for all of you.” The aged man looked at the Kithrin Dwarf.

“Uther, your ring is enchanted with a shielding effect, meaning you will take less physical damage from weapons, falling, animal attacks, like being mauled by a bear, Etc. It will also aid you if, the great bearded one forbid, you cannot find a hearty mug of kohakk.” The knowledge master grinned at the Dwarf, who instantly bellowed in laughter.

“Well, by the great bearded one, I hope this ring will not be needed to pacify my thirst!” Pointing a finger at Uther, the Knowledge Master nodded.

“I don't think you will ever have a problem with that.” Uther held up the ring, as if it was now a sacred Kithrin heirloom.

“So, If I cannot find a mug of kohakk, and my thirst begins to torture me, will I feel the taste of it in my mouth?” Holding his chin, the Knowledge Master thought for a moment.

“That is correct.” Uther grinned happily and put the ring on.

“Uther, if this mission is completed successfully, I will give you an enchanted flask of endless kohakk. Every day it magically fills itself to full. Deal?” Stunned, Uther raised his axe high.

“Deal!” He shouted, loud enough to stun every creature out in the Grasslands. Sekali and Finyat cringed, covering their ears for a moment as the

Knowledge Master chuckled, humored by Uther's enthusiasm. Uther suddenly became curious.

“Can I see the flask -- just a peek?” Nodding, the old man walked over to a large ornate chest, set off to the right of the hearth. Raising the lid, he looked in and began noisily rummaging through its contents. Insatiably curious, Uther moved up behind the knowledge master, peering over his shoulder, anticipating the appearance of the magical flask.

“Ah, here it is,” the elderly gentleman stated. “It's a bit dusty, but still works just the same.” Standing, he turned to Uther and handed him the flask.

“The day is nearly spent, so try it. If you do, you will get to see it refill soon.” Uther took the flask, unstopped it, and smelled it. Putting it to his lips, he raised the bottom of the flask and guzzled the entire contents in one breath. Lowering the now empty flask, he belched long and loud.

“Ah, now that is good kohakk. Now what?” Raising an eyebrow, the Knowledge Master looked at Finyat, who shrugged sheepishly.

“My bad, sorry, I should have warned you he'd do that.” Waving a hand at Finyat, the old man turned his attention to Sekali as Uther stared at the flask in great anticipation.

“The ring you have, has the power of healing. Now, the ring will not heal you of physical, spiritual, or mental wounds. It aids you on a course to find healing . . . life healing. I thought it most appropriate for your situation. Like the other rings, it does not carry you into success, or discoveries that increase the well being and station of your life. However, it gives you a little edge when making life choices. Sekali, please use your own intuition, ignoring the fact that this ring will aid you. Do not rely on magic and enchantments to achieve what you desire. One more thing: This ring is visible only to others who you deem as an ally.” The Knowledge Master lowered his head and raised his eyebrows at Sekali. “That added enchantment was placed upon the ring to keep it out of enemy hands.” Sekali looked at the ring, suddenly deep in thought. After a minute, he looked up.

“Thank you master. I am in your debt.” Shaking his head, the old man came

and sat down in his favorite soft chair and sighed.

“If you succeed in this mission, I, and a multitude of others, will be in your debt,” he stated, looking at all three of them. With a wave of his hand, he invited them to sit down. As soon as they were seated, he clapped his hands together. Sekali noticed he seemed a bit anxious.

“You three will travel to the Sister City and reclaim it. You will throw down all resistance that stands in your way. There are two keys to victory in this. The first is secrecy, which is why only you three are being sent. Three visitors from another land are hardly a threat, or concern, especially if they are not known – famous. The second key to success is the amulet you each wear. Each amulet is a third of one key to the raising the Sister City. If you raise the Sister City by using your amulets, you will hammer the final nail into the coffin of our enemy, the Veleighen, who dwell in the Northlands across the Navarian Sea. Do you have any questions?” None of them did, except for Uther, who nodded, watching the flask unblinking. After a while, as the talk went on, Uther bellowed in great delight, startling Finyat.

“It's full, it's full!” Quickly, he emptied it again, belched even louder, and handed it back to the Knowledge Master, who took it, shaking his head and smiling. After a few moments, in which he looked at each one of them for a long moment, he sobered.

“I ask you now to go. Take your belongings and return to the forest of the Druid. There you will receive further instructions. Farewell, my friends, until we meet again. Vannar watch over you.” The Knowledge Master stood and bowed to each of them. The three stood, bowed and retrieved their belongings. As Uther and Finyat were packing up their gear, Sekali saluted the Knowledge Master and then embraced him.

“Thank you again, master. We will not fail this mission.” Parting, he turned away and retrieved his pack. The three retreated from the presence of the Knowledge Master, who stared after them for quite some time after they had departed. Sekali had just assured him of their success. This was reassuring to him,

but also worried him highly.

“Dost thou think they can do this thing, sir?” The old man turned to the beautiful Herald, who had slipped into view unexpectedly, and bowed, as if it was no surprise to see one of Vannar’s personal servants on the Earthen Plane.

“There is strength and determination in those three. Each has his own personality and set of abilities, just as the other two groups did. But, I have faith in these three. I am very attached to them, and do not wish them to end up as the other six . . . who failed in death. Asira, I am tired of being here, stuck in a library in which all books are as familiar to me as a house one lives in too long. I want to see trees, fields, waters and stars again. My lady, will you please petition our lord Vannar to help them in some way? I would be in your debt.” Placing a gentle hand upon his shoulder, she nodded.

“Of course. And when all is said and done, and the Sister City raised, thou shalt be free. When that day comes wilt thou -” She faltered, then embraced him, a worried look in her beautiful face. With a warm smile, he returned her affection, wrapping his arms about her.

“Milady, when their mission is successful, I will be freed from my stewardship here. When this great day comes, will you -” “Yes,” she cut in. “Yes a thousand times.” Pulling back, he winced at a pain in his back, then chuckled.

“Yes? Asira, do you even know what I was going to ask you?” She nodded, smiling brightly.

“Thou, Aan, wast about to ask my hand in marriage.” Chuckling, he released her and raised his aged hands up before her.

“I’m full of too many years. What can you possibly see in me?” Raising a forefinger, she poked him in the chest.

“Aan, thou knowest full well that is of no concern to me.” He shrugged.

“I’m just prolonging our conversation. I enjoy your company.” Flattered, Asira wrapped her arms about the Knowledge Master and kissed him as she smiled.

“Didst thou just ask me to marry thee without bending the knee and holding

up a ring?" Pulling away from her, he slowly knelt upon one knee, wincing in pain, and produced a beautiful ring, set with a white diamond.

"Asira, I have always felt a deep, passionate love for you. Would you lower yourself to my station and be my wife?" Tears instantly flooded down Asira's face as she nodded.

"Again, a thousand times, yes." Quickly, she helped Aan stand, then embraced him, chanting words of healing. Within the space of three breaths, Aan was engulfed in a brilliant blue radiance, relieving him of any pain he felt, especially in his knees. Aan then slipped the ring on her finger and gently embraced the single most happy Herald in Utaemia. "It is about time thou didst ask. I have been waiting for this since the Sister City was buried. Why didst thou wait so long?" Smiling, Aan touched her cheek.

"I wanted to wait until I reclaimed my immortality again. I wanted to wait until I knew I could be your equal in all things." Smoothing his hair back, she grinned.

"Thou art my equal in all things. Thou dost have a job to finish, that is all." Aan grimaced.

"What if they fail, and we can't find anyone to try again, or we are too late? Do you realize what will happen if the Veleighen raise the Sister City first? They will come here, into this city. And the first thing they will do is kill me." Asira's eyes flashed with abrupt anger.

"If they come here, I shall call upon my brothers and sisters as I drive them back through the portal, then take back the Sister City by blood and death and carnage. They shall not harm a hair of thy head whilst I live!" She kissed Aan again, then turned away, shaking with rage.

"Easy Asira, easy. I'm not completely immune to the effects of your presence now, especially at this age. Sekali will lead his companions to victory. He will . . . he has to." Asira turned to Aan, her eyes flashing dangerously.

"Yes, they will. I shall besiege our masters aid in this matter, my fiancé. I will petition. Patience for now. Patience." He smiled.

“Of course milady, what else is there? Only folly. I love you.” His last three words caused Asira’s stern demeanor to instantly melt away, replaced by tears of joy as he, once again, returned to his chair and gently, slowly, lowered himself into its comfort. Reaching out, he picked up the book on the table beside him, opened it and turned to the last written page. After a moment, words began to form on the surface of the paper, streaming slowly from left to right. He followed the words intently as Asira laughed for joy, holding up her engagement ring, and slowly faded out of view. Before she vanished, she threw Aan a broad grin, her eyes sparkling with delight.

Without looking up, the old man waved her off, smiling happily as he looked down on the book.

The Knowledge Master read on . . .

The small company exited the City of Knowledge to a full and brilliant moon cresting the night horizon, shedding its smooth light down upon the vast, grassy plains before them. A steady breeze commanded the bowing of the grasses stretching out as far as the eye could see.

Uther brandished his axe, raising the flat of the blade so the moon's radiance reflected off the surface of the steel, causing silver runes to come to life, flowing from one end of the axe's edge to the other as he turned it this way and that. His dark eyes glinted, a smile spreading across his rugged face.

"This grand axe is set with Starr-Runes. I have heard of such enchantments, but never seen them with my own eyes. This is a weapon worthy of a dragon's neck! I hope one day we shall put it to the test. If this can be accomplished, I shall be worthy of its companionship!" He placed the enchanted axe at his belt once more and grasped the top of it with a strong, gnarled hand, proud to carry it, and proud to be wearing his new ring.

Finyat watched him intensely, then smiled sardonically. Pulling his blades free from their ornate sheaths, there was a ring of steel that sang into the night air. He grinned.

"Ahhh, and I hope these blades will be swift and sure, worthy of my side! Ha!" Uther shot him a cold look and grunted, followed by a slow smile that spread across his face.

"Silence, both of you. Be still!" Sekali hissed. Both froze, suddenly tense and wary at Sekali's warning. They looked around but saw nothing. After a tense moment, Finyat ventured a whisper.

"What is it?" Sekali stared into the Grasslands, still as the victim of a wasteland basilisk.

"I feel something . . . I cannot say. Something is not right. It's like . . . like . . . as if . . ." He growled sharply and looked around, ignoring the two. "I cannot

pinpoint my feelings. Something is not right. Come, we must go.”

“Go where?” Finyat soberly inquired. Sekali had Uther's full attention. It seemed the Dwarf could sense it now as well. Off Sekali jogged, Finyat and Uther following after. They departed the ruins, traveling deep out into a sea of green.

At first they kept their old armor and weapons, thinking to sell them to buy supplies for the journey. Yet, after a while, they decided to discarded their gear, as well as any extra items they did not need. Finyat grumbled about losing the extra money. Uther did not care in the least, until the sharp-witted Shallant stated how much kohakk his share of the profits would have purchased. Tired of their complaints, Sekali increased his speed, pushing them to exhaustion just to shut them up. It worked. With the excess weight gone, the three traveled more quickly. The alloy of their finely crafted armor was far less cumbersome, and granted a greater range of motion than their old armor.

The moon worked its way across the night sky as they made their way through the gently rolling hills of knee-deep grasses. As the moon set in the horizon, the pre-morning dawn began to chase the stars into hiding. On they ran throughout the morning until the heat of day came upon them. It was then that they rested and ate.

They continued their run during the cooler time of day, never seeing a soul and hoping they were not seen. For three nights they traveled until, finally, they saw a darker area far ahead of them, signifying the border of the forest. Pressing on into the late morning, they eventually saw the border of the forest not far in the distance. They decided to enter the woods after resting up and eating by a stream that ran out from within the tree-line. After refilling their water flasks, and quenching their thirst, they entered into the woods. Sekali's heart lifted as they broke through the edge of the forest. He was confident she was alive. The lady would not lie; of that he was sure.

“Mabuhi,” he whispered, and then headed into the dense woods, not knowing which way would lead them to her. Just after mid-morning, a great, black wolf came into view, not far ahead. Finyat slowed his pace, then stopped.

“I hope it’s her's.” Uther nodded in agreement and stopped, staying by his best friend. Sekali grinned and continued toward it, yet no longer running. When the great wolf made eye contact with him, Sekali spoke to it.

“Mabuhi . . . we seek her.” The great wolf’s head cocked to one side, its tail slightly wagging. It advanced upon Sekali at a walk, shaking its head, seemingly fearless. Uther and Finyat were whispering . . . something about the wolf, and its entire pack, killing Sekali. Sekali ignored the talk behind him and smiled, kneeling down before the majestic animal. Taking off a gauntlet, he held out his hand.

“I know you,” he whispered. “Do you remember me?” The wolf sneezed and pushed its muzzle into his hand and licked it. Slowly, he began scratching the side of its jaw, then gently caressed its ears.

“There now, friend, can you take me to Mabuhi? We really need to speak with her.” The wolf sat down and looked back over its shoulder, its ears suddenly laying back. Sekali scratched its chest lovingly, admiring the animal as dozens of wolves appeared in silence all about them, filling up every avenue of retreat for the three. “Where is she, my friend?” he whispered, repeatedly running his hand from the wolf’s head, down to its back. Then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw her standing by one of the wolves, clad in a forest-green robes, white staff in hand, a look of astonished joy in her countenance.

“Sekali, Finyat, Uther? I . . . where have you been? Out of nowhere you return. I thought you were gone forever.”

“Ish ta moren (It is safe),” she whispered, speaking to her guardian wolves in their own tongue. Instantly, all but the black wolf turned and vanished into the woodlands. Sekali stood and bowed to Mabuhi, happy to see her well. Curious, he approached her, followed by Uther and Finyat. As Sekali secured his gauntlets once again, he gave her a puzzled look.

“What do you mean out of nowhere we return?” Looking the three up and down, studying their armor and weapons, she reached out and slowly laid a hand on Sekali’s breastplate, her fingers slowly tracing the runes. Sekali looked at her hand, a feeling of hope rising in his heart. When first they met, had she laid her

hand on him, he would have instantly gone on the offensive. Now he was delighted.

Deep in thought, she looked up at Sekali frowning, her brows knit together. Steadily, the frown changed into a sad smile. Her eyes filled with tears as she emotionally whispered, “It has been over three years since we parted.” As if she had just hit him with her staff, Sekali felt the weight of her words. Uther and Finyat stood behind him, speechless. Placing a hand over hers, he frowned, deeply concerned.

“Mabuhi, your words are heavy, for, to me, it has only been a few days. How is this possible?” As she looked at his hand covering hers, he watched her closely, expecting her to withdraw. She did not.

“Of a truth, I speak. It has been three years since last we met. I swear it.” She looked at him in earnest. “Where did you go?” Sekali sighed heavily.

“The City of Knowledge, wherein abides the Knowledge Master. We spoke with him, as well as a Herald of Vannar.” Mabuhi was visibly shocked. Her free hand instantly straying to the top of the black wolf’s head.

“Follow me,” she said, forcing emotion out of her voice. Without further words, she led them deeper into the forest in silence. After a long hike, they found themselves in a small clearing, filled with ankle-deep grass, and a variety of plant life. As if a spell of sleep had been cast upon them, they dropped their packs. Uther and Finyat laid down and instantly fell asleep, as if they had not slept in a week.

Sekali felt weary and knelt at the center of the glade, apart from his two friends. Mabuhi knelt by him and helped remove his gauntlets, he was suddenly struggling with. She then unclasped his helm and placed it by his gauntlets.

“Thank you wolf maiden,” he stated wearily, throwing her a smile that quickly evolved into a yawn. Laying down beside her, he noticed the braid was still in her hair. Reaching up, he touched it, grinning. Returning his sentiment, she did likewise, brushing her delicate hand over the braid still in his hair. As Mabuhi blurred and shifted, she whispered, “I missed you.” Darkness began to

overshadow him as he slowly failed to fight off an overwhelming sense of exhaustion. Taking her hand in his, he closed his eyes, wrapping his fingers through hers. Before succumbing to sleep, he felt her hand tighten.

Mabuhi knelt and watched the three, deep in thought. The mannerisms of Finyat and Uther were different; how much so, only time would tell. She watched over them as they slept throughout the entire night, into the next day, then into the evening of the second day, her wolves keeping a vigilant guard about the clearing.

It was nightfall when Sekali awoke, stirring out of a dreamless sleep, his eyes slowly focusing to a darkened sky filled with stars. He could feel something in his hand, but did not comprehend it as thoughts of his homeland played in his mind. The stars were seldom seen in the Wastelands, if ever. Once, when he was very young, he and a friend thought they spotted a pinpoint of light as the mists parted in the skies above Sardakahn Citadel. For he and his friend, this became a topic of discussion for years to come.

He lay there studying the stars for quite some time, wondering about the old man and the time they had spent with him. Everything played out slowly in his mind, up until the point in which he had received the amulet, or a third of it. Curiously, he reached up with his free hand, feeling the chain upon which hung the amulet. Slowly, he pulled it from under his armor, held it up and looked at it. Scarcely had he done so, when he heard her voice beside him.

“Where did you get that?” Mabuhi whispered, all in wonder. Sekali turned to see Mabuhi beside him, still holding his hand. Smiling brightly, he sat up, facing her in kneeling position. It was difficult to take his eyes off such beauty, just to look at a piece of oddly cut metal dangling from a chain, but he managed.

“From the Knowledge Master. He gave us each one, saying they are three pieces of one amulet. He gave us the charge to take them into a place called the Sister City. What more we are to do, once there, I have no idea. He told us to come back here and we would learn more.” In sudden wonder, she looked at Sekali, and then over to Uther and Finyat. She seemed speechless.

Grabbing his gauntlets, she hastily fitted them on his hands. Once fitted and bound, she grabbed his helm, threw him a brief half smile, then shoved his plate helmet back onto his head and secured it. As he tested his range of motion, she grabbed the amulet and shoved into down through the opening in his chest-plate. Jumping up, she clapped her hands loudly, picked up her staff, then blew out a long breath.

“Three years, and then this?” she said, as if talking to herself. “Up, we must go! Up!” She snapped her fingers in front of her loudly, rousing Uther and Finyat, who staggered to their feet and grabbed their packs. Sekali gave Mabuhi a confused look as he grabbed his pack.

In haste, the four headed west through a forest buzzing with life. In a great rush, Mabuhi lead them, open worry etched into the delicate features of her face as she paced a steady run. As they traveled, Sekali could not take his mind off or her. It was perfectly clear to him that a particular legend about the Aldarian Elves had been a lie. She was incredible, steady-minded, wise . . . and absolutely charming. Well, at least this one was.

Keeping pace with her, they struck deeper and deeper into the forest, descending a steep embankment into a large ravine, only to climb and struggle up the other side. As the day came on, they crossed a shallow river, then plunged into the shadows of a much more densely forested area. It was nightfall before Mabuhi raised a hand, signaling a halt.

“Rest,” she said, panting heavily. Kneeling, she bowed her head and closed her eyes, resting. Uther grunted disdainfully and stood in defiance, while Finyat plopped himself to the ground sucking in ragged breaths and sweating. Sekali came to her side, standing as lookout for them all as he brought his breathing under control.

After catching her breath, Mabuhi rose to her feet, and without a sound continued into an even heavier forested area, making it much more difficult to travel and maneuver. The forest itself seemed to close in around Sekali and his companions, hedging up their way, as though the very woodland itself did not want them there. Uther grumbled under his breath consistently, saying it would be easier to just cut his way through, rather than dodge the entire forest. Uther stopped and growled as he worked a web-work of vines from his plated boots.

“Arrg! Let me be, you foul thickets! I take my eyes from the path we follow, only to look again and see the way is barred! Witch, you seem to be in tune with these tangles, will you not weave a spell and remove these obstacles?” Mabuhi stopped and turned as Uther awkwardly raised a foot and removed more undergrowth attacking his boot, provoking a deep and loud growl. Mabuhi, abruptly broke into laughter, her eyes sparkling, and she saw Uther struggle.

Sekali joined her, followed by Finyat, who was having a better time at this than Sekali and Uther.

Mabuhi seemed unhindered by the undergrowth, and often stopped, waiting for them to catch up. Uther placed a hand to the hilt of his axe, scowling. Mabuhi's laughter sobered within a breath, all the joy in her countenance melting away. Casually, she walked back to Uther, who noticed her advance and froze, eyes locking with hers' stubbornly. Stopping directly in front of him, she bit her lip in sudden thought. In neither a harsh nor gentle tone, she spoke.

"Uther, abandon your arrogance, or you - I fear - will fall to your own ruin in the near future. I forgive you for past actions and words; they are forgotten. Can we not wipe the slate clean and start again, please?" Mabuhi bent down and touched the ground with a forefinger.

"Ishula se immin." Uther's eyes widened in surprise as he beheld the grasses, plants and the gnarled roots of all the trees begin to shift and pull back, steadily revealing a dirt path before them in the direction they traveled. Sekali and Finyat staggered as the plants they stood upon wrenched themselves out from under their feet, creeping steadily through the area to clear the way at Mabuhi's command. Sekali believed what he was seeing, only because he was witnessing it. Once the area had cleared for them, Mabuhi sighed and looked at Uther.

"You have my blessing of travel, Uther. Be respectful, keeping honor foremost in your thoughts, and where we travel now . . . will not devour you." She smiled at Uther, placing a hand upon his forearm for support as she rose to her feet. In silence, Uther silently aided Mabuhi to stand as Finyat laughed nervously, grabbed a handful of dirt and let it sift through his fingers.

In wonder, Sekali stared at Mabuhi, questions about this magic she wielded longing to be answered. Holding his tongue, Sekali watched Uther. As she stood, Mabuhi slipped her hand from Uther's arm, sliding it over his hand that gripped the top of his battle-axe. She shook her head slowly.

"Uther, please." She looked at him for a long while, until, finally, he looked up at her, fixed, Dwarf stubbornness carved into his hardened face. "Uther,

abandon your arrogance forever and you will cultivate power in your life as you never will know otherwise. You are strong and mighty in battle, sir, yet where I now take you, your demise, and an end to your mortal life, awaits – and swiftly – unless you listen to my words. There will be a time for your axe, and soon enough. This day is not that moment.” Grinning at Uther, she turned to Finyat and Sekali.

“Things are now in motion that you three have become a part of. You must come to the heart,” she looked directly at Sekali, “my heart . . . of this forest. Hear what we say. If you will do this, your ignorance will melt away, and you will know of the risen threat.” Glancing at Uther, she gave him a quick, worried look, then turned and bolted down the fresh dirt path created by her spell. Speechless, the three followed.

At length, the path ended in a massive field wherein stood a lone tree of the most exquisite whiteness. What shocked them even more was the green-scaled dragon wrapped about its trunk conversing with many other different species and races. Sekali froze as his eyes fell upon the dragon, expecting an attack that never came. Beside the dragon stood a silver stag with a twelve-point rack, proud and majestic, an intelligent gleam in its eyes. Most of the species present were either Human or Elf. Apart from the stag and the dragon, were four others he could not identify.

Without waiting, Mabuhi strode into their midst and was greeted warmly. The shining silver stag lowered its rack, bowing to her, after which the dragon snatched her up into its arms, embracing her for a moment as she squeezed its neck tight. Each person, each creature, greeted Mabuhi with no less affection in their own way. Mabuhi then introduced Sekali and his companions, yet giving no names to the three.

Sekali looked up to see the numerous boughs of many trees, stretching over the clearing to form a massive natural dome-like canopy that blotted out the stars above. Within the glade, and all throughout the canopy above, a myriad of white soft-glowing lanterns dotted the entire clearing, painting it with soft splendor. Sekali thought it beautiful, yet strangely haunting.

Majestically, the branches of the white tree stretched out in all directions, filling a good portion of the glade. It was this tree that caught his attention more than the silver stag, or the dragon. He had never seen nor heard of anything like it in all his long years. While in the middle of absorbing the scene before him, Mabuhi clapped her hands twice.

“Honored guests and friends, please come and eat.” All gathered in a large circle and were served honey combs and buttered bread. As well, drink, in all its variety, was plentiful. Mabuhi came to Uther and placed two mugs of kohakk before him, surprising him greatly, instantly brightening his mood. No doubt, she did this to build relations with the Dwarf. It seemed to be working well.

After eating his meal, Sekali found himself exploring through the wooded area beneath the light of the lanterns. Many questions filled his mind about the Living World, and he found himself asking question upon question aloud as he walked.

“What is this place? What is the white tree? Why are there people and creatures here in this manner, and why are they unified as though they are kin?” He looked up through the thick canopy in the attempt to catch the glimpse of the stars, but failed to find the glint of a single point of light. The air was still, but not stagnant, which surprised him.

He hopped over a narrow, deep-flowing brook populated with many fish, startling them, and sending them jumping and scattering in all directions. One flipped out onto the bank at his feet, helplessly flopping about. These fish were much smaller than the ones he had seen at the end of the dock in the City-Port Navan. Taking it up, he studied it for a short moment, feeling it struggle. Setting it back in the water, he watched it dart to the other side of the stream, where it vanished under some overhanging grasses at the opposite bank. Washing his hands off, he stood and ran them through his hair, enjoying the coolness of the water.

Sekali unbuckled and removed his armor, laying out all fourteen sections upon a large boulder by the stream. After inspecting and tediously cleaning every piece, he left it to dry. Looking around to make sure he was alone, he quickly undressed, placed his clothing on the bank near the water's edge and lowered himself in. The water was cool and refreshing as he began scrubbing the dirt from his body.

Removing the braids in his hair, he dunked his head and worked his fingers through it, thoroughly cleaning every strand, which took more time to accomplish with cold water. Hot water would have been ideal, but it was a luxury he did not have at the moment. Finishing, he quickly wove his long black hair into a simple braid, then grabbed his traveling clothes from the bank. Scrubbing them as clean as he could, he put them back on while yet in the water, fearing a breach of privacy. After enjoying the water for a time, he pulled himself up out of the stream

and laid back on the bank, looking up at the great, forested dome above.

Feeling tired, he closed his eyes, soon drifting off into a rare, peaceful, undisturbed sleep. After a time, Sekali opened his eyes, feeling as if he were home. Sitting up, he noticed his clothing was dry on one side, and damp on the backside where he had laid. Standing, he brushed down his tunic and breeches, then hopped up onto the rock where his platemail set.

Sitting down, he knocked the dirt out of his boots and slipped them on. As he bent over to put his second boot on, the amulet swung loose from his tunic. Grabbing the large, flat pendant, he held it up, studying it closely.

“Master, what now?” he inquired aloud. “Three years? I don't understand.” A soft voice came in response to his questions, startling him.

“Talking to yourself, sir?” Sekali leapt to his feet and spun about to find himself facing the Druid. Rather embarrassed, he shook his head and jumped down in front of her.

“Hello,” he stated quietly, avoiding her eyes. She grinned, glancing at his armor.

“Hello,” she returned, a little shy. “Unless you would rather be alone, would you like some company?” Sekali turned to grab his armor.

“Yes, I would like that, please.” Waving a hand at his armor, Mabuhi stopped Sekali.

“There are no thieves in my home.” Trusting her, he abandoned his armor, turned and offered an arm, upon which she rested a gentle hand. In silence they slowly made their way through the army of trees surrounding them.

Sekali felt as though a Herald was accompanying him within a dream as they casually made their way to nowhere in particular. Her delicate hand upon his arm distracted him, especially when she adjusted her fingers, or shifted her hold. They walked for quite some time before reaching the edge of the lighted area of the canopy, where they looked out into the dense and unlit part of the forest. It seemed ominous and forbidding, compared to what Sekali felt while within Mabuhi's sanctuary. Mabuhi let go Sekali's arm and pointed out into the forest.

“That way, beyond my forest, across the expanse of the Grasslands, lies the Navarian Sea.” Sekali looked the way she was pointing, grimacing.

“It is cursed; the water. It is horrid tasting.” Mabuhi suddenly laughed.

“You drank from the ocean?” He shuddered.

“I had no idea.” Laughing, she placed a hand on his shoulder. Her laughter and sound of her voice brightened his heart. He shrugged at her, his face sobering.

“Mabuhi, why are we here?” Her smile vanished instantly. Sliding her hand down his shoulder, she caught his hand, weaving her fingers with his and squeezed.

“You always did get straight to the point, didn't you? Even after three years, you still do it. Do you ever relax?” Confused, Sekali thought about it.

“Try growing up where relaxation gets you digested.” Mabuhi cringed, making a face at him.

“Point well taken. But, I must counter your statement. You are not in the Wastelands, and have not been for some time now. Relaxing here, in my home, is safe, that I promise.” He looked at her, conceding her view.

“What other scenes are here in your home? The natural dome is incredible.”

“This forest borders another forest, wherein dwells my druid mentor. She it was who put me through the test to see if I possessed the gift. Her name is Illianna. She is a most adept and powerful Druid. My druidic powers are very green and young compared to hers.” Mabuhi shook her head.

“There is a Dryad in my forest. Let's see, what else. I would tell you about a village of Wolden in my home, here, but that's as much of a secret as I can tell you.” Sekali made a face at her.

“What is a Wolden?” Holding up a finger, she shook her head.

“When you return from your mission, I will introduce you to them. They are wonderful and beautiful. Very misunderstood creatures.” She neared him, and whispered, “very misunderstood.”

“I will trust you on this. What else? I see there is a dragon here.” Laughing, she squeezed his hand tight.

“There are a variety of dragon breeds here. The one you saw is a Forest Dragon. I know of about five others here.” Sekali looked at her, amazed.

“They don't fight among each other?” Shaking her head, she thought about it, biting her lip.

“Oh, I suppose there is the occasional argument, but nothing that is not as normal as within the Human or Elf societies, outside the Wastelands of course. I know of a family of Fawn that exist here.” She made a face and puffed a breath of air, just thinking about them.

“I take it they are mischievous.” Looking at Sekali, she nodded emphatically.

“Tenacious,” she exclaimed, “but a good heart deep down.” Sekali looked around as he began to play with her fingers.

“Sekali, some things you would have to experience. Otherwise, I would do no justice in trying to explain them. Really, I've only explored a very small portion of this forest. It will take quite some time to explore even half of it, which is fine by me. I'd hate to know it all in a week. What would I have to look forward to after that?” Sekali thought about it.

“Sounds appealing. I would love to see at least a portion of it. Maybe you could be my escort and show me around.” Grinning, she gripped his hand tighter than ever.”

“Mind if I show you something that opened a huge door for me to be here? I'd love to show you, if you would be willing. Besides, you did ask why you were here.” Nodding, Sekali looked at her, not wanting to go anywhere that would part him from her.

“I despise being alone. I hate leaving. Always alone, no belonging,” he whispered darkly, his eyes shadowing over with a pain, masked by a hardness that shocked her. Soberly, she wrapped her arms about his waist and looked up at him.

“I also despise being alone. I loath the fact that you are leaving. But, you do belong, Sekali, mighty Warrior. I want you around, if you want me around. I know we are from two vastly different worlds, but you have already told me it doesn't

matter. I know it doesn't matter. You offered to do this mission. You can decline it, you know that, don't you?" Wrapping his arms about her neck, he began running his fingers through her hair.

"If I declined now, I would dishonor my name, thus shaming my people. This thing, whatever it is, I will do swiftly, with no hesitation. I will keep my honor intact, and will not fail. After, if you still want me to come here, I would do so happily." He looked down at her, trying to read the look of curiosity and confusion mingled into her expression.

"What is it with you?" he bluntly asked.

"What do you mean?" she replied, rather confused by his question.

"Why me? Of all strangers, why me? What about suitors within your own race? Why me?" Biting her tongue, she became silent.

"Safe and secure, I sat upon a throne within a castle of stone wherein none could penetrate," he stated. "Then, you came along, and when you did, the walls began to crack and crumble. Slowly, reducing my castle to dust." Mabuhi, tightened her hold on Sekali with a non-to-gentle grip, gaining his full attention, her emerald eyes, suddenly menacing and cold.

"Sit on this throne, in this castle. It will lock out your pain . . . until time claims your last breath. Then, just like others before, you will fall to the cold stone floor before that throne of deception, adding your decay to that ever-thickening layer of dust, caressed by the eternal hands of atrophy, that merciless monster that lies in wait for the next fool to do the same." Shuddering at her reply, he pictured the end of his life, and the end of his posterity. He would be forgotten; none to carry on in his line. He would shrivel and end.

"Vannar save me, what do I do?"

"Why me, you asked? Why not you? Sekali. It's as if you are trying to deny my affection for you. That is unfair and unjust. Each time you say that, I begin to believe you want to fail, and then fade away." As if she had just slapped him, he sobered, then nodded once.

"You are perfectly right. Please forgive my lack of compassion for your

feelings. I was being selfish.” Instantly she pulled his head down and kissed him. Her sudden affection shattered his once mighty castle to dust, which blew away, as if touched upon by raging gale-force winds.

For a time, she gifted him with tender affection, softening his heart to flesh once again. Finally, he had to pull away from her. When he did, she laughed at him and pushed him none too gently, causing him to smile a little more than usual. Taking his hand, she turned away and pulled him after her.

“Come with me.” Without hesitation, he let her lead him, which gave his head a chance to clear and balance. Back through the woods, they hurried. As he began to stop to get his armor, she yanked on his hand, not allowing him to retrieve one single piece. Over the stream they jumped as she hastened on, until he found himself standing at the foot of the white tree at the center of the clearing they had initially entered into. Letting go his hand, she neared and embraced its wide trunk.

“Hello Grandfather,” she said warmly. Sekali’s eyes widened in astonishment as the tree shuddered and slowly turned to face Mabuhi. Within its trunk there were two faint eyes. Sekali watched on, hearing it whisper, but not understanding. After a few moments, she nodded, turning to Sekali. Holding out her hand, she beckoned to him.

“Come meet one of my very best friends.” Sekali neared, taking her hand, both curiosity and apprehension mingling within. With a smile, she pulled him close and placed his hand upon the smooth surface of the white bark. With her hand over his, she watched Sekali with a faint expression, and thought he detected a tinge of fear in her eyes.

Sekali felt something move within him. A thought? No. He could feel something . . . his spirit? Maybe. Frightened, he felt a power take hold of him from within, forbidding him to move. Whether within his mind, or spirit, he was not sure, it spoke to him. At first it was faint, barely discernable, like a wind in the distance. Bending his will upon the sound, he strained to hear. Slowly it became much more clear, but, still, he could not understand the language, for it was strange; beautiful and marvelous, spreading joy into his being, but strange.

Closing his eyes, Sekali focused on opening his mind, giving himself to it. As he did, he envisioned a great ocean upon which he was sailing. The crew of the ship looked to the north in eerie silence as they traveled to a foreign land. The ship docked near a great landing built for large trading vessels. Curious, he looked over the railing of the ship to behold the docks, soaked in thick, oozing blood, dripping constantly over the edge of the wooden planks into the water of the harbor.

Reeling back from the white tree, he gasped, severing the link of communication. Speechless, he stood before the Dremmin Tree, staring in disbelief, fighting to still the confusion whirling about like a storm in his mind. Turning to Mabuhi, he shook his head, trying to get a grip on the present.

“Am I sent to the other side?” he whispered. Mabuhi shook her head.

“What happened?” she ask in great earnest.

“I traveled north to another land on a ship. The ship landed at a dock bathed in blood.” He rubbed his face with trembling hands. “Mabuhi, I believe we will travel into the north; into great strife and bloodshed.” At his words, her eyes widened with apprehension. “Mabuhi, I do not know, or pretend to know, what is happening here; it is all strange to me. However, I do know this: I will defend you, your forest, and your people. Command me, and I will do anything you need.” Grinning, she laughed quietly.

“Sekali, the Dremmin’s communication was a test you had to be put through. I could not decide, in my own judgment, if your heart was yet truly pure. I would have bet my life on it, but the final decision had to come from the heart of my forest; the Saga Natur; the Dremmin Tree; Grandfather.” She took in a breath and sighed in relief. “I was surprised to discern a profound significance in your communication with Grandfather.” Instantly curious, he gave her an inquisitive look, and was about to ask what she meant, but Mabuhi shook her head. “In the future, I will tell you, I promise. For now, one thing at a time.”

“Tell me later then.” He flatly stated, letting it go. She smiled up at Sekali, instantly charming him . . . again.

“Thank you for your faith in me,” she whispered, almost reverently. He glanced at the Dremmin Tree, his face hardening.

“War is coming upon your people - upon this entire land. I can feel it in my bones, Mabuhi. We stand here in peace, yet blood will flow.” Mabuhi paled at his words, feeling chills stroke her face and neck.

“Why do you believe that?” she whispered, her voice sounding haunted. He brushed a few strands of hair from her cheek.

“I can feel it. I am not wrong about this. I will help protect your forest in whatever way I can.” Mabuhi’s delicate hands trembled as she looked up into the canopy above, and softly whistled. Instantly, birds began dropping down from the branches above, landing on the ground about her. Sekali held perfectly still, watching with great interest as she whispered to them in a language he could not understand. In an instant, they all took flight, spreading out in all directions and vanished into the trees.

“You speak their language. You are full of surprises.” Smirking, she looked at him and smiled.

“I am full of more surprises than you know. You are a good man, Sekali of Sardakahn Citadel,” she whispered. Sekali's heart begin to beat quickly as he raised his hands to the left side of his head, weaving the second braid. Mabuhi took his hands and guided them up to the left side of her head.

“Will you braid the first three for me?” Taken back by the request, he looked at her.

“Did I hear you correctly? Did you just say three?” Smiling, she nodded.

“Three.” Immediately he did as she requested, then added another for himself. Reaching up, she touched them.

“This is a foreign way to court a girl, but I like it.” He stared at the braids in her hair, wondering why she had chosen three.

“Mabuhi, this is too fast. Maybe we should -”

”I am happy with three braids, if you feel the same way.” She waited for his reply.

“Thank you,” he whispered.

“My pleasure, Sekali of the Wastelands,” she returned.

The next morning the area was steadily populated with many of Mabuhi's allies, among which were the familiar faces of the forest dragon and the silver stag. All gathered in a great circle about the Dremmin tree, eating and drinking. The fresh smell of fruit, honey, bread and something pleasingly sweet came to his senses. He noticed Uther and Finyat were drinking heavily and laughing. They seemed at home.

After eating, and after the plates and utensils were whisked away, the dragon looked to Mabuhi and nodded, bringing an instant hush and seriousness to the area. Finyat fidgeted next to Uther uncomfortably as the Dwarf listened, even if he was not sober. He had a mug of drink in one hand, his other hand rested upon the Shallant's shoulder for support. Sekali secretly frowned upon his drinking at such a time as this, but said nothing. A bonfire near the center was stoked up high as the dragon and Mabuhi quietly discussed some business. At length she arose and bid Sekali and his companions to her side. Sekali was impressed to see Uther walk without help. He stalked up to her, Finyat at his side, and stopped, weaving slightly. Mabuhi threw them both the most loving and gentle smile.

“You three have accepted the task the Knowledge Master offered. He has entrusted you each with an amulet, a key, divided into three pieces. This key is the secret to the Sister City, and the City of Knowledge, wherein you were entertained for three years by its steward. There is a great legend between these two cities. If this key is fit together correctly, and placed into its resting place within the Sister City, it will rise up from the depths of the ocean in which it is now locked away, hidden from our enemies. Long ago, these two cities thrived in peace and prosperity, but selfishness, bred and nurtured unto evil, took hold within many of the hearts of those who dwelt there, leading to events which cursed it. Most all the inhabitants fled the city. In the end, it was sealed up and thrust into the depths of the Veleighen Sea, far beyond Port Valon, which you, Sekali, beheld in a vision while you were in contact with the Saga Natur.” A sudden chorus of whispers

filled the circle as all eyes fell upon Sekali. Holding up a hand for silence, Mabuhi waited. When silence was restored, she continued.

“The Sister City was, and still is, linked with the city of ancient ruins to the east of this forest, and shares the same curse. As did the inhabitants of the Sister City, so too fled the populace of the City of Knowledge as it fell into ruin and decay. You have visited its timeless library, and have spoken to its keeper.” She stopped just long enough to quickly take a sip of water, then continued.

“Before the Sister City was brought down into the deep, the great Fates, Supernaturalists and even a group of powerful Enchanters were called together by its rulers. They were beseeched to perform one great act of mercy upon the Sister City, for these rulers loved their home, and their people. The great evil ones fought against them in the very hour they gathered to council. There was no turning back. A plan was hastily devised to preserve the Sister City. Its people were gone, save one full battalion of their most faithful legionaries; powerful men and women who had, from birth, studied the craft of martial warfare. They were all guild masters; we know this by the written histories within the timeless library.” Again Mabuhi took a sip of water. All present remained silent and grim.

Leaving the Wastelands in search of knowledge, Sekali had stumbled into legend; a legend in which he was now caught up in. He could see these events not only effecting Mabuhi and her forest, but Sardakahn as well. From the look upon Finyat and Uther’s faces, he surmised they realized the significance and impact of it in their lives as well. Mabuhi took a deep breath, sighing heavily, and continued.

“I regret to reveal my thoughts on the purpose of the Veleighen, but I feel compelled to voice my worst fear. As my mother always says, If we ready ourselves for the worst, we can only be that much more prepared. The Sister City is linked physically with the City of Knowledge by two portals, one in each. If the Sister City is rebuilt by our enemy, it could easily be our demise. If it is rebuilt by our allies, it would be a great asset against them. I believe the enemy to be those of the Veleighen, who dwell in the far north. A ship can take one on a steady flow of

wind there in three moons' time." Mabuhi took another drink.

"I will reverse my course of speech now, back to the concealing of the Sister City, because you three," she held a hand out, signifying Sekali and his companions, "are the literal key to its rising. The amulets you carry are three parts of a single relic known as the Sundering Key. If this key is properly fit together and placed into a depression upon an altar built specifically for this purpose, the Sister City will rise from the depths of the Veleighen Sea. The significance of this is great, and terrible, for the Sister City and the City of Knowledge are physically linked, as I have said. And, as I already mentioned, they are linked by two portals; one at either city. I suspect the two cities to be more than merely linked in this fashion. We believe they are alive, as a brother and sister are alive, born from the same mortal parents. I have studied long within the timeless library, and can discover no further information to support what I have just told you." Quickly, she took another drink of water, then continued.

"Armies can be sent from one city, through the activated portals, into the next by the hundreds, and in a short period of time. We do not know if another key can be constructed to function as the one you three now carry, but within the Veleighen civilization there are guild masters, I believe, who rival the power of the ones who initially created the key. I know they hunt for what you will be seeking, even as I speak. If they find it, and manage to duplicate the key, they will send their armies through, bringing widespread war upon us, bathing this continent in blood. That is what the Veleighen do; war and conquest has always been their black-hearted nature." Mabuhi closed her eyes. After a tense moment, she spoke one last time on this subject.

"You are not known as enemies to the Veleighen, or any within the Northlands. This is why you have been chosen. Find and fit the key into the altar, or destroy the altar altogether so she can have eternal rest in her watery grave. We will leave this entirely up to you. If you can do it without letting her fall into the hands of the Veleighen, please save her. Two other groups of three have been sent

on this same task, and have never been heard from since. We suppose they were killed by the creatures which roam the northern lands, swallowed up by the Navarian Sea, or slain by the enemy. In all this, one thing did happen, which was most assuring and hopeful. The Knowledge Master has reported these three amulets reappeared in their resting places with the failure of each group. By the wisdom of the ancient guild masters, we have a protection against the loss of the Sundering Key.” Mabuhi embraced all three, holding Sekali for a long while.

“You do not have to do this thing, yet I beg your help in this matter.” Fearfully, she looked at Sekali. “I am terrified I will never see you again.” Sekali nodded sternly.

“This effects all the nations of this continent. It is a worthy task, and I will do it. It effects my kin as well as yours.” Uther growled.

“If it will spark some fighting, I’m in!” He grabbed the handle of his axe, as if to draw it forth, then decided to leave it be. “There will be plenty of opportunity for some sport, but not here,” he added hastily. Finyat fidgeting uneasily, avoided eye contact with Mabuhi, a reluctance in his expression. The dragon noticed his expression, its gleaming eyes narrowing at him.

“The riches of treasure will flow unto you as you undertake this quest, Shallant.” The dragon's eyes shone with a burning fury as Finyat looked up at the dragon, who nodded once at him. It was enough to provoke the wanderlust within him, and to fan his courage to life. As a grin slowly spread across his face, he looked at Mabuhi and nodded.

“I’m in,” he stated greedily. She grinned at him, her eyes sparkling.

“I hope you do become rich. I am, and will ever be, a resource to you and your companions for this bravery. Thank you.” Finyat bowed.

“You are most welcome, milady.” All present silently bowed in respect to the three, then simply, turned away and departed, vanishing into the forest. Soon, only Mabuhi, Sekali, Uther and Finyat remained.

“Rest up for now, for tomorrow you depart for the City-Port Navan.”

Much to Sekali's disapproval, Uther and Finyat returned to their drinking, but he said nothing, letting them fill their own time with what pleasure they could have before morning. He watched Mabuhi retrieve her bedroll and lay it out at the base of the Dremmin tree.

Sekali turned and walked away, slipping into troubled thoughts. For the second time in all his years Sekali felt helpless, and he did not like it. Leaving the area, he quietly headed out into the dimly lit forest, following the lanterns as before. Nimbly jumping over the stream, Sekali walked over to the rock whereon set his armor. Each section was dry and ready to be donned once again. In silence, he strapped all fourteen armor pieces on, adjusting each section to perfectly fit his body. He then drew his blade and silently knelt. Placing his sword before him, he closed his eyes, meditating calmness.

Clearing his mind of all thoughts, Sekali focused upon the blackness he beheld as he let himself go to all feeling, all thought. Soothing darkness filled his being as he bent his mind upon that place within, where no other could invade. He reached out, becoming one with it. Finding it, he embraced that blessed peace wherein he could no longer feel. He did not know if breath filled his lungs, he did not care. Where he was gave him total, utter, peace. He'd been here many times before . . . always after terrible confrontations with the horrors of the Wastelands.

There he floated in bliss for a time, neither feeling Mabuhi's hand upon his shoulder, nor hearing her voice. Yet he did not stay long within the void; he needed to get back to the others. So it was, that, as Mabuhi began to leave, Sekali opened his eyes to see her withdrawing. Surprised, he called out to her.

"Mabuhi, wait." She stopped and turned.

"Oh, I thought you were sleeping. I could not wake you. Uther and Finyat passed out after their first mug. They've had a difficult time at all this. I don't think this is what they had intended when they got together to go *adventuring*." She emphasized the last word. "I wanted to talk with you, if that is alright. I have to express some things; concerns you should hear. I'm certain it will enlighten you

about where you are going.” Picking up his blade and sheathing it, he motioned her to sit with him.

“Please, you need not ask.” Mabuhi walked over to Sekali, kneeling in front of him, smiling. He knew he was enjoying her company far too much to deny the fact that he was quickly falling for her.

“Sekali, your hands are trembling. Are you well?.” Narrowing his eyes at her, he smirked.

“I am more than well, milady.” Playfully, she grinned, her eye glittering as she squinted at him. In silence, Sekali removed a gauntlet and held a hand out, offering it to her. Slowly, she surrendered her hand into his. As she did, he gripped it and smiled. Laughing quietly, she gripped his hand in return.

“You have no idea how happy it made me when we met in the Grasslands. I am nearly overwhelmed with joy,” she whispered. Flattered, he gently pulled Mabuhi close and kissed her. When they parted, he touched the three braids on the side of her head.

“You heal me. I never looked for such a blessing as you, but here you are. I never thought I would meet another who would begin the healing process of my heart, yet here you are.” Mabuhi grinned.

“I want to tell you something, but it must wait until you return,” she said, a sudden fear overshadowing her, “if you return.” Sekali put himself in her place, and she in his. If she went away on such a mission, he would be more than worried sick.

“Mabuhi, we will use caution, and stay out of sight. Unless there is no other option, we will not engage in combat. The more invisible we are, the better chance of success. Secrecy is of the uttermost importance. I promise to be careful.” Sekali watched relief settle into her face.

“Your words comfort me, sir. Please use more caution than you think you need.” He nodded.

“I promise, I will.” She tightened her grip on his hand.

“From our first meeting, outside the City-Port Navan, you have kept all your

promises. Keep this promise most of all. The Wastelands of your home are deadly, but where you go now will be the same.”

They talked until the dawn of morning began to intrude on the time he had left to spend with her. He stood, aiding her to her feet.

“Mabuhi, I love this forest. I don’t know why, but since I communed with the Dremmin Tree, I have felt the seed of attachment to this place growing within me with every moment I stay. I love these lands, and I swear to you that we will raise the Sister City.” She gave him a fragile smile.

“I hope you do, sir. I have something to do. Can I meet you back at the Dremmin tree?” Sekali raised the back of her hand to his forehead as he bowed, then released it. He then turned and began jogging back to camp.

Watching Sekali head back, she sighed heavily, fear in her eyes. His last words haunted her. In the past, others had spoken the same. As she watched him fade into the forest, a feeling of great uneasiness filled her.

“Mother, do you think he will be alright? You have more insight, I know.” A light began to grow beside Mabuhi, as it had before the three companions within the City of Knowledge. Soon the brilliance of the Herald shone beside her. Mabuhi smiled.

“Hello, Mother,” she said, her voice filled with admiration. The Herald ran a gentle hand over the braids adorning Mabuhi's hair as she looked after Sekali.

“Child, he will need help; all three will need all our help. Even for a weathered Warrior of the Wastelands, the Veleighen are formidable.” Slipping her hand into hers, Mabuhi sighed heavily and wiped sudden tears from her eyes.

“You have feelings for him,” the Herald whispered, smoothing back Mabuhi's hair. The Druid nodded, gladly taking in the attention mother was giving her. She closed her eyes.

“Yes. When I heard a veteran Sardakk Elf Warrior had come into the land, my hopes ascended. I had to try and recruit him. If he had brought a thousand more of his kind, I would not fear so much. Yet, he is only one man. As formidable as he is, and as skilled as his two companions are, if they do not take the uttermost care, they will end up corpses, as the others.” She did not see her mother smile.

“Then for your sake, I will aid him . . . in time . . . in my own way, with your help. Mabuhi, a darkness lies within you still, and we must conquer it for you to ascend to full power as the Druid of this forest. Are you willing?”

“Yes,” Mabuhi said with no hesitation. “I am more than willing, mother. Thank you. I don't know how to repay you for all you have done for me. I am forever in your debt. The day you found me, was the day you saved me from a fate worse than death. My family was gone; I was alone.” Mabuhi turned to the lady and took her hand. “If not for you, I would have truly, irrevocably, died. I love you.” With the deepest love of a true parent, the Herald embraced her.

“I'm glad Vannar sent me to you. Mabuhi, just being you, and who you are, is more than enough payment for me. I will forever be your mother. That lost and frightened child I rescued years ago is now the master over many things. But, now it is time to step back into that darkness and master it also. Be brave. What you witnessed, what you endured, even I can only imagine.” Desperation fill Mabuhi's countenance as she gazed into the eyes of the Herald.

“I will, mother. Just tell me what to do.” Smiling upon her, she lifted her left hand, showing Mabuhi the ring. Mabuhi's eyes shot wide open as she abruptly grinned from ear to ear.

“What, who, when? Oh my . . .” The lady laughed in return, but said nothing. Reaching up, the Druid touched the ring, smiling from ear to ear. “Wow, congratulations!” She admired the flawless diamond, then looked at her mother. “I thought Heralds were above such things. I assumed, since you had already lived a mortal life, you were no longer interested in such wonderful happenings. Oh, what am I saying? I can't believe it. Who is the most lucky man?” Amused, the Herald sighed.

“Aan.” Mabuhi raised her eyebrows in surprise.

“Wow, he sure did pick a young woman. Not that he made a bad choice at all. It's just, he's ancient, and you are, well, very young. How is he to survive you?” Narrowing her eyes at Mabuhi, the Herald gave her a motherly look.

“Child, I am older than him. There is something you were never told about the man known as the Knowledge Master.”

“What is it? Tell me, please,” Mabuhi pressed.

“He is also Herald. When he took on the monumental task of keeping the City of Knowledge safe, he voluntarily renounced his immortality. Once again, he became mortal, like you. What scares me the most is, if he dies in his current state, he will be lost forever. Now, any more sarcastic remarks from you, young lady, and I'll tip you upside down in that creek.” Narrowing her eyes at the Herald, Mabuhi beckoned toward the creek as fast as she could. Water instantly ascended like a reverse waterfall, striking the herald and drenching her from head to foot.

“You mean, that water?” she mockingly asked, laughing as she wisely backed away. Shocked, her mother sputtered, then broke out in sudden laughter.

“No, this water.” A sudden ice-cold waterfall appeared from above and fell upon Mabuhi with a force that drove her to her knees. The Druid sucked in a few breaths in shock, then laughed in glee. Leaping to her feet, she threw her hands high. Just before the impact of the spell struck, her mother's eyes shot open wide in surprise . . .

Sekali did not stop running until he stood before the Saga Natur, or Grandfather, as Mabuhi called it. Glancing over at Uther and Finyat, he noticed the two were fast asleep. Turning his attention back to Grandfather, he placed his hand upon the surface of its white bark, closing his eyes.

“Grandfather, please keep her safe while I am away. She is now everything to me.” Instantly, the tree moved, its great trunk twisting slightly as Sekali felt it connect with him. Energy filled his body and mind, and he felt the overwhelming sensation of approval. Then, as quickly as the connection had been made, it was severed. Stepping back, Sekali placed his right hand over his heart, then turned and walked over to his companions.

“Up, Finyat. Up, Uther. We must go.” Without waiting for a response, he began readying his belongings in haste. Surprisingly, the two stood without a sound and did the same.

Mabuhi returned and began breakfast preparations. In silence, they ate the food left over from the night before. After they had eaten, Mabuhi escorted them to the edge of the forest, casting a spell to clear a smooth path for them to follow in peace. In this manner, they traveled quickly, arriving at the border of the Grasslands by late midday. As the four stood in a circle, facing each other, Mabuhi looked at Finyat, smiling.

“Be brave and true, my friend. Upon your return, I have a gift for you.” Finyat smiled, a look of sudden curiosity twisting into his eyes.

“Thank you my lady. I can't wait to see what it is.” Mabuhi hugged the Shallant tenderly.

“Watch out for these two, alright?” Finyat blushed and nodded.

“I will.” Turning to Uther, Mabuhi took his thick hand in both of hers and grinned.

“Watch out for Finyat and Sekali, will you?” She kissed him on the cheek, her eyes tearing up.

“Bah,” Uther grumbled, then looked at her with a respect he had never

shown. “As best I can, Druid.” She laughed emotionally and hugged the Dwarf tight.

“Thank you sir. I know if you are watching their backs, they are more safe. A gift also waits your return.” Mabuhi straightened, took in a deep breath, and turned to Sekali. Uther instantly harrumphed` and began walking out into the thickness of the rolling Grasslands, motioning for Finyat to follow.

“Come Finyat, we need not listen to the Elf chatter of flowers and dancing. We have riches to discover!” Eagerly, Finyat followed after the Dwarf, falling in step beside him, raising a hand to the sky.

“Sixty, forty!” he replied, to which the Dwarf growled. Mabuhi's smile slowly faded as she watched them walk away. After a long moment, she turned to Sekali, tears beginning to flow.

“Stay safe. Keep those two out of trouble. Be kind to them. I don't know how you developed such a friendship with two of the most unlikely people in the world, but deep down, they are loyal to you.” Pulling free his gauntlets, Sekali tenderly wiped away her tears.

“I will. Mabuhi, we will succeed and return. The others who failed did not have such an incentive to return. I do.” Desperately, she embraced him.

“I hope so. It's been too long since we first met.” Sekali tightened his hold on her, smiling.

“Three years – I'm sorry. I'll try not to let that happen again.” Mabuhi stretched up and desperately kissed him. Parting, she ran a hand across the three braids in her hair.

“Grabbing his hands, she raised them up to her head.

“Two more.” Without question, Sekali did as she asked, then braided two more for himself.

“Now, we are -” Putting a hand to his mouth, she silenced him, then kissed him again. Parting, she tried to pull herself together, but failed.

“Just come back to me. Upon your return, I have a fitting gift for you as well. I'm sure you will like it. Pulling her to him, he embraced her, placing his lips

on the top of her head.

“I hope it's the sixth braid.” Again, Sekali wiped her tears away, then abruptly broke away and followed after Finyat and Uther.

Trembling, she raised a hand to her chest and slowly gripped her robes, as if in pain, watching him diminish into the Grasslands . . . again. Once he was out of sight, she turned back into the cover of the forest. Not ten paces in, she stumbled and fell to her knees. Bitterly, she began to sob, her face twisting in pain.

Instantly, numerous packs of wolves appeared within all the trees about her, gathering close by, surrounding her in silent loyalty, supporting her with their presence. Three wolf pups squirmed through a forest of legs and paws, jumping into her lap, whimpering for attention. Pulling them to her, she embraced them lovingly.

“What would I do without you all? What will I do without him?” As if in answer, a large dark-brown, wolf-like creature, appeared at the outer edge of the massive pack in majestic silence, holding its head high and proud. For a moment, it looked at the sea of wolves, its night-black eyes eventually singling out Mabuhi. Slowly, it moved forward, and as it did, the ring of wolves parted respectfully, clearing a path to the Druid.

As it neared, its body shifted from that of a wolf, into a black-haired female with eyes of ashen coal, clothed in breeches and tunic, the same color as her eyes. As she raised up on human-like feet, she walked among the wolves, her long, sharp claws gliding delicately over the manes and ears of each wolf she passed. Mabuhi did not see the shifter until it stopped directly before her.

“Druidess, druidess?” Mabuhi lifted her eyes, recognizing a friend she had known since she was a child. Mabuhi greeted her with a twisted smile that failed instantly, replaced by a flood of tears.

“Rae, I try to be strong, fearless and brave, but I don't feel it. Am I going to lose him?” The slender, animal-like female knelt before Mabuhi and bowed respectfully.

“I say you will not.” Mabuhi tried to even out her breathing and calm down.

“I’ve been trapped in this nightmarish cage for too long now. I need to break free.” Mabuhi shuddered, then threw Rae a look of silent apology for being so insensible. Within the darkest of eyes, Mabuhi witnessed the deepest sympathy she had ever beheld in one of the best friends she had ever been privileged to know. Forged into the features of both their countenances revealed an open, everlasting, unbreakable bond for one another.

Rae threw her a smile, exposing fangs, similar to that of a wolf, yet more vicious in appearance. Even as fearsome as Rae appeared, her presence brightened the Druid's heart. Slowly, she touched mabuhi's hand, her short razor-sharp talons gently caressing her fingers. For a time, there was silence between the two as they looked at one another.

Mabuhi had been on many journeys with Rae. She did not see her as most might; the monster to be avoided, or dispatched. Outwardly, she was sleek, graceful, menacing, horrifying, and one of the most wonderful creatures in her forest. Tenderly, Rae reached up and wrapped her arms about Mabuhi, pulling her close.

“Our lives, we are blood allies. Listen to my words.” Mabuhi dropped her white staff, returning Rae's embrace, drawing comfort from this deadly, wonderful, friend as she squeezed with all her soul.

“I watch your Warrior. He is strong, forged by Wasteland's hammer and anvil. I cannot track your Warrior by fear. There is none to rise like smoke from his body.” Rae snapped her teeth in Mabuhi's ear, making sure she was still listening. “Are you sleeping Druidess?” Warily, the Druid nuzzled Rae with the side of her head, indicating she was not.

“Good. Listen. I spy out lands far and wide. Three days I entered the smoking blacklands your Warrior came from.” Shocked, Mabuhi pulled her head back.

“What possessed you to go into that horrid place, Rae?” Rae brushed a lock of hair back from Mabuhi's face and eyes, then touched the center of her chest,

grinning, her eyes growing dark beyond menacing.

“You.” Eyes widening in disbelief, Mabuhi struggled with Rae’s answer.

“Me? How did I possess you go there? Me? I could have gone with you. You were with others, yes?” Rae laughed darkly, quietly, so as not to upset the wolves.

“Alone, secret. Don't be angry with me. If you wish it, we can go there together.” Mabuhi shuddered and shook her head, worried.

“No,” she choked. Rae's eyes burned suddenly with an energy, dark like the deepest night.

“Listen. Upon the winds in all the lands, I smell change. Plants seed only one way, and only when the strong wind blows.” This information was not only the most odd news she had ever heard, but highly disturbing.

“Why would that be, Rae?”

“They retreat,” Rae hissed in the Druid's ear. “I will give you more news if I can. We watch.” Rae moved to stand, but Mabuhi took her by the arm, stopping her. There were so many negative thoughts and feeling within her, she just wanted to talk about something else for a change. Wiping her eyes, she inhaled deeply, then let out a quivering breath.

“Do you remember when we tried to enter the city?” Rae frowned, but said nothing. Mabuhi could see she did not like bringing that event up. “It wasn't all bad, now, was it?” Rae stared at her hard, waiting. Mabuhi stared back, waiting longer. Letting out an exasperated breath, Rae threw her a slight grin.

“Not all bad.”

“It was long ago, and the last time either of us entered the City`Port Navan. While I was accepted, you, Rae, were instantly rejected and driven from before the gates under penalty of death.” Rae bared her teeth dangerously at Mabuhi, who lifted a hand over Rae's mouth to cover her teeth.

“You know Rae, sometimes you make me nervous. Apart from that, do you remember the one and only guard who did not draw his blade on you? How he instantly petitioned the others to give you a chance, just as they did all the other

rages?” Rae lowered her head, blushing slightly, then scowled, pushing the Druid's hand away from her face.

“Yes.” Mabuhi continued, feeling her spirit lifting a little, even though tears still slid down her cheeks.

“Instantly, he was stripped of his weapons and rank and dismissed forever from the guard. I remember him rushing to you, shielding you with his own body as we were forced out from the entrance. You know they did not loose arrows on you because of that guard. Once out of the city, and far from its gates, he took your hand, stopping you. I thought you were going to gut him.” Rae cringed. Mabuhi laughed, mingled with emotion.

“He had absolutely no idea that taking your hand like that was an act of suicide. You took him down viciously, your eyes burning with rage, quickly turning to murder. You were so offended.” Rae, held up a hand, looking at her claws.

“But he lived.”

“Yes, barely. Even in the act of positioning yourself to rip his throat out, do you remember what stopped you?” Rae looked around at all the wolves and squinted at them sentimentally.

“Will you not let me love you?” Rae whispered, as a smile spread across her face. Mabuhi wiped her face, feeling the tears beginning to slow.

“Yep, that was all he said, and it hooked you right at the center of your beating heart. I remember the shocked look of horror on your face as he reached out to you with his entire soul, even as your claws began to pierce his Human throat.”

“I stopped,” Rae said factually. “I did not do more damage to him.”

“Rae, I saw your rage melt to anger, which instantly turned to concern for the man you had just hurt . . . the man who not only instantly forgave you, but who gave up his former life as a citizen of the City`Port Navan because he defended you.” Rae seemed lost in a silent, unbreakable, daydream. Mabuhi waited for a full minute before breaking the silence of, no doubt, very fond and favorable

memories.

“How is Rupert doing these days, Rae?” Startled by the sudden question, Rae licked her lips.

“He scouts the forest border for signs and news.” Shaking her head, Mabuhi, bent her attention on Rae, who seemed suddenly, highly distracted at the talk.

“That's not what I asked, Rae. How is he?” Rae swallowed hard, and shook her head, coming to her senses.

“His Forest-Knight abilities are unrivaled. He can infiltrate a den of honey badgers, play with their pups, then vanish without notice. He is incredible.” Mabuhi grinned, drying the last of the moisture from her face.

“Do you have any younglings yet?” Shocked by the question, Rae's eyes widened, as if struck by lightning. Shaking her head, she answered the question, only because it was Mabuhi.

“We can't. But we love our life together, just as you and your Warrior will.” Mabuhi thought about Rae, who was one of her greatest source of comforts in life. Because the authorities of the City`Port Navan rejected Rae, they would never know just how loyal and deep her friendship ran. They only saw a savage Wolden Lycanthrope . . . a murderous Werewolf, and so, in fear, acted rashly. But, it wasn't true. Rae was honest, sincere and most of all, a true friend. The day she was rejected, was the day the race of Humans lost her and her people as an irreplaceable ally.

“Thank you Rae. I love you.” Gracefully, the Wolden Lycanthrope shifted back into her true form in mid-bow, and nuzzled Mabuhi tenderly.

“Rae val skithis wol aeva (Rae will always love you).

The three traveled at a quick pace across the Grasslands, until they found the main road that led them directly toward City-Port Navan. After a few days, they entered the main gates and stopped at one of the many provisional shops to stock up on supplies. Gold had been placed in their packs, for which they were grateful.

Finyat volunteered to buy all the items needed for the journey. Uther snickered at him and approved, knowing full well what Finyat had in mind . . . a discount. Sekali was oblivious to the Shallant's intentions, and nodded.

"I will go to the port and see when the next ship will be sailing north. I will meet you both at the Golden Feather Inn." Uther grunted.

"I'll book us rooms for the night. We will have an evening to eat and drink. I also wish to do a bit of gambling." Though he did not know what 'gambling' meant, Sekali agreed and departed toward the docks, hearing Finyat laughing with delight.

"Good times, eh, Uther?"

"Yes, my good friend, good times!" He heartily said as he headed toward the inn, leaving the Shallant in the street.

Finyat happily watched him go. When Uther was out of sight, a sly look replaced his childlike demeanor. Cracking his knuckles, he eagerly climbed the stairs, approaching the doors of the provisions shop. Before entering, Finyat paused, took a deep breath, let his shoulders slump and pulled the door open. A look of total exhaustion overtook him as he entered and staggered, struggling with a pack much too heavy for a boy his size.

Making his way north, through the main avenue of the city, Sekali pressed through a growing throng of people. He could see the masts of three ships and hoped one of them might be setting off for the northern lands in the near future. With such pressing matters, he did not wish to stay long in this city.

He passed by a blacksmith dousing a blade into a large container of oil. Steam billowed as the man removed the steel as quickly as it had been submersed. He then stabbed it into a large container of sand. Continuing on down the gradual slope of the cobblestone avenue toward the shipyard, Sekali thought about two young girls who were now in Gaunten. He missed them very much. Yet, he knew he would one day see them again.

Of the three sea vessels, he noticed one was much larger than the other two, dwarfing them by at least twice their size. At the front of the ship was set a plaque that held the ship's name – Harbringer. As he approached, Sekali looked for anyone who looked to be in charge. Spying out a woman pointing here and there, and noticing the laborers following her instructions explicitly, he approached her.

As he neared, her flaming-red, waist-length hair drew his attention, taking him off guard. He had never seen hair this color in all his life. From behind, he spotted a short sword at each side of her hips. Instinctively, she turned on Sekali, holding out a hand, warning him to stop. Her brown-black eyes sternly flashed as she focused her attention on him. Sekali stopped, noticing the lithe nature and her muscular tone; she was a weathered Warrior, or he was a fool.

“You there, halt. I don't know you.” Sekali bowed, to which she stated. “Strange custom, bowing; seems a bit superficial. What do you want?” He held out both hands to show he was not armed.

“My two companions and I need passage to the Northlands. His statement instantly made her laugh.

“The Northlands is where this ship is headed, but this is not a passenger ship. You will have to wait until you can book passage with the regular traveling ships; they do not arrive at these docks for another three days. Try one of the other

ships here, you may get lucky.” With that, she half-turned, ignoring him. Sekali pulled out his bag of gold and threw it to her. Without looking, she snatched it out of the air. Untying it, she looked into the sack, half smiling.

“We leave at sunrise on the morrow. I have a cabin you can use. I keep it for personal guests, which you now are. Don’t be late, or I keep your money and sail.” Glaring hard at him, she added, “And there will be no alcohol on my ship, no exceptions.” Sekali nodded, and bowed.

“Yes, Captain, thank you.” Turning away, he headed for the inn, pleased at not having to wait.

Uther had booked three connecting rooms. With a mission such as this, it was wise to stick together; he knew that from personal experience. However, he was not about to share a room with an Elf, or a thieving bushranger. Taking the closest room to the stairs, he threw his pack onto the bed, then exited the room, locking it behind him.

He kept his money in a pouch at his hip. Finyat would be here soon, and the Dwarf wanted a rematch. The last arm-wrestling contest was still eating at him. By the great hammer of old, that Shallant had a strong arm! Why he had chosen the profession of Thief bothered Uther to no end. Well, putting that aside, he made up his mind this night would be different. With all in order, Uther made his way downstairs.

As he entered the common room, he stopped and took in the high energy all about him. This was his favorite place to be in all the world, and it put him in a grand mood for eating, drinking, gambling and, of course, arm wrestling!

Finyat entered the provisions shop, un-shouldering his pack, staggering a bit, as if it was too heavy. Plopping it down on the floor, he turned and began walking around with his hands clasped behind his back. As he casually looked at all the items in the shop, he felt the older gentleman behind the counter watching him closely.

“Whatcha' looking for, son?” Finyat turned and shrugged, feeding into the man's ignorance.

“My dad sent me here to get something. I'm trying to remember what it was. I will know it if I see it, sir.” The gentleman nodded as a new customer entered the store, even as a stack of folding grappling hooks caught Finyat's eye. He figured, since they were going to do a lot of traveling, the three might need something handy like this. Waiting for the perfect moment, Finyat calmly stared at the hooks, acting unsure. When the provisions shop attendant began talking to the customer, Finyat snatched up three, one after the other, and tucked them under his arm in one smooth motion.

As the new customer was being helped by the old man, Finyat picked up his pack, walked out of the provisions shop without making a single sound. Not allowing the door to slam shut, he triumphantly headed back to the inn. Uther was waiting for him outside on the porch, a scowl on his face. As he neared Uther, Finyat grinned happily and entered the inn.

“And I suppose you think you are very clever. Stop wasting time, we have a common room to enjoy,” the Dwarf grumped.

“What did I do now?” Finyat stated, a look of innocence playing on his face. Narrowing his eyes at the Shallant, Uther shook his head.

“You know exactly what.” Finyat laughed, waving a hand at Uther.

“Now don't give me any moral lessons; just get your belly and arm ready.” Finyat's brightening smile melted Uther, who slapped him on the back, then glanced back over his shoulder as they entered the inn.

“Hurry, or the Elf will thwart us!” Breathing in through his nose, Uther

grinned.

“You smell that?” Finyat sniffed a few times and shook his head.

“Smell what?”

“Your gold, and it will soon be mine, ha!” They laughed and hastily proceeded to their rooms to get ready for a night of fun.

That evening, in the inn, a washed up and brightly dressed Finyat walked down the stairs and into the common room, surveying everyone happily, a gleam sparkling in his eyes. From a table in the far corner of the room, the Dwarf hailed the Shallant and pointed to an empty chair next to him.

“Finyat, let us begin with a drink and some dice!” At the invitation, Finyat began to eagerly weave his way through the crowd and sat down by Uther, throwing him an excited grin.

“Lots of people here tonight,” the Shallant whispered as he studied the patrons. Uther smirked, then threw some coins on the table.

“Then let it begin!”

Not long after, Sekali entered the inn.

Sekali moved to a less lighted corner of the common room, distancing himself from the burning fire-pit at its center. Spying out an empty table, he settled down and watched his two companions in silence. About their necks, each carried a piece of legend, and so he needed to keep an eye on them. He watched them move from one gambling table to another throughout the evening, throwing out money like they did not care.

Eventually, they left the gambling tables and found a seat at the bar, where Uther challenged Finyat to a contest of drinking. Grinning, Finyat knocked on the counter, but failed to get the bartender's attention. Instantly, Uther slammed the flat of his hand down upon the bar, bellowing in a deep voice.

"We need drinks! Finyat and I will be having our annual drinking contest now!" He pointed at the quickly approaching bartender and licked his lips in anticipation of his favorite drink.

"And a fine evening for drinking and storytelling and -"

"Just drinks for us! Keep your stories to yourself! Bring me ten kohakk, and then ten more my good man," Uther cut in, interrupting the bartender, who frowned at the Dwarf, and was about to say something, until Finyat shoved a number of gold pieces into the man's hand and grinned. Glancing down, the bartender looked at them briefly, then let them fall into the pocket of his apron, suddenly smiling.

"Coming up, my good friends!" he laughed, and began pouring black frothy liquid into quarter pint-sized mugs, sliding them down the counter one by one as he filled them. The foam spilled over the edge of each rim as Finyat and Uther caught them. The Dwarf licked the froth off his fingers, grinning happily as the Shallant smiled at a number of patrons gathering about them.

Finyat and Uther raised a kohakk high, and waited, their spirits soaring happily as bets began to mount among the patrons, who began to laugh and throw money into a pile on the counter before Finyat. Prepared with five kohakks each, they waited until the last of the bets were placed, then guzzled their first down in a

flash, causing a sudden chorus of cheering to fill the common room. The elevated mood of the evening began to soar as the two quaffed mug after mug of kohakk.

After draining the first five, Finyat ordered two plates of food; the house special. In a flash, a beautiful waitress brought plates filled with meat, gravy, breads and greens which hung steaming over the sides of their plates. Tipping her three silver pieces, Finyat grinned at her.

“Thank you milady!” he shouted, to which she happily laughed and moved out from the throng of guests surrounding the two. As the bartender placed five more kohakk before the two, they hungrily began to devour their dinners.

Sekali was surprised to see them eating so much. By the time they emptied their plates, they were on their last mug of kohakk. The crowd cheered them on, impressed to see how well they could hold so much food and drink in their bellies without passing out. It was a gift, how Finyat had the natural ability to attract people to him. They constantly slapped him on the back as he ate and drank.

Uther, on the other hand, had a gleam in his eyes that dared anyone to touch him; no one did. Then again, it could have been the axe strapped to his back that warded off the patrons hands. Uther always had one hand laid upon his money pouch. Sekali guessed, that, after meeting Finyat for the first time, Uther had no doubt learned to guard his gold, even if they were pals.

Finyat bought a round of dark ale for all gathered about him, and was instantly thronged like never before. Four more kohakk were guzzled, and another plate of food consumed. Upon reaching for their last mug of kohakk, they both quaffed them down and slammed the empty mugs onto the bar. Leaping up onto his stool, Finyat pronounced their contest a draw, and bought another round of drinks for all. A cheer went up from all about the two as they stood and stalked back to the gambling tables.

Into the night, Sekali noticed Finyat spent money, as if he had no end of it. He began to watch him close enough to realize the Shallant had the innate ability of picking the pockets of every person who got within arms reach of him. Finyat was not spending his own money, and though Sekali disapproved of it, he silently

admitted Finyat was truly a master Thief. He wondered at his life, at his upbringing. He wanted to know Finyat's story and decided to ask him one day.

It was in the earliest hours of the morning, just past midnight, when Finyat got up from an unsuccessful throw of the dice and called it quits. His following dispersed as he patted each one on the back - no doubt relieving them of a bit of coin in the process - wishing them safe travels and a pleasant evening.

Uther followed after him, ascending the broad, slightly winding stairs to the hallway on the second floor where their rooms were located. Sekali patiently waited, sipping on some water, watching for any signs of the two being followed. He realized at length that Uther was guarding him as Finyat did what he did best. Finyat's skills would be very useful on the journey ahead, and Uther's axe would prove no less valuable at his back.

After the two had vanished upstairs, Sekali stood and headed upstairs, feeling a new respect for the two he traveled with. Entering, he noticed the doors were wide open between the three adjoining rooms. The Shallant was sitting at a table with stacks of various coins piled high. Uther stood behind him grinning as Finyat tallied up the profits for the evening. At the end of his counting, Finyat laughed and turned to Uther, noticing Sekali in the doorway.

"We did very well indeed, my good men. Well indeed!" Uther growled at him impatiently making Finyat laugh. "I spent twelve white-gold, electrum, two silver and some change. We made very close to forty-seven white-gold total. I like this city!" Standing, the Shallant broke into a jig about the room while Uther bellowed out in hearty laughter.

"Yes, my friend, quite hospitable, these folks!" Sekali shook his head, not able to keep a smile from his face.

"We must be on the Harbringer before sun-up. Good night Uther, goodnight Finyat." Uther tried to give Sekali a Sardakk salute, staggering happily. Finyat grinned.

"Pleasant dreams, Elf," he laughed, almost knocking over the largest stack of coins.

Shaking his head, Sekali turned to his room and looked at his bed, feeling sleep overtaking him. They would be leaving for the docks in a few hours with more money in their pockets than they entered the city with. It was a risky, yet profitable profession, one Sekali would never consider. Laying down, he could not help but laugh at the thought that Finyat had been buying drinks for strangers with their own money.

Sekali slept for three hours, then arose before sunup, pleased to have actually slept without having that nightmare. Strapping his blade to his back, he adjusted the handle to the left so it could easily be drawn. He walked into Finyat's room to wake him, but Finyat was prepared, counting his money at the table once again. Uther was passed out on the floor behind Finyat's chair, snoring loudly. Noticing Sekali, Finyat nodded.

"Sekali, good morning. We have to leave now. I went out last night exploring the city while you both slept. Reports will probably arouse the city guard to search people as they leave, by way of the city gates and by ship. If we leave now, we should escape the bother of the guards." Sekali rolled his eyes, alarmed, and nudged Uther with his foot.

"What did you do?" he asked, looking out the only window to Finyat's room. Without hesitation, Finyat scooped a very large pile of money into a bag, tied it quickly, then secured it into his pack as Uther jumped up, growling in annoyance.

"Uther, we have to leave . . . now." The tone in Finyat's voice was even and soft. Uther cracked his knuckles and grabbed all his belongings, instantly ready.

"Lead us safely then, Shallant, through the snares of the watchful eye." Finyat headed for the door and opened it. Cautiously, he poked his head out, looking both ways into the hall. Before exiting the room, he turned to Sekali and whispered.

"I stole a crown of the king three hours ago. He has a lot of them. I took the one that had the most dust on it." He winked, his eyes brightening as Sekali's

widened in disbelief.

Sekali and his companions took to the alleys in silence, avoiding all eyes, as they made their way to the docks without the notice of a single soul. As they met with the Captain of the Harbringer, Sekali noticed dozens of guards beginning to gather in numbers back up in the city, milling about in the main streets.

They entered the ship unnoticed and unchecked, soon setting sail northward upon the Navarian Sea. As the ship began to pull away from the city, Finyat kept an intense eye on the docks. After the ports of Navan escaped their view, Finyat began to sing a merry tune, seeming very pleased with himself.

Sekali had never been on a ship, and it wasn't long before his stomach told him so. Soon he was leaning on the railing, trying not to vomit. Now he knew for sure this ocean was cursed. It made him sick if he drank it . . . or sailed upon it. It was vile, and he vowed he would never step foot onto a ship again if he survived this voyage. Clutching the rail, he concentrated, having half a mind to slip into shadow.

It was Uther who saved him from the curse of sea sickness. Uther hated sailing, and made no pretense about it. But the Dwarf was prepared with a plant that cured sea sickness. Seeing Sekali's plight, he appeared beside him and looked out to sea.

"Didn't know an Elf could get sick," he jested in all seriousness, poking fun at Sekali. Ignoring the Dwarf, Sekali tried to focus on anything but the constant up and down motion. Laughing, Uther pulled out a leather pouch and opened it. He picked a piece of serrated leaf from a cluster, as long as his palm. It was two-fingers wide, and instantly gave off the aroma, similar to mint.

"Here, suck on this, but do not swallow the leaf itself." Sekali took it, not caring if it was poison and placed it in on his tongue. It was sweet, but the texture was very coarse and prickly. After a while his stomach stopped torturing him and his head no longer danced in circles. Uther looked at him the entire time, waiting.

"Thank you, Uther," he stated, sighing in relief, and headed to the stern, curious to see how the ship cut through the deep water. For hours he watched, feeling the fine ocean spray mist over him again and again, grateful for a Dwarf that once wanted to kill him.

That evening, as they were up on deck, some of the crew were throwing dice, as the Captain watched on with no expression. Finyat wanted to play, but Uther touched his shoulder and shook his head once. Sighing, Finyat resigned himself to merely watching. Sekali could have sworn Finyat was near to drooling, but he did as Uther bade and witnessed the gambling . . . without picking one single pocket.

The crew played on into the night. Sekali listened to dice bouncing on the wood of the deck as he sat at the stern, watching the stars slowly revolve across the night sky. During the night, as he watched, mesmerized by this new experience, Sekali noticed Uther and Finyat nearby. They were sneaking sips of something out of a very small keg. Without hesitation, he walked over to the two and snatched it from Finyat. Raising it to his nose, he sniffed it. It was kohakk, and they'd already had a bit to drink.

Without a second thought, he threw it overboard and began to walk away. Behind him he heard Uther growl viciously, and the distinct sound of his axe being unfastened. Turning to Uther, he saw Finyat quickly walk away.

“You wasted kohakk, Elf!” Uther roared and advanced. Realizing what was about to occur, and realizing what he'd just done, Sekali quickly looked about him to make sure there were no obstacles nearby. The Captain and her crew slowly gathered in a half-moon about the two and watched in dead silence. It was obvious this sort of behavior was forbidden on the Harbringer, for the look on the Captain's face, and all her crew, plainly showed disapproval.

Uther looked like a wounded and cornered basilisk, and seemed about to strike. His eyes were bloodshot and he looked truly out of his senses. Sekali knew he should have spoken with him instead of reacting, but it was too late now. Maybe he had misjudged Uther; maybe he was far too unstable to rely on. Never before had a companion turned on him, which truly put him at a loss as to what to do.

“Uther, stop!” Sekali held up his hands, leaving his blade sheathed in an attempt to calm him down. As Uther took a step forward, the ship suddenly slammed into something and was shoved sideways through the water, sending those near the railing hard up against it. Uther staggered back and hit the railing as the ship dangerously submersed into the water. There was a splintering sound as wood gave way to the force of something below.

They hadn't struck something; something had impacted the ship, and it was not small. Three men were taken overboard by the wave that washed up over the

deck, Uther being one of them. Sekali lunged to grab him with all the speed he could as a wave of knee-deep water forced him frightfully toward the side. The men falling overboard cried out in terror as the Captain yelled out the order to fight.

Sekali painfully felt the solid rail of the ship as he hit it. Luckily, his armor relieved him from most of the impact. His armor! Sekali realized, for the first time, that it was death, should he fall overboard. He grabbed hold of the railing as he shot out with a hand to grab hold of Uther's foot. He had one chance, or the Dwarf, and his amulet, would be lost; the mission would instantly fail.

He felt his hand strike the ankle of Uther as a violent spray of sea water shot up the side of the ship as it lurched upward. Gripping with all his might, Sekali held on to him and the railing as he, too, was forced over the rail. He closed his eyes against the sting of the saltwater and held on with all his might, focusing on the handrail and Uther's foot. The confusion lasted but a few moments as he held on, feeling another wave splash across him. The ship felt as though it would capsize, but did not. It righted itself as the Captain screamed loudly, "Brace, brace!"

All Sekali focused on was not letting go. To him, there was nothing else in the world. Everything other than this was nothing, even should he be suddenly attacked. He could hear Uther sputtering and cursing in rage and fear beneath him. At one point Sekali opened his eyes and caught a glimpse of Uther. He still had his battle-axe in hand, runes glinting off the surface in the light of the moon and stars.

In all the confusion, he heard one of the sailors yell, "Sea Turtle, Sea Turtle!" There was a sudden cheer from the entire crew, cut short by the Captain's voice barking out swift orders.

"Lower all sails but one! Turn this craft about! Get those men out of the water! Get below and check the damage to the hull! Move, move!" As one, the crew did as she commanded. A few hands gripped Sekali's arm and heaved him and Uther back up onto the ship, saving them from a watery grave.

The ship's sails were lowered, all save one. The two, who had fallen overboard, were retrieved not long after the Gargantuan Sea Turtle had submerged. The collision had no doubt startled it, for it quickly vanished within a moment after impact, fleeing into the deep.

The damage to the ship was repaired before the light of morning began to illuminate the horizon. Sekali was amazed at the swiftness of the crew, who were adept in their trades. A bucket brigade fought against the water pouring through cracks in the side of the ship, as other members of the crew grabbed wide planks and tools to patch over the damaged sidings. Pitch was heated and applied to the patch, stopping the water from invading the Harbringer.

The Captain oversaw everything with thoughtful precision, no panic, nor fear in her demeanor. Sekali admired her unshakable mind and the powerful presence by which she bolstered her men. Quickly, the last of the water was emptied back into the sea where it belonged, and the ship was at full sail once again. As if it had never happened, the crew returned to their duties. There was even a game of dice being enjoyed topside, as before. As Sekali dried himself off, Uther approached him, axe still in hand.

"If you ever waste kohakk again, I'll pike your head, Elf!" Sekali ignored him and checked to make sure he yet retained his third of the key. It was still there on the chain about his neck. Uther put up his axe, began to stalk away, then stopped. Turning, the grumpy Dwarf walked back up to Sekali, his expression changed.

"Oh, thank you for saving my life, Elf. I'll call it even and forgive you." Uther held out a hand which Sekali took, much to the relief of one Shallant who had not been seen until that moment. Where he was the entire time, Sekali did not know. The important thing was, he was safe and accounted for.

"I'm just glad you are alive, Uther," Sekali stated with conviction. Grumping, Uther pulled his hand free and stalked away. Sekali thought the Captain would have words with them, but she did not. She acted as though the alcohol incident had never occurred.

Six weeks took the Harbringer closer to the Northlands where dwelt an enemy Sekali and his companions had little knowledge of. Sitting up on the railing of the Harbringer's stern, his favorite place to be, he watched the sea, his mind setting up Uther nearly falling into the depths of the water. He wondered what the repercussions of failing this mission would have been. To avoid the possibility of drowning, they would no longer wear their armor while sailing. In this, there was no argument.

It was early in the evening as Sekali knelt at the front of the ship, watching the water, when he caught a glimpse of multiple objects moving within the waters below him. Like the haunted melody of a hundred master bards, strange music filled the air with a tune that lifted his heart, filling him with a joy he had not felt since she had him tied the fifth braid in her hair, and when Tamith asked him to be her father.

It felt good to feel again. And though there still remained a lingering threat of darkness within his soul, it was more bearable nowadays. Still, there was a darker part of his mind that tortured him, as if it was not his own, and this disturbed him greatly.

Watching the water, Sekali witnessed great white-winged creatures with tails that fanned out behind them like many long and slender tentacles. Gracefully they rose up, not quite breaking the surface of the water, gliding before and along side the ship. The most curious thing about them was their snow-white skin that emulated the glow of a waxed moon. Speaking aloud, he did not realize the Captain was standing behind him close by, watching his reaction to this strange, wondrous encounter.

“What manner of life is this?” He peered down at them, letting go his caution. A faint, soft wail, followed by many more, echoed all about the ship, as if they were calling to him personally.

“They are Sea Spirits,” she said, startling him. He nearly toppled headfirst into the water, but caught one of the ropes in front of him. Getting control of his

balance, Sekali turned to her.

“Will they attack?” Smiling fondly at him, she shook her head.

“No, they are peaceful. They follow every ship that passes through this area of the trade route.” For the first time, since departing the City-Port Navan, the Captain had smiled. Unbuckling her sword, she dropped it to the deck. To Sekali's astonishment and great alarm, she suddenly ran and leapt off the side of the ship, gracefully arching through the air. As she descended, and before she plunged into the water, he swore he heard her laugh. Then, she was gone. Looking back at her crew in great alarm, he noticed they were smiling.

The Sea Spirits turned in their course, heading for the Captain, who quickly emerged and flung her blood-red hair back and wiped the seawater from her face. One of the creatures moved under her and raised up slowly, lifting her up out of the water, yet not breaking the surface itself. Raising her hands high into the air, she laughed as it bore her smoothly alongside the ship. He could not believe what he was seeing. Her crew began cheering her on as the creature sped along, racing the ship.

Catching the look on his face, the Captain pointed at Sekali, laughing at him. She then beckoned him to join her in the water with a wave of her hand. Shaking his head, he declined, for he did not know how to swim. Shrugging, she lay back on the Sea Spirit. No sooner had she lay down, it submerged, steadily vanishing into the deep water where the eye could not go.

A moment passed into a lengthy amount of time as he kept on eye on the water where she had vanished. As the time passed, Sekali watched the water, expecting her to emerge any moment, yet she did not. He began to worry. She had been submersed for too long now. Looking around, he observed an unconcerned crew. Two more of the crew dove into the water, following after their Captain. The remaining half broke away from the railing of the ship and returned to their duties as if this was just part of another day in a sailor's life.

Sekali leaned over the edge, staring at the water, watching for any sign of the Captain as Finyat came up beside him. The Shallant poked his head through the

railing, the amusement of it all fading from his face as well. Uther joined the two as well, looking down at the water. After a moment, he shot a disgusted look at Sekali.

“Who would want to ride a slimy fish? Hrmph!” He then stalked off, grumbling about the fish drinking his lost kohakk as he vanished to some other part of the ship. Uther was not to be seen for a long while. Finyat looked at Sekali.

“Think she’s alright? The crew doesn't seem worried.” Sekali nodded, still watching the water.

“Yes, she’s alright. I wager this is one of many times she’s played in the water.” Turning, Sekali sat down and closed his eyes, feeling the Harbringer’s gentle sway as it coursed along through the water at full sail. He thought he would never get used to the rocking motion, and the horizon constantly tilting, but Uther had gotten a good supply of Desh`Weed, and it did a perfect job of keeping the sea sickness at bay.

One thing was for sure: Sekali would never take kohakk from a Dwarf again.

After a time, he opened his eyes, and saw Finyat still watching the water below as if expecting the Captain to suddenly surface. As usual, his eyes were wide with wonder and curiosity. Simply put, Finyat was curiously into everything, both large and small, simple and complex. It was his nature.

“Finyat, what is your story? Where do you come from?” Finyat's answer came quickly, without hesitation, and without taking his eyes from the water.

“My mother.” Sekali smirked as Finyat continued eyeing the surface of the water.

“Sekali, I live in the present, not the past. The past is gone, and there is nothing to be done about that. Live for the day is my standard.” Understanding, Sekali shut his eyes, the rocking of the ship gently soothed his mind and body.

“I wish I could do that.” At least for now, until trust and the right moment presented itself, Finyat would remain a mystery. Weary, he slipped into meditation and conscious rest.

Coming to, he looked up to see the dark heavens blanketed in a massive belt of stars. There was no moon, no wind . . . no crew! Jumping to his feet, he felt that terrible, dark threat again. Spinning in circles, he ripped his blade from its sheath. The runes on the blade slowly shifted and writhed, as if in agony, as if they too felt what he did.

Why did he let himself sleep?

A thick, rolling, blackened fog began to seep through the railings of the ship all about him, fingering across the deck as if alive, stretching and groping, reaching and clawing after him. The icy claws of his past played out right before his eyes as he spun about, searching for Mahkaia's murderer.

“Coward, show yourself!” he abruptly raged, screaming out a challenge. As if accepting, it formed up from the black mists which spread out to cover the entire deck of the ship.

Death!

Sekali sprang to his feet, sword already in hand, awaking from nightmare into nightmare. He spun in circles, teeth clenched, waiting for the same enemy that had taken away his beloved Mahkaia. Steadily, it arose out of the shadows, creeping and stretching over the deck of the crewless` ship, wielding a scythe of unspeakable blackness that caged the souls of those it had claimed. Its influence was so terrible, Sekali could neither move or speak as it floated toward him, as if in an unseen wind, its long, shredded, black robes trailed out from it like a hundred evil banners, carried by an invisible legion of darkness. Sekali grit his teeth, hating it. The deep seeded malice for the Soul`Reaper filled him with enough power and will to move and attack. With all his hate, pain and the darkened energy of his soul, Sekali broke the paralyzing effects which held him physically bound. Advancing swiftly, he struck out, as it also did. Dark and white lightning shot out from between their clashing weapons. Again and again, Sekali relentlessly beat down upon his foe. Yet, try as he might, he could not overcome its defenses.

Frustration overwhelmed him as he screamed in fury, cursing his silent enemy with death and destruction.

His offense was soon turned to defense, as the fight took a turn against him. Soon, he found himself fighting desperately for his life. His blade became as lead in his hands, heavy and awkward, and just as he thought he could lift it no more, and had just given himself to the same fate of his beloved Mahkaia, Mabuhi appeared at his side, wielding a white shining staff that shone brighter than the sun at noonday.

“Fight it Sekali, fight!” she screamed, urging him on. “Never give up the fight!” His heart leapt with sudden hope as she contested against his unnatural foe along-side him. With bolstered strength, he leapt forward, renewed and exhilarated at her sudden appearance and unexpected aid, the illumination of her staff filling him with strength and endurance. Together, they battled on. The sudden terror of her being slain, as Mahkaia was, sent Sekali into a frenzy. Breaking forth in a terrible fury, he turned the tide of his foe's offense to defense as he rained blow after blow down upon the darkened specter. Blinding bolts of pure white energy poured forth from Mabuhi's staff, striking the apparition as he landed strike after strike with every swing and thrust of his blade, driving it down onto the deck of the ship.

He had seen a battalion of the greatest Sardakk Elf defenders render this thing shredded and beaten into the earth, only to see it rise and fight on. He would not give it the chance this time! An unnatural focus filled his vision as he sliced and cut and rent it, not allowing it to rise. Seeing an opening, he struck that terrible scythe from its fleshless' hands, disarming it as it howled in pain and desperate rage. As the scythe skidded to a stop, beyond its grasp, he stomped its skull against the surface of the deck, cracking it. Feeling a terrible, intense, blood-lust he broke into a killing frenzy. Straddling the apparition, he gripped it by the neck, pinning it to the deck, even as it struck him across the side of his head. Trading blow for blow, Sekali burned with a sense of death as he brutally beat the Soul' Reaper's head into pieces, not feeling the pummeling he was taking to the

head. Though he did not see it, Mabuhi's eyes widened in surprise and shock at Sekali's rage.

“Die!” He screamed again and again, smashing in its boney chest with his bare fists. Working his way over its entire, sickening frame, Sekali broke and splintered every bone of its hideous body, then rolled off it and stood, raising his blade to strike again. Before he could land a single blow, a blaze of pure energy fell upon it from above, shattering every splintered piece of its being to dust, ripping the shadowy fragments of its macabre robes to shreds of writhing, diminishing darkness.

Uncaring, he continued to chop at its once robes, which retreated slowly back into the darkened mists from whence it came, a ghastly shriek filling the night air as it crept and sifted back out through the railings of the ship and over the sides. Last of all, its scythe vanished.

Soon the ship was as before, yet without its crew. Sekali panted heavily, sweat pouring down his entire body. He staggered, struggling for the strength to catch his breath. Falling to his knees, he dropped his blade, sucking in precious air. Gathering her senses, Mabuhi rushed to his side and helped him set his back against the railing. Kneeling before him, she brushed back his long, black hair, deeply concerned. When his breathing calmed, she smiled and kissed him.

“Sekali, now you are free to sleep. Now you can sleep in peace.” She began to fade away. “Now you can sleep,” he heard her whisper as she faded from his sight. He felt his strength fail him. Closing his eyes, he painfully lowered his head, falling into a deep and peaceful slumber.

Deep within the lush and dense forest of her home, Mabuhi suddenly awoke and gasped, crying out as she struggled to sit up. Groaning, she collapsed back into her bed, tears cascading freely down her face. Beside the bed, mother took her hand firmly, squeezing it tight, compassion filling her eyes. Mabuhi looked up at her, writhing in terrible pain, gasping for breath.

“It is -” she struggled to say, then began to tremble uncontrollably. The Herald nodded, placing a free hand on Mabuhi’s heart and smiled.

“Yes, child of the woodlands, it is finished. He is free to dream again. Now he may know true, physical rest. You, however, have taken on his nightmares. Now, it will be you who must deal with his once torment.” Clenching the Herald's hand tight, Mabuhi groaned.

“It is heavy, even in my waking hours. How am I to endure this?”

“The only way is to destroy that which killed his wife. To do this, you must take on that curse. Do you still wish to continue?” Emphatically, and without hesitation, Mabuhi cried out in agony, nodding.

“I will not give in to this,” she cried out, then quickly began to fade, an exhaustion she had never before felt clawing into her, overcoming her mortal frame. With all the strength she could gather, she squeezed her mother's hand.

“I'm glad. Thank you mother.” Closing her eyes, Mabuhi began slipping into an unconsciousness in which she felt an awareness . . . a perceptive darkness that instantly began to reach for her. Her eyes shot open, as if she had suddenly been submersed in hot water.

“He has lived with this for so long . . . terrible . . . terrible . . .” Brushing her tears away, the lady smiled, her eyes gleaming with inner power.

“For over three decades, Sekali has been afflicted by the Soul`Reaper. Sekali wounded it many times during the battle in which he lost his love. By doing so, he earned its enmity; a curse that would claim him in the end. For now, I will protect you as you sleep, child. I will keep at bay the curse he was tormented by . . . the curse you now carry. Sleep deeply.”

Sekali opened his eyes to the countless stars above. Slowly, recalling the nightmare, in which Mabuhi fought along side him, he shuddered, stricken speechless. No one had ever shared in his nightmare. Unsteadily, he stood feeling the wind upon his face. It felt good. Looking around, he saw the night crew going about their tasks the same as always. Everything looked as it had before, with the exception of his sword laying upon the deck of the ship. In doubt, he checked his scabbard, and found it empty. Looking back to the deck, he marveled greatly and retrieved it. Sheathing the blade, Sekali was astounded and in wonder. He pondered the meaning of it all, coming to no conclusion. Something had happened; something significant.

As breakfast was called out by the ship's cook, he surrendered his curiosity to his hunger. As he ate a breakfast of mush, half steamed vegetables and dried fruit, he watched the sun rise from the eastern horizon, and enjoyed the rush of the wind as the Harbringer continued to sail steadily toward the Northlands.

All that day and into the late afternoon, Sekali watched the ship cut into the ocean as they sailed further into the north. To him the sea was mesmerizing, and he lost track of time as the currents of the wind sailed past him, chilling his body, even as the sun fought to warm him.

As night drew on, the stars began to show in the heavens. First the brightest star revealed itself, followed by the next brightest star, then the next, until, as the last of the daylight faded away, the full expanse of the stars, once again, covered the night sky. In the western horizon, no stars could be seen.

The Captain, and the three crew members who joined her in the water, returned, suddenly leaping up over the railing of the ship, surprising Uther, who drew his axe in a flash. Uther angrily rebuked her in his native tongue. Laughing at him, she retrieved her untouched blade and sheathed it.

One of her crewmen came to her and pointed to the west as she bent over and wrung out her blood-red hair like a towel. After she had finished ridding what sea water she could from her hair, she looked west and whispered something quietly to him, her countenance changing to a grave look of concern. The crew worked together, securing everything below and above the deck, preparing the vessel to receive the oncoming weather conditions.

Just prior to the storm breaking upon the ship, Sekali, Uther and Finyat were commanded by the Captain to return to their quarters. Finyat and Sekali agreed without question, but Uther grumbled in his native tongue, as if defying her. Focusing on him, the Captain replied in the language of the Kithrin Dwarf not to question her, or she would personally remove him from the ship. Taken back by her knowledge of his language, and, of course, by her threat, he grunted, looked out at the increasing ferocity of the waves, and immediately did as she commanded.

As they sat in the cabin appointed them for the journey, Uther gave Sekali and Finyat each a piece of Desh Weed, and took one for himself.

“Here, we are probably going to need this,” he sighed, and he was right. As they waited out the storm, Sekali could hear thunder growing louder as the center of the tempest passed directly over them. The Harbringer was a large, trading vessel, filled to capacity with goods. It was a well-built ship and could take on storms of no small magnitude, but this storm was exceptionally fierce.

The Captain of the ship, though unknown to the three, was a weathered sailor and militant explorer. All her life she had studied the ways of war and peace, through educational books as well as hands-on experience. She knew many languages, and like her crew members, was highly skilled in the art of trading and bartering. She was adept at sailing, star navigation, carpentry, and above all else, cultures. She had no small pool of knowledge concerning geography and weather patterns, keeping explicit logs, time-dated for the best routes at each and every point during every season of the year. She shared as much as she could with her crew, teaching and educating them to successfully navigate the seas as well as she. Above all, she shared her profits with her crew with an even split.

Especially versed in all the forms of life within the sea, the Captain was ever-learning about all creatures; breeding rituals and times, upbringing, habits. She especially enjoyed learning about sea life by hands-on experience. She had built this vessel, sparing no expense to create the finest, sturdiest ship to sail upon the waters.

The storm's fury did not defeat the Harbringer, but challenged it to her limits. Time crawled by as the storm threw the ship about, like some powerful water child playing with one of its favorite toys. But as is the nature of all children, this water child needed to rest, and sleep. Before half the night was spent, the storm's fury subsided, diminished, then ended completely by noon the following day. The crew was safe within a ship that sustained no damage. The Captain spoke quietly to each crewman aboard, embracing each one. It was incredible to see them working together in harmony with a Captain who openly loved and respected them. It impressed Sekali highly to see Humans banded together and unified in such a fashion.

After the ship was cleaned up and in order, the Captain took a score of her crew and bade the others sleep, or relax in whatever way seemed good to them. The three heard the last words the Captain gave to her crew, and it planted the seed of apprehension within them.

“Listen up! I’ve checked the charts. We are blown off course somewhat to

the east, just over midway to our destination. I'm sure you all know what that means!" She looked directly at Sekali, Uther and Finyat.

"For those of you who are unfamiliar with where we are, listen up. We are directly over the western edge of the great deep, the breeding waters of the Dredge`Worm, sea serpents. They will not usually attack a ship unless they feel their nests are threatened. But this is not always the case." With that she smiled grimly, drew her blade, and then continued on with the business of the ship as if no longer concerned with talking.

Sekali drew his blade as well and took his favorite position at the point of the ship. As the Harbringer sailed north-west, and back on course, he watched the waters intently for any signs of movement below as Uther stalked up and down the side of the ship, grumbling about coward worms. Finyat had vanished completely shortly after the Captain's news.

By evening an unnatural stillness in the weather settled in. The sea became, as if it were, glass, and the sails hung useless. The Captain and her crew were silent, many of them had armed themselves with bows and blades, ready. Sekali approached her.

“Captain,” he whispered softly, “what is the weakness of the Dredge`Worm?” She snickered.

“They bleed.” Sekali stared at her, waiting.

“Okay, I'm going to give it to you quick, so pay attention, okay?” He nodded, focusing his full attention on her.

“Wound it, its breaks into a frenzy, striking faster and harder - though it becomes careless. Instant kill-shot if you sink your blade up under the base of its jaw, in the soft area. Just prior to striking, its eyes turn white, exactly like a shark does, so it won't get shattered bone fragments and pieces of its victim into their soft, bulbous eyes. They are easy to blind, but touching their eyes in any way will cause it to slip into an unnatural, frenzied rage, and that is a bad thing.” She paused to see if Sekali had any questions. He did not, and so she continued.

“Killing them quickly is their weakness.” Sekali turned to make his way to the bow of the ship, but she grabbed his arm, stopping him.

“Oh, Sekali, when one comes out from the water, a noxious stench fills the air, giving you a sure sign of imminent attack. One last thing: Do not let their blood drip into the water unless you wish to witness a Dredge`Worm swarm.” She gripped his arm tight and grinned. “Luck.” Smiling brightly, the Captain winked, as if suddenly having fun. He took his place at the bow, but not before relaying this information to Uther, who was keeping watch over the side of the ship. In silence they all waited as the Captain made her way to each of her crew, quietly whispering to each of them, boosting their morale.

The day passed as the Harbringer sat motionless in the waters. The Captain glanced up at the sails often, hope in her eyes. Time crawled on, and still the winds had not picked up as the sun set in the west. Darkness was coming on, and

as it did the Captain began to be openly nervous. She informed them that light attracted the worms, so they could not light torches or normal lanterns.

“If they attack in the night, I believe you, Sekali, and you, Uther, will be the only two to see them clearly. I have special lanterns of red stained glass, made just for the occasion, though I hoped to never use them. This is all the light we can risk, so help us out here.” She looked Sekali up and down and grinned fiercely.

“You have encountered much worse than this.” Her statement did not comfort Sekali in the least. Grim and silent, he waited, watched and listened as she lit the lanterns quickly. One was placed at the back of the ship, one at the center, one at the front. Like glowing blood, they illuminated the topside of the Harbringer, transforming the ship into something ominous and macabre.

Sekali waited, kneeling in ready position, ready to spring into action. Maybe they would get through the night unnoticed. A dead silence, broken only by the occasional creaking of the ship, echoed as nightfall left them all floating blind upon a sea of glass beneath a cloud-covered sky, waiting, ready for battle.

It was deep into the night when Sekali smelled a stench that filled the air about him. Not daring to make a sound, he slowly raised his arm, signaling. Slowly as he scanned the waters directly below him, seeing nothing.

“Below, at the base of the ship,” the Captain whispered, her lips touching his right ear. “If blood hits the water, others will come. Ready?” Sekali nodded once in silence, chills sliding down his ear and neck where she whispered.

“I am at your back. Call out your every move. I will match your movements. Always move right, if you safely can. I will stay with you. I move when you . . . move!” she yelled, grabbing Sekali and heaving him backwards onto the deck. As he leapt to his feet, a lengthy serpent shot up over the railing, landed on the deck, and struck out, all in one motion. Had she not pulled him back, he very well could have been hit. For not seeing too well in the dark, she had been the first to react. Truly, she was impressive.

“Watch each others backs, there may be more!” she called out. The first

thing Sekali noticed about this creature was its fangs, which were as long as short blades. Its forked tongue snaked out over the bottom of its open jaw, smelling out the air before it hissed loudly and focused on Sekali.

“Watch its eyes!” the Captain warned, gripping Sekali's tunic from behind. Just as she warned, the huge worm's eyes turned white, followed by an instant strike that rivaled the swiftness of a wasteland basilisk.

“Strike!” Sekali called out, leaping to the right and raising his blade as the serpent struck the deck, just missing him. He could feel her perfectly matching his movement. Pivoting, he slashed down to behead the Dredge`Worm, but it recoiled faster than it had struck, taking him by surprise. Instantly it raised up again, readying to strike again as Uther fearlessly charged up from the side, a grim determination in his face.

Abandoning Sekali, it spun out of the path of Uther's powerful stroke, hissing dreadfully as three arrows hissed past their heads, two striking wood and one sinking halfway into the Dredge`Worm's mouth, causing it to shriek in sudden frenzy and rage, its eyes instantly shifting to a blood-red glow. The Captain let go of Sekali and turned on it. Now seeing its eyes clearly in the darkness, she could help more.

“Frenzy, Frenzy!” Drawing two blades faster than Sekali had ever seen, the Captain lunged in next to their attacker and froze in place, looking up, waiting for the serpent to expose the underside of its head. In the moment she hesitated, a tiny dart, no larger than her smallest slender finger, whizzed across the deck and sunk into the side of the Dredge`Worm's neck in what appeared to be a futile attack, flinching, the Dredge`Worm furiously struck down on Uther, biting his battle axe, deeply wounding itself in the mouth as it wrenched the Dwarf's weapon from his hands.

Shaking the axe violently back and forth, it raised its head and swallowed it, even as it struck Sekali full in the chest with its tail, sending him hurtling across the deck into the railing, the violence of the impact disarming him. Following him into the railing, the worm quickly coiled to strike as Sekali leapt to his feet, feeling

a knot rising on the back of his head. Hovering over him, its eyes changed to white as it poised to strike . . . and jerked frantically, once, arching its head back as if something had struck it from behind. Raising up to three times his height, it froze in place for a split second, gurgled hoarsely, as if being choked, then crashed to the deck, its mouth slowly opening wide, then froze as still as death.

Sekali grabbed his blade, rubbing his head, and returned quickly back to his position. The Captain grabbed him by the collar and pulled him down, eyeing his head.

“You good?”

“Yes,” he whispered.

Finyat arose from a large coil of rope, blowpipe in one hand, walked over to the Dredge`Worm and nudged the creature with his foot. Again silence dominated the ship as all turned outward, expecting another attack. In a silence that lasted much too long, the Captain finally relaxed and looked over at Finyat in wonder, nodding her approval.

“Nice work, all,” she said in an even voice. “No worm overboard . . . no blood spilled into the water. We may just live out the night after all. Let’s hope no more of them noticed us.” She snapped her fingers and ten men were at her side with large cloths, soaking up all the blood slowly creeping to the edge of the ship, threatening their victory.

Finyat stood by the fallen Dredge`Worm, as if guarding it. Each time a ship hand came close to where he was standing, he would wave them around the immediate area. The Captain noticed, but said nothing more than to stay clear of the body of the worm for now.

Time seemed to crawl by, bringing on a delicate breeze that gently caressed the sails of the Harbringer, lightening the mood of a crew that remained on high alert. Steadily the breeze increased into a current that filled the sails with wind, moving the ship slowly ahead. As it picked up speed, the Captain sheathed her blades, sighing in relief. The crew slowly put up their weapons as well and warily returned to their duties, retrieving arrows, scrubbing and even repairing the deck of the ship as best they could. As they worked, Sekali watched the Captain speak to each member of her crew, embracing each tightly, one by one, making sure they were alright. One thing he noticed above all; she loved them all, as if they were family. Her unity reminded Sekali of the bond of the Sardakk. She was a true and gifted leader – one to respect and follow. In some small way, she reminded him of Mahkiah. Sekali recoiled inward, feeling suddenly cold inside.

The great ship was returning to its course, cutting through the waters on its way back toward the common shipping lanes. The Captain retrieved the lanterns and put them in her cabin, then returned to see Finyat kneeling down beside the carcass. Quietly, she watched, not interrupting him, as Uther stood on the other side of the body, also giving Finyat the space to do what it was he was doing.

Ever so cautiously, the Shallant scanned the surface of the Dredge`Worm until he found what it was he was looking for. Cracking his fingers, he reached into his tunic and produced a pair of gloves and slipped them on. Again, reaching into his tunic, he pulled out a small leather pouch and opened it. Within were a number of small tools, among which he chose a pair of pliers. Carefully, he focused his full attention on the end of a dart protruding from the underside of the worm's neck. Even more carefully, he removed and then cleaned the tiny weapon, then cautiously placed it back into a very small leather pouch with a fold-over flap. He then placed the leather pouch into a small, hand-sized, hard case, then into another leather bag with a pull string. Putting his tools away, he stood and kicked the dead worm. The Captain snickered.

“That is strong poison, Finyat. What type it is?” Turning to her, Finyat

smiled, eyes glinting.

“Toxin, from the Toxin Cactus within the Crystal Desert that lies deep in the southern part of the Zurkel Mainland. I had to modify them for flight.” She walked up to him.

“How much did they cost you?”

“I removed them myself. Being among the most deadly of poisons, I refused to buy them. It was risky, but worth it.” She nodded.

“Well, had I known you were carrying such, I would never have let you on my ship.” Finyat frowned.

“I will throw it overboard if you say.” The red-headed woman neared Finyat and grabbed his forearm, pulling him close.

“No,” she whispered, “I am grateful for what you did. Had a single drop of that creature's blood fallen into the water, we, all of us, would probably be dead. Keep your poison. Oh, and this is for saving us.” The Captain embraced Finyat tightly, then kissed him on the cheek.

“I owe you much for what you did. I owe all three of you. Thank you.” Taken back, Finyat blushed, smiled then embraced her in return, not displeased in the least, for she was fair to him.

“I hope I can save you again,” he whispered, to which the Captain placed her hands on each side of his face, and planted a real kiss on him. Grinning at him, she let go.

“I'll take a rain check on that. You owe me now.” Nodding, he shut his eyes tight and shook his head.

“I could owe you a few times, if you like. I'm good on my tabs.” Quietly laughing, she looked at him, narrowing one eye.

“How-a-bout dinner in my quarters later? Oh, what am I doing? It's not a woman's place to ask such things. My apologies.” She gave him a look that made him laugh. With a growing gleam in his eyes, he placed a dramatic hand to his chest and slightly bowed.

“Would you lower yourself to my level and bless me with your company? I

would enjoy it if you have me for dinner?” A sly smile played ever so slightly upon his face. Yes, he could not help it. He enjoyed such games, rare as they were.

Raising an eyebrow, she found herself rather surprised at the way he was acting. For a moment, the captain of the Harbringer stared at Finyat, not breaking eye contact. Slowly, she felt her defenses lessen, until she discovered she like him very much. Sighing, she motion in no certain direction, relaxing her guard.

“I thought you'd never ask. We've been on this pile of wood for weeks. I was beginning to think you weren't interested.” Looking around, Finyat noticed no one was paying attention to them. Luckily, they had kept their conversation low.

“Would you take me on a tour of your cabin? I actually would love to see your star charts and the things a real Captain has. No tricks, I promise. Besides, I don't want to swim home.” Smirking, she turned and walked toward the cabin. Opening the door, she turned and motioned him inside. After he was inside, she entered in after him and shut the door.

“Look around, but don't touch anything. Ask as many questions as your thieving heart desires.” Clasp his hands behind his back, Finyat slowly walked about the cabin, looking at everything. There were tables fixed to the floor, covered in rolled out maps and books. As he studied one map, he became curious.

“I have a question.”

“Shoot,” she said, watching him closely.

“What race are you? You are about my height, but I cannot place your race.” Walking over to him, she tip-toed.

“I'm actually taller, but only just. I am Ketchin. Have you ever heard of us?” Shaking his head, Finyat tip-toed back at her, looking at her hair more closely.

“Nope. I love your hair. Its very thick, yet hangs down. Is it hard to control?” His question make her laugh.

“Nah, it behaves itself fairly well.” She stared at him for a moment, then stole another kiss. “Thanks,” she said in all seriousness.

“You are welcome any time, milady. What is your name?” The Captain of

the Harbringer smiled with a gleam in her eye.

“Ness.”

“Ness,” Finyat repeated. Rolling her eyes, she folded her arms.

“That's what I just said.” Looking around, Finyat felt suddenly cornered, yet pleased at the situation.

“I didn't mean -” “Will you please just kiss me again?” Finyat burst out laughing and happily obliged her.

Uther had to cut the Dredge`Worm open to retrieve his axe. As he pulled his axe free from the worm's belly he growled in triumph.

“My axe!” he bellowed triumphantly, and kicked the Dredge`Worm. Sekali watched Uther from the bow of the ship. In a moment, he made a life decision, and an important one at that. As long as he lived, he would never take kohakk from a Dwarf again. Sekali pondered on what they were about to get themselves into as he watched the ship cut steadily through the Navarian Sea. He wondered if it would be easier to fight all the Dredge`Worms in the great deep, or complete this mission successfully.

Later that evening, the Captain announced they were back on course, according to the stars and her charts. At that time, she ordered the Dredge`Worm's carcass thrown into the sea.

“It is safe to dispose of this thing now; let's get rid of it. It stinks.” Before doing so, she commanded all its teeth cut lose and saved in a chest, which she and one other of her crew brought out from her cabin.

“Sekali, Uther, Finyat, come over here!” she called out. As soon as they were gathered around, she offered them an equal share of the fangs.

“These teeth fetch a good price on the Veleighen market. They are made into weapons, and are difficult to make, even for a master. The Veleighen pay handsomely for them.” Finyat brightened up at the prospect of making some money.

“What could I get for one?” Ness laughed at the Shallant.

“I knew you would be the first to speak up. I believe one average-sized tooth can bring about one yellow-gold piece.” A whistle escaped Finyat’s lips as he looked at the chest full of them.

“I’m in. Thank you.” Uther nodded in approval, then shook his head.

“Maybe we should go kill them all and get rich. Then I can start an inn where the kohakk I drink will be free.” The Captain looked at Uther with a blank expression. Slowly, a wry smile crossed her face. She picked up a large tooth and studied it closely.

“Uther, if you killed them all, you could no doubt purchase a city port, like Navan, as well as a fleet of your own ships. But I must decline; maybe another day we will try,” she jested. Uther did not catch the joke and nodded.

“We have some things to do first. After we are finished, I’m in. Finyat and I will contact you, if we can find you.” She raised an eyebrow, a small grin spreading on her thin lips.

“Uther, come to me one day in the future; we will make the necessary preparations for a future hunt. It could be quite profitable.” Sekali wanted nothing to do with such a hunt. He wanted to get off this wasteland of water, and never return. However, he did like the idea of the teeth, and agreed to his share.

Another small chest was brought out and bundles of Dredge`Worm fangs were divided equally into piles. There were exactly one-hundred and fifty fangs. All the crew accepted one fang each, which left a number remaining, which the three were given. The body of the Dredge`Worm was then cast overboard and the area cleaned up by a zealous and high-spirited crew.

As Sekali rested, kneeling at the front of the ship, his thoughts turned to a forest that haunted his heart. Within that forest was a creature who had softened his life, even in the process of sending him to war. Closing his eyes wearily, he did something he’d not done voluntary for years. Sekali fell into a deep, blessed slumber in which he dreamed of being back home . . . within a forest filled with moon lanterns.

The remainder of the sea voyage passed without mishap. After the work was done, the crew would gamble among themselves in the evening. Finyat was invited into games of dice and chance, in which he eagerly accepted. Every now and then, Finyat won. Sekali wondered at his losses, but never asked him about them. He knew the Shallant was playing fair. He supposed the Shallant had taken a liking to the crew, and especially their Captain, who reminded Sekali of the Wasteland Catur, a graceful creature he had seen only once. They were agile and swift, quick to aid his people, but also quick to anger.

He suspected the Captain had the blood of a cat within her veins, so subtle and lithe were her movements and mannerisms. He discarded the notion that she was Human, or that she had Human blood in her veins at all. She was very thin and far too coordinated to be of the common races. Sekali thought highly of her, and a part of him wanted to come with Uther one day and hunt with her. Who knew what the future would hold? It was only a thought.

His mind turned to the dark side of this race for the Sister City: If their enemy discovered the city before he and his companions, and if they managed to raise her from the depths of the sea, the Veleighen would use the portals to invade.

However, if he and his companions succeeded, according to what he had learned, they could return by way of the portals. There would be no long sea voyage back. In that, there was hope. Once he returned, Mabuhi would be there. She had something to tell him; something that had to wait. Whatever it was, he did not care. All he wanted was to see the sixth braid in her hair. She was beautiful and kind. He loved the softness of her manner, her speech, and especially her eyes.

One day, as he looked out across the waters, he spotted a large port far in the distance. As he pointed, one of the crew called out their arrival. They were in enemy territory now, though the Veleighen did not know them as either friend or foe. Looking on the enemy's homeland port, Sekali renewed his conviction to help Mabuhi and her people.

As the Harbringer came to a stop at the second dock, Sekali was astonished to see the exact image of the structures and other ships the Dremmin Tree had shown him. To his relief, the docks were not covered in blood.

Armored up, they said their goodbyes to a Captain who embraced each of them, wishing them a safe and prosperous journey. She held onto Finyat the longest and whispered something in his ear, making him smile with joy.

“I will, he said.” The Captain sighed heavily and kissed him for a long while.

“You know how to find me.” Licking his lips, he nodded.

“Count on it. Thank you so much for everything.” She kissed him again and returned back to her ship, barking out orders. Uther looked at Finyat and raised an eyebrow.

“Finyat?” The Shallant did not look at his best friend. He was watching her.

“Yes?”

“Don't ever make that one mad at you, my friend. If she even hints at doing the dishes, do them quickly.” Finyat's face reddened as he picked up his gear.

“I won't, if I ever see her again.” Uther slapped him on the back.

“You will, you will,” he said in the kindest voice Sekali had ever heard. Finyat smiled sheepishly. They carried their belongings down the gangplank, departing into a massive city port.

Even though the sun was shining, the air was cold. Sekali, Uther and Finyat got directions to the nearest inn where they would stay and make further preparations.

As they passed a neighboring vessel with the title of Wave Crasher, the crew gathered at the side of the ship and began to taunt and jeer at the three. Uther grit his teeth, placing a hand on the top of his axe, but did nothing more than that. Sekali looked at Finyat, who had an expression of relief on his face. Ignoring them, they moved on.

On a wide street of massive flat, perfectly laid flagstones, they headed toward an outer city busy with trade and commerce. People everywhere were bargaining and haggling over the prices of wares. One could walk for hours, never reaching the heavily guarded inner city, beyond which towered an ominous and dark castle that loomed up in the distance. The sight of it made the three seem insignificant and small.

As Sekali gazed at its massive ramparts and many towers, he half-expected to see stone gargoyles, or something evil, take flight. The mighty structure gave him the feeling of being watched, hunted. The top of the castle had the distinct shape of great dragon-like horns jutting up into the heavens. The inner-city walls enhanced the feeling that outsiders were not welcome. Upon parting, the Captain had embraced Sekali, whispering a warning, telling him to go straight to the inn and not speak with anyone. The Veleighen were not a friendly people.

The shops and other structures lining the massive avenue, leading them into the city, was filled with fish markets on one side, provisional shops and inns on the other. Each shop was built as if expecting an attack. Tall and strong gates surrounded every business and inn. Numerous guards watched everything and everyone as far as the eye could see. Instantly, he was impressed with the defense of this city.

Up ahead, Sekali caught sight of a man, large in stature, riding upon a giant black lizard through the center of the street, forcing the crowd to part before him.

The reptile hissed viciously at everyone it passed as it stalked toward them. Nudging Uther with an elbow, Finyat motioned to the approaching rider. Uther nodded, his demeanor transforming to grim as he watched the rider's approach.

Reining his steed directly toward them, he stopped a few paces in front of the three. Yanking chain-linked reins, he turned his mount sideways, blocking their way. Instantly, the great lizard hissed out a challenge. In a stone-like voice, deep and threatening, the man pointed his razor-sharp, serrated, short lance at Sekali.

"What is your business here, outsiders?" Instantly the area around them cleared. Sekali bowed shortly, as did Uther and Finyat, who followed his move. Finyat took the lead by moving a half step toward him.

"We are travelers from the Zurkel Mainland. We booked passage on the Wave Crasher to come here. We are explorers." The presence this guard radiated was overbearing. His eyes did not veil the cruelty he possessed as he glared at each of them, scrutinizing them one by one, until his eyes set upon Finyat. For a moment, he seemed at a loss for words as he looked upon the childlike Shallant. Bursting out in mocking laughter, which echoed though the area as he pointed at Finyat, he shook his head.

"You look like a pathetic Human child, though you carry a sword and wear leathers!" The guard leaned forward eyeing the chests each of them carried.

"Open the chests now!" Sekali lowered his to the ground and flipped the latch, throwing back the lid. In surprise the guard whistled long and loud.

"Dredge` Worm fangs; where did you purchase them?" Finyat cut in as Sekali opened his mouth to answer.

"We slew it." He said evenly. "The Captain of the Wave Crasher informed us the Veleighen possess a rare skill in crafting these fangs into weapons of no little value." The guard raised a thick, black eyebrow, skeptical of his story. He then pointed back the way he had come.

"If you follow this road, on the north side you will see a sign that says, The Carved Knight. Go into that shop and Gorum will buy these fangs from you. Tell

him Arkanian sent you and he will deal with you. I will take your words as truth, as I have no reason to disbelieve them.” He then leaned forward slightly, his eyes suddenly a threat. “If you are not who you pretend to be, I will hunt you down and gut you all.” Finyat began to shake and tremble in fear as the reptile hissed down at him.

“Sir, we are not here to die. Thank you for your time.” With that he handed the Veleighen guard one tooth.

“Here, a token of truce. Please take it.” Arkanian smiled suddenly, then laughed.

“Little man, you should be an ambassador. I take it gratefully. You may go about your business. Good luck with your journey.” His large hand secured the tooth greedily as his steed hissed frightfully at Finyat, who shrunk back before it, terrified. Jerking the thick chains, Arkanian forced his steed into submission, then packed the tooth into a side bag, seeming very pleased. He then turned to Finyat and nodded once, darkly.

“Let no one say these outsiders are without diplomacy. Be on your way!” With that he glared at them one last time, before urging his angry steed forward. They each secured their chests and began heading for the weapon crafter as instructed. Once Arkanian was out of sight, Finyat’s shaking abruptly stopped. Looking over, he threw an evil grin at Sekali. Noticing the look Finyat gave him, he continued walking with no change of expression.

“What did you do, Finyat?” Finyat shrugged, replying very quietly.

“Let’s put it this way. That rider and reptilian freak-show have about three days of mortality remaining. They should use them wisely. Don’t worry, it will be quick.” Finyat grew silent, heaving the chest he carried to a more comfortable position and moved along.

Sekali abruptly felt his face flush hot, realizing they had to leave the city without delay. He could not believe what the Shallant had just done. Since they met, he knew exactly what Finyat was. But the Shallant had fooled him into believing he was nothing more than a Pick Pocket, a Bush Ranger, a Thief who

could not even defeat simple Goblins. Suddenly, Sekali suspected Finyat could have taken every Goblin down by himself!

Just before boarding the Harbringer, Finyat told him he had stolen a crown from the castle. Up until this very moment, Sekali thought he was joking. Now? Now, he was not so sure. Finyat was more than what he portrayed. In fact, Finyat was so good at what he did, he had the adept ability to make others think of him the way he wanted them to. Thinking on it, Sekali began to doubt if he even knew the extent of what this small, childlike man was capable of. He was not only a Thief and an Assassin, but much, much more. It was as though he could bend the opinions and social actions of others to his every whim. Sekali remembered the last night at the Golden Feather. The gambling, the drinking contest, being thronged by people who gave up their money to him while laughing and patting him on the back. His mind reeled at the realization of the Shallant he traveled with; a Shallant he now called friend. Finyat was deadly!

“Finyat?” Sekali whispered.

“Yes?” he whispered back.

“Do you have a crown in your pack?” There was a short pause, in which time the Shallant's eyes brightened. Sekali could tell he was instantly loving this game they were now playing, or the game Finyat was playing in Sekali's head.

“Okay, if you can guess the right answer - and you only get one guess - I'll tell you if you are right, or wrong. If you guess wrong, when all this is said and done, I get to take Mabuhi out on a friendship date, and you must set it up so that it happens. Sekali, just to warn you, I will spend so much of my personal resources and money on her, I'll make her feel that any gift you ever give her in the future seems mundane. Now, before you lose against me, you have to ask yourself this question: Are you willing to risk continuously falling short with any gifts you ever give her again – and all due to the fact that you let your curiosity get the best of you?” Uther lowered his head, trying to hide a sudden grin.

“Finyat,” Uther whispered, “you're a menace.” Sekali looked down at Finyat, suddenly realizing the complexity of the Shallant's mind. It was staggering.

Grimly determined to know the truth, he dismissed the Shallant's intricate threat, forcing himself to keep it simple.

“I agree. And, if I answer correctly, you owe me the gift Mabuhi will give you upon our return.” Finyat stared at Sekali in silence for at least a hundred paces, trying to read his face, as if they were sitting opposite each other at a table, holding cards.

Uther abruptly laughed, instantly drawing the attention of at least two-hundred Veleighen all around them. Finyat gave Uther a fleeting look of alarm, then burst out laughing. The Dwarf slowly got control of himself, shaking his head. Sekali noticed most of the Veleighen were scowling at them, no doubt thinking they were the target of some racial jest. Uther wiped his eyes and stopped.

“That one always gets me!” he stated loudly. Setting his chest on the ground, he placed a foot on top of it and pointed at Finyat.

“Did you know, Gnomes are so short, they are always the last to know when it begins to rain?” the Dwarf said in all seriousness. The crowd around the three instantly chuckled. Some began to laugh aloud. Sekali was confused. He felt like a bug caught in a spider's web, and the spider was being nice to him as venom dripped from its fangs. This situation was not only confusing, but highly alarming. What were these two doing? Finyat, turned to the Dwarf and waved his joke away, as if it were nothing.

“A man was invited to dinner at a Shintar Monk Guild. During dinner, out of the blue, one of the monks said, 'Number fifty-three'. There was a chuckle among the monks, which confused their guest, who politely continued eating, wondering what that was all about. A moment later, another monk stated, 'Number twenty-three'. Every monk at the table burst out in instant laughter, some spitting their food back onto their plate. The Shintar Monk Master noticed his guest's confusion and held up a hand. 'I'm sorry, my friend, you are new to our circle. You see, we have been together in this guild for so long, and have told so many jokes, we simply know them all. So, to save time in telling the entire joke, we assigned a

number to each one. Now, we just say the number of the joke we wish to tell. We recite the joke in our head, then think of the punch line and laugh. ‘Ahhh’, the guest stated, now understanding, ‘I get it’. And so all the monks continued their meal, laughing and enjoying each others company. During a quiet moment, as they ate, the guest piped up loudly, stating, ‘Number eighty-seven!’. Instantly, all the monks at the table burst into uncontrollable laughter. The master monk fell back, his chair crashing to the ground, his plate of food following after him. The master rolled upon the floor, holding his aching sides as the other monks burst out with glee, spitting their food across the table at each other, tears streaming their faces, their sides splitting in pain from too much laughter. After a good while, they all sat back at the table, still snickering, but trying to control themselves. With a will not many possess in this world, the master monk composed himself, picked up his chair and brushed food off the seat. Smoothing down his robes, he returned to the dinner table. Sighing, he looked up at his guest, his eyes still wet from crying, and stated, 'That was a good one! We've never heard that one before!.'

The crowd about the three erupted in uncontrolled laughter. Even the stern Veleighen guards began laughing. One of them began clapping, which sparked a thunder of applause. Bellowing as usual, Uther held up a hand, waving to one of the guards, who actually waved back . . . smiling! The Dwarf picked up his chest and began walking, Finyat and Sekali falling into step beside him.

Sekali wondered why the Veleighen were laughing, and happily. It was like being in a nightmare that liked him. After walking for some time, Sekali quietly continued their previous conversation.

“Is it a deal?” Sekali asked. Finyat nodded, trembling for some reason. Looking ahead, as if nothing had ever happened, Sekali gave his answer.

“You stole the crown, but do not carry it with you. You hid it, and your plan is to retrieve and sell it later, when the time is right.” Uther forced himself not to laugh, setting his jaw hard to keep a straight face.

“I don't know what is funnier, Finyat, that joke you just told, or that.” Uther threw a quick thumb at Sekali. Looking up at Sekali, Finyat barely contained a

burst of laughter that tried to explode from his mouth. Stopping, the Shallant took in a deep breath, then let it out slowly, sobering and not looking too happy. He pointed up at a hanging sign above a doorway that read, The Carved Knight.

Gorum was equally as sociable as Arkanian, constantly belittling the three, especially Finyat. Uther remained calm the entire time, but Sekali saw his jaw fixed; the tell-tale sign that he was just about to explode. Sekali was grateful he had not, and hoped he would refrain.

They were paid ten white-gold pieces for each tooth, a tithe of their value. Finyat did all the communicating, and pretended to be excited about the price he got for each tooth. Sekali wondered how many would handle the Dredge`Worm teeth before the poison would take effect.

With a bit of “pocket change,” as Finyat put it, they left the weapons shop and headed north through the main avenue of the city. It took them until sunset to find the south gate, where they had to pay five white-gold pieces each just to exit.

Finyat’s cheerful mood, and generous nature kept all suspicion at bay. Finyat, gave each guard a white-gold coin as a tip, and was instantly liked. Still, they constantly belittled and treated him as a lesser race. The attitude of the Veleighen was that of a black-hearted dragon; demeaning and mean. Sekali breathed a sigh of relief as they exited the city.

Soon they found themselves on a wide lane of cobblestones, heading out toward a distant forest that seemed as ominous as the hearts of the people Finyat had just poisoned.

After traveling for two days on a road that became less and less tended, they saw weeds growing up from the cracks in the cobblestones, which slowly tore up the road. Placing a hand on Finyat's arm, Sekali stopped him. Without hesitation, Finyat turned and reported, knowing exactly what Sekali wanted.

“I think eighty will be the death toll by tomorrow night – we had better move on.” He shrugged and smiled innocently. “Sekali, we obviously landed in the city of the enemy. You did not think we could leave without performing some

service to King Nishane Asmond and our homeland did you?" At the mention of the king Sekali grew silent and respectful.

"No, Finyat, you have done well. If news of what you have done were to reach the king, you would be highly praised for the terrible danger you are putting us all through. I salute you in the name of the king for your deed." Sekali drew his sword and struck his chest-plate with the hilt, the Sardakk custom of military saluting.

"Finyat, Uther, It is an honor to travel with you. Mighty are your deeds. You are great in my eyes." Uther snorted.

"Elf, shall we move on? We haven't time to fondly cuddle and strike ourselves with our own weapons!" Uther's words surprised Sekali. Unsure how to respond, he stared at the gruff Dwarf. For the first time, since they met, Uther noticed Sekali at a loss for words. Barking out in sudden, deep laughter, Uther slapped him on the back.

"Lighten up, Elf!" Uther growled, stalking on up ahead. Seeing the look on his face, Finyat threw Sekali a grin.

"You know," he whispered, "Uther has never been able to properly receive a compliment – he doesn't know how." Finyat then added, "Most all Dwarves are like that, so you know."

They traveled until they reached the border of a dark and gnarled forest, into which they plunged, leaving behind one of the last civilized areas on the northern continent. They did not know it, but from the time they set foot in that forest, they were being hunted by a creature more vicious than Arkanian and his terrible reptilian steed.

In the beginning, he was relieved to be in the forest. The trees concealed them from the possible prying eyes of the Veleighen, for which he was grateful. By now the enemy had, no doubt, connected the three with the deaths which were occurring among them. But after being in the forest for only a short time, Sekali had the persistent feeling of being watched. Not long after entering, they noticed the trees began to appear twisted and gnarled, as though they suffered in pain. Moss hung in long strands off every branch of every tree, and mushrooms the size of bushes grew as thick as the trees all about them.

The road began to branch off in many directions, all of which were untended and untraveled. They quietly discussed which path to follow, unanimously settling on keeping to the most preserved for easiest navigation. As the day wore to a close, even the more well-preserved paths finally came to an end. Mists began to cover the lush, mossy, forest floor, and the sounds of insects and birds ceased altogether, leaving them in an unnatural silence. Sekali would have preferred a guide, but this mission was secret. They had to face the fact; they were lost.

The first night they camped, they ate cold rations. Always on guard, they kept everything in their packs in case they had to move quickly. Sekali whispered, breaking the silence for the first time since all paths ended.

“Uther, Finyat, we are lost, and this was to be expected. How much food and water do we have to go on?” They counted their rations and water supply. They could last one week on the water, and almost one moon on the dried rations. The concern was water more than food. The rations would last them two moons if eaten in halves. Finyat shrugged.

“We are in a forest where there is much green. In my opinion, we are bound to find a water source. As quiet as it is, if there is a stream, it will not be hard to locate.” Both Sekali and Uther agreed, looking about the area uneasily. Uther whispered, as best he could.

“I don’t like the quiet. Something’s not right here. I feel as though I am being watched. It could be this place, but I feel it in my bones – something is out

there.” Finyat’s brow creased together and he bit his lip hard and looked into the trees all about him.

“I don’t like this. Maybe we should go back to the edge of the forest and make our way around it.” Sekali shook his head.

“Finyat, according to your predictions, the Veleighen should be dying or dead as we speak. They will come after us. We cannot go back.” A heavy silence hung in the air about the three at his words. Finally, Finyat’s eyes brightened, and he snickered quietly, abruptly pleased with himself.

They finished eating and hoisted their packs over their shoulders. Uther and Sekali could see well enough in the dark to travel, but Finyat had to walk between them, holding on to Sekali’s pack for guidance. He did not like it one bit, but kept his objections to himself.

Sekali led them as true to north as possible, but was not completely sure until Finyat informed him that moss always grew on the north side of the trees. The three slowly progressed through the darkness of the night, and then stopped to rest, and make camp. It was agreed that no fire should be built until they were a few days away from Valurin. According to Finyat, the danger would be the greatest at this point in time. The enemy would either be swarming the ship Finyat had named, or chasing it down. No doubt, they would be gathering information from the crew. All in all, this was about to become a secondary concern.

Uther decided to make a campfire with the driest wood and kindling he could locate. He did not set it ablaze, but set his flint and steel close by in case they needed light during their rest. It was wise he had done so, for scarcely after preparing it, there arose a clicking sound out in the darkness that grew quickly louder as something approached.

Drawing weapons, the three peered out into the trees, squinting, attempting to spy out what it was. Uther struck his flint on the edge of his axe, sending a shower of sparks into the dry bracken of the campfire, lighting it instantly. As the flames grew, there could be seen a pair of huge slanted eyes reflecting the fire’s light, hastily closing in on them.

Sekali cursed it in his Sardakk tongue as Uther instantly charged, rushing to meet the challenge. Finyat was simply missing, which did not surprise Sekali. Rushing foreword, he joined Uther in the charge, flanking what looked to be a gargantuan-sized praying mantis, like the kind he had seen in Mabuhi's forest, yet enormous. This one looked the size of a very small dragon.

Great mandibles spread wide as it struck at Uther, who dove behind a large tree to shield himself. With two lunges, its attack splintered the large trunk of the tree, provoking Uther into a Dwarvish war chant. As it recoiled and prepared to strike again, Sekali circled around behind it, only to be met with a powerful kick that caught him full in the chest, sending him hurtling backwards. He felt the impact of the tree that instantly stopped him. Falling to the earth, he shook a ringing out of his head. Managing to keep a grip on his blade, he leapt to his feet, hissing angrily. He saw Uther sidestep away from the safety of the tree, raise his axe with both hands and throw it at the giant insect. The axe sunk deeply into its chest plate, but its exo-skeletal body armor absorbed most of the damage. Ripping the axe out of its wound, it lunged at Uther who quickly rolled back behind the tree. As he rolled, he began laughing in a deep booming voice. This gave Sekali enough time to lunge in with an attack that pierced deep up into its softer underbelly. Anticipating its kick, he dropped to one knee, and severed its foot. Screeching in pain, the mantis turned and swiped at him, catching Sekali in the right shoulder, sending him sprawling across the ground. The armor he now wore protected him better than any other he had ever donned. The moss-covered forest floor cushioned his bouncing rolls as he lost his blade somewhere out in the dark forest. He heard the singing of the blade as it glanced off a tree, but as he tumbled, he could not tell which direction the blade had landed. Rolling to his feet, he ripped two daggers from concealed sheaths upon his forearms and charged again, as the attacker charged him.

As Sekali and the gargantuan preying mantis closed the distance between each other, Finyat dropped from the trees above, landing on its upper back. Using all his weight and the velocity of his fall, to plunge both his short swords into the

base of its neck. The strike was so precise, the massive insect dropped to the forest floor without a sound, skidding to a stop before Sekali. Finyat held on to the hilts of his blades tight as it fell. The fight ended quickly. Finyat unsheathed his blades from the neck of the creature and leapt off the carcass.

All three lit torches and searched the woods until they found Sekali's lost blade. They then put out the fire and left the area, moving away from the fresh kill. Predators would be attracted to the scent, and so it was best to move on. Each took comfort in keeping a burning torch in hand at all times, deeming it best to be seen, rather than miss a sudden attack, should the occasion arise. As they left the area of the fallen insect, Uther looked up at Sekali and grunted.

"Elf, you get knocked about a lot. You had better change your tactics, or you are going to get unlucky one of these days." Sekali shook his head.

"I was just thinking the same thing. Thank you Uther." The stout Dwarf nodded in satisfaction and trudged on in silence. Sekali thought about Uther's council; he was right. The creatures here in the Living World had a different approach than those of the Wastelands. He also took note that Dwarves did not work in a unified attack pattern. As reckless and non-team oriented as Uther was, Sekali had to admit, the Dwarf was effective.

Sekali would adapt to Uther's way of combat. Finyat, on the other hand, was adept at combat support . . . invaluable.

The trek into this tangled forest was a battle in and of itself. The mushrooms became intensely thick, sprouting up from the lush, green, mossy bed of the forest in the thousands. As they carefully moved through the multitude of various sized mushrooms, the many varieties and colors were captivating to the eye. Never before had any of the three beheld such unique splendor and beauty. Occasionally they stopped to admire them. The colors ranged from white to dark-greens and browns. There were even small purple mushrooms growing upon the larger ones, which were pleasing to the eye, as well as plentiful, yet it soon became impossible to keep from stepping on them. At times, to continue on, they had to cut a path through the large blanketing clusters. The air, though musky, seemed to close in on them, yet was not necessarily stifling or unpleasant.

As they delved deeper into this mysterious region, the quiet became more intense and the trees pressed in around them. It was this unnatural silence that began to wind Sekali up inside, like a cloth being twisted by strong hands to remove too much water from the fabric. He felt he was the invader here; that he did not belong. The feeling of being wrong prevailed in his mind to the point that he stopped and turned to his companions.

“Uther, Finyat, are we doing the right thing in this, our mission? I have been thinking on the matter, and it seems we have set ourselves into other peoples lives and wars without first proving one side or the other. We’ve only taken Mabuhi’s side of the conflict. What if she is wrong, or we are bewitched by the sweet lies of a master enchantress?” Finyat stopped, looked up at Sekali as though he were insane, then glanced over at Uther, a worried look flashing across his face. The Dwarf growled at Sekali suspiciously.

“Elves!” That was all he had to say before trudging onward. He did not speak to Sekali for a long while after that. Finyat looked at Sekali, shrugging.

“He’s stubborn this way, see? You’ll just have to follow Uther if you don’t want to get lost, you know.” Finyat jogged up beside the Dwarf. Sekali hesitated only for a moment, shaking his head, as if bees had suddenly made a nest in it. He

followed after the two, though did not approve in the least. He would have words with the both of them later - when Uther stopped being unreasonable.

He had noticed the darkening of Uther's eyes as he was expressing his concerns to him. Maybe Uther and Finyat were allied spies of the Veleighen. He would have to keep a close eye on those two from here on out. Simply put, the two were not to be trusted. It was becoming clear to him, they had brought him into this dark, forbidding forest to make him lose direction, become easy prey for unnaturally large insects. He hadn't been brought up in the Wastelands, forced through trials, the likes of which Uther and Finyat could not comprehend, just to fall here, at their hands! They would pay for their traitorous ways and plots as soon as he knew he was through this place.

Onward they picked their way deeper and deeper into the woodlands, Uther stubbornly leading the company into the unknown, Finyat following him, and Sekali suspiciously stalking up behind them, intent on their every move; vengeance and suspicion hatching like tiny poisonous spiders in his mind.

Now and again, Finyat began to nervously glance back at Sekali, quickening his pace to whisper with Uther, who growled at Finyat to shut his Shallant mouth. This went on until just before the light of day came into the woods.

After reapplying wax to their torches, they soon came upon a scene that caused Finyat to bite the palm of his hand in sudden horror. Uther stopped, his eyes widening in disbelief as Sekali cursed aloud, drawing his blade. Before them, two corpses were held up within the dense branches of a tree, one in full chain armor, the other in full plate, each run through by the other's blade. Both, it seemed, had killed the other, and both had many open wounds and slashes. The most disturbing feature was each were yet fully geared, and still wearing their backpacks. They were both elven, and, by their rotted stage, had not been dead long enough to fully decompose.

The stench of decay hung heavily in the stagnant air, yet there were no flies upon the bodies. Stunned, the three stood there beholding the macabre scene.

Sekali stood behind the two he once called friends, quivering in silent rage. Betrayers! He forcefully ground his teeth, hissing. Uther and Finyat had brought him here to murder him!

“Like them, you brought me here to kill me! Traitorous spiders!” Sekali threatened them with a motion of his blade. Uther and Finyat backed a pace and looked at each other, much alarmed by the accusation. Finyat drew both short swords and tossed them in front of Sekali, holding up his hands as he knelt upon the soft moss.

“I surrender . . . don’t kill me!” As Finyat knelt, he elbowed Uther without Sekali noticing. For an instant, Uther looked as though he was about to charge. Reluctantly, the Dwarf knelt, surrendered his axe to the ground and raised his hands up behind his neck, where he wrapped his fingers about the hilt of a hidden dagger. Sekali snatched up their weapons.

“Down on your faces traitors! I knew all along you were in league with that sorceress! It was all a trick!” Sekali screamed at them, white froth beginning to form at the corners of his mouth as he paced back and forth, his eyes darting from the corpses within the tree to the two.

Within a few moments, Sekali stiffened and collapsed to the ground as if dead. Finyat calmly stood, walked over to Sekali, gripped him by the collar and dragged him away from their weapons. Horrified, Finyat stared at the decomposing bodies, held up by the branches of a tree as Uther stood and reached for his axe.

“Don’t touch the weapons until the poison wears off. It will take a short while for the potency to dissolve. Then we gather him up and get through this accursed forest.” Uther shrugged.

“Did you see his face, Finyat? He was going to kill us.” Finyat winked at him.

“No he wasn’t, no he didn’t and no he won’t. I can keep him sedated for a year if I have to. Uther, we need to leave this forest, soon. There is something wrong with these woods.” Uther shook his head, as if trying to shake buzzing

insects from his ears.

“Yes, of course, just tell me when I can pick up my axe.” Finyat nodded once, his eyes fixed upon the two locked in eternal death. After a time, Finyat pulled out a flask and doused their weapons with water, washing away any poison residue. After sheathing their weapons, Finyat and Uther picked up Sekali and tediously carried him through the forest. The two had no idea what they were leaving behind, and from the danger they had narrowly escaped.

For two days they continued, cutting through a sea of mushrooms. Sekali was kept sedated by Finyat until the third day, when they came out of the forest into a strange looking grassland. There they made camp. The first night out from the forest, as they set up camp, Finyat expertly tied Sekali's hand and feet. No longer did he administer poison to him.

Sekali's stomach forced him to consciousness, and into a state of misery. His head spun dangerously as he tried to focus on the countless dancing lights above him. After quite some time, Uther's face focused by the fire. He seemed so familiar. Concentrating on his face, he slowly recalled his name and who he was.

“Uther,” he mouthed. The Shallant's face popped down in front of Sekali, startling him.

“How do you feel pal?” Sekali struggled lightly against his bonds.

“Untie me. Why have you done this?” Finyat's face vanished abruptly, but he could still hear his voice.

“See, Uther? It's our comrade in arms. He's a bit sick, but he'll get over it; just give him a while more. Shall we untie him?” Uther used his favorite, most well-used expression, grunting.

“Do what you want! If he pulls that stunt again, I'll knock him out faster than your sleepy fairy dust did!” Pointing at Finyat, the Dwarf smiled. “Save you some money that way.” Finyat smirked, flicked a blade out from his sleeve, and knelt down.

Sekali felt the rope binding his legs come loose, followed by his arms, then hands. Rolling onto his front, he managed to get into crawling position. His limbs felt wobbly, like boiled carrots. After gathering his senses, which took some time, he crawled over in front of the fire and knelt, facing it, trying to get the dancing flames to focus. After some time, he looked up at Finyat and Uther, who sat together on the opposite side of the campfire staring at him. Lifting his eyes to the stars, Sekali relaxed and watched them slowly come into focus. The moon was rising over the distant tree-line. Somewhere out in the darkness an owl hooted.

“What happened?” The effort of speaking caused his stomach to twist. Sekali gagged, and the fire twisted unnaturally before him. His mouth was dry, his stomach empty, and he felt terribly weak. Finyat shrugged as he dipped a single spade-shaped leaf into a cup of hot water and began to slowly stir it. For a while, no one spoke. Finyat continued stirring and dipping the leaf into the steaming-hot

liquid. Moving around the fire, the Shallant knelt by Sekali and offered him the drink.

“Sip it a little at a time. It will help with the nausea.” Sekali took the warm cup into both hands and put it to his mouth. Letting a bit of the steaming tea seep between his lips, he felt its warmth spread through his mouth. The liquid tasted odd, but not unpleasant. After a few sips his nausea eased and his stomach stopped rebelling against his every move. Noticing the moon was now well above the horizon, he grimaced. Time seemed to be passing too quickly.

“What happened in that forest?” he inquired again. Finyat shrugged.

“In that place, there was something effecting you. Whatever it was, I felt it too, but not as you did. Over the sea, we successfully sailed, making it past the Veleighen. While in that evil forest, it crossed my mind that we might fail this mission.” Sekali shook his head slowly as Finyat continued. “I suspect, based on the two in the tree, that Elves are more susceptible to something in that forest than Dwarves or Shallants.” Abruptly, Uther bellowed out laughing.

“That forest destroyed my theory of prancing, singing, dancing forest elves! Now I have to come up with some other insult to use.” Uther's brows raised as a thought came to him. “Now, Sekali,” he said, lowering his voice in all confidentiality, as if someone might overhear, “if you kept this a secret, I could simply burn down the forest and continue with my theory. What say you?” Finyat laughed.

“And what would that prove?” Uther rolled his eyes and harrumphed loudly at Finyat's lack of understanding.

“I wouldn't have to come up with another insult, ya dolt! Now, what say you, Sekali?” Sekali smiled.

“How-a-bout I keep it a secret, and you keep your favorite Elf insult.” Folding his arms, Uther leaned his head back, looking down his nose at Sekali.

“Oh, you are a hard one to bargain with . . . done!” All three laughed as Sekali continued sipping his tea. Before they slept, Finyat told Sekali everything, and in great detail. Afterward, Sekali looked over at Uther, who was kneeling

before the fire and adding a few dead branches to it to keep it stoked. Guilt and shame welled up within him.

“Uther, Finyat, I’m sorry. Please forgive me. I do not remember.” Uther grumped, looking about as if a bit nervous.

“Pray don’t mention it, Elf,” was all he grumbled as he pretended to fix an out-of-place piece of wood. Finyat smiled cheerfully and shrugged.

“Wasn’t your fault. I just think you were out of your mind. There was something in those woods that got to you. I’m just glad we didn’t end up the same as those two unlucky Elves.” Finyat shuddered at the thought.

Sekali could not recall anything past the battle with the insect, and it plagued him to think he had lost control of his senses, and that he had turned on his allies; his trusted companions . . . his friends. He did not sleep well that night as Finyat and Uther kept watch. In the morning, they would continue northward into a land that was becoming more and more strange and dangerous.

He compared this land to the Wastelands, deciding both to be equally filled with both wonders and danger. In the Wastelands, the horrors were not as subtle as in the Living World. This place was different, but by no means a lesser challenge. Looking out over the valley, Sekali observed a gentle dip in a landscape filled with tall, tube-like clumps of arm-thick vegetation. They would make their way through the valley to the mountains in the distance. It would be a two day hike, if all went well.

In the morning, they packed up in haste and made toward the mountains. A gentle wind brushed through Sekali’s hair as they walked toward a new destination. It felt good to be in the open air, and to leave a forest behind that he would never step foot into again. As they descended the gentle slope, they worked their way through the vegetation. Sekali looked back at a forest very unlike Mabuhi’s. If she had been with them, would things have gone differently?

Turning away, he led Uther and Finyat down into a sea of thick crops of bamboo-like plants, hoping the mountains ahead would be more hospitable. He

had no idea where they were going; only that they searched for the Sister City in a strange and hostile land.

The journey through this strange region was peaceful, the weather sunny and inviting. The birds were plentiful, cheerfully busy in their noisy activities. The soothing warmth of the sun soon chased away the gloomy influence of that hostile woodlands as Sekali, Uther and Finyat distanced themselves from it.

Happening upon a clear, bubbling stream, populated with small schools of tiny minnows, they filled both their stomachs and water-flasks. Once their thirst was quenched, they kept to the stream, following it toward the mountains which slowly, steadily, drew closer. A full day's march began to take them out of the valley and into a lower range of foothills.

That evening, they camped without a fire and arose before sunrise, continuing their march that took them to the top of the foothills, at the base of a grand range of mountains, towering high above them. Against the sheer side of the mountain set an expansive, deep lake of clear water, fed by an endless crystal falls cascading down from high above. High up the mountain, bathed in sunshine, towered snow-capped peaks and ridges, glistening like magnificent jewels in the sun.

Again, they took their fill of water and filled their flasks from one of the many streams that escaped the confines of the lake. Looking around, Sekali spotted an animal trail. Pointing, he headed for it. Uther and Finyat followed. The trail wound its way up toward the base of the waterfall, or appeared to, so they followed it cautiously. Finyat called up to them from behind.

“If this is a dead end, we'll go back and skirt the mountain. Chances are, there is a pass somewhere along this range of mountains.”

It was not long, as they hiked a well-worn path, when a great bear suddenly rounded a small bend in the hillside and stopped. Initially, the animal seemed taken off guard, as did they. Both parties instantly halted, looking at each other in surprise. Sekali looked at the magnificent creature in silence, noting its size. In all his life, he'd never seen anything like it.

“Beautiful,” he whispered in awe, calmly backing up a step in hopes of

showing it he was not aggressive. Sekali wanted to fish some rations out and try and feed it; possibly come to a mutual, friendly agreement. Uther, however, armed himself, narrowing his darkening eyes. The large bear raised up on its hind legs, sniffed once, then again, towering over Sekali more than twice his height. Lowering to the ground, it growled, stiffening up at the shoulders. Finyat slowly backed away.

“Uther, Sekali,” he whispered in a calm, yet urgent plea, “follow me. It's challenging us. We are in its territory. If we back off, we may avoid a fight.” But, as was most always the case, Uther instantly lost his temper and kicked dirt at the bear, bellowing out a challenge as he raised his axe and rushed into battle.

Accepting Uther's challenge, the huge bear lunged forward with surprising speed. Uther had only taken three steps before they met head-on. With all his might, Uther swung his enchanted axe, cutting deep just inside its left shoulder. In the same moment, the Dwarf was flung to the ground like a child's doll, losing his axe. In a rage, the bear began severely mauling him.

As Sekali charged, he drew his long sword and leapt up onto the animal's back, driving his blade between its massive shoulders with all his might. Up to the hilt his blade drove, landing an instant, fatal blow. The bear's instant reaction to his attack was swift, and Sekali found himself flung backward onto the path behind it. Instead of fighting the fall, he used the momentum to propel him into a back-roll, using his hands and feet, he slid to a stop.

As he regained his balance, he saw the bear lying on its back bawling in rage and panic. Not daring to retrieve his blade, he watched it thrash about on the path, its life slowly ebbing. In the last throes of death, it weakly rolled to its side and stilled, its last breath sending up a small cloud of dust.

Uther attempted to stand, then fell to one knee, shaking his head. Sekali and Finyat rushed to his aid, one on either side, to lend their support. Everything had occurred so fast, it was over as quickly as it started, leaving Uther with terrible bites to his arms while trying to ward off the bear's onslaught.

His left arm looked unnaturally twisted, and was bleeding badly, where the

bear had clamped a vice-like bite down on it and shook. He spat blood and coughed. Though his armor had saved him from an almost instant death, the attack had still wounded him terribly. Within seconds, he collapsed in pain and shock.

“Take him!” Finyat withdrew his support and threw his pack to the ground. In haste, he opened and rifled through it with impressive reflexes, almost instantly producing a small steel vial. He uncorked the top and watched as a spasm overtook Uther.

“Uther, hold still, drink this!” Uther coughed up blood as Sekali held him in a sitting position from behind. With great effort, Uther stopped moving, then nodded, opening his mouth. Quickly putting it to his lips, he tilted the vial, pouring the full contents into his mouth.

“Swallow, Uther, swallow it!” He urged as he withdrew the vile from the Dwarf's mouth. Uther managed to gulp down the liquid before an agonizing fit of coughing overtook him. He then fell limp, gasping and sucking in ragged breaths as he struggled for his life.

Sekali looked at Finyat, who stood and motioned him away from Uther. Gently laying the Dwarf on his side, he stepped to Finyat's side and turned, seeing that familiar look of the dying carved into Uther's face. Sekali had seen it too many times before to be mistaken. Finyat gripped Sekali's arm and pointed.

“Now, watch!” Reluctantly, he did, watching, feeling helpless to aid his companion. After a few moments, Uther's breathing relaxed and the grim, death-like expression in his face eased. His breathing became steady and the blood stopped flowing from his arm. Sekali heard a snapping sound as Uther's arm straightened. Finyat sighed in relief.

“This will not heal him completely, but the death damage has been reversed in its course. He is still severely wounded; it will take two to three weeks before he can travel. Even then, he will have to go slow.” Finyat knelt beside his friend, brushing his blood-soaked hair from his face. “He will live.” Sekali knelt on the other side of Uther, sighing in relief.

“Finyat, you are full of wonders. Is there nothing you cannot do?” The

Shallant grimaced and replied without hesitation.

“Impress Elf women?” Sekali chuckled and placed a hand on Finyat’s shoulder.

“You would do well in the Wastelands among my people. I would reserve a place on The Watch for you.” Finyat raised a hand and rested it on Sekali’s arm.

“Thank you sir.” It was at that moment when they both heard voices from up the path ahead, toward the waterfall. Sekali leapt to the dead bear, gripped the handle of his blade and, with some effort, pulled it free. He turned back to Uther as he saw Finyat shouldered both their packs. With no time to clean it, Sekali quickly sheathed his blood-stained sword and leapt to Uther and carefully picked him up.

“His axe, Finyat, his axe,” he urged. The Shallant looked around frantically as Sekali carried Uther into a thicket, concealing the both of them. After locating Uther's axe, and joining Sekali in the thicket, they became still as the stones around them, waiting for the inevitable. By the look on Finyat's face, Sekali knew his choice of a hiding spot was a mistake.

Soon, a band of Elves, with readied weapons, rounded the bend exactly at the point where the bear had been encountered. One preceded them all, stooping low to the ground as she moved forward with incredible stealth. She wore the black robes of the Guardian, and the martial battle robes of the Vekkarian Monk, a fighter, skilled in hand-to-hand combat. Her robes were secured about her thin waist with a black sash, signifying she was high ranking.

The robes of the Guardian she wore represented a prestigious class that took on the dangerous burden as the protector; a shield. Along the entire border of her robes were set silver runes, signifying she had made the Guardians Oath to be someone or some thing’s protector. Such an oath gave her incredible abilities and powers to fulfill that oath, whatever it was. Sekali had seen them in action in the Wastelands, and knew full well escape would now be impossible. Not only could she sense the slightest movement - their heartbeat - but she was also a tracker.

Soon after coming into view, she instantly picked up their trail. Turning

toward the thicket, she stopped and pointed in their direction.
They were caught.

Smooth as silk, she drew forth an ornately, rune-etched katana faster than Sekali had ever seen a weapon drawn. By the way she moved, and held her blade, he instantly knew this person as a Guardian Master; a teacher, not a pupil. The only encouraging thought he had at this point, was that she was not Veleighen. In this, hope sprung to life within him.

As she knelt, six archers knocked rune-tipped arrows over her, aiming into the thicket in which they were concealed. There was no other choice, but to come out. Without being hailed or commanded, Sekali, took a deep breath, stood and simply walked out onto the path carrying Uther.

“Finyat, come with me. There is no other way.” From the look on his face, Finyat disagreed with this sudden decision. Nonetheless, he followed. As Sekali came forth from the thicket, he noticed these Elves were of a slightly darker complexion than Mabuhi, who was a fair-skinned Aldarian.

He waited in silence as she watched him, eyes riveted on him without blinking for a time, before looking to Uther, then Finyat. For a moment, Sekali thought he was taking his last few breaths. The good thing about that, was he would get to see his Mahkaia in the next world. The bad thing was, he would miss his new fiance. Smiling slightly, Sekali nodded.

“Hello.” Finyat glanced up at him, startled.

“Great opening for an ambassador,” he stated openly. Sekali shrugged. The woman stood erect and pointed her blade at them, saying something in her tongue, which was smooth and flowing. Sekali knelt and gently laid Uther on the ground before him. She looked over at the bear, then at the three.

“Do you speak the Human dialect, outlanders?” Sekali nodded.

“Yes master, we are travelers and explorers.” The woman stared at Sekali and bit her bottom lip in thought for a moment.

“Your Dwarf friend is injured.” She glanced at the massive bear again, then to her company.

“Use it all.” A few of their numbers drew daggers and commenced skinning

and butchering the animal while she kept a close eye on Finyat and Sekali, who noticed the toned muscles in her slender neck and face. Her dark-brown, wary eyes seemed to bore holes into his. She was fair to look upon, and held the grace and movement of the Lykkinnin, an ancient species of man-wolf rarely seen in the world. Also, in a sense, she reminded Sekali of the Captain of the Harbringer.

She watched him unemotionally as he tended to Uther the best he could. Once he'd tended to the Dwarf, she commanded all their personal effects removed.

"Take off every thing you possess, down to your underclothes. After you do this, we will search you. If we find you have withheld anything but your clothing, you will die," she stated as a matter-of-fact. By her tone, Sekali knew she meant it.

As he unarmed himself, and began removing his armor, a terrible fear welled up within him. The amulets! Could they take them off, and still retain them, or would they vanish to return to their resting places? Finyat glanced at him in alarm, his thoughts obviously matching his. After removing everything but the amulet, Sekali decided he must take a terrible chance.

"Milady, please do not make us remove these amulets. I fear they will vanish, and return back to their resting place if they are taken out of our hands. Please, allow me to explain." Sekali's heart seemed on the edge of failing him as the woman's eyes suspiciously narrowed.

"Show me. If you are deceiving me, your deaths will be slow and painful. I have spoken." Sekali's heart began to pound within his chest. She had made an oath in the Sardakk Elf custom. She knew what he was, and this sparked a hope within, but also a great fear. Either she was an enemy, or confederate with his people. There was only one way to find out.

Hooking the chain with his thumbs, Sekali slowly lifted, drawing the amulet out from within his tunic, even as he heard the strain of many hidden bows all about him. Freezing, he waited as she cautiously walked up, sword poised and ready to strike him down. As she neared, her eyes fixed upon the amulet. Instantly she gasped in surprise. Stepping back, her blade lowered to the ground, a look of instant concern, almost panic, flashing across her face. Throwing a quick glance at

Uther, she called out, “Hinya natuala shin (the sister key)!”. Those about her hastily put up their weapons as a murmur rose in the air all about the three. Sekali took note of his blade; where he’d positioned the hilt for a quick grab, should he need to fight. At least, before he was killed, he might cut her down. But it was not necessary, for the Elf woman sheathed her blade, ran to Uther and fell to the ground before him, now looking upon as if he were family.

“What are his injuries?” she asked in great haste. Sekali dropped the amulet to the outside of his tunic, taken back by this sudden turn of events.

“His arms were chewed, and he was crushed by the weight of the bear.” She called out something in her native tongue quickly, as she placed a hand on Uther’s brow.

“We heard the fight”, she said, her expression more filled with fear than astonishment. “This is not good.” She seemed to be speaking more to herself than anyone else, her expression suddenly filled with great anxiety.

“Equip yourselves quickly! Aid them to armor up, now!” She backed up as a number of others came forth, carrying out her orders. Four men gently picked Uther up, and vanished back up the trail with as much speed as possible. In no time, Finyat and Sekali were fully armored, and their weapons returned to them.

Turning, she motioned for the two to follow, then guided them up the trail toward the base of the falls, staying with and leading them within her group.

She spoke to them as they traveled, asking many questions about their knowledge of the land, about the Veleighen and their position with all other races, other than their own. Sekali cautiously gave what knowledge he had, but asked no questions in return. Finyat was silent and grim the entire time, always looking up the trail to where his injured friend had been taken.

For a full day they swiftly climbed until the path ended at a high, cascading waterfall. It seemed they had come to an end, within a canyon from where there was only one exit; the way they had come. There they rested for a short time to regain their strength.

Uther was nowhere to be seen.

Soon, she stood and beckoned to them. Following her, they were led behind the waterfall up onto a narrow ledge of rock, just wide enough for one to move across if carefully managed. Sekali found himself hugging the wet stone for fear of slipping into the deep waters just below him. Through the mists and spray, created by the torrent of the waterfall, they inched their way across the narrow ledge into a hidden cavern where they exited the light of day.

In the dark, Finyat began to stumble on scattered rocks and other obstacles, and so a torch was lit and given to him to see by. Into the mountain they traveled, passing many other Elves, sentinels, who grew in number as they progressed through this secret passage. It came to mind, that, even if they had evaded this woman, and her war band, they would have inevitably been caught.

As they worked their way to the other side of a lengthy, natural tunnel, the tracker informed the two that she had been leading a war band to scout out the lands in hope of finding clues as to what the Veleighen were up to.

After a lengthy underground trek, they exited the darkness into a beautiful land, emerging to see the sun setting in the west, shedding its last hour of light across a great valley filled with a grand forest. As his eyes grew accustomed to the sudden light, Sekali looked on in wonder at a land, painted by a master artist. It would have taken him much of a day to describe its most eye-catching beauties and splendors. About the seemingly endless valley were three sparkling waterfalls which fed into a forest of golds and greens, reds and yellows. Finyat jumped up on a boulder and sat down, drinking it all in. But their guide gave them only a few moments to become accustomed to the light before urging them on.

“Come, friends, welcome to the Forest of Utaemia, my home, and the sanctuary of my people. Here you will witness something seldom seen by your kind. Come, my friends, and I will introduce to you a wonder that yet thrills me . . . even after ten ages.” She smiled brightly at them both, as if they were old friends united once again.

Suffering, and in terrible pain, Uther saw the deathly-white of skeletal hands clutching and clawing at him, attempting to drag him down into darkness. His natural stubborn side defied the overwhelming feeling to give up. Growling at the skeletal hands, he rejected the relentless onslaught of those boney fingers, clawing at him, driving them back to their infernal waiting place.

After enduring in an agony that seemed to last forever, the pain began to ease, giving him a respite from that constant, relentless torture. In time, from somewhere within the darkened void of despair and utter desolation, he perceived a faint voice calling his name. Uther nearly dismissed it as his own desire to hear the sound of another. Here and there he looked out into the blackness about him, trying desperately to speak, but could not.

As his pain continued to diminish, he saw the darkness about him steadily lightening to gray. Raising his hands up before his eyes, he noticed they were covered in blood that was not flowing, but seeping into his skin, as if the bleeding had reversed in its natural course, flowing back into him.

All at once, the memory and scene of the bear's attack came back to him. He growled, reaching for his weapon. In a daze, Uther leapt up from a bed of furs, by which a small fire was burning, and staggered.

“Where’s my axe?!” Finyat and Sekali both came to his side, steadying him. Finyat grinned at the Dwarf happily.

“The same ol’ Uther. Welcome back, my friend.” Uther placed a hand on both of them for support, growling in frustration as his legs rebelled. He looked deeply into Finyat’s eyes for a moment, then grinned.

“Did you bring kohakk? I’m thirsty!” All about Uther came a sudden laughter. It was then the Dwarf saw the Elves, his eyes focusing on them instantly. Elves surrounded them all! At first Uther panicked, reaching up to make sure his amulet still rested about his neck; it was. Breathing a great sigh of relief, Uther pulled it out to see it. A hush fell upon the strangers about him as a woman Elf approached.

“Uther, my name is Ellianess, I have healed your wounds, which were deep.” She looked at everyone about her. “We must talk. When you are ready, come council with me. There you will be enlightened.” Her voice was as penetrating as the waves of the sea. Ellianess possessed an inner radiance, as if a silver flame burned within, her eyes being the only escape for that light.

She turned to leave, and as she did, Uther raised a hand after her, as if begging her to stay. As she departed, he only managed the words, “Thank you.” The three stood speechless, gazing after the woman as she vanished among a throng of Elves.

A council was held that night, but not before food was laid out upon extravagantly carved tables of stone, set amidst a forest of snow-white trees. None of the three had ever seen anything so grand in all their lives. Hundreds feasted merrily as music and singing sprung up all about them. Entertainers captured small crowds of people here and there with their skills, creating expressions of joy and wonder as they dazzled their audiences with magic tricks and sleight of hand.

The festivities snared the three in a wonderful, carefree, evening of comfort and joy. In one area there was continual dancing, which Finyat enjoyed the most. In another area of the grove were held competitions, where many pit their skills against each other in the forms of archery, knife throwing, darts and javelins. Even Uther found a game of axe throwing and joined in.

Late into the evening, Ellianess held up a hand in silence. A hush fell over the grove as all games were put aside. The singing gracefully faded away, as the entertainers ceased their performing, and the dancers stilled. All attention was bent toward Ellianess, who smiled, like a mother who fondly looks upon her own children as they play.

“My people, strangers from the Zurkel Mainland, welcome to the second, and more serious part of my council. I trust all have been fed well and have socialized with one another as do brothers and sisters . . . family?” There was a great host of drinks raised into the illuminated night air. Ellianess laughed quietly, as if to herself. “It is well, I have so many loving, caring souls as you. I love you all dearly, and it is my love for you that causes me great anxiety and fear in your behalf.” At her last words, an instant murmur fell like rain throughout the massive assembly. Gracefully, she held up a hand, signifying she would speak further.

“Three have come, according to the legend, to raise the Sister City from her slumber within the depths of the Veleighen Sea.” The more part of the Elves present were astonished at her words, and a murmur rippled throughout their numbers. Looking over at a man seated to her right, she smiled, an expression of concern etching into her silver eyes. He placed a gentle hand over hers, and stood, his white hair blowing in a slight breeze caressing through the trees. Instantly, everyone fell silent as stone. Turning to each of them, he bowed slightly to Sekali and his companions, politely acknowledging their presence.

“I am Valishur, and it is an honor to have you here.” The three bowed respectfully in return. Valishur turned to his people and continued. “My people, your queen has given you words this night which you have been raised with, yet hearing them only as tales and legends handed down to you by your fathers and mothers. Listen to me now, my people. Listen and know the truth!” Valishur held out his hands to the throng before him, commanding their attention. He looked down upon Ellianess, who held his gaze. For a time, it seemed as though the two were mind-linked. Soon, he nodded, as did she, and turned to his people, who waited, their attention fixed on him in great anticipation.

“My people, more than twenty ages past, there was indeed a living city known, in truth, to you all as the Sister City. I was there, with many others, who were called upon to seal it safely from the hands of the Veleighen. They are the same Veleighen, our enemy, who dwell on this continent.”

The tale went on throughout the night as Valishur told of the rise and fall of two great cities, each linked to the other in a living state of being, crafted by the great ones of old. He spoke to them of the purpose of the two cities; their power to unite two kingdoms by a magical passage known as the Great Gates. These two cities were influenced by evil before the first history books were completed. The gates were created in answer to the ancient threat, but forgotten by most within the boundaries of Utaemia.

Each city was alive with a spirit of their own. But as the Sister City was brought down into the deep, the other city, the City of Knowledge, fell into chaos and decay, slowly falling into ruin . . . dying. Valishur gave a detailed description of both cities and many more histories of them, which were both great and terrible.

“And so we can suppose that our beloved Sister City is the spirit of the City of Knowledge. When it was taken from us, the other fell.” Valishur politely stopped, giving his full attention to an Elf of great stature, who arose in silence.

“Speak,” Ellianess whispered fondly.

“What is meant by these cities being alive, my lord and lady?” He bowed slightly, reverently, and again sat himself down. Ellianess arose, touching Valishur’s arm, signifying she would speak. Valishur sat down, but held her hand as she respectfully began.

“Give heed to my words, my people. What is meant by these two cities as being alive is just this: As you have a spirit within you, so to do these two cities. They are, in reality, living souls. As you live, so also do these cities, though they remain in a deep slumber. The nation, or faction, that raises either of the two cities are upheld by both, in that the elements they are built with would rise up to hinder any who invade.” Off to the side, the woman who guided Sekali and his companions to the Forest of Utaemia came forward and grimly knelt beside the three, continuing to listen to every word spoken.

When the key was mentioned, her attention was drawn to Sekali and his two companions, her heart skipping a beat. She stood in silence, waiting to be acknowledged. Instantly, Ellianess fixed her eye upon her.

“I knew you would have a say in this matter, Aria. Speak, Daughter of The Guard.”

“Mother, I beg your blessing to let me see these three to their goal.” There were gasps and murmurs as all present looked from Aria to Ellianess. Ellianess smiled, as if she had expected this.

“You have ever been the Guardian of our homeland. You would leave Utaemia to the hands of the Veleighen?” Without hesitation, Aria nodded.

“Yes. It is time to reclaim our home. I miss it, as do my parents. I will speed them in their course if you will but grant me your blessing. Otherwise, I can do nothing for them but merely hope for their success.” Aria waited, standing, which was against the custom and etiquette of a council meeting.

Ellianess stared at her with no expression for a time, not giving an answer. Leaning near Ellianess, Valishur whispered something quietly to her.

“Come to me, daughter. I, as well as Valishur, believe you are the key to their success.” She beckoned Sekali, Uther and Finyat foreword as well. Slowly they arose and stood before the queen of the Eldishar, and as they did, hope kindled like a brightly burning flame within Sekali. Within Uther’s eyes there burned conviction to successfully finish this mission as well. What thoughts lay within Finyat, not even Ellianess could have revealed for a surety. Aria joined the three before her queen, who stood forth and embraced Aria tightly.

“I release you from the Guardian’s Oath to protect and serve this homeland. I give you my blessing as you have requested.” Instantly the silver runes all about the borders of Aria’s guardian robes faded. Ellianess spoke in a hushed whisper.

“It is done, daughter. Now a new charge I give you: See these three successfully to their final destination. Use what skills and power you have obtained throughout your life to aid in the raising of the Sister City. Bring us home.” Aria nodded, tears welling up in her eyes as Ellianess turned to the three.

“Do you accept Aria’s aid?” The three nodded in silence, accepting her as their guide. As they did, there appeared upon the borders of Aria’s Guardian Robes, their names in silver, flowing, runic script. Aria turned from Ellianess and

knelt before the three.

“Now I am your shield, I am your weapon. I will bleed for you, and take upon myself the wounds which you would be inflicted with. I have spoken.” She bowed low to each of them. Uther fidgeted uncomfortably, not quite sure what was expected of him, and so awkwardly bowed in return. As he did, his face gave way to sudden suspicion.

“I hope you will not enjoy my kohakk for me! That is one pleasure I can handle for myself!” Instantly, a deafening laughter filled the forest about them. Ellianess grinned at Uther, her eyes glittering like two stars as she looked upon him, suddenly loving him. Soberly, Valishur smiled and raised a drink to him, signifying his full approval. Finyat nudged Uther hard with his elbow.

“Uther, be serious,” he whispered, to which Uther frowned, glaring hard at Finyat, and instantly retorted, “I am being serious, Shallant!” Sekali watched the two, a slight smile playing at the corners of his mouth. Composing herself, Ellianess raised her hands into the air.

“Please, my people, let the third part of this great council begin, thus continuing the first!” With that, many drinks were raised, accompanied by a great cheer. At the sudden roaring cheer, Uther started, abruptly looking around.

“Kohakk!” he bellowed, resting his hand upon the top of his axe. Turning on the throng of Elves, he looked hard into their ranks. After a few moments, he hollered out, “Vannul, where are you! I have to finish whooping you senseless!” Within the milling throng of Elves, an axe was silently raised, catching Finyat's eye first. Hitting Uther in the shoulder with the back of his hand, Finyat pointed.

“Ha!” Screamed Uther, and stalked toward his nemesis, ripping his enchanted axe from its sheath. “Prepare to lose!” The entertainers sprung into action, egging the host of Elves into an ascended state of merriment, performing and playing and singing, provoking the continuation of eating and drinking, singing, dancing and games.

Out in the forest, Uther threw the first axe, and his bellowing could be heard by all. Spirits soared as Ellianess and Valishur left their seats to join the festivities.

Sekali joined the festivities for a time, and found himself being persuaded to dance with the queen of the Eldishar Elves. Terrified, he looked to Valishur, who gave him a nod of approval. That evening he danced with a married woman for the first time in all his life, enjoying three full dances with her before she moved on to Finyat, who was anxiously waiting for her. As she approached Uther, who was preparing to throw another axe, the Dwarf shook his head vehemently, raising his hand, declining.

“Oh, no, I do not dance,” he stated in all seriousness, just before she took his hand and pulled him over in front of the minstrels. As she grabbed his free hand, he dropped his enchanted axe, reluctantly giving in. Though he did dance with the most beautiful woman he had ever beheld, still he only endured a single dance with her. The moment it ended, he bowed cordially, then returned to retrieve his axe, his face crimson red. Ignoring a few raised eyebrows his way, he raised his axe and let it fly.

After a while, Sekali withdrew from all the noise, needing quiet meditation. Wandering a short distance into the forest, his heart and mind began to fathom the weight of the task at hand. He needed some time to think.

The dawn came, and the people went back to the business of their daily lives. The tables were cleared and washed, everyone aiding in the clean-up until the forest was as it was before the council began.

Before Aria disappeared, she informed Sekali, Uther, and Finyat that the queen and king requested they come to their personal council chambers in three days time. Until then, they were to rest up, and do as they wished.

Uther and Finyat filled the three days by launching six drinking contests. In-between each contest of 'dwarvenhood', as he labeled it, they slept. Uther even managed to slip in another two games of axe-throwing, in which he lost, much to his displeasure.

For the three days, Sekali took to wandering and exploring the Forest of Utaemia. He loved the forest in the day, but was especially enchanted by it at night, when the moon and stars added to its splendor and beauty. One morning, as he walked, he thought of this people, devoted to their queen, and she to them. This was a people devoted to family in total unity. As did his people, they too were one without conflict, and were a truly beautiful and impressive nation. He found his heart was quickly being anchored here; he was losing the desire to leave. Looking to the southern horizon, he yearned to bring Mabuhi here with him. Truly, they would be happy in this blessed forest.

“Sekali,” he heard his name called, bringing him out of his thoughts. He turned to see Aria standing by a boulder cut to serve as a natural table. There were many throughout the woods, all carved with mastery and uttermost care. Walking to Aria, he spied a scroll in her right hand. As he neared, she unrolled it out onto the table, securing it with four items from her person, one at each corner.

Watching, as she smoothed the parchment with the flat of her hands, he marveled at this stranger, who had recently tracked him down, threatened him with a slow death, then became an unbreakable, loyal shield.

Sekali stood at the opposite side of the table, his eyes drawn to the four

objects holding the map in place. Placing a hand upon the map, Aria drew his attention to the top where the word, Northlands, appeared in bold, flowing script. Scanning the map, he noticed it was not fully complete. The southern border was labeled, Mistshadow Forest. So that is what that horrid place was called. Moving on, he continued looking over the many other marked regions until he read, Forest of Utaemia, which was at the very heart of the map. Aria pointed to a certain location on the map, north from where they now were.

“We will leave north, and a little east from here. These are the mountains we will pass directly under.” She looked at Sekali, pausing, as if giving him a chance to ask any questions he might have. At this point, Sekali had to many curiosities to inquire of. He waited for her to continue.

“Once again, a cave journey. This one, however, will be extensive. I know it to some degree. Long ago, before taking on the guardianship of my lands and people, my friends and I would hunt in the deep therein, taking the spoils of our victories from our fallen quarry. I explored them in my youth, but my memory of them is dimmed by the passing of the ages.” Sekali nodded, fully understanding.

“Aria, this is where Finyat and Uther will be most useful. This will be their assignment: To get us through safely.” She nodded.

“Uther knows the roots of mountains, I assume, for he is Kithrin, and they dwell within the earth, crafting mighty cities from massive mountains of solid stone.” Sekali’s hope began to build. It seemed to him that, even though the weight of his future road was heavy, it was manageable.

“Aria, what of the Veleighen? Are we past the major threat of them?” Aria grimaced, a cold look darkening her countenance at the mention of her enemy.

“Yes, but how you were able to get through their city baffles me. Why did they let you out?” She slowly looked up into the darkest shadows of the trees nearby, as if expecting to see an enemy spying on them. Aria leaned forward, placing her hands upon the map, fingers extended wide. Looking directly into Sekali’s eyes, she frowned.

“I believe you were allowed to pass.” Sekali frowned, knowing full well

what she was implying.

“So they could follow. They want intelligence, and we could give that to them.” Gravely she nodded.

“They were using you and your friends.” Sekali shook his head.

“I suppose it was the only way to get out the gate then.” Aria's brow creased.

“My question is this: How did you get through Mist`Shadow Forest alive?” Her words caused Sekali to step back a pace.

“Finyat got us through. I do not remember past the second day. When I awoke, I was tied.” Raising an eyebrow at him, Aria shook her head, then softly laughed.

“Go and rest as you can. When you three are ready, come to this rock. Be ready to travel. I will come to you, here.” Sekali bowed formally. He watched Aria retrieve her personal effects, roll up the map, slide it into its case and tie the end off with a leather sleeve and cord. She then departed without further communication.

Returning to camp, Sekali laid down on his bedroll. As he settled in, exhaustion crept over him, and his mind became heavy as it was dragged into the world of sleep, a thing he now enjoyed. He hadn't had the opportunity to experience true sleep, until after the dream of Mabuhi fighting for him upon the deck of the Harbringer.

As he drifted off, he felt the warmth of the fire nearby, lulling him into slumber. Slowly closing his eyes, he watched the intricate patterns of the dancing flames. Prior attempts to watch the flames of a fire had thrown him into horrid nightmares. Now? He wondered at this change, though welcomed it gladly. It gave him hope. As he stared into the burning flames, he reflected upon a certain Druid; her emerald eyes and the delicate structure of her thin physique . . . especially the impressions of her speech and her mannerisms came to mind.

Steadily, he closed his eyes and fell into a peaceful slumber that eventually shifted to the Veleighen, who tracked and hunted them all, mounted upon angry,

black-scaled lizards. Sekali slept deep and long, enjoying a rest he'd not experienced in decades. Even though, within his sleep, there were flashes of the Veleighen hunting them all, they were never found.

In the night, Sekali awoke to a snoring competition between Uther and Finyat. It was dark in the forest, but the trees illuminated the forest with a soft white glow all about him. Standing, he stretched and noticed three basins of water close to the small fire, which had been rekindled to keep the water warm. He looked over at Uther and Finyat and decided to let them rest as long as they needed to.

He washed his face and hair as he reflected upon the connection of the two cities. As he pondered this mission, and its significance, his mind caught hold of an idea. The two nations that would inhabit the two cities could unite and bring more power to defend against an enemy. Then his mind set upon the alternative. If the Veleighen discovered the Sister City and found the altar they sought, the repercussions would not only lead to war upon his homeland, but upon his people, even though they stood shrouded from the Living World. Eventually, the Veleighen would find Sardakahn Citadel and wage war upon it. If for no other reason, this mission had to be successful for the sake of his people. Either the Sister City would be raised, or the altar had to be destroyed. The thought of slaying a living city suddenly weighed heavy upon his heart, from which he inwardly recoiled. In silence, Finyat appeared out of nowhere.

“Morning, Sekali, do you ever sleep?” Sekali splashed water on himself without looking at Finyat. He then dried his face.

“Yes,” he said, as Uther sat up and viciously stretched. Finyat and Uther washed themselves and began packing up. After securing their belongings, the Shallant began to entertain himself by rolling some dice he’d found in his pack. Sekali motioned for the two to follow him. He took them to the stone table where Aria had shown him the map and stopped.

“Aria will come to us.” Uther grunted and sat his back against a large tree. Finyat joined him, fidgeting impatiently as he waited, playing with the dice upon the ground in front of him.

It was not long before she appeared. When Finyat spotted her, his dice

quickly vanished. She motioned them follow her. In silence, they did so and soon arrived within an area heavily overgrown with white trees. The trees in this particular area were most astonishing, as they were intertwined with each other, as though woven together since they were tender saplings. They created an excellent shelter wherein many natural archways, alcoves, stairs and paths led. It was as if the very trees themselves had gifted the Elves with a wondrous abode.

Led by Aria, they ascended gracefully spiraling stairs of living branches, which steadily wound upward into the topmost boughs of the ancient grove. At the top of this natural staircase, Aria led them through a lengthy tunnel of living green that ended in a wide chamber, wherein, at its center, set a long table of polished stone, similar in fashion to the ones on the ground.

Sekali was astounded by everything he saw, but especially the ornately carved stone table set in the most unlikely of places. It was easily twice the size of the largest stone table upon the forest floor. How could such a such a table have been set within this forest canopy? At the head of the table stood Valishur, who bowed slightly, throwing them a slight smile. With the exception of Uther, who simply nodded, grumbling under his breath about the custom of bobbing heads, each returned his greeting in like manner. Ellianess came and lovingly embraced the four, Aria last of all.

“Come, make yourselves comfortable. A special breakfast has been prepared for you.” Motioning toward the table, she returned to Valishur's side and took his hand as six Eldishar Elves in cooks uniforms silently brought in a variety of prepared fruits, vegetables, fish and meats.

As they departed, Uther licked his lips and began to sit down. Placing a hand on the Dwarf's shoulder, Sekali caught his attention before he could sit. Uther looked at him, slightly annoyed. Making eye contact with the Dwarf, Sekali shook his head.

“Wait for the queen and king to be seated,” he whispered. Understanding, Uther avoided eye contact with both Ellianess and Valishur as his face turned crimson, all the while his eyes wandering over the food on the table, especially the

meats.

After the king and queen were seated, the four took their places at the table. Finyat sat next to Aria on one side, Uther and Sekali on the other. They ate in silence, with the exception of the Dwarf, who never ate quietly, and drank with less dignity. Soon each of them were satisfied and pushed their empty plates forward, signifying they were done. Uther and Finyat, who were the last to stop eating, seemed to make it a point to out-gorge each other. This time, Finyat surrendered; Uther had won. Soon all sat at a cleared and polished table with only a mug of drink before them.

Leaning back, Uther belched long and loud.

“I must say, that is the best food I have ever filled my gullet with. Thank you!” he half bellowed and took a long, deep drink of kohakk, provided by the hospitality of the Elves, then belched a second time. Aria looked stunned, and did not know whether to be offended, or not. In silence, she waited for the king and queen’s lead.

After Uther's mug was refilled, Ellianess arose, signaling all to remain seated as she walked around the table, stopping behind Finyat. Reaching around his neck, she pulled the amulet out from concealment and let it rest on the outside of his armor for all to see. She then did the same to Sekali. Before she stepped behind Uther, he grunted and pulled his amulet out for her, making her smile.

“As long as you are alive, your third of the amulet, the key, will remain. Should your amulet fall into the hands of the enemy, it will vanish, along with the other pieces. If this happens, the mission will fail. If one of you should perish, the others can carry the amulet of the fallen. One of you can carry all three pieces of the gate key, but you must take it before your companion’s heart beats for the last time.” Ellianess continued.

“I believe the Veleighen are suspicious of you three, and that you were let through to help lead them to the Sister City. Why they did not overtake you in the forest is a mystery to me.” Sekali and Uther's eyes glided over to Finyat, who slowly, reluctantly, raised a finger.

“My lady, although most hate what I do, it is what I do. I poisoned those we made contact with. It was a slow acting, lethal agent.” Finyat glanced up at Sekali and Uther, briefly making eye contact, then turned his attention back to Ellianess and Valishur. Shifting uncomfortably, he noticed their attention was fastened upon him. “I did not do it because they were mean and unfair, cruel and heartless. I did it so we would not be followed by those who could identify us. Learning of the Veleighen, I knew we could not simply walk out the gate under their gracious hospitality. I satisfied their lust with money and the commodities I had.” Shifting his gaze back to his two companions, he shrugged. “Unknown to you both, as we rested, I secretly left camp to make dummy trails to throw off our pursuers. That is why they never caught up to us. Well, I did lay a *few* traps. I suspect the death toll is far greater than eighty.” With a trembling hand, Finyat picked up his mug of Kohakk and took a swig, his fear of what would come next, obvious. Valishur abruptly stood, causing the already on-edge Shallant to jump.

“Finyat, Valishur stated, his voice stern and filled with pride, “I salute you for wise thinking. I dare say, by this act, you have saved the mission up to this point. Well done!” Completely surprised, Finyat was taken back, speechless. Valishur sat back down and threw a hopeful smile at Ellianess, who seemed at a loss for words. After a moment, she shook her head, gathering her thoughts.

“I am with Valishur, Finyat. Your acts have eliminated witnesses and thrown the enemy off course. Even so, should they be watching, we have a plan to confuse our enemy by creating many teams of three to depart as you venture forth from here.” Ellianess narrowed her eyes at the childlike Shallant.

“I doubt they are. Still, precautions must be taken.”

Their departure was secreted within the innermost sanctum of the Eldishar; a place that even the eyes of a most powerful and skilled enemy could not penetrate. Ellianess gave each her blessing for the mission, and told them to travel due north until they came to the mountains. Aria would then further instruct them on their journey.

Aria embraced Valishur, holding onto him as he whispered his last council to her. After parting, she turned to Ellianess, wrapping her arms about her for quite some time. There were no tears between the two, and no verbal communication. At length, Aria parted and smiled.

“We are going to raise the Sister City, mother, this I swear . . . I have spoken.” Her father beamed with pride, and stroked his daughter's hair affectionately. Before leaving, each were given a robe that blended in with the forest. As they departed, cloaked and hooded, they saw many other groups of four join them in the large hall. None were allowed to show their faces, or speak. Four groups traveled east, four west, and four south. As they departed, three groups of four began making their way northward with Sekali's party, but steadily parted from them in total silence. Soon, Sekali and his companions were alone.

For a full moon they traveled in silence, hooded and cloaked, until they approached a great range of mountains on the opposite side of the valley.

One evening, Aria held out a hand, signaling a stop. She pointed to a great boulder at the base of the steep, jagged, unfriendly mountainside that dared their approach. The beauty of the woods was being left behind, replaced by a mountain that openly repelled the goodness of the forest. As they rounded the massive half-buried boulder, they found a large opening with the twisted roots of trees which had wormed their way down through the soil, covering the entrance and creating the foreboding vision of the mountain gaping its mouth wide to receive them.

They had not spoken a word, nor shown themselves for a full moon, and it was eating at Finyat horribly. He was highly sociable, and this silence was driving him mad. Yet, he bore with it, as counseled, for who knew what could have been

pursuing them, or even if they were being pursued. They took no chances.

Aria motioned Finyat in through the opening. Without question, he entered. He knew his place now, and led the company into the mountain, Uther falling in behind him, axe in hand. Sekali and Aria took up the back, silently drawing their blades in unison.

Entering through the tangle of twisted roots, which dripped of slimy moisture, a pungent smell challenging their breathing. Uther seemed totally unaffected, and suddenly brightened up at the prospects of being in a homelike environment. As they entered past the wall of roots, they could hear the distinct sound of rushing water somewhere ahead in the deep recesses of the natural subterranean structure. Aria brought forth an arm-length, thin, silver chain, on which hung a ball of clear crystal, no larger than the size of a common chicken's egg.

“Vessen (light),” she whispered. The ball instantly illuminated, shedding a pale-red light, and instantly catching the Shallant's full, undivided attention. Aria turned to him, the corner of her mouth curling in amusement as she drew back the hood of her cloak. For the first time, Sekali witnessed Finyat distracted from treasure, for as Aria drew back her hood, the Shallant looked at her in the strange light of the orb, gazing in open admiration.

“Wow,” he whispered. Aria gave him a strange look, then smiled, shaking her head.

“Finyat, Finyat, Finyat,” she whispered, trying to break him out of an apparent trance. Looking over at Sekali and Uther, she shrugged, her eyes widening for a split second. Sekali drew back his hood, a slight smile playing on his face, but said nothing. Uther removed his cloak and smirked.

“Finyat, you dropped your cactus needles.” Instantly, the Shallant came to, looking down at the ground.

“Where, I don't see them.” Uther laughed, as quiet as he could, and pointed at Aria.

“She wants to tell you something. Pay attention.” In sudden understanding, he looked at Aria.

“Sorry, sorry,” Finyat repented. Aria smiled.

“I'm flattered, Finyat, thank you for the compliment. Now, take the light orb. I want you to carry it.” Abashed, he reached up and took the item, glancing at it

for a moment before looking at her again, highly distracted. Before he could put his mouth in check, he whispered, “In this light, you look amazing.” Aria shook her head and leaned to his ear.

“The mission, my friend, the mission.” Lowering his eyes, he nodded, his attention turning back to the glass ball and chain. She looked at him for a moment, then reached out and squeezed his hand once, briefly. Stepping back, she looked at the three, her blade in hand.

“My friends, we now descend into a labyrinth of natural tunnels and caves. I am sworn blood`kin to you all. The hurts which you may sustain, I will take on me as long as I am able to bear them. Please be merciful toward me, your servant, for though I am immortal, I am considered a lesser immortal, meaning I can be slain. I do not know sickness, nor do I fear disease. However, I am vulnerable to the physical. Because of my abilities, battle will become easier for you. As it does, it will take its toll upon me. Again, should you come to harm, I will take the majority of any damage you sustain. Please, once again, be mindful of my physical limits.” Finyat sighed ever so quietly.

“Not with beauty,” he whispered, just loud enough for her alone to hear. Throwing a grin at Finyat, she continued, her eyes sparkling with delight.

“I would see you to the Sister City alive.” She looked directly into Sekali’s eyes. “I have spoken.” Sekali raised his right hand over his heart, slightly bowing his head to the bloodline princess and heir to the Eldishar kingdom. Uther looked at her for a moment, as if he wanted to say a number of things, but was not quite sure which line to pick. Puffing, he grimaced.

“So, why do you have to say you said it, when you just did?” Shocked, Sekali refrained from backhanding the Dwarf, but only due to Aria, who shook her head at him and sighed.

“Uther, that means, I promise to do what I say I will do. It's my commitment verbalized – like making an oath.” Uther gave her a strange look.

“Elves,” he muttered. Aria walked over and knelt before the three, placing her hands in a triangular position flat upon the ground before her, forefingers and

thumbs touching. Directing her attention to each of them, Aria bowed three times, touching her forehead within the triangle of her hands, uttering words they could not understand.

To their astonishment, Uther and Finyat felt the power of battle fill their beings. Sekali felt it also, but was not surprised by the sudden rush of energy and focus, having been the recipient of it many times before. A silver sheen began to emanate within Aria's eyes, the sign of her sharing of power with them. Her eyes had always harbored an inner radiance, but now there was a mirror-like reflection set behind that natural radiance. Aria stood and turned to Finyat.

“Guide of safely through, Finyat. Keep this mission alive, as you have already done.” With pride, Finyat turned and began leading them into the dark of the mountain. As they followed the Shallant, Sekali neared Aria, and whispered so only she could hear.

“When we succeed, a better day will be seen for all our friends and kin.” Smiling, Aria glanced up at Sekali, placing a hand on his forearm, her eyes burning with conviction.

“Te su anu (yes it will),” she whispered in her native tongue, then translated it for him. As they picked their way through the natural obstacles of the tunnel, Aria drew closer to Sekali. “We should talk sometime about your people Sekali. There may be much even you do not realize about your own.” Instantly intrigued, he focused his attention upon her.

“I would like to hear what you have to say, Aria.” Aria stopped and drew apart from him. “Hold,” she whispered loud enough for all to hear. Finyat and Uther stopped and turned as she removed and folded her hooded cloak. She motioned for them to do the same, then placed her's in a small backpack she carried. Uther wadded up and stuffed his under his armpit. Grunting, he grabbed it, squeezed it into a smaller bundle, then nodded in satisfaction.

“Give me all the belongings you do not want weighing you down as you travel, quickly now.” Curiously, Sekali unshouldered his pack and handed it to her. After Sekali had given Aria his entire backpack, Finyat and Uther also did the

same. Kneeling, she opened the top of her pack, and then his. Quickly, began placing Sekali's belongings into her backpack until his was empty. Lastly, she rolled up his empty backpack and slipped it in to her's. All three stared in wonder as she did the same with Finyat's, and then, Uther's. She then stood. Observing their expressions of wonder, Aria smiled.

“Gentlemen, the planes and dimensions of Utaemia hold greater wonders than this.” Finyat looked confused.

“You mean your home, the Forest of Utaemia?” Aria shook her head.

“No, the Forest of Utaemia is only the name of the forest, which is my homeland. Utaemia is the name that encompasses all the planes and dimensions in existence. For instance, the world you were born and raised in, is called the Earthen Plane. It is only one world within the boundaries of Utaemia. The Plane of Spirits is another. The Abyss is yet another. The Underworld, yet another, See?” Finyat nodded.

“I think so. Have you been to others worlds in Utaemia?” Smiling, Aria diverted from his question.

“If we are lucky, my friends, we might find some wonders in the depths of this mountain.” She pointed the way. “Finyat, please lead on. I have little memory of these caves. And, Finyat?” Staring at her backpack, he spoke, highly distracted.

“Yes princess?” Shooting him a look of mild distress, she pointed a finger at him.

“My name is Aria. Finyat, this is the place I took this pack from.” Aria gave him a clever look, waiting for his reaction. With an almost innocent look, he glanced at her, then at Uther, and grinned.

“Treasures and wealth untold,” he whispered greedily. Uther nodded enthusiastically, instantly causing Finyat's eyes to practically bulge with anticipation. Eagerly, he moved forward, suddenly focused as he lead them into a wide and tall corridor of stone, strewn with rocks and debris.

Ahead, the small, childlike figure of Finyat steadily let them down into the darkness on a dangerous path of stone, littered with loose rock which had fallen from the roof of the tunnel. The deep-red illumination revealed the tunnel in a strange light as the three followed the Shallant down into the dark of the mountain.

After traveling in silence for a while, the incline of the tunnel became steep, descending at a sudden angle that put Sekali on his highest alert. Aria noticed his discomfort and placed a hand on his shoulder, briefly, bolstering his confidence with a supportive look.

Downward they struggled, taking care not to trip on the many traitorous rocks which jutted up from the surface of the cave's floor. As they tediously picked their way downward, now and again, great holes opened up on either side of them; side passages that let to other places. Sekali watched these openings with suspicion, expecting something to suddenly rush out and attack.

Finyat stopped for a moment and produced a pair of hand claws from an inside pocket in his leather coat. Slipping them on, he fastened the glowing orb against his chest by weaving the delicate, silver chain through his armor, using a few of the straps on his armor to secure it tight against him. After a long trek into the dark, Aria called a halt.

“Let's rest for a while, and eat.” Uther didn't seem interested in stopping, but complied, soaking up every detail of this place as he laid a hand upon the side of the tunnel.

“The stone of this slope would make a grand stairway,” he mused, patting the rock. Finyat sat down, nodding absently, facing ahead, watching in silence with his head slightly tilted, listening . . . feeling. His demeanor had changed after entering the mountain, his usual carefree attitude replaced with an unbreakable iron-willed focus, only broken when Aria gave him any kind of attention, or when he looked at her for any extended amount of time. Finyat was charmed by her, yes, absolutely, but lately he avoided the Eldishar Princess. Should he fail to detect the snares and pitfalls of this place, and guide them safe, their lives could easily be

lost. After eating in silence, Aria stood.

“Let's move on,” she whispered. Without a word, Finyat moved forward, that blood-red light shining dimly before him as he guided them safely into the mountain. As they slowly progressed through the main tunnel, they came upon a smaller opening to their right. A cold breeze flowed out from the opening, sparking Sekali's curiosity.

“I wonder where this leads to? This chilled breeze must come from somewhere,” he whispered. Aria looked at him.

“If we were not pressed with more important matters, we would explore it, as I used to do. Too bad we do not have the luxury of time for that now. We might have discovered some hidden secrets, or forgotten treasures.” Uther threw a look at Aria, and shrugged, spinning his axe through his hands.

As Finyat stared into the opening, a vehement hiss broke the silence from deep within the tunnel, met by a deep growl, startling him. Instinctively, he backed up, brandishing two short swords, as if something was coming for him. In the next moment, the distinct sounds of a vicious fight broke out, filling their ears with the cries of a short-lived battle. When the battle ended, they could hear the victor feasting upon its fallen quarry.

“Uther,” Finyat whispered softly, “I've finally met another that eats more noisily than you.” The Dwarf shot an offended look toward Finyat.

“Shall I fix this dilemma? Is this one of our games, little man?” Finyat waved him off, shaking his head, then continued on.

Carefully, they made their way down a slope that increasingly became more steep, slowing their progress to a traitorous descent that demanded the use of their hands. Putting up their weapons, they worked downward for quite some time before discovering a distinct trail cut from the rock in the form of switchbacks, accompanied with an ever so slight scent of something burning.

Stepping down onto the fairly even trail, each of them rested for a short time, grateful for the unexpected relief. Sekali stepped up to the edge and looked down to see the zig-zagging trail vanish into darkness far below.

“We should expect to meet whoever created this trail,” he said, his hand gripping the hilt of his blade. Aria joined him, and looked down.

“Do any of you smell smoke?” All nodded.

“Good. That means, I’m not crazy.” Nudging Sekali, she smirked, but he did not think her comment funny.

“Aria, only the sentient craft trails.” Sighing, she stared down into the dark below.

“True. Sekali, I was making a joke. Maybe it wasn’t funny. I need to think of better lines in the future.” Shaking his head, Sekali thought of laughing, just to appease her. No, that might attract an unwanted encounter. Leaning close, he whispered, “My apologies, Aria, I missed your humor.” Puffing air into his face, she grinned and turned to Finyat.

“Lead on, Shallant. We are not going to get through this part of the tunnel without a fight, or I’m a fool.” With a gleam in his eyes, Finyat stood, turned and proceeded downward. They descended the lengthy trail in silence, Finyat creeping like a spider before them, checking every inch of the path for traps and other dangers. When they reached the base of the switchbacks, the trail continued in through a large opening, from which came the now heavy smell of smoke. Opening up into a rather large cavern, there appeared many stalagmites and stalactites, forming many natural columns.

Within, the flames of a large fire ascended, appearing above the ledge. Smoke drifted up over the edge of rock and out through the opening of the cavern above them. The trail led directly to the ledge, then turned right about one of the columns of rock.

Abruptly, the sound of a great hammer striking an anvil split the air, startling them. Motioning them to wait, Finyat stealthily crept to the edge and looked down as Uther drew his axe. Quietly, Sekali unsheathed his blade and watched as Finyat vanished over the lip of the path that led directly down into the camp.

Looking around, Sekali noticed the large silhouette of a humanoid creature on the wall of the cave as it made its way up the trail from the camp below.

Quickly, they moved forward, taking cover behind the largest column at the bend in the path. This would keep them hidden from view until the creature reached them.

Uther seemed eager, gritting his teeth firmly as he spun his axe slowly in muscular hands, anticipation for a fight gleaming in his eyes. He looked truly savage, unlike what Sekali had seen since they had banded together in company. Sekali looked at Uther just in time to witness the pupils of his eyes steel over, shifting to a dark-gray color. Just as quickly, the Dwarf's eyes deepened to solid black.

Within a few short moments, a large, burly humanoid, clad in thick, crude, platemail, reached the ledge close by. As it did, an energy filled Sekali, sharpening his vision. By the power of her Guardian abilities, Aria was giving him energy and strength. Looking at Aria, he doubted what they were doing.

“Are we the intruder?” he mouthed in silence. Quickly, she placed a hand on his shoulder and pulled close to his ear.

“There is nothing honorable here,” she whispered. Grim determination set Sekali's countenance to stone. Peering carefully around the column of rock, he failed to spy out Finyat. Sekali knew the Shallant was close at hand, no doubt preparing to strike in his own way.

Smoke drifted up and over the ledge as the creature lumbered up the path. Halting at the edge of the smoke trail, it sniffed, waving a hand in front of its face, suddenly annoyed. Coughing and blinking, the lumbering brute moved forward, stalking into the thick, drifting smoke. Even hunched over, as it was, it was nearly the height of two grown men.

“Ogre,” Aria whispered. Abruptly suspicious, it looked around, sniffing, then moved through the smoke. By the look on its face, it seemed to know something was amiss, for it cautiously stalked up the trail, suddenly on guard, seizing the great hilt of its jagged blade with a gnarled hand and readying a large crude shield on its right arm. With a quickness that surprised Sekali, it ripped the great blade from its sheath and burst out in anger and rage.

“Affa! (Elf!).” From below, two others roared the same in their guttural language, instantly enraged as well. The ogre stalked forward, ready to crush something, as Uther eagerly grinned and readied himself. As it lumbered up the path, it abruptly flinched and slapped the side of its own neck. In a sudden froth of anger, it charged around the cover of the stalagmite. Uther was standing there, feet apart, axe ready.

“Baste long, Kathron!” Uther screamed, and spit at the Ogre, openly challenging it. The armored brute focused its attention on Uther, roaring in hatred. Raising its blade to strike, it wavered, then shook its head, as if a weight had been dropped on it from above. With a sudden, spastic jerk, it arched its back and fell to its knees, attempting to suck in a breath. Uther rolled his eyes and growled.

“Finyat, leave one for me!” the Dwarf bellowed angrily.

“Ha!” came the Shallant's reply as the Ogre's blade fell from its hand, clattering to the stone path before Uther. Clutching at its neck, it choked once, then collapsed face first onto the trail, twitching and jerking. As it struggled in vain, two more Ogres stalked up the trail, charging through the smoke flowing across the path. Seeing their struggling comrade, they instantly charged toward Uther, who taunted them by stepping on the quivering Ogre's head. The leading ogre flinched and slapped at its leg. Uther shook his head in disgust.

“Finyat!” he bellowed, aggravated at his friend. Before the Ogre could deliver its first attack, it fell close where the other had, gagging for air. The last ogre hesitated, suddenly unsure of the situation. Easily within arms reach, Sekali witnessed the scene, marveling at how Finyat and Uther competed against each other in everything, including combat. He looked at Aria incredulously.

“Shall we take a break and eat?” he inquired, causing her to suddenly burst out laughing.

“No,” she laughed as the other Ogre looked around, suddenly realizing it was flanked. Sekali was truly impressed at the Shallant's skill in the arts of concealment and poisons, and was suddenly grateful to be on his side.

The last ogre advanced, as Uther backed up, taunting it, trying to keep its

attention on him. But, as it rounded the stalagmite, it spied out Sekali and Aria. With a great, cleaving strike, it swung its jagged blade to take both Uther and Sekali out in a single stroke. With a grunt, the Dwarf ducked and stuck it in the plated leg, doing little against it. Sekali lowered himself, angling his sword to deflect his attacker's blade. As their weapons clashed, sparks burst from between their weapons on contact, showering he and Aria. The Ogre's blade impacted the stalagmite, cutting into the stone, covering them with rock and dust. The force of the Ogres attack threw Sekali off balance, foiling a counterstrike.

Without hesitation, Sekali rolled past the Ogre as it wrenched its blade free, pulling loose a chunk of the stalagmite down on Aria's shoulder. Uther backed up two steps, securing a good foothold and a defensive stance and bellowed at the Ogre. Startled, the brawny humanoid spun to face the Dwarf and roared out a challenge, saliva dripping from its mouth. Aria leapt at the Ogre, her blade instantly flashing with a golden hue. Instantly the monster was distracted from Uther. Seeing her, an Elf, instantly forced its full attention.

“Affa!” it screamed in open hatred. Without hesitation, Aria leapt into the large humanoid, thrusting the point of her katana into its chest, piercing steel, flesh and bone. As quickly as she struck, Aria kicked the ogre in the mid-section, using the leverage to pull her blade free. Leaping back, she took up a defensive stance, waiting for its next move.

In agony, it raised its large, jagged sword and lunged foreword, bringing it down on her in a last attempt to kill her. Aria nimbly stepped to the side and into her enemy, slipping past the Ogre and pivoting to face it. As its blade fell upon the path, the Ogre followed its weapon, crashing to the ground, screaming in frustration. Aria turned and looked down upon her weakening foe as Sekali leapt upon it, driving his blade deep into the base of its neck, instantly ending the conflict.

“Ha!” Uther screamed in victory, raising his axe high. As if in answer, a reverberating roar challenged them somewhere in the distance, beyond the fire, past the chamber below. Aria quickly bent one knee to the ground and cleaned the

blade of her katana on its tattered cape.

“We haven’t much time. As in the Wastelands, other creatures tend to be attracted by the sound of battle here. Search them and the camp, and let us be gone.” Finyat’s voice came up from below them.

“Do not touch their skin. If you prick yourself on the darts I hit them with, you will die as well. You have been warned! I’m searching out their camp now!” Uther grimaced.

“Well, I suppose you will report there is nothing . . . even if there is something, Thief!” Finyat laughed wickedly, then became silent. Aria smirked as she looked at Sekali.

“I’ll wager you a hundred gold pieces, you never get half of what he scavenges.” Sekali shrugged, not really caring about the loot of wealth untold. Taking care, he jerked a large side-pouch out from under the ogre’s leg and opened it.

“This is my first mission with him. I don’t really know him that well.” Amazed, Aria looked at him, then at Uther.

“Strangers from the south shall come . . .” she whispered. “It’s a prophecy. You are not only strangers to us, but to yourselves.” Sekali opened the pouch, checking for valuables.

“That is the second time a futuristic prediction has been mentioned,” Sekali said as he looked within the filthy pouch. Aria slid her backpack off, placed it on the ground and opened it.

“Uther, hand me the blades,” she said, gesturing for one of the swords. As he grabbed the blade, Aria looked at Sekali. “It doesn't matter now. All that matters is that at least one of you makes it to the shrine.” With a gleam in her eyes, she added, “All three of you will make it, if I have any say in the matter.” The Dwarf quickly grabbed the first blade and gave it to her hilt first. Hastily, she turned the blade hilt downward and lowered it into the pack. Uther and Sekali watched the marvelous workings of Aria’s backpack as it swallowed the first blade.

“Long ago, a Fate, known as Lorenelia peered into the future. She saw three

who would raise the Sister City; strangers from a strange land.” Pondering her words, Sekali handed her the pouch.

“A few coins and oddities,” he informed her, glancing at the pouch. She took it and stuffed it in.

“How much does that grand backpack of yours carry?” Uther’s question made her smile as he handed her the second blade. She lowered it in and accepted the third.

“If we wish to chance another encounter right on top of this one, we can take each piece of the Ogres armoring. They have metal value. I can store a large chamber of items within this.” Without looking, her hand shot out to the right, catching Finyat as he tried to touch the magical pack. Innocently, he looked up, throwing her a nervous grin.

“I want one . . . bad.” Aria laughed.

“You are good, Finyat, very good. But this one is mine; get your own, master Assassin,” she said, narrowing her eyes at him. Finyat beamed a smile at her and winked.

“You know you love me.” Before she could react to his statement, he slid without a sound back over the edge, and into the ogre camp. His voice came back to them. “You all love me.” The Dwarf’s head shot up, as if he’d just been pricked with a needle.

“Finyat,” he bellowed, “if you find any kohakk down there, it’s mine!” A growl invaded the cave from another tunnel branching out from beyond the fire.

“We are going to have company,” Finyat stated casually. Sekali stood and walked to the ledge, watching the tunnel that would continue their path. Aria and Uther joined him, overlooking the area. Uther growled out a challenge and spun his axe.

“Come on, worm!” In response, a deep hiss hatefully issued forth from the tunnel before them as a small, gray, wingless, dragon-like reptile stalked out of the tunnel. It knocked over a barrel and froze, its forked tongue extending from its mouth again and again.

Sekali noticed the form of its jaws, which reminded him of an Wasteland Ashen Serpent. Tasting the air again, its attention was drawn up to the path, overlooking the ogre camp. Hissing dreadfully, it leapt up onto the ledge, driving the three back as it snapped at Sekali. Taking the initiative, Sekali cut the nose of the lizard, drawing blood, and its undivided attention. He needed to set up his comrades; give them the best possible advantage point to attack. When they engaged it, he would then base his next move on their positions.

With a renewed effort, it lunged, snapping down on him multiple times, testing Sekali's defensive abilities to the limit. Uther cursed, bellowing a challenge as he charged. With all his might, he slammed into the side of their foe, throwing it off balance just enough to give Sekali the opening to balance and strike.

Together they maneuvered to always be flanking their foe, hacking and slashing against a scaly hide of natural, durable scaled armoring that turned most of the damage they inflicted. Catching its attention, it turned upon Uther, clawing and snapping, raising up as it menacingly towered over him, lashing out at Sekali with its tail.

Aria stood back and began chanting as the battle raged on. As she did so, both Sekali and Uther felt a power of might and balance enter into them. Bolstered with renewed energy, they surged forward against their foe, unleashing well-placed strikes upon it.

As if they had been trained upon The Watch, Uther knew where Sekali would be, and when to strike. As well, Sekali knew instinctively where Uther would be, and how he would attack, giving him added advantage against their quarry. Unified by Aria's chant, they seemed unstoppable, and began to decimate their foe as their weapons struck true, biting deep, penetrating the huge reptilian's protective scaled hide.

“You’re mine, worm!” Uther snarled, his axe biting deep into the bridge of its nose as it snapped at him. The beast recoiled back, shaking its head in shock and rage. Not giving the two time to advance, it crouched and sprung upon Uther, even as the Dwarf swung his axe, driving it up into the base of its belly with all his

might. Uther vanished under the great reptilian beast as it landed, crushing him to the stone of the path.

Aria cried out in pain, then continued chanting as she staggered. Turning upon Sekali, it screamed. For a moment, it froze, giving him a wicked look, sizing him up as it readied for another leap. For the split second it was still, it jerked back, grunting in pain, then began desperately pawing at its face.

While it was distracted, Sekali charged. But, as he closed the distance, the great reptile whirled about, catching him full in the chest with a powerful tail-strike that sent him hurtling back into a column of rock. Again, Aria cried out, then growled viciously as she steadied herself.

“Mashi vin morahla (Strength of stone)”, she hissed, trying to shake off the effects of the blows she had just absorbed for the two.

Sekali felt no pain from the impact. In the time it took him to take a single breath, he recalled the time when Mahkaia had cast a protective spell on him just before being struck by the tentacle of a massive creature that sent him crashing through multiple stone structures. He looked over at Aria, who staggered, yet continued chanting. Though she was not taking on the full damage they receive, it still weakened her. He knew the ability she was shielding them with, and how it worked. It was beginning wear her down.

Desperately, the beast pawed at its left eye, as if trying to get something out. Determined to end the fight, Sekali scrambled up to the highest point of a nearby boulder. Wasting no time, he flipped his blade, the tip pointing downward, gripped the hilt with both hands and crouched halfway, waiting for the best moment to attack.

As if suddenly chilled, the reptile shivered. Seeing the opening, Sekali leapt down onto its back without hesitation, driving the tip of his blade into its upper back, just above its shoulders. As quickly as he struck, he leapt from its back, rolling away as it fell to its side, desperately clawing at the stone before it as it tried to stand.

As Uther found himself no longer trapped beneath the beast, he leapt to his

feet, snarling in rage. Grabbing the handle of his axe, the Dwarf ripped it from the belly of the beast and began furiously raining blows down upon its neck, throwing caution to the wind, beheading it with his mighty strokes.

Planting his foot on its head, Uther bellowed, “Ha!, in triumph, holding his great war axe high. Sekali wondered why he always did that as he ran over to Aria, who slumped to the ground, shaking her head. Kneeling down, he offered a supportive arm.

“Are you hurt?” he inquired, deeply concerned, knowing she had taken quite a beating. Aria rested a hand on his forearm. Looking up at him, she threw Sekali a smile, then grimaced.

“No, no, I'll be fine,” she panted. “The wounds I take upon myself are different from the wounds you would have received; they heal much faster. I need to stand.” Sekali pulled Aria to her feet, watching her with every care. As she stood erect, she winced in pain, and faltered. Catching herself, she shook her head and leaned heavily against him. Pointing to the ledge, she took a deep breath and slowly let it out.

“Take me there.” Sekali walked her over the ledge, where she looked down. Shaking her head, as if not believing her eyes, she witnessed Uther and Finyat rummaging eagerly through everything that might hold anything of value. Resting her head on Sekali's shoulder, and feeling suddenly dizzy, she pointed at a nearby rock.

“Never mind, I need to sit down.” Sekali aided her to the rock, and helped her sit. Kneeling beside her, he began scanning the area for more threats. Getting as comfortable as possible, she sighed, keeping a firm grip on him.

“Thank you sir.” Taking in a deep breath, she looked up at him. “Those two are reckless; not the kind usually found in company with a Sardakk Warrior. How did you find yourself in company with them?” Feeling his face flush hot, Sekali let out a breath through his nose.

“Ignorance. I was sent into the Living World to gather information.” Aria gave Sekali an inquisitive look.

“Information?” He shrugged, feeling shamed at the reply he would give her. He knew full well why he was here, and not in Sardakahn Citadel.

“I don't know, my master did not give me time to ask.” Aria's eyes filled with sympathy, which stung his heart like one of Finyat's cactus darts. He sighed heavily, suddenly struggling for words.

“After losing Mahkaia, I became reckless. Deep down inside, I wished to follow her. Through death, I believed I could join her in the next world.” He shrugged. “But the horrors of the Wastelands failed to succeed. To protect my people, I was sent away for a time. I am guilty of negligence toward my team. Now, I realize the horrible danger I put them in. Selfishly, while I grew stronger and stronger, more skilled at combat, I did not see my crime, which was the inadvertent attempted murder of my own team, as well as innocent people within the citadel.” Aria squeezed Sekali's arm, giving him a look of genuine care.

“Sekali, I am so terribly sorry for your loss. Maybe, this will be of short duration; then you can return. Sekali, I watch the way you fight. Why do you hold back?” Looking down at the Dwarf and Shallant, excitedly making a pile of items to sort through, a slight smile touch upon his lips.

“I'm afraid to endanger them as I did my brothers and sisters of The Watch. If I cause their death by my own recklessness, their blood will forever be on my hands. I would cause this mission to fail, further endangering my own people. It would be difficult to live with such burdens. For them, I take hits I know they would otherwise suffer from.” Aria leaned forward, resting her forehead against the side of his shoulder, took in a deep breath and released it.

“You, sir, never lost your honor,” she whispered. “Have you ever thought to train as a Guardian? I believe it would suit you perfectly.” Sekali closed his eyes, thinking. After a minute, he reached up a hand and gently began fixing her hair.

“Not until you just said it. Maybe I will look into it when all this is said and done.” Aria looked up at him.

“I will train you.” Looking down, Sekali gazed into her shimmering eyes.

“Does everyone you travel with fall in love with you?” Laughing quietly,

Aria rested her head against his shoulder.

“Yes,” she answered, tension suddenly in her voice.

“Does such admiration bother you?” She up at him.

“Not at all. Sekali, you are not speaking of romance, are you?” Shaking his head, he laughed quietly.

“No. I speak of genuine and pure love and loyalty.” He looked at her, waiting.

“Sekali, do you love me?” Running a hand through her hair, he watched it fall with great interest.

“I would die a thousands deaths for you, Aria. More so, ten-thousand times would I live for you. I would be your shield, your blade and your companion. Yes, I love you.” Melting, she placed a hand on the side of his armored neck, and began weeping.

“Sir, that is the deepest compliment I have ever received. I am beyond flattered. You make this journey actually pleasant for me. Sekali, I sincerely, truly, honestly love you in return.” Resting against him, she wiped her eyes and sighed happily. “Sardakk, I don't know where you came from, but under that incredible armor you wear lies a shining heart of pure gold.” Sekali actually smiled, and enjoyed the feeling of receiving such a compliment. Living in gloom for so long, he had forgotten about moments like these.

“Aria,” he whispered, caressing her hair and smoothing it with a gentle hand, “that is the best compliment I've ever been given. I wish -” Sekali fell silent. Turning her head, she stared at him, silent as the rock she sat upon. Finally, looking over at the two stacking up the pile, she sighed, shaking her head, perplexed. As she watched the two, Sekali began to feel his heart being pulled toward her. He had to correct the direction it was headed quickly, before it was too late. Tearing his eyes from her, he looked down as Finyat carried over and placed a small chest by the pile.

“Am I too much to bear? If so, I apologize.” Mildly surprised, he twirled his fingers into her hair, enjoying it thoroughly.

“Aria, the feelings I am developing for you, cannot be resisted. In fact, I will not attempt to.” He saw caution begin to dawn within her. Holding up a hand, he continued. “Hear me out.” Slowly, she nodded.

“Of course.”

“In the Wastelands, every ounce of energy is channeled toward whatever actions benefit others. Whether it be indifference, annoyance, resentment, anger, or rage; whether it be loneliness, anxiety, fear, despair, hope, attraction, excitement, or love; if it be jealousy, antipathy, aggravation, terror, horror . . . or genuine love of the heart, that energy is channeled into a power of will and focus, used to best serve a situation. If we, each of us, can take emotion, mold it to best serve the current purpose and need of the many, then we can best serve the task at hand. Aria, do not let my attraction, or the intense love growing in my heart for you, drive you to caution. It will build a wall, hindering the energy and power I need to accomplish the task at hand. Do you understand what I am telling you, Princess Aria?” Contemplating his words, Aria took them to heart. After a few moments, she let down her defenses to Sekali, realizing she also loved him.

“I do, and I fully, completely, honestly trust you. I would kiss you right now, but you are wearing a helmet. Remove it.” Sekali laughed softly, raised his chin and unbuckled the clasps securing his helm. Aria helped him remove his head-gear.

“Aria, I trust you in the same manner.” Aria placed his helmet on the stone between them, raised up and kissed him on the cheek, her eyes shining more brightly than usual.

“Five braids, congratulations, sir. Will you tell me about her?” With dark eyes glinting with pleasure, Sekali smiled and kissed her on the cheek in return.

“I would love to. Mahkaia is a -” Sekali choked to a stop, his smile instantly shattering. Aria gave him a supportive look as she reached up and smoothed his hair down with the most gentle hand he had ever felt.

“Don't stop. I know Mahkaia will be forever etched in your heart, like priceless silverleighen runes, she will remain in your memories.” Unfastening his

gauntlets, she removed them and set them slowly upon the ground next to his helm, “But I would love to hear about this wonderful woman you are engaged to, please.” Sekali took a deep breath and focused on his Druid.

“She has the eyes of flawless emerald. She speaks the language of the wolf and communicates with Grandfather, a Saga Natur. She holds the affection of a green-scaled dragon, and is allied with a Silver Stag with a twelve-point rack.”

Aria perked up, suddenly excited.

“The Great Silver Stag,” she whispered in awe. Sekali gave her an inquisitive look.

“What does that mean?” Her face brightened at his inquire.

“Sekali, that is the Kazar, the king of his kind. Sekali, I think when you were in Mabuhi's forest, you were in the presence of many kings, though you did not realize it.” Worried, Sekali frowned.

“Do you think they were offended at my admiration alone? I did not know. Mabuhi introduced Uther, Finyat and myself, but our names were withheld. Is there significance in this?” Aria thought for a minute, then slowly shook her head.

“If your names were not given to them, there is a reason. No, I do not believe any offense was taken by them. In fact, I'll wager not being personally introduced was a safeguard.”

“What do you mean, safeguard?”

“Most don't know this, but formal introductions create a link between the two being introduced. That link can be exploited by certain abilities, powers and spells. By not personally introducing you, Mabuhi has skirted a danger, no matter how slim the chance might be.” Confused, Sekali frowned.

“Aria, how can that be exploited?”

“You and I have been introduced. If a Psychic, or a Fate, bound you with a certain spell, the caster could see into your memories, detect our feelings for each other, even see through your eyes . . . what you beheld of me at the time of our introduction, up until when you were no longer in company with me - like looking into a crystal ball, yet only based on the memories you have.” Sekali frowned.

“I would slip into darkness. They would get nothing from me.” Aria chuckled and looked down at Uther and Finyat, who had found a few kegs. Uther was smelling them.

“But those two cannot do that.” Sekali shrugged and shook his head.

“Then the caster would have to eat my blade.” Aria grinned.

“What else can you tell me about this future bride of yours?” Coursing his fingers through her hair, Sekali thought for a moment.

“She is perfect,” he continued, not really knowing what to say.

“Perfect? In what way?” A slight smile played across his face. He was actually enjoying this conversation more than he had expected.

“The way she moves, her hair, her mannerisms. The way she talks to me, her physique, how she listens. She is perfect.” Aria squinted her eyes at Sekali.

“So, what you are telling me is, I don't have a chance to get the sixth braid from you.” Laughing, Sekali looked away.

“No, you don't. But, if it were not for my Druid, you might just get lucky.” Aria's eyes shot open and her jaw dropped.

“Oh, you think I would be the lucky one, do you?” Sekali nodded. Quietly, she chuckled.

“What's so funny, Eldishar?”

“You would be the lucky one.” Sekali gently lifted the helm from her head and set it on the ground by his. Looking at Aria's hair, he froze, his eyes widening.

“What's the matter? Sekali, what?”

“I, it's, I am not used to -” He stopped, shocked, finding himself at a total loss for words. Taking a deep breath, he blew it out nervously. Swallowing hard, he continued. “To see a woman with no braids is like seeing her immodestly. I know this is not your custom. It just took me off guard.” The dawn of realization washed over Aria, who was instantly sobered.

“Okay, will you give me some braids?” she asked, turning her back on him. Nodding, Sekali reached up with trembling hands and tried to focus his attention on doing as she asked. *The worst thing about this? She is a bloodline Princess!* He

thought to himself as he tried to fight off the panic he was feeling. If he had been caught by his people, and had no legitimate excuse to offer, he would have gotten in trouble. Instead of battling the wastes, he would have been assigned to sweeping the streets of Sardakahn for a year.

“Quickly, he did a simple braid, then relaxed, lowering his trembling hands. Aria felt her hair and smiled.

“That was incredibly fast. Thank you.”

“You are welcome,” he said in a nervous whispered, staring at her in fear from behind. Grinning, Aria squeezed his hand.

“Sekali, I won't tell anyone. It was just a mistake, alright? The memory is only ours. Calm down. You know, assuming I knew a lot about your culture, I missed a huge no-no, didn't I?” Nodding, Sekali reached up and touched her hair, running a hand from the crown of her head, down the back, taking a handful.

“Yes, but it was actually my fault. I removed your helmet.” Turning, she threw him an odd look, biting her lip.

“You were in the City`Port Navan, as well as in Valinur. Did this not effect you then?” Shrugging, he sighed.

“I did not reveal their hair. It was already like that when I happened upon them all.”

“So to uncover a woman's unbraided hair is the problem.” Sekali nodded.

“Yes. That would indicate I was undressing her.”

“Well, then here.” Aria covered Sekali's eyes with one hand and unbraided her hair with the other. Then she lowered her hand from his eyes.

“Is this acceptable?” Sekali nodded, but still felt uncomfortable. He was not in his homeland, and there were no other Sardakk Elves present, so he let it go.

“I need to get past this, I'm not doing anything wrong here. So, with that said, I must state that I absolutely love your hair. While mine is soot black, yours is white, like freshly made paper.”

“I like to think of it as freshly fallen snow.”

“What is snow?” She laughed.

“The white that caps the mountains we are under.” Understanding, he nodded.

“Aria, thank you for asking about Mabuhi. It helps to talk about her.” Smiling, she sighed.

“You needed the outlet. This is what I am for. Aside from it being my job, I really enjoyed our conversation. I still say you three are an odd team.” Sekali played with Aria's hair as she spoke.

“Uther and Finyat are reckless, greedy, arrogant, selfish, belligerent and, at times, abusive. But, looking past that, I've witnessed valuable qualities in them. Though their manners need tuning, they are growing on me by the day. I am honored to travel with them.” Positioning his thumbs on either side of Aria's neck, he ran them back, catching the entirety of her hair in one hand and brought it over her left shoulder. He began weaving a style into it.

“So, you are not so much strangers anymore?”

“Since our encounter with the Knowledge Master, and the lady, a Herald of holiness and beauty, those two have changed.” Stunned by his last words, Aria looked at Sekali in disbelief.

“You have seen her?” He nodded, turning her head to the side. Leaning down, he inhaled the scent of her hair. It was different than the smell of his.

“Two times.” Aria's eyes rolled back as he worked her hair into braid after braid. She seemed almost euphoric.

“This is an unexpected pleasure, sir.” Smiling shortly, Sekali began massaging her scalp to loosen up the base of her hair. He noticed she was loving it very much, and so began to massage her neck and spine as well. She had been giving her all to them. Now, it was his turn to return the favor.

“Tell me if it hurts, and I'll let up. I know you just took some hits for us. Thank you for that, by the way.” She grunted and relaxed.

“If I can get this each time I absorb a strike for you, where is the next foe?” He smirked at her mirth.

“Skip the beatings. I'll give you a work-over whenever you like.” Tilting

her head to her left shoulder, she whimpered a little. Letting up a bit, he continued working his fingers into the base of her skull.

“That okay?”

“Yes sir, it is more than okay. Thank you. Please, tell me, what is she like?” Sekali smiled, turned Aria's head slightly, then continued working her jaw line.

“Like you. Though, while her entire being radiates sunlight, yours burns from within, and can be seen when I look into your eyes.” Flattered beyond measure, Aria smiled happily.

“You know, I could get used to this,” she whispered, holding still long enough for Sekali to finish. After finishing the massage, he focused on creating the perfect braid for her. After a minute, he sat back and scrutinized his work.

“There, all done. Now you are marked with the designated Guardian braid.” Aria reached up and delicately ran her fingers over the braid, feeling it.

“You are a master at this.” Wrapping his arms about her from behind, he squeezed her in a bear-hug. Aria returned his affection, perfectly content.

“Well, I have been braiding hair since I very young,” he said, releasing her. She rolled her shoulder a bit, wincing.

“No, I wasn't talking about the hair. I was referring to your choice of words when you described the lady. Thank you for such a compliment, sir. I am beyond flattered that you would compare me to a Herald. And to think, I almost killed you.” Sekali laughed quietly, rolling his eyes.

“Thank you for not killing me. It was kind of you.” Aria nodded and stood, obviously sore.

“Don't mention it.” Working out the soreness, Aria looked at the beheaded reptile, then back at Sekali's companions. Tilting her head, she listened.

Sekali scooped up Aria's helm and slipped it down over her head, then tediously secured it. He then picked up and equipped his helm and gauntlets and began cleaning his blade. Once finished, he looked at Aria, waiting for her next command.

“We seem to have defeated all hostiles in the vicinity. Good. Uther, Finyat,

we must leave this area,” she called out. “The scent of all this blood will attract . . . things. We need to find this dragonling’s lair. They are collectors, and we could get lucky.” Sekali looked at the carcass, suddenly curious.

“Dragonling? I thought it was merely a lizard,” Finyat called out. Taking in a deep breath, Aria shook her head.

“No, this is a yearling Lizard Dragon, not a mere reptile. Even though they are wingless, and are not in the family of breathers, they are a rare encounter,” she stated factually as she walked down to stand by the fire. After Uther and Finyat had finished their growing pile of wealth untold, Aria placed everything that would fit into her pack.

Pointing through the only tunnel that continued through the mountain, they headed out of the Ogre's cave, Aria taking point. As she led them on, Aria stooped and tediously probed the floor of the tunnel. Many openings began appeared on either side of the main tunnel as she followed the Lizard Dragon's trail. With the skill of a master tracker, she was able to successfully track the dragonling back to where it came out of one of the side tunnels.

Cautiously, they headed in. It spanned about one-hundred paces back into a huge chamber in which many victims, both creature and humanoid alike, lay mingled within its feces. Hand-sized beetles dotted the rock surface of the cave, half of them moving about from scat to scat, feeding off the droppings.

In silence, the four split up and gathered what valuables could be located. Finyat found a pack full of rotted and dried rations still on the back of the unlucky adventurer who got too close to the dragon's lair. Uther found some white-gold pieces in a torn sack. Sekali found nothing, and Aria was cursed with the same luck. Aria signaled them to regroup, then led the three out of the cavern and back into the main tunnel. Aria drew close to the Shallant before moving on.

“Finyat, *vessen* is the word to activate the magic of the Light Orb you carry. As you say the word, think of the intensity, color, or shade, of light you need, and it will be so. Speak *vessen* once again, and the degree of illumination will, again, change to your desire. Understand?” Finyat nodded, reached up to his neck, where

the orb was secured and unfastened it.

Dangling the glass ball before him, he wrapped his other hand about the chain and slid his palm down its length until it hung the space of three fingers below his palm. Satisfied, he wrapped the excess chain about his hand until the remaining length was in his fist. Holding the sphere before him, he quietly spoke the command word.

“Vessen.” Instantly, a faint, purple light took the place of the blood-red illumination. Satisfied, the Shallant secured the egg-sized ball between his thumb and two fingers. Onward he led the company into the mysterious unknown; an unknown that his kind thrived upon.

Finyat cautiously led the way, scrutinizing everything before him. Sekali found himself impressed by the way the Shallant probed and spied out every potential danger; it seemed he was working his craft, as if his awareness was set into the future. More than once, he demonstrated the innate ability to vanish, unseen and unheard, as they encountered creatures in the deep.

Sekali recalled the incident when he and Uther had nearly come to blows just outside the City`Port Navan. As he and Uther's conversation had evolved into serious threats, Finyat had risen up from the knee-deep grass between them, appearing out of nowhere, stopping the fight before it was too late. Having witnessed the Shallant's skill at stealth, Sekali decided he would not be in the least surprised to see Finyat pass through a swarm of rats undetected.

On the seventh day, after leaving the switchbacks, Finyat held up a hand and stopped. Slowly, he removed his hand-claws, as if time were on his side. With great care, he put them away. Uther grit his teeth, doing his best to be patient.

While they waited on Finyat, Sekali watched Aria retrieve a finger-sized steel vial of liquid from a pouch at her belt. Unstopping it, she raised it carefully to her lips and imbibed a small amount of the liquid. She then sealed and returned it to its resting place. Curiously, Sekali moved close to her.

“Aria, what was that?” he whispered.

“Healing potion. I keep a few on me when I am sworn blood`kin; they help.” Understanding more of the weight of her charge, Sekali was about to ask another question, concerning potions, when Uther growled in annoyance, cutting him off.

“Shallant, we will never find our way through these grand tunnels if you keep taking your time!” Uther’s harsh voice ground like stone through the tunnel, echoing multiple times before there was silence once again. Shocked by the sudden outburst, Finyat shot his best friend a look of alarm, his eyes widening in disbelief. Uther cringed and threw Finyat a look of apology, then grumped silently.

Aria calmly, silently, walked over and knelt before Uther, who refused to make eye contact with her. Sekali had never seen Uther act in this manner, and wondered what would become of it. Finyat, who had finished packing away his hand-claws, was nervously watching the two.

Aria placed her right hand on Uther's right shoulder, gripping it tight. Without moving, she waited. A look of surprise came over Uther, who lifted his head and locked eyes with Aria, gripping the inside of her right arm with his left hand. He then waited, still looking into her eyes.

Aria drew close, whispering so only he could hear. As she did, Uther's face seemed to transform to stone, pride instantly burning within his eyes. After quite some time, they parted. Uther took two steps back and bowed, his eyes burning fiercely. Aria stood, bowed to Uther, then returned to her position, giving Finyat the signal to continue. Once again they moved forward.

Sekali wondered what had just occurred between Uther and Aria. Whatever it was, Uther's countenance was changed. Maybe he would ask one day . . . most likely, he would leave it alone.

After a long and silent travel, the tunnel expanded into a huge cavern, wherein set a natural crossroads of four tunnels. If they continued straight on, their path would take them through a large, natural, archway at the chamber's opposite end. There was also the choice of turning left or right. As critical as this mission was, they needed to make a decision, which meant each tunnel would have to be scouted out; there was no leniency for ignorant decisions – no second chances.

Without debate, Finyat eagerly took on the challenge and headed down the left-hand tunnel. Shortly after disappearing into it, he returned to them, pointing at it.

“That way, the roof of the tunnel has collapsed. Nothing can get through,” he whispered. As quick as he delivered the message, Finyat vanished down the tunnel to their right, again leaving the three waiting for him in silence. After an uncomfortably long wait, Uther became restless.

“I am going to look about, quietly.” Aria observed Uther slowly meander

off in no specific direction, watching him search about the cavern for anything of interest, or value. As the Dwarf explored, Aria looked down the tunnel after Finyat, openly concerned. Sekali pulled close to her.

“What is it, Aria?” he asked. Shuddering, she glanced at him.

“I feel uneasy, Sekali. Something is not right here.” Sekali slowly drew his blade and knelt at her right side. If she was feeling uneasy, it was for a reason. Too many times, when the guardians of his people sensed danger, danger reared its ugly head.

“Do you want me to retrieve the other two?” Shaking her head, Aria rested a hand on Sekali's shoulder.

“No, Uther is in plain sight, and Finyat can handle himself. Stay close to me, so I can support you.” Fixing his attention on the tunnel Finyat was exploring, Sekali inhaled deeply through his nose, held it until his lungs began to burn. He then, slowly, steadily, exhaled through his mouth, banishing all thoughts from his mind.

“I am your blade,” he whispered.

Not long after, Finyat returned, stopping before the two, positioning himself so that he faced the tunnel he had come out of. He would not take his eyes from it, and seemed nervous. Looking around, Finyat spied out Uther slowly making his way toward them. In silence, the Thief waited for the Dwarf to join them. Once together, the Thief pointed at the opening.

“Within that tunnel lie the bones of a thousand creatures, both great and small. Some are more fresh, filling the air with the stench of decomposition, mingled with a strange, foul odor. This is good, as our scents are overshadowed by the smell. Those unfortunate enough to venture into that lair lay as a forever, silent witness that a predator of great power lies in wait.” Aria, Sekali and Uther looked at Finyat, suddenly apprehensive. Before his companions could reply, Finyat looked at them, suddenly fascinated.

“The air current flows into the tunnel, masking the stench and danger until it is too late. It is actually a perfect trap. Genius,” he added. Uther glared at him, a

horrified look in his eyes.

“I say we leave, move straight on through,” the Dwarf whispered, glancing at the tunnel, openly nervous. Sekali and Aria agreed. Finyat shivered, as if a sudden cold had touched upon him.

“As curious as I am about what might be found down that tunnel, I'm with you three on this decision.” Quietly, the four cautiously made their way to the far end of the cavern. Under a great stone archway, in a northward direction, they continuing their march.

For three days they followed the tunnel, stopping at times to rest and eat. During one of their meals, as they ate, Finyat quietly cleared his throat and raised a finger, catching their attention. Once he had their full attention, he stood, looking rather pleased with himself.

“As we have traveled,” he began importantly, “I've learned an irrefutable truth.” He paused dramatically, taking in a long even breath, then released it. “With no thought, nor suspicion, we ignorantly entered this mountain through a cave that appeared as a wide open mouth. Throwing wisdom to the wind, we entered without the slightest idea of what we were getting ourselves into.” Confused and annoyed, Uther narrowed his eyes at Finyat, quietly growling.

“Shallant, what are you going on about?” he mumbled, giving the ration in his hand a sour look before shoving it in his mouth. Sekali watched Aria hide a smile behind her hand as she pretended to scratch her nose. Dramatically, Finyat continued.

“From the deepest roots, to the highest peaks, I tell you this is no mountain range, but a monstrous creature, in the appearance of a mountain.” Sekali watched Aria's expressions. If there was any truth to Finyat's words, she might tell him by her body language. But all he could discern was humor, which she hid as best she could. Uther looked at Aria as he held out a hand toward Finyat.

“Maybe he has struck his head on a low hanging rock one to many times.” To Uther's annoyance, Finyat continued with an evil grin.

“Down here in the darkness, we are all truly alone.” Aria was the only one

to find Finyat's rambling entertaining.

“Finyat, you should have been an entertainer, poet, or a Bard.”

“What she is trying to say is, shut yer steak hole,” Uther growled, trying his best to be quiet as he grumped at Finyat. It seemed to work, until, Finyat had nearly finished eating.

“We are being slowly digested, and we are not alarmed by this?” Aria quickly pulled her sleeve up to cover her mouth as she burst out laughing. Sekali shook his head, giving Finyat a brief look of mild disbelief. Uther, however, glowered at the Shallant, pointing a thick finger at him.

“Finyat, we are not food,” he growled, “So shut yer’ trap!” Grinning from ear to ear, Finyat turned his attention back to finishing the rest of his meal.

Four more days passed without incident. As they followed, Sekali observed Uther, who was no longer focused on the path ahead, as before. Instead, the Dwarf constantly jumped at every little noise and echo, nervously glancing this way and that, all the while cursing Finyat under his breath.

The end of the fourth day brought them to a fork in the tunnel, both leading northward, yet separating into two directions. Finyat scouted both tunnels out as usual while they waited. When he returned, it was not in his usual manner. Suddenly, Finyat appeared out of nowhere, as if he had been invisible. What was more, he was directly in the center of the three.

“Ready?” Startled, Sekali jumped back, ripping his blade from its sheath, ready for battle. With an innocent face, Finyat held up his hands.

“Easy, it's me.” Sekali sheathed his blade and forced himself to relax.

“By the great hand of Vannar, Finyat,” he hissed. The Thief's ability to slip right under his nose, without being detected in the least, was astounding. In all his years, he had not witnessed anyone more adept at concealment than he. Aria and Uther did not seem surprised in the least. Sekali knew enough of the Guardian class to know Aria felt movement, due to her special abilities. No doubt, Uther was used to Finyat popping in and out -- the two had traveled together for quite

some time now.

“Well, both tunnels seem fine to travel, so what do you want to do?” In silence, Uther and Aria stared at the two paths before them. Sekali shrugged at Finyat.

“You choose, Finyat. You have led us safely thus far. I trust your decision.” Finyat smiled.

“Thank you, Sekali. Coming from you, that means a lot. This way,” he whispered. Cupping the faintly glowing orb in both hands, he parted his fingers enough to allow only enough illumination to touch the ground before him. Finyat carefully led the group in through the right hand tunnel.

“Always down, and in the dark,” the Shallant mouthed without a sound. He thought of Aria and Sekali, upon whose eyes this infernal darkness held no power. Then there was his best friend, Uther, a Kithrin Dwarf, who could not only see clearly, but actually loved being down in the bowels of the earth. As Uther enjoyed this little stroll in the dark, Finyat felt as though the mountain was swallowing him. He had been down here long enough, and wanted out.

In the beginning, this natural hallway of stone was smaller, forcing Sekali and Aria to always stoop to keep from striking their heads upon low-hanging stalactites which began to appear in great numbers. As stalagmites began to appear, Finyat looked back at Uther, pointing at them.

“See? Teeth,” he whispered. Annoyed, the Dwarf waved him on in silence. Aria looked up, catching Sekali's eyes, and grinned. Without thinking, Sekali pushed the side of her head, forcing her to correct her balance. Laughing without sound, she pressed on, a gleam of happiness sparkling in her eyes. For hours they traveled, and as they did, their pathway of stone expanded into a massive, cavern-sized, tunnel that transformed into a forest of stone columns.

A host of massive stalagmites and stalactites came together to form thousands of natural pillars, which filled the area, eventually leading them into a grand and magnificent chamber. Sekali noticed the Dwarf's instant fascination in this place. He wondered what a thousand Dwarves would transform this place

into, if given the chance.

Onward they marched, in the silence of their own thoughts, until, a good while later, they came to the end of the stone forest, revealing a large tunnel leading out. As they neared the opening, a strong odor, similar to the smell of a large population of cattle, filled the still air. Finyat halted, holding up a hand as he scrutinized the opening. Turning to his comrades, he held a finger to his lips, and then quietly approached and ran his hands over deep grooves covering the rock surface. Frowning, he quickly returned.

“Talon marks”, he whispered, “Follow me, slowly, and at a distance. Vessen, he whispered as he turned back to the opening.” Like a whisper of soft wind, he crept in past the opening, a faint, dark-blue light preceding him. The others followed in silence as he made his way around large rocks and the long-since-slain skeletal remains of many creatures, most of which were reduced to fragments and pieces.

Ever so slowly, the four inched their way into the depths of the cave, the smell steadily intensifying. At one point, Finyat motioned them to stay put, then crept foreword, silent as the shadow of a spider moving in on its prey.

The bones unnerved Finyat badly; the side of a skull, a backbone - or all that was left of one - attached to broken ribs bearing deep teeth marks. All of it told him of horrific death wrought upon each and every creature that either ventured down here, or was brought down here, caught by whatever stalked the deeper caves.

Slowly making his way down through the widening cavern, Finyat often froze in place at every little sound. He watched a hand-sized beetle with a long horn-like snout clamber away, squealing after he'd mistakenly placed his hand upon its back. Instinctively, Finyat knew that, whatever was down this dark corridor, would never be so merciful as to let him go if he were noticed. Stopping, Finyat removed a pouch from some hidden pocket of his cloak and opened it. Within, lay a number of vials smaller than his smallest finger.

"Vessen," he whispered softly, causing the light to change color from blue to violet. He pulled his cloak about him and up over his head, so that he was concealed within. Carefully, he thumbed through a few vials of musk scent. Pinewood? No. Roses? No. Rotten log, wolf hair, frog? No, no, no. He continued to search the vials until finally he found the most appropriate one needed: Earthen soil musk. Yes, that would do nicely.

Removing it from the case, he gently twisted the cork from the vial with his teeth and poured half of it into the palm of his hand. Recapping the vial, he dropped it back into the pouch and laid it on the ground. Slowly, Finyat rubbed his hands together, patted his face and hair, as well as many other points about his body, until he was satisfied.

He licked his hands and swallowed; the taste was no better than eating dirt. Using some of the droughts he carried made him queasy. Better queasy than to end up in the belly of a monster. The thought of being suddenly chewed and swallowed made him grimace. That would not do . . . no, no, not at all. Control; that was the key . . . control. He tied the pouch securely and replaced it within the pocket in his cloak.

“Vessen,” he barely whispered once again, changing the light of the orb to just brighter than a blackened glow. Adjusting his cloak once more, he checked for his poisoned darts. They were there, which gave him courage. Slowly he loaded a toxin dart into a small blowpipe. The long quill was old, yet no less deadly than when he took it from the deadly cactus. One prick would send almost any creature to its grave in a few short moments. He used one on the Dredge`Worm while on the harbringer, two on the ogres, and one on the dragonling. Its effect on the latter, to his disappointment, had not killed it. But it was a good study to know that the more powerful the creature, the lesser the effects toxin had on them. He would have to work on implementing a catalyst substance to increase potency. First, he would need to find that catalyst.

Holding the orb in the palm of his hand, he shielded its dim rays from giving away his position, as he began to creep further down into the tunnel, making sure to remain in uttermost silence.

It was not long before he’d worked his way far into the tunnel and up into a large entrance to another massive chamber. He stopped at the entrance and waited as a warning began to claw at his mind. For some reason he dared not move, nor explore it further . . . yet.

A few long moments crept by when a large gray-scaled dragon moved within the cave. It had been perfectly camouflaged with the background of stone it was set against. He knew it for the breed it was; a Hunter Dragon. This one was an Assassin, stealthy and superb at tracking and hiding; greedy in its lust for dominance and treasure. This was its nature.

He should have turned back at that point, but he took the nature of the dragon as a personal challenge and found himself creeping into the cavern as he readied his blowpipe. This would be his crowning achievement . . . well, until he stole the wealth of an entire kingdom (which had always been his goal).

Finyat worked his way back to the opposite end of the cavern, and to the backside of the dragon, which began picking at the carcass of an old kill, stripping it hungrily to get at the drying meat yet clutching to the broken skeletal frame. A

thrumming began to fill the cave as the great dragon worked the remaining shreds of flesh from the carcass.

Scanning nearby ledges and the darker corners of the cavern, Finyat noticed an almost vertical shaft at center-point at its center. No doubt the shaft led up and out onto the mountain; a superb vantage point for hunting.

A loud snap caused Finyat to freeze still as the stone under his feet. With a low rumbling growl, the dragon ripped the body of its victim to pieces, trying to get into the parts where there were yet scraps of meat and cartilage. Feverishly, it tore into the great carcass, rending it into a dozen sections, then raised its nose and sniffed. Shaking its head, the massive gray-scaled beast settled down once again and began picking at the remains.

Returning his attention to the natural tools he had to work with, Finyat fixed his attention upon the shaft above the dragon. He had to explore that area; get the best advantage over the dragon.

As of yet, he had not seen a single copper coin. He knew the nature of this breed; he'd studied them growing up, collecting bits of information continuously. This particular dragon was a collector, and very cunning about hiding its treasure. If all went well, he would search the cave later.

Moving just behind the dragon, Finyat looked up into the tunnel above. He suspected all the treasure of this overgrown reptile might be stashed up in that area. Capping his blowpipe at both ends, he made sure to secure the deadly dart, so it would not fall out. Very slowly he slipped his blowpipe back into a long, slim, pocket within his cloak and secured it.

Creeping slowly to the closest pillar of rock, the Shallant Thief began scaling the rough surface like a shadow. As he ascended, he could hear the dragon breathing through its nose as it chewed and gnawed at the carcass. The smell of this place was beginning to turn Finyat's stomach.

Without sound, he explored the shaft above. He smiled to think the dragon, in its comings and goings, had loosed many rocks and boulders, setting a trap for itself. Finyat shook his head, thinking just how stupid and prideful dragons could

be.

Inching his way up the steep incline, he spotted a section of the tunnel that offered him a possible opportunity. Spotting a large boulder set on an outcropping of rock above would be the perfect weapon, if he could manage to dislodge it. He decided to give it a try. If this failed he would flee up and out of the mountain, then head north over and down the peaks in hope of rejoining his comrades.

Positioning himself behind a large rock, far up in the tunnel, he thought for a moment as he contemplated the intelligence of this very large lizard. If it heard a rumbling from above, it might instinctively clear out from beneath the opening. No, that would not do. He would have to bait it up into the tunnel where it would meet the falling debris. This way was the only sure way.

This one boulder could kill it, if it struck the dragon just right. If it failed to kill the beast, it would cripple it, and that was a reassuring thought as well. Either way, he knew he had to get the dragon up into the shaft. Frozen in indecision, Finyat thought twice on what he was about to attempt. If it failed it would be difficult to escape the dragon's wrath . . . but possible, especially if it was wounded. He just needed to keep a calm mind about this, and swallow the instinctive panic beginning to well up within him.

Quietly, he retrieved and equipped his hand claws, then strapped another set upon his feet. With these on, he could traverse practically impossible angles, even scale walls of sheer ice and stone. Committing to the decision, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath.

"Vessen!" he yelled as he coiled the long chain up into the palm of his hand. The Light Orb flared to life with a brilliant white light, just as he desired, but it also blinded his own vision. Blinking, his eyes teared up as he heard the feeding of the dragon instantly silence, replaced by a low, menacing growl. Finyat forced himself to wait for the space of three breaths, his heart suddenly pounding heavy within his chest. Placing his feet against the rock, he leaned out to the left, peering down into the shaft, but saw nothing, due to the blinding light he held in his hand. He simply could not see into the darkness beyond. This was not good.

With no other options, other than to wait and be digested, he reached out his fist, averting his eyes, and released the Light Orb. Looking down the shaft, he watched it descend into the vertical tunnel below, lighting up the sides as it cut through the darkness, falling, falling, as if in slow motion.

“Come on, you want it! Take it!” he screamed at the dragon. “Take it!” Peering intensely after Aria's orb, Finyat grit his teeth and waited. Just before the orb struck the incline below, the dragon snatched it out of the air before it struck the cavern floor. Curling its talons about the orb, the dragon peered at what it had caught.

“Like that, do you?” Finyat called down to the monstrous, winged reptile. “So do I, and I want it back!” The dragon was just up on the ledge at the bottom of the shaft, overlooking the cavern below where it had been feeding. It blinked at the brilliantly shining orb, squinting. Slowly it looked up, eyes filled with menacing hate, then screamed a vicious challenge.

“Mine!” Finyat screamed, taunting the beast, then pushed against the boulder with all his might and strength, just as the dragon raised up through the tunnel, the boulder came loose too easily, sending Finyat over the edge with it. Nearly slipping into a sudden free fall, Finyat twisted and used his hand and foot-claws to catch himself on the wall of the shaft. Skidding to a stop, the Thief looked down over his shoulder as the boulder fell. He watch the great stone strike the side of the shaft and spin downward toward the dragon.

“Worm!” he mocked, then laughed. Instantly enraged, the dragon greedily cradled the orb to its chest and blinked, squinting up into the tunnel, temporarily blinded by its light. As the boulder fell, the dragon tucked its wings tight against its body and lurched upward through the shaft. As it climbed frantically upward, it was met by the full impact of the stone as it struck the beast full in the face. The weight of the stone forced it back down through the shaft, sending the dragon crashing to the floor of the cave from whence it came.

All Finyat heard from the dragon, as the boulder struck it, was a loud grunt. The cave shuddered as many rocks followed the first, tumbling in a roar down

through the opening.

Finyat pushed off from the side of the shaft, free falling until he caught himself on the other side, the claws of his climbing gear cutting like talons into the side of the rock, sending out a shower of sparks as he slowed to a stop. Without hesitation, he leapt again and caught himself a number of times before dropping down onto the ledge on all fours, like a cat. Looking down, his eyes narrowed like a shadowy menace.

They heard the rumbling, and felt the earth tremble beneath their feet. Uther, who had been spinning the shaft of his axe in his hands, thoroughly impatient, jumped up from the rock he was sitting on and looked down the tunnel.

“Finyat!” he bellowed, then raced after his friend. Sekali glanced in alarm at Aria, who drew her blade and followed after Uther.

“He lives, or I would know, and he's not hurt,” she said as Sekali drew his blade and followed.

“Uther, wait, stop!” Aria called after him. “Uther!” Ignoring her, the stubborn Dwarf raced along the tunnel calling for Finyat, fear in his voice. Foolishly, as if he had a battalion of his kinsmen at his back, Uther charged into the dragon's chamber, Aria and Sekali trailing behind. In disbelief, Aria and Sekali stopped, dumbfounded by the scene before them. It took Uther a dozen more steps before he also stopped, stunned at what he beheld. Finyat was sitting upon the massive belly of a fully grown Hunter Dragon, polishing a brightly burning orb of light. Locking eyes with Aria, Finyat grinned happily.

“About time you made it, princess. I was wondering if I needed to pack my treasure out piece by piece, or use that wonderful little pack of yours.” Finyat laughed merrily, jumped to his feet and began dancing a jig upon the dead dragon's belly. Aria burst out in uncontrolled laughter and sat down, wiping tears from her eyes with the back of her sleeve. This of course fueled Finyat's fire, egging him on. Since he had an audience, which was a rare thing down here in the belly of a vast mountain range, he did a perfect back-flip on the belly of the dragon and raised his hands into the air. Even Sekali could not resist smiling at the sight of, what appeared to be, a child standing in victory upon a fully grown dragon.

Uther stood there, speechless, as Sekali slowly walked up to the carcass and placed a hand upon its scaly hide. Stepping back, he gave Finyat a Warrior's salute of honor. Still dancing on his defeated foe, Finyat threw him back a quick salute.

Aria slowly gained control of herself, stood and approached the carcass, still wiping the tears away. Finyat leapt from the dragon's belly, rolling into a double

somersault and landed before her on both his feet, one hand on the ground, the other holding up the wildly swinging orb. As he landed, he growled as if he were the dragon.

“Halt, who dares invade my lair! I shall splinter and smash your bones!” Mustering up the most fearsome look possible, he glared menacingly at Aria. Uther bellowed out in deep laughter to see Finyat making such a fool of himself.

“Why bless my Grandfather’s, Grandson’s beard! Tell us, how did you manage this grand deed Finyat?” Uther stalked over to Finyat and slapped him on the shoulder hard, and was returned with a mighty, heroic grin.

“You should have been here for the battle, Uther. First, I drew my blades and challenged it to a duel, just him and I, one-on-one. Seeing its escape route blocked off, it had no choice but to accept the invitation. The dance of death began – it was a long, exhausting struggle, but the better half of this cave’s population was the victor!” Finyat began dancing about Uther gleefully, circling him again and again, until Uther asked, under his breath, about the treasure. At the mentioning of treasure, Sekali’s heart leapt into his throat. The richness of a dragon's plunder might be useful in their quest.

“We need to find its treasure. We could benefit greatly from it,” he said. Finyat stopped dancing, holding up a hand, his carefree demeanor putting on a regal air.

“Ahem! My treasure! I fought it. I defeated it one-on-one without help. The treasure is mine.” Sekali observed the instant sudden change of their mood. Uther tilted his head back slightly, becoming silent, folding his arms across his broad chest, feet apart; the body language tactics for Kithrin Dwarf bartering. Aria abruptly unshouldered her backpack and held it out for Finyat to take.

“You speak the truth. It is rightfully yours.” Uther threw her a startled look that plainly stated, *What are you doing?* Finyat agreed with a smile and walked over to take the pack, face beaming in satisfaction. As he reached for the pack, Aria retracted it, putting a finger to her lips, then pointing a finger up before her. As if he had expected it, Finyat diplomatically held up a finger of his own.

“Ten percent.” Negotiations had begun. Uther smirked seriously, and turned his attention back to his best friend, a sly look creeping over his face. Aria bit her lip, instantly lowering the backpack, thinking.

“It will take you a lifetime to pack out a dragon's treasure hoard. You might get it all, considering other wanderers don't come upon it in your absence.” She smirked at him, giving the Shallant a business-like stare. Backing a pace, Finyat brought his hands to rest on his hips.

“A shrewd thought, but true. Alright, eighty-twenty.” Aria continued as if she had not heard him.

“It would take two twice the time to pack up a mature dragon's treasure, than it would four.” She threw him a sly, yet charming, smile. Uther nodded enthusiastically, but said nothing. He seemed to be liking the tactics of the Eldishar.

Sekali witnessed the two banter back and forth. Never in all his life had he seen such an interesting exchange of words. Aria seemed to have the upper hand, while the Shallant, filled with treasure-lust, was finagling as much to his advantage as possible.

Aria knew Finyat's weakness. The Shallant was distracted by her looks, the way she moved and talked. She knew this, and took full advantage of it, slowly breaking down his resolve. This went on for some time, until Finyat gave up, throwing his hands in the air.

“Oh, alright, equal shares . . . but I get first pick. All potions, and such, which relate to my training are mine.” Aria held out her enchanted backpack and nodded.

“You drive a hard bargain, master Rogue. Sekali, Uther, are you in agreement with the deal?” They both nodded their approval without saying a word. “We are settled on it then. Go ahead, Finyat, take my pack. So we are clear with each other, once the treasure is loaded, you will not be the holder of the backpack.”

“Agreed,” Finyat said, finishing the deal, reaching up to take Aria's pack,

half expecting her not to hand it over. As his fingers wrapped about the shoulder strap, she let go, bent down and kissed him on the cheek. Grinning from ear to ear, he rubbed his hands together happily.

“Alright, it seems I've already gotten the better part of the deal.” Aria laughed and hugged him tight. As she did, her smile faded away, replaced by a look of relief and concern.

“Finyat?” she whispered.

“Yes, Aria,” he returned, thoroughly enjoying the hug. Bringing a hand up to the back of his head, she held him tight.

“Don't you ever do that again.” Finyat cringed, but said nothing. “Finyat, you and your companions are far too important to risk losing. Let me take those risks, please?” Pulling away, she smiled fondly at him. “Okay?” In all seriousness, he shook his head.

“Aria, this was the only way through. Something had to be done.” Aria sighed heavily.

“No, you did good. You did good. Please be careful -- that includes you, Uther, and you, Sekali. I've grown quite fond of you all.” Sekali thought about his people. He recalled a time when he stared at himself in a mirror, feeling terrible guilt and shame for failing to save every person he defended.

“Finyat,” Sekali whispered, “the time you have in mortality, every moment, depicts the course of not only your life, but the lives of those around you. We, all of us, are champions of those who would not stand a chance against the Veleighen and their allies. We are their hope, though they do not know it.” Sekali's words sobered Finyat completely. The Shallant looked hard at Sekali for a moment.

“I don't like heavy weights draped over my shoulders, and I won't let my friends suffer when I can do something about it.” Taking Aria's hand, he squeezed, smiling at her in admiration. “Aria, I do understand, and I agree, but I will always protect and back my real friends . . . I have spoken.” Uther's eyes instantly bulged.

“Bah!” he gruffly barked and walked away. Aria gripped Finyat's hand tight, suddenly grinning at him.

“Well spoken, Finyat. Well spoken.” Sekali walked over and placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Thank you Finyat,” he said, pride burning in his eyes. Uther turned on his heel, abruptly heading straight back for the Shallant.

“Alright, thank you very much, we are done with this,” his voice grated as he crowded in between Aria and Finyat. The Eldishar Elf, backed off, throwing Sekali a wink.

“Now, down to business,” Uther demanded, putting on his best manner of business, his voice harboring a serious tone. “Where’s the treasure, Finyat? Did you find it already?” Finyat shrugged.

“I really don’t know, pal. Really.” Uther instantly harrumphed'. Walking over to the dragon, the Dwarf looked up into the large opening above it as a stream of silt and dust cascaded down upon its belly. Finyat joined him, shielding his eyes, looked up, pointing up into the shaft and sighed.

“I did not explore far up there. It might be up there, but I doubt it.” Aria shook her head.

“No, it won’t be up there. A dragon like this will never hide treasure on its front porch. Look about the cavern, especially for an area where many things could be secreted into a crevice, or a hole of some sort. It might even be buried, so look for any broken rock piled up on the floor of the cave.” Each split up into different directions, searching throughout the dragon's lair, eagerly looking to find the wealth of the dragon.

Aria’s guess had proven correct. With some searching, Finyat discovered what they were looking for. At the far end of the cavern, behind a large pillar of rock, he saw a few silver coins scattered about on the uneven floor.

“The wealth of dragons,” his voice echoed. All gathered over by him and looked at the few coins upon the ground. Uther picked up a silver piece and grinned.

“Finyat, make it safe for us. Do what you do best.” With a bright-eyed look, Finyat eagerly held up Aria's light orb.

“Vessen,” he whispered. The crystal in his hand illuminated with a comfortable, white light. Smiling briefly at Aria, he turned and vanished in through an opening hardly large enough for a dragon to squeeze into.

Finyat moved along the stone floor, light flooding the way before him as he scrutinized the area, searching for dangers. The crevice had widened, changing directions in a zig-zag pattern three times before opening up into a smaller cave.

In stunned amazement, the Shallant's eyes bulged at the site before him. It was what he had always been after . . . wealth untold. Before him lay the plunder of a dead dragon that no longer needed it. Black, yellow and white-gold, mingled with electrum, silver, bronze and copper, lay in heaping piles everywhere! Bags and chests of money, half of which were broken open, scattered the stone floor.

A variety of weapons and shields, as well as many curious items, dotted the uneven bed of sparkling wonder, taking Finyat's breath away. Glancing back over his shoulder, Finyat looked to see if any of them had followed. He was alone. A sly look crept into his eyes as he took his first step toward the largest pile of coins in the cave.

“Help!” came the desperate cry of the Shallant. Without hesitation, Uther ripped his axe forth and charged in, followed by Sekali and Aria. The three entered the chamber and spread out, ignoring the thick bed of treasure sparkling before them. Finyat was nowhere to be seen. Sekali and Uther moved in opposite directions about the edge of the cave.

“Finyat, Finyat!” Uther roared. It was then that Sekali decided the Dwarf's volume would one day be the death of him. Then again, he was a good decoy.

Aria closed her eyes and moved foreword through the center of the treasure hoard, chanting softly. No sooner had she set foot at the base of a large pile of coins, than there came a disturbance at the center, top-most, pile. Gold and silver began to displace as something arose from under the thick layer of money.

Preparing for battle, the three watched in growing anticipation as a figure

forced its way free from beneath the coins, shrouded within tattered, decayed, hooded robes. A sickening-green light emanated from within its robes as it harbored the dim, decaying light of the dead within. Uther cursed, raising his axe, his eyes shading to black as Sekali charged, shield in hand. Aria stopped, her eyes opening wide.

“Hold!” she cried in a loud voice. Instantly, Finyat threw back the ragged hood of the robes he wore, laughed with glee, and fled from Uther, who still charged, bent on hewing his enemy down. Sekali abandoned his advance, eyes widening in surprise as Finyat turned and fled from before the Dwarf, who continued up one side of the mound of coins and down the other in pursuit of Finyat. As the Shallant ran, he broke out into hysterical laughter, stumbling once on the hem of the rotted robes he wore.

“What's wrong with your eyes, Uther? All wound up? Ha ha ha!” At the bottom of the other side, Uther skidded to a stop, letting his axe fall upon an already broken chest of treasure, shattering it. Frustrated, he bellowed, “I hate Shallants!” Laughing like a madman, Finyat disrobed and cast the rotting garment to the ground, pointing at Uther, who angrily turned and stalked away toward Aria. Sekali walked over to Aria, trying not to laugh. Aria was covering her mouth with both hands, a wide-eyed look of glee sparkling in her eyes.

“You Elves think something's funny?” the Dwarf grumped, violently putting up his axe. The two shook their heads, but Uther was far from convinced. Spinning about, he folded his arms, glaring at the pile of treasure, behind which Finyat voice resounded, filled with far to much glee.

“I've always wanted to do that!”

Rummaging through a variety of armors, shields and weapons, they did not find any greater than what the Knowledge Master had given them. They did, however, discover a number of rings and bracelets, earrings and amulets, as well as an assortment of other curious trinkets. These they packed away, not equipping them. It would take a spell to reveal their nature, as well as the knowledge on how to use each one, before each one was put to use. Otherwise, if the piece was used ignorantly, negative impacts could very well occur. They had to be cautious. It would not do, to have some insignificant looking trinket defeat them on their quest.

Finyat feverishly searched for, and found, twenty-six potions, draughts and vials, all filled with various colored liquids. Carefully, he arranged them upon the flat surface of an empty crate, largest bottles in the back, smallest in front, and knelt down before them. Rubbing his hands together briskly, he studied them for a time, then took one. Looking at it carefully, he noted the color and consistency of the liquid. Gently, he worked the cork free from the top of the bottle and smelled it. Finyat took his time with each and every bottle and vial, eventually labeling and keeping seven out of the bunch. Standing, he announced, "This is my first pick. When we divide the rest, we roll dice to see who gets first pick from there." Looking at Uther, he added, "I am in on the first roll!" the Dwarf eagerly stated.

Uther aided Aria and Sekali in scooping coins into her backpack. As the money vanished into the pack, he seemed very pleased. Uther began humming a Dwarven song. Along with all the currency, Finyat watched with great interest as each piece of treasure - that would fit - vanish into Aria's pack.

"Aria, can your backpack fit enough treasure in it to equip an army?" He curiously asked. Aria laughed.

"Sadly, no. There is a limit to its enchantment." Finyat looked at the treasure stash; they had a long way to go. He bit his lip.

"How much can it hold? And what makes this pack work in such a manner?" Aria thought for a moment.

“I delivered provisions to all the guard posts about my homeland. There was quite a large amount of food, water, medical and sleeping supplies to hand out. This treasure hoard seems about half as much,” she placed a reassuring hand upon his shoulder, “if that is any consolation.” He nodded, still distracted by what remained un-gathered. “To answer your second question: Within this backpack lies another dimension.” Noting the confused look upon his face, Aria knelt and touched the stone floor of the cave as Uther and Sekali continued raking treasure into the pack.

“Finyat, here, we stand upon the Earthen Plane; one world within the vast expanse of Utaemia. I spoke of this when we first entered the mountain.” Uther rolled his eyes at Finyat. Aria continued, choosing her words carefully.

“Dimensions are much different from planes. Within a dimension exists pure, raw element, such as acid, air, earth, fire, water . . . even the building blocks of dreams. Every plane is crafted from dimensional materials. This pack is bound by strong enchantments to expand the space within it. That's why it holds so much.” Finyat shook his head in new wonder at Aria's backpack.

“Amazing!” he said, openly coveting it. She laughed.

“Finyat, you are a breath of fresh air. Now, shall we finish packing this treasure and be off?” Enthusiastically, the Shallant stood, nodded and began helping them, humming to himself happily . . . he was rich!

Three days passed before they departed the dragon's lair. A day before leaving, Aria took the claws, teeth and spines of the Hunter Dragon and stored them away. It was a tedious job; cutting each free. She managed it by the use of her sword. Finyat watched her with enthusiasm.

“Too bad we can't take the hide,” he said.

“We don't have the time, or I would find a way to get it back to my city. This hide could be used to create sturdy armor.” Aria neared Finyat and placed a hand upon his armor. “This dragon's hide is nothing compared to what you wear. So, be at ease klepto”. Finyat grinned and admired her for a moment. He then

placed a hand upon her hand.

“I do love you, Aria,” he whispered, so the Dwarf would not hear him. Aria beamed happily.

“I love you too, master Thief. You and I are family now.” Finyat caught the emotion beginning to play in his eyes, which he averted.

“Well, we better get the rest of this treasure packed away. Some critter might come and challenge us for it. Best we hurry.” Aria embraced Finyat.

“You are rich now, Finyat.” She then began gathering all the coins she could. Finyat happily held the backpack, so she could scoop the money into it.

“Cool”, he whispered happily, and greedily, catching sight of a large gem vanishing into the pack.

After the treasure was gathered up, the company headed back, turning northward through the great tunnel; always as northward as possible. The grand mountainous shaft grew in size as they silently traveled further and further into the roots of the mountain range, remaining in a steady descent. Finyat lead the way with Aria's orb dimly shining on the ground before him.

Seven days passed by with no encounters, nor the usual, distant sounds which would, at times, set them on edge. Even the subterranean insects they would occasional happen upon vanished altogether. As they steadily moved on through the grand tunnel, an uncomfortable feeling began to settle within each of them. Unlike at home, as he was in the bowels of the earth, Uther seemed uncomfortable and jumpy.

On the seventh day, as they traveled cautiously forward, they began to hear the sound of rushing water, water that grew steadily louder as they pressed on. As they came to a large bend in the cave, Finyat motioned the group to stay put, then preceded to scout ahead. Not long after departing, he returned, looking as though he were taking his time.

Sekali watched him carefully, noticing his gate was not normal. Something was wrong; terribly wrong. When he joined them, Sekali noticed he trembled, and looked quite pale. Sitting down on a rock, Finyat hugged himself, looking at the ground as though it was not there. He did not speak for some time. Aria retrieved a small blue-glass bottle from her pack and unstopped it. Gently, she placed the open end to Finyat's mouth, concerned.

“Sip only a few drops, no more.” With quivering lips he took a little onto his tongue and swallowed. Within a few moments he visibly relaxed, color returning to his face. All were silent, awaiting his report. At length, he sighed, swallowed hard and wiped his face as if trying desperately to awaken from a nightmare.

“At first, I thought it odd why we hadn't seen or heard any signs of life these past few days,” Finyat whispered in a quivering voice. His jaw was clenched tight

to keep his teeth from chattering as he spoke. Alarmed, Aria knelt before him, placing a gentle hand on his shoulder in silence. Within a few moments, her eyes grew wide, a tinge of fear creeping into the beautiful features of her face. Glancing toward the sound of rushing water, she frowned.

“Finyat, I feel what you feel, but will you tell us what you saw?” Flinching at her request, he shuddered violently, as if suddenly the victim of his own poison. Slowly, he looked up at Sekali, locking eyes with him, shaking his head in disbelief.

“I never believed you. At first, I thought you were crazy. The talking in your sleep, the nightmares, the things you would say.” Sekali's eyes hardened as he listened, feeling a dread instantly creep upon him. As if cold, Finyat tightened his grip about himself and began rocking slowly back and forth. “I believe you now, I believe you. I - I saw . . . death!” Sekali stiffened, as if an arrow had struck him in the back. The scene of the Soul`Reaper killing his wife clawed through his mind like the merciless talons of a dragon. Staggering back, an instant haze of red clouded the borders of his vision, and his heart began to pound in within his chest.

He felt it then; a beckoning from the direction of the rushing waters, challenging him, beckoning him to come join his wife. He knew he could not evade a confrontation with this dark being forever. One day, it would find him unprepared and take him. Now, right now, was the time for action, not cowardice.

Turning, Sekali knelt, closed his eyes and inhaled deep, holding his breath. When his lungs burned for fresh air, he slowly exhaled, focusing on the moment. Aria stood, drew her blade and began chanting as Sekali arose, pulling his shield from his back and drawing his sword. Gladly heeding the call, he waited, ready to spring into action.

He recalled many years ago, how many it took to defeat the Soul`Reaper. He was young then . . . weaker. Whether he was strong enough to do this deed or not, he neither knew or cared. All he knew was he needed help, and Aria was a powerful Guardian. Her assistance would be vital in this situation.

As her chant ceased, Sekali felt a burst of incredible energy fill his body, his

mind focusing like never before, even as she groaned in pain. Instantly, he broke into a run toward his true nemesis, a being that had destroyed his love. As he approached, Sekali beheld a suspension bridge, crafted from the very stone of the mountain. From bank to bank, it arced over a large, fast-flowing river. At the highest point in the stone bridge, a structure set in the form of a small castle.

Pausing to look down, he beheld a night-black river, covered in a sickening white froth, that rushed and broke about many jagged stones jutting up through the water's surface. Impaled upon every shard of rock were the rotting bodies of countless victims.

Tearing his eyes from the horrific scene below, he studied the structure at the center of the bridge. It was hollow at the base, so one could simply pass through to reach the other side. Squinting, he peered into its hollow and beheld a familiar sight that threatened to throw his conviction down.

Suspended just above the surface of bridge, was the dreaded apparition of his past, cloaked in ragged, blackened, flowing shreds of dark night. Within its fleshless grip was a scythe, as eternally black as the fiend itself. Hate and rage exploded within him, freeing Sekali from the terrible grip threatening him. All he perceived was the source that plagued his dreams, tortured his life, and killed Mahkaia. Bent upon revenge, he leapt forward in silent fury, channeling all the hate and malice into focused control.

Since that tragic day, when Mahkaia fell, Sekali had longed for the moment he knew he could not escape. Being present, when the Gorolith Vahkrin's curse fell upon Mahkaia, had caused this unearthly being to perceive, and then pursue him. Over thirty years later, and the moment was upon him. It would end here, now, or he would die!

In a clash of blades, both met head on, the sound of their weapons ringing out in a contest that would only end in the eternal destruction of one or the other.

She stood waist-deep within an endless sea of bones, bound in chains to a surface she could feel with her feet, but not see. The scarlet heaven above played host to frequent streaks of silent, black lightning, from which came no thunder. Oblivious to her own screams, her body ever-so-slowly whitened under the influence of a slow and steady atrophy, grasping her in the clutches of a spiraling course of withering decay that would eventually lead her into the current state of the sea of victims pressing in about her.

Bathed in this endless sea of horror, she felt each torturous moment creep by, as if it were a day. Each grueling span of time became two days, then three, and so forth, at length fulfilling the span of time in which she suffered. Each day passed by as if it were a year, building slowly into a span of three decades.

In vain, she contested against unbreakable chains which held her fast amidst the endless carnage, her wrists perpetually shedding blood from the constant struggle against her bonds, running down the links to mingle with the mass of bones pressing against her. There was never rest; never peace; only her endless screaming as she desperately sought freedom.

Gazing up into the blackness, she strived and yearned to see something, anything, other than what plagued her. When black lightning struck the crimson, whitened landscape, it spread throughout the sea of death, causing every bone to shift and shudder about her, as if trying to escape, terrible groans filling the air.

The realization of her future not only panicked her, but spurred her on to struggle against the chains imprisoning her. Again, her wailing screams overpowered the groaning sea of the dead she eternally waded within.

She was cursed . . .

. . . Mabuhi shot up from her bed, landing upon her feet, sucking in ragged gasps of precious air. Spinning about in panic, she could see only the dead about her, eternally touching her, as if groping at her own spark of life; to take it for their own. Mabuhi stilled and closed her eyes against the horrific onslaught.

She took a few deep, quavering breaths and slowly opened her eyes to find herself in her own home. An expression of regret and sorrow fell upon her countenance as she slowly fell to her knees, not believing what she had just dreamed.

There was always a part of her that never rested, since she could recall, even as a child. This one nightmare had ever vexed her whenever she slept for any significant amount of time. Folding her arms about herself, she silently wept, gritting her teeth as if in terrible mental anguish.

“Oh, Mother, will this ever stop? I can bear it no longer . . .” In the darkness, broken only by a distant lantern’s light streaming faintly through the opening in her room, Mabuhi wept bitterly, quietly, secretly. “I shall never be rid of this accursed dream.” Bowing her head, Mabuhi gave into a sadness that had plagued her since she was a small child.

A thought penetrated her being then . . . Sekali . . . and she took courage.

Blades rang out, lighting up the darkness with an ever-constant display of showering sparks and tendrils of jagged lightning, as they contested against one another. Vapors of darkness arose from beneath the bridge, invading the air with a dread that Sekali did not heed. In silence, he landed well-placed strikes against an unbeatable foe. Frustration fed only into his sword arm, fear transformed into the strength of a battalion of well-trained, master warriors, and his ever-burning hatred gifted him with the will to conquer.

In the power of his hate and bloodlust, channeled into an intense focus, Sekali increased his assault, an unreal energy coursing through his entire being. All the malice that had built up over the years lent him the strength he needed to shatter death's defenses, destroy its weapon of destruction. The pain of losing Mahkaia burst forth from within him, surging like too many waters rising up against a weakening dam, and broke forth into one moment of total, utter fury.

Sekali knew only revenge and hate; bloodlust of the Sardakk! Down he beat upon his failing enemy; down to the stone he drove it into the ruin of its own darkened existence, his sword blazing like the blinding sun.

"Mahkaia!" he screamed in fury as he smote his terrible foe to pieces, cutting through blackened robes and bone with a fierceness that distracted Aria, nearly breaking her chant.

Soon his enemy lay shattered and broken upon the bridge about him. With one last stroke of his blade, he focused all his might upon the blade of the Soul`Reaper, shattering it. Screaming in fury and rage, he felt the sting of regret fan to life within him. Why could he not have saved Mahkaia then? Why was he able to conquer it now?

As he stood in waning rage, the overwhelming sighs of a multitude of the slain within that sickened river below filled the entire expanse of the deep that traveled within. His companions stood afar off and covered their ears in fear and pain . . . screaming in silence.

The darkness about Mahkaia broke into the blessed dawn of the morning sun as a terrible groan silenced her own wails. There was a great movement within the sea of the dead beneath her and a multitude of spirits arose from beneath her feet.

The chains which bound her, fell from her wrists and feet, silently wasting away before her astonished gaze, as if the atrophy of an eternity touched upon them all in a single moment's time. Spirits cried out in joy as they ascended toward the sun, now shining brightly above, chasing away the night.

Mahkaia sobbed out in hope as the once sea of bones beneath her feet shifted and changed, melting into a sea of green, fertile Grasslands, dotted with a thousand arrays of the most beautiful flowers. A herd of deer grazing nearby bolted at her sudden appearance. She watched them in new wonder as they raced away.

“What is this? What blessed mercy have you bestowed upon me, righteous Vannar?” She laughed aloud, yet in disbelief, and looked into the sun which held no power to blind her. She looked down at her delicate wrists, which healed before her very eyes, leaving no scars . . .

. . . Mabuhi leapt up from the floor of her room where she had fallen asleep, gasping in astonishment.

Sekali staggered back as the energy and fury within him drained from his body and mind. Groaning in pain, his eyes fell upon the corpse lying shattered upon the bridge. All about Sekali, sudden movement caught his attention. Glancing to either side, he watched the spirits of the dead rise all about him, ascending into the darkness of the cavern above.

One spirit halted and turned before Sekali. It was his first brother who had fallen defending Mahkaia. With a formal salute, he smiled and then lifted his head upward and sailed away, laughing for joy. Astonished, Sekali watched his brother vanish as he passed through the zenith of the cavern. Sekali reflected back to the day when the white cloth had been tied about his and Mahkaia's hands. Slowly, he reached into an inner pocket of his cloak and pulled forth a tattered strip of white cloth and stared at it. Lowering his head, Sekali began to sob bitterly, anguish embracing him in its terrible grip.

"You are my soul Mahkaia. How I've longed to tell you . . . be at peace. You are always in my heart." It was then that Sekali knew he was finished with this struggle.

It was over.

After a long while he slowly arose, turning back toward his companions. He could not recall a time when he had missed Mahkaia more. His heart felt truly broken. That she was now within the arms of eternal peace and rest, was his only consolation, and that was not much, for he was not with her.

Approaching camp, his limbs became heavy, and his strength began to fail. In a growing haze, he staggered, failing to find a place to rest before his legs gave out from under him. Uther and Finyat were instantly at his side to support and steady him. His vision grew dim as the earth beneath him revolved and tilted. Setting Sekali down, they made him comfortable. Uther then built a fire at Aria's request as she began to prepare a meal with dried herbs and vegetables retrieved from her pack.

After some water was heated, she added a variety of dried vegetables into the steaming water. As they absorbed the water, she sprinkled in a strange smelling herb, stirring it into the mix. Holding his hand tight, Aria fed him a bowl of soup. Finyat and Uther ate their meal together in silence, watching their friend's strength slowly return. For three days they did not travel, during which time, Aria tended to all their needs, paying especially close attention to Sekali, nurturing him back to health with every care.

On the third day, without neither word nor warning, Sekali stood and walked out of camp, making his way up onto the bridge. He did not see Aria follow at a distance, nor stop not ten paces behind him, a look of deep concern in the features of her face.

Stopping at the edge, he looked down at the dark, forbidding waters rushing through the jagged stones beneath, where the torn and decayed bodies of the slain were yet visible; a foreboding scene of death and carnage. Pulling his eyes from the sight below, his attention was drawn to his fallen enemy. Approaching his defeated nemesis, he stopped and looked down on it.

"You. You took her from me. I pray to holy Vannar you eternally struggle in vain for freedom within the Blackened Abyss. You deserve no less. Now, I send

you to the river below, even as you have sent others.” Sekali drew his blade and pushed every piece to the edge of the stone bridge, making sure not to touch his fallen enemy. Looking one last time into the black waters below, he scattered the body into its eternal grave and turned away . . . to see Aria, who stood before him, watching, a solemn look in her eyes filled with sorrow and pain. He stopped, gazing at her in silence as tears formed slowly in her eyes.

“I’m so sorry, Sekali.” A sudden flood of tears spilled nonstop down her face. Sekali’s heart suddenly ached for this wonderful woman. Approaching her, he bowed, suddenly exhausted in both mind and body.

“Milady, we should never have gotten this far without you. You are a blessing from Vannar, and I am grateful for your guidance, your strength, your endless, unyielding determination.” She smiled shortly, the tears still cascading her face.

“Sekali, I would take upon myself the emptiness you suffer.” She shook her head despairingly. “How long have you been cursed?” Sekali frowned, lifted his hand and gently brushed her tears away.

“Do not shed tears for me, or for my fallen wife, Aria. Even though we are parted in this life, I know we shall be reunited one day. In this, there is comfort. Do not weep.” He slowly sheathed his blade and gently took her in his arms, embracing her, just now realizing how tender this powerful Guardian's heart truly was. As he held her, the remaining stone within his heart softened to flesh, and he found himself yearning for his beloved Mahkaia. Shuddering, Aria looked up at Sekali.

“Let me do this for you, please.” He knew Aria could feel his emotions, his sadness, the yearning to join his lost wife. In this, she would suffered with him?

“Aria, are you sure you wish to do this? You feel what we all feel. I don’t pretend to understand how you do this, but it is a very heavy burden.” Aria nodded, her tears spotting the steel of his armor.

“I have to, Sekali . . . all my life I have served.” She looked up and managed a smile. “My path is like a forge; I was a raw and unrefined piece of metal. Yet

though all my trials, I have become tempered. Because of all these trials, I am become the blade of my people; a blade that will yet sunder my enemy . . . our enemy.” Again Sekali brushed away her tears and smiled down upon her, nodding, giving in.

“I accept your offer, my lady.” Resting the side of her head against his shoulder, she began to whisper.

“I take upon myself your pain, I taste its deepened sorrow.
I will suffer so you gain, a hope, renewed tomorrow.”

A feeling of comfort filled Sekali, and his pain diminished within, as if he were a container of unwanted, filthy water, suddenly emptied and cleaned out . . . ready to receive the fresh. Looking up at him, she grimaced, then forced a smile. As he stared deeply into her eyes, he noticed pain filling them . . . his pain. Astonished, he slowly pulled away, feeling the mental anguish of loss recede and dim within his heart. Speechless, he looked at the pain in her face and frowned. Maybe he had made a mistake. Maybe this was too much for her. She smiled, new tears forming within her eyes, then turned and walked away, heading back to camp.

A firm resolve instilled within him as he watched her gracefully stroll up to Finyat and embrace him as well. He watched her as she parted from Finyat and turned to Uther, who held up both his hands, shaking his head. Heading back, Sekali joined the three, packing up the camp. The next leg of their journey was about to begin.

Finyat would not go near the structure, and so they waited for him to bolster up the courage to cross over that terrible place. But he could not force himself to near it, so awful was the memory. Aria was finally able to coax Finyat across the bridge by embracing him tightly. As she did, she said something to him quietly in his ear. Finyat then perked up and held her hand as they both crossed.

Once on the other side he embraced her and whispered something to her.

She laughed and walked away, shaking her head. Finyat shrugged and fell in with the company, seemingly pleased with himself. Uther laughed richly.

“Finyat, you are smooth.” To which Aria threw a quick comeback.

“You owe me a Sovala Keenya for that, Finyat!” Finyat brightened, smiling ear to ear.

“How about two?” Uther looked expectantly at Finyat, until the Shallant rolled his eyes.

“I asked her to marry me. I think she said no, because I didn’t have a ring. Next time, I’ll have to remember that part.” Uther grinned.

“You, my friend, barely escaped the webs and clutches of an Elf!” Aria laughed, her eyes sparkling with delight.

Nearly three weeks passed them by, with Finyat once again leading the way. The massive tunnel crept by as slowly as did time. Every day (or night, they could not tell), seemed the same as the day before. At the end of the third week of traveling through the never-ending tunnel, it abruptly stopped, giving them the choice of turning to the right or to the left. Finyat whispered to them quietly, as if there were hostiles within the range of his voice.

“I fear the way to the left. I don’t know what it is, but that way has a bad feeling to it.” He shuddered, staring into the darkness, then nervously looked to Sekali. Uther thumbed the edge of his axe and sneered silently as he peered into the tunnel Finyat faced. Sekali chuckled, turning right at the advice of the Shallant.

“It does not matter the way we go; it matters that we choose the correct path.” Uther grinned, falling in step with the others as Finyat continued to guide them on.

“You know, these grand halls could be shaped and crafted nicely. There is good stone here to work with.” Aria glanced over at Uther.

“No doubt, sir, you could create the most beautiful city within these mountains. I doubt you not.” Finyat cut in.

“I’m glad we head this way. I tell you, I feel dread creep over me when I look the other way.” He pointed behind him without looking. “I feel cold.” Uther snorted loudly, startling Finyat.

“Mighty dragon slayer!” The Shallant shrugged, openly annoyed.

“Uther, I will admit that was a bit of luck. But it also was just an overgrown lizard, not a fire-breathing dragon – I tell you, something waits that way.” Uther stopped for a moment and peered hard back down the tunnel, swallowing, suddenly nervous.

“Well, you’ve got that uncanny sense; no disputing that. I’ve been with you long enough to trust your instincts.”

And so they set off, traveling ten days before the tunnel split, one section continuing on, the other branching off to the left, which was more a northern direction. Finyat's perception of direction was keen, and he led the company into the left tunnel that began to slope upwards.

As the days of their ascent turned into weeks, they felt as though they were lost in the deep of the earth, of course, with the exception of Uther. The tunnel seemed to oppress all but him, darkening their minds. The tunnel branched off many times, forcing them to make the decision on what path to follow. At times the carcasses of many creatures made the decision for them. Mostly, they relied on Finyat's sense of direction, which Sekali marveled at.

For six more weeks they traveled through a corridor of winding and twisted rock deep within the earth, trusting Finyat to bring them safely out. Finyat seemed constantly nervous, yet Uther was content, and bolstered the spirits of everyone with many tales of the deep.

When they camped, Uther would expound upon the legends of his homeland, which kept them sane, for unlike him, they were surface dwellers who needed light and air, and the warmth of the sun upon their faces. Uther was born in Tremor Keep, deep within the Gemstone Mountains. The underground of the earth intrigued him immensely. So while all his comrades craved the sun, and the stars above, he was content . . . more at home than they.

It was at the end of their nineteenth week within the mountains when the air about them began to steadily grow colder. As they pressed foreword, the tunnel ahead began to illuminate with the light of the outside world. Shivering, Finyat turned to the others and grinned.

“We are finally through the Mountains.”

They made camp, and a small fire just inside the mountain's entrance, for it was bitter cold up on the high ledge overlooking the view of a great forested valley shrouded in a fog-like mist. They spent the afternoon and night within the cave, bundling up within their cloaks and bedrolls. That evening, they all huddled closely together, for warmth, plagued by a strong wind that smote the mountain-side and threw mists of snow into the tunnel to swirl about them.

The winds brought in a winter storm, leaving a heavy blanket of snow just outside the cave within a short time. It was as if the icy fingers of winter were trying their best to grip them in its cold clutches from without the mountain to stop their progress. Finyat did not mind; he had taken a liking to Aria, and looked for every opportunity to be near her.

That evening, even with a fire burning, they were cold. The night brought on a more intense chill that crept into their clothing. Naturally, Sekali slept little, unlike Uther and Finyat, and so volunteered to keep the entire night's watch.

Kneeling with his back against the fire, he warmed himself as best he could. Facing the fire was blinding, which created the risk of missing potential danger. Bringing his hands behind his back allowed him to keep them warm. Of the four, he was the only one who had yet to experience cold and snow and freezing winds. As beautiful as the snow cloaked everything in the purity of white, he wished for no more.

It was late on the first night of the first watch, when Sekali heard the faint, yet distinct, sounds of deep, heavy breathing from deep within the tunnel. Quickly kneeling beside Aria, he shook her by the shoulder, instantly bringing her to full alert. Pointing into the tunnel, he moved to Uther and did the same, as Aria closed in on Finyat and shook him awake.

Once up, they all listened intently as a fine mist of snow snaked about their feet. The heavy breathing steadily grew louder as they listened. Sekali shot Aria a look that clearly stated, *We need to move, now*. Understanding, Aria motioned them to follow her. Leaving the fire burning brightly, they followed Aria; all but

Finyat, who had suddenly, mysteriously, vanished.

Retreating outside was not an option, as they would leave tracks, pinpointing their location and numbers. Ironically, to conceal themselves, they would have to go into the mountain, toward that which they were attempting to avoid.

Aria quickly led them back into the tunnel in search of a place to conceal themselves. On the way out, she had seen multiple areas which would do nicely. The problem was, how far back could they search for a place to conceal themselves before running into whatever it was coming out? Time was running out. In greater haste, she hurried, searching for a place to slip into. Just as Sekali began to doubt they would find a spot to conceal themselves, she pointed at a narrow fissure in the side of the tunnel, just wide and deep enough to give them some concealment and advantage. Quickly, they slipped into it.

Sekali took the position nearest the opening, listening to the heavy breaths of the creature growing louder and louder as it approached. Impact tremors began to vibrate the stone beneath their feet as the creature neared. Anticipating a confrontation, Sekali slowly began to draw his blade, until he felt Aria's hand cover his, stopping him. Slowly, he looked over his shoulder to see her shaking her head.

“Don't,” she mouthed, then withdrew her hand. Smoothly, he rested the blade back into its scabbard, abandoning the idea of open combat. Apparently, she had an idea what it was, and if she was reluctant to fight it, so was he. Returning his attention to the tunnel, he found himself wishing Mahkaia was with them.

They waited for only a minute before a massive humanoid lumbered up out of the depths of the cave into view. It was easily three times his height with broad, muscular shoulders and thick, knotted hands. Clad in the scaled hides of what he thought to be dragon-leather suggested both physical brawn and intelligence. The most shocking feature was the creature's three heads, a great eye at the center of each.

Passing them by, it approached the entrance and then halted, suddenly suspicious, all three heads sniffing as it glared about the area. Catching sight of the burning fire, it cautiously approached, two great stone clubs at the ready, and bent

over it. All three heads curiously tilted to the side, and it reached out and poked the dancing tongues of red with a large finger. Recoiling from the flames, it growled in pain, and shoved its finger into the mouth of its middle head as the other two glared angrily at the fire. In a sudden burst of anger, it pounded the fire several times with both clubs, extinguishing the fire almost instantly and causing smoke to rise. In triumph, it raised its clubs high to the cavern's roof and bellowed. As the monster gloried in victory over the now dead flames, Aria gripped Sekali's arm. Pulling herself up next to his ear, she whispered, "Triclops."

Intrigued by its three heads, Sekali watched in fascination as the Triclops stared hard at a hand-sized coal, still smoldering with heat. Bending closer, it watched it with great interest, until the wind shifted slightly, sending a small wisp of smoke into the eye of its middle head. Blinking in surprise, it backed away from the coal, a twisted look carving into its faces. Instantly, it bellowed in abrupt rage, and smote the coal with a club, sending a shower of tiny sparks scattering across the frosted floor of the cave. Frustrated at seeing more glowing coals, like the one that had just attack it, the Triclops dropped both clubs, grabbed a nearby boulder, raised it high, then began hammering every smoking coal in the area until nothing remained but black ashes strewn and mixed with the snow.

Its instant rage was an incredible display of its thickheaded and less intelligent nature; a deadly combination by which many aspiring heroes had fallen to in the past. After the rage of the Triclops was spent, the three headed giant retrieved both clubs and headed out toward the ledge, one head keeping a wary and suspicious eye on the ashes of the now, decimated fire, one staring at its burned finger, and the last looking to the exit of the tunnel. Stopping out on the wide ledge overlooking the valley far below, it once again placed its burned finger into the mouth of its middle head, nursing it for some time.

He knew they could defeat this brute with Aria's assistance. She harbored incredible power, rivaling the Sardakahn Gate Guardians. Looking back at her, he marveled how calm she remained in every situation. Looking up at him, Aria's eyebrows raised.

“What,” she mouthed. Looking back to the Triclops, he suspected he would not have the privilege of witnessing Aria unleash her full potential until they were within the city buried in the sea. Then again, he was not sure if he wanted to see Aria in her wrath. Truly, she was a force to be reckoned with. She was also wise; a rare quality he desired to cultivate within himself.

The Triclops pulled its finger from the mouth of its middle head and looked at it, annoyed. Shaking its hand in pain, the brute turned and abruptly lumbered off to the right, descending a wide ledge that clung to the mountainside, leading down to a grand forest below.

As they waited, the wind died down and stopped probing and tormenting them with its icy fingers. They all stayed quietly out of sight, trusting Finyat to follow the Triclops, then return and report its position, that is, if it was safe to do so. Sekali wondered if the Shallant would try and kill it, as he had the dragon. As expected, just before midday, Finyat returned, tired, hungry and cold.

“I followed it down the path, leading to the edge of a forest that begins at the base of the mountain. I think it hunts in the valley and returns here during the night. It is headed back up the mountain now, carrying something large and black. I could not see more than that.” Aria looked at the cave entrance.

“Let it come, then we will go,” she whispered. Huddled close together for warmth, the four waited for the Triclops to return.

Just before nightfall, the Triclops appeared, bearing an abnormally large black bear slung over its right shoulder with its head crushed in. Suspiciously, it stalked around the ashes and past the four, ignorant of their presence. Steadily, the Triclops lumbered back down through the tunnel, disappearing into the depths of the mountain, intent on its meal. To be sure it was gone, they waited for a lengthy amount of time, then crept silently out from the crevice and headed down the path toward the next stage of their journey.

Down a long, steep and traitorous path they carefully descended, hugging the sheer side of the mountain for safety. At the end of the rocky path set a thick border of trees that marked the beginning of a vast forest. Sekali's breath hung in the air, slowly dissipating as he spied into a thick forest border that looked like a barricade of gnarled sentinels guarding the region within.

“This place looks haunted,” he whispered. Uther shot him a skeptical look, then shook his head.

“That's absurd, Elf.” Finyat snickered, his face all eagerness.

“I wonder what kind of treasure a ghost collects?” Aria gave him a incredulous glance. Sighing with enthusiasm, she locked her fingers together behind her back and lifted, cracking both her shoulders.

“Let's move on, shall we?” Without waiting for a reply, she began hiking north. To Sekali, it seemed she knew exactly where she was going. Noticing an heir of excitement within Aria, portrayed by a change in her body language, as well as in her eyes, Sekali watched her. He noticed how she probed the forest ahead and to both sides, as if expecting something. She moved with increased confidence, even more than in her homeland. Moving up to her, he looked at her as they trudged through the blanket of white as it once again began to snow.

“This is the second time you have stared at me. What is it, or are you just looking?” Sekali wiped snow off his shoulders, shivering.

“I was about to ask you the same. What is it, or are you just looking?” Shaking her head slightly, she glanced up at him.

“Perceptive, aren't we?” Shrugging, Sekali moved a bit closer to Aria.

“The nature of the Wastelands instills an awareness for subtle change.” Smiling, she held a hand out before her.

“I am in my element once again.” Not falling for the decoy, he continued.

“What is it?” She sighed quietly.

“What is my element?” Laughing quietly, Sekali held up his hands, surrendering.

“You seem, excited, expectant, that's all.” Slowly, he began to fall back, taking his time so as not to attract the attention of the other two. There was no need to involve them in this conversation. Right as he began to distance himself, Aria briefly rested her hand upon his arm.

“If you were in familiar territory, would you not be likewise?” He thought about her question for a moment, then nodded.

“Of course,” he said quietly, and dropped the subject. Like countless shreds of cotton, the snow began to fall as a blanket of low-lying mist began to appear, creeping up from the snow-covered earth to shroud the forest in a phantom-like gloom that penetrated their clothes and armor, chilling them.

As they progressed, the snow slowly turned to sleet, sticking to them, melting into the cracks of their armor. As they descended, their feet often sunk into the half frozen mud, slowing them. By nightfall, the temperature had dropped, freezing the ground, making it easier to travel, but more frigid and cold. Early on, their feet occasionally broke through the frozen crust, creating havoc with their feet. Sekali and Uther kept slipping on uneven patches of half-living grass and uneven earth as they struggled on. Finyat and Aria seemed totally unaffected, to the consternation of Uther, who became maddened at the weather.

As the night wore on, the temperature dropped even further, freezing the ground altogether, making travel much easier, lightening Uther's mood. Somewhere, out in the night, the deep and lonely howls of many wolves broke the silence that, up until now, had only been interrupted by their breathing, and Uther's occasional grumping. Finyat, jogged up to Aria and grabbed her arm, stopping her.

“Those don't sound like common wolves,” he whispered apprehensively. Aria looked down at her arm, staring at Finyat's grip. He slowly let go of her and stepped back.

“I'm sorry, I didn't mean to grab-” Aria sighed and turned on the terrified Shallant, placing a hand on his forearm.

“No, they are not. We should keep moving, Finyat, it's getting too cold to be still.” Sympathetically, she patted the side of his face and smiled.

“When we travel to unfamiliar regions, things become strange. Do not think we are under attack just because these howls are deeper than the wolves you are used to back home. Come on, let's keep moving. Besides, wolves rarely hunt dragon slayers.” Finyat smiled.

“I hope not,” he stated with little more confidence than before speaking with her. With a reassuring look, she tightened her grip, even as a great howl shattered the still air.

“That was not a wolf!” Uther barked, pulling free his axe. Aria looked suddenly worried and looked around.

“Okay, see up ahead? There is a small clearing. Let's set up camp there and get a fire going. Come on!” She slipped her arm around Finyat's, taking it in escort fashion. Taking courage, Finyat made for the clearing. Once there, Aria stopped and looked around.

“In this case, fire will only help us in that it will keep us warm,” she said, un-shouldering her pack and kneeling beside it. Opening the top flap, she reached into her enchanted backpack and began pulling out a large tent. Seeing the tent intrigued Finyat. In awe, he shivered and began aiding her, which cheered him up.

“Can I help you set it up?” he asked, wanting her near.

“Please and thank you,” she replied, pulling out a number of long metal poles. He gladly helped her set it up, enjoying the time with her, even though the howling raked at his nerves. Sekali and Uther wandered the immediate area in search of firewood as the tent was being laid out. Realizing the frozen ground would not allow the tent-spikes to penetrate the frozen ground, they rigged the tent within a cluster of trees and tied it secure with a spool of thin rope.

As they prepared camp, the deep voices of wolves continued to fill the air all about them, this time much closer than before. Their strange, deep cries carried a threat on the night air, provoking fear into the hearts of all but one of the group.

Sekali noted Aria's apathy at their inhuman cries. Finyat pretended not to notice as he untied and spread his bedroll out within the tent. Uther stalked this way and that, gathering more wood than was needed. As the woodpile got deeper,

they listened to the sounds of what they thought to be a pack of giant wolves on the hunt. While Uther prepared wood for the fire, the other three worked together, preparing the campsite as the howling closed in about them. Finyat flinched as a single howl broke a long silence very near to the back of the tent. Jumping, he looked to Aria in fear as she entered the tent.

“Aria, are they hunting us?” She nodded soberly.

“Yes, they are. Finyat, these wolves are not the common sort you may be used to.” Finyat shivered as she turned away from him to secure a loose cord. As she began double-checking her work, Finyat cringed as yet another howl split the night air.

“Well, what does that mean?” he asked in growing terror. Sighing heavily, a sudden frown played across Aria's face. She took a deep breath and exhaled.

“Uther, Sekali, I wish to speak with you!” she called. The two came into the tent and stood before her, waiting.

“Okay, first off -” she began, but was cut off by a deafening howl that invaded the immediate area. Finyat looked at the back of the tent as if something would suddenly tear through it and rip them all to pieces. Uther placed a hand on his axe, but did not pull it free. Narrowing his eye at Aria suspiciously, his eyes began to darken.

Sekali watched Aria's body language. For the situation, the princess of the Eldishar seemed more at ease than normal for this type of situation. In fact, if he was not mistaken, Aria acted as though she was expecting company. Either way, what he was seeing in her demeanor was a stark contrast to the way Finyat was behaving. He had the suspicion she knew what was closing in on them, and her lack of fear was encouraging to him.

“We have been tracked and hunted to this spot.” Aria held up her hands, silencing Uther's comment even before he verbalized it. Snapping his mouth closed tight, the Dwarf glared at her. She knew him well enough by now to know he would become offensive the instant he spotted what hunted them. Before that happened, she needed to speak with them.

“They who are upon us are only guarding their own lands. They are known as The Pack.” She looked at Sekali. “In your homeland, The Watch.” Sekali nodded, fully understanding. Aria's attention turned to Uther, who seemed as though he was about to split in half.

“In your land, The Guard.” Uther raised a brow at her words, but did not take his hand from the handle of his axe, causing Aria to frown at him severely. “Uther, do you conspire to fail this mission?” Instantly he retorted, contempt dripping in his voice.

“Are you accusing me -” “Uther,” she cut in, “it would be best if you did nothing. You should go to bed. Maybe the cold has slowed your senses!” Her voice raised to a shout as she finished. The Dwarf's face turned red, his jaw setting firm. Noisily, he ground his teeth. Both glared stonily at one another for a long while, making the frigid air about Sekali seem warm and inviting. Finally, Uther gave in, lowering his hand from his axe.

“If you have led us into a trap, Aria, I will cut you first.” He opened the tent flap and stalked out into the night, not caring if there were ten-thousand wolves waiting to pounce him. Aria glared after Uther for a minute, then sighed heavily.

“Finyat, do you understand the nature of our next encounter?” He shook his head in silence and relieved himself of all his weapons, putting them carefully within his bedroll and covering them up.

“No, Aria, but I trust you.” He stood up and approached her, respect, faith and admiration in his body language. “I have every reason to have faith in you. I will go talk with him.” Without waiting for a reply, Finyat slipped out of the tent. She looked up at Sekali and spoke loudly.

“I'm glad Finyat has some wisdom in this matter, but Uther needs to curb his stubbornness . . . his temperament. It might be his demise.” Sekali unbuckled his sword-belt and threw it down next to his bedroll. He then ridded himself of both daggers, as well as his bow and quiver of arrows. Turning to Aria, he shrugged.

“What now?” She looked to the tent flap.

“Would you build a fire, We are all cold and hungry.” With a short bow, he

went out of the tent to see Uther already preparing tinder to get some flames ignited, mumbling something about ice. Sekali walked over and knelt by the unlit fire as the cold began to steadily penetrate him to the bones. One strike to a hand-sized rock of flint threw enough sparks into a pile of tinder to create tiny embers which Uther puffed into. Like magic, a tiny flame sprung to life within the tinder, igniting finger-sized flames. Placing the palm-sized ball of burning tinder within a prepared formation of fine kindling, Uther took a double handful of shredded wood and sprinkled it upon the tiny flames, instantly creating a large fire. As the flames shot up, he stacked larger pieces of wood over the burning wood in a standing triangular pattern.

Sekali was amazed at how quickly the Dwarf had brought a large, crackling campfire to life. It was as if Uther was a magician casting a spell. From the time the sparks hit the tinder, until a healthy fire was warming the area, took no more than three short breaths. Uther stood, staring into flames of the growing fire as Aria came out of the tent shivering.

A howl broke the silence, mingled with the crackling, popping wood of the fire as she stepped up close, warming her hands. After a warming her hands for a moment, she wrapped her arms about herself and looked out into the darkness. Uther did not look at her, but into the flames, either lost in thought, or ignoring her; Sekali was not sure. As the four warmed themselves, Aria began to sing, uttering words in a language foreign to them all.

*She came upon the land apace, Swift predator on prey
Her icy claw, her shadow cast, Nature's deadly day
Man and Norst`Kin once at war, Now allied wit and maw
Relying on each other more, Than sword against the claw
But even working side by side, They starved within this strife
Drawing lots, who should abide, Or leave and give their life*

*In company both Man and Beast, Mastered mood and storm
Secure within, for now at least, Safe and well and warm
Time passed on, new cycled life, History fading dim
Knowledge severed; time's deadly knife, Truth faded, tales to whim
Man and Beast were free to choose, a path they wished to follow
Without thinking, win or lose, Wisdom became hollow
And er` the feuds came on at first, Fraying once strong bond
Quickly turning, bloody thirst, Alliance shattered, gone
But Man, more cunning, won the fight, fleeing once-safe light
Into darkness, curse man's might, Safe wrapped in frigid night
Weakened, frozen, lost in time, Beneath moon upon the land
Howling, praying, splendid shine, Plot vengeance on all Man.
But Man, more cunning, won the fight, fleeing once-safe light
Into darkness, curse man's might, Safe wrapped in frigid night
Weakened, frozen, lost in time, Beneath moon upon the land
Howling, praying, splendid shine, Plot vengeance on all Man.
To this day Man yet does teach, In arrogance contends
Fierce Norst`Kin stay without their reach, Man biased to the end*

As she ended the song, Aria turned away from the fire and walked toward the thickest part of the tree-line and drew her blade, handle upward within her grasp. Kneeling, she placed her blade gently upon the frozen earth, both the point and cutting edge toward her. Then, a deep and sinister voice broke the silence.

“It has been years since I taught you our song. What brings you from your homeland, Eldishar? Do you pursue the Veleighen into our lands?” Aria held up open hands before her, palms facing up.

“If they be here, would you have allowed me such an honor?” Aria replied.

She placed the backside of her right hand upon the ground in front of her, elbow raised, lowering her head slowly. For a time there was silence.

“No. Who are they that travel with you? I do not recognize their scent.” Though the dark of night had no power to hinder his vision, Sekali could not see the creature Aria was communicating with. Looking around, he knew it was not alone, for that same darkness invaded the trees all about them. Aria turned, holding a hand toward the three.

“Sekali, Sardakk Elf of the Wastelands; Finyat of the Shallants; and Uther of the Kithrin Dwarf nation. All hail from their homeland, the Zurkel Mainland.” A deep rumble filled the air, casting a dread into the hearts of the three traveling with Aria.

“What is their purpose?” She shivered.

“Grisham, I am very cold. I swear an oath to you upon the forfeit of my life, they are confederate.” A deep and sinister growl rumbled from the trees.

“You would let me take your life?” Without hesitation, she nodded, her teeth beginning to chatter.

“Yes. I can't resist you,” she said without hesitation. Instantly a large timber wolf-like humanoid sprang forth from the shadows, its long, thick, serpent-like tail trailing behind it as it launched at Aria. Eyes suddenly widening in surprise, Aria screamed as it snatched her from the ground in a powerful grip, as if she were the weight of a mere child's doll.

The instant Sekali laid eyes on it, he knew what it was. He and Mahkaia had fought such a creature long ago in the Wastelands, just before engaging a young dragon. Unlike that one, this breed of Lykkinnin had spoken, communicated, and was far more advanced than the one he and Mahkaia had slain.

Aria's scream of surprise was instantly cut off as the creature gripped her about the waist, the other sliding up, and clenching the back of her head. Sekali watched on, not daring to move as Aria half vanished into the Werewolf's muscular arms and thick fur.

Finyat's mouth dropped open in terror as it bared its teeth and pulled her

head back, forcing Aria to look into its eyes. Glaring at her, it froze, as if deciding what to do next. Helpless, Aria looked into its eyes slanted eyes as it bent its attention down upon her. Slowly, carefully, she worked trembling hands free and raised them, gripping either side of the base of its jaw as it ran its razor-like talons over the back of her head. Finyat looked on in horror.

“She's dead . . . we're dead,” the Shallant whispered.

Its coat was a soft-brown, dry brushed white at the ends, as if a fine mist of snow had fallen upon it and never melted. Easily twice her height, and twice the weight of the bear they had encountered, it held Aria without strain, gazing down on her with eyes which held the heart of a crystalline-blue glacier. Within those terrifying eyes, smoldered a cunning intelligence.

Suddenly, Aria threw a wide grin at the Werewolf and laughed. The beast watched Aria's hair, as it flowed like water through its claws.

"I've missed you," it breathed. When reports of your scent was discovered, I came quickly." Grisham gently let her down, then stooped, reaching for her blade. Without warning, the princess of the Eldishar launched at Grisham, driving her shoulder hard into the beast. Too late to evade her attack, she executed a perfect technique, catching it off guard and landing it on its back. With a hand upon its chest, Aria growled viciously, then whispered, "I missed you too." Backing off Grisham, Aria watched the Werewolf stand. With a deep, sinister chuckle, it retrieved her blade and handed it to her, hilt first. Aria took her katana, cleaned and secured it.

"I knew you would find us. Well, I hoped you would," she eagerly added, moving close to the Werewolf for warmth. "I would have come sooner, but I had my duties," she stated, her teeth beginning to chatter. "I hope you will forgive my absence." Grisham shook his head, his ears laying back.

"We both have our duties, and serve with honor. There is nothing to forgive. As well, I could have come to you. I hope you will forgive my absence." Aria grinned.

"We both have our duties, and serve with honor. There is nothing to forgive," she replied, repeating his words. Grisham bent down to her neck, closed his eyes and inhaled long and deep. As the Werewolf took in her scent, Aria did the same, exchanging the formal greeting of the Norst`Kin Lykkinnin. Aria sighed, taking a step back.

"Did you know a Triclops hunts in your forest? It hails from the entrance to

the mountain cave,” Aria informed the Werewolf. Grisham sighed, coming to as if awakened from a daydream, and shook his head.

“Yes, we let it.” She bit her lip and closed one eye, narrowing the other at Grisham.

“Why?” With a deep growl, Grisham motioned toward the mountains.

“Its presence keeps the Veleighen and other unwanted out of our lands. We have decided to let it be.” Grisham looked over at Sekali and his companions, who watched the two in silence.

“Welcome to Norst`Kin Valley,” Grisham rumbled. Turning from Aria, it dropped down on all four legs, stalked over to the fire and sat down. Closing its eyes, it enjoyed the flames, silently basking in the heat. After a while, Grisham sighed, eyes still closed.

“What brings you so far from your packs?” it inquired as Aria slipped up under its right shoulder, pressing into its furry side. Without hesitation, the Lycanthrope pulled her close as Sekali pulled his third of the amulet forth. Looking over at Finyat and Uther, he motioned them to do the same. As all three amulets were revealed, glinting in the dancing flames of the fire, Sekali explained.

“Together, these amulets are the key to the raising of the Sister City on the northern sea coastline of this continent. We have come to fight for its rebirth.” Grisham growled, opened its large, slanted eyes, narrowly looking upon him.

“That land is not due north; it is north and a little east, Sekali of the Wastelands. And if you think you can do this deed, you are more powerful than you smell.” Grisham sniffed.

“It will take one of great cunning to get you into that accursed city. In this, you have chosen well in Aria's guidance.” Looking down at her, Grisham was silent for a minute. The great Lycanthrope took in a deep breath, its eyes falling on the border's of Aria's guardian robes.

“I see she bears the symbols of your names, and so you may succeed. But know this, there is a Veleighen warship that has long since departed the ports of Valurin. It is heavily laden with supplies and their feline steeds.” Aria looked up at

Grisham as he gave them this unwanted news. The hackles on the back of Grisham's neck lifted.

“Aria, there is one ship that sails from that port every season in search of the cave that is the only entrance to your destination. Though they seek it, I do not believe they know it is a cave. Until this season, they have searched the wrong area. Aria, this time they are close, very close. They will find it. I have scouts watching that area at all times. We do what we can to prevent them from entering.” Aria pulled herself free of Grisham and stood. She looked at the three, Uther last of all, then turned to Grisham.

“What is to be done, Grisham, what is the straightest and safest course?” Grisham shook and stretched, a few joints cracking in his thick neck as he raised his head to the star-filled sky above. Sekali was thankful for Aria’s presence, supposing the journey might have ended here had she not been their guide.

“Aria, Princess of the Eldishar, High Guardian of the Forest of Utaemia, are you asking for my aid?” Aria brightened, gripping the thick fur of his long and muscular arm, shaking her head.

“No. I’d never ask anything of you,” she said, hope kindling in her eyes.

“Liar!” Grisham roared, to which she tightened her grip on the Werewolf.

“I dared not hope for any aid. It would be a great honor to run with you again . . . welcome to our pack!” Grisham sneezed and lowered to the ground, grooming its talons noisily, its eyes fixed on Uther. Once its talons were sufficiently clean, it raised its head, ears pricking forward toward the Dwarf and sniffed.

“Uther, are you ready for a real fight?” Without hesitation, the Dwarf ripped his axe from its resting place and raised it high.

“Yes!” The Dwarf snarled. Grisham snorted.

“Well met then, Uther of Tremor Keep, son of Thragur.” Uther was stunned at Grisham’s statement.

“How did you know -” “I know your homeland well, Uther,” Grisham cut in. “I have been there, though your people did not smell me out, ha!” Grisham’s

baritone laughter, and the gleam emanating within its eyes, gave Sekali chills. Focusing on Finyat, the Werewolf stood and stomped the ground heavily, causing the logs in the fire to collapse and settle, sending sparks up from the flames into the frigid night sky.

“You will not die this day, Finyat, Wander Thief, Master of Shadow.” The Shallant's eyes slightly widened at the titles, but he said nothing in return. Grisham left quickly to the camp's edge and stopped. Lifting a great paw, he inhaled deep. Raising his head to the stars, the Werewolf's howl shattered the night with an unnerving cry. The sight of Grisham's breath hanging in a heavy mist before him, enhanced the terror of the beast. Other nearby howls came in answer, one after the other as Grisham communicated for a short time with his pack.

As they cooked their dinner, a full moon crested the horizon, greeting a multitude of stars as it added its illumination to the night. Grisham pricked up his long ears, cocking his head slightly, watching the moon with great interest. Aria nuzzled into Grisham's side again to keep warm as Uther stoked the fire high, he and his two companions watching the beast intently as it gazed at the moon without blinking. Aria watched in silence, content within the sheltering arms of a creature most all would flee in terror from. When the moon reached its zenith, Aria broke the silence, whispering, "Do you miss her?." Without looking down, Grisham pulled Aria tight.

"Very much." Aria smiled.

"She will return to you, I foresee it." The great Lycanthrope looked down at her.

"Good. I trust your word on that. Until then, I will wait patiently."

"Uther, Finyat," she called out, "I stowed away some kohakk in my pack. Do not to drink too much, for we have an early start in the morning." Not surprised, she watched as the two launched a drinking contest, not heeding Aria's instructions. Soon the night was filled with glee as the two sang songs and laughed, enjoying each others companionship and forgetting the troubles of the world.

In silence, Sekali ate a meal of herbs and dried vegetables, softened by hot water. The food at the Golden Feather, back in the City Port Navan was much better, but this was satisfying. As he ate, images of his past danced and twisted through his head like tiny, chaotic, marionets, reminding him of home, where once he enjoyed true belonging. Not all his thoughts were of loss and regret. Touching the five braids at the left side of his head, his mind turned to her; the Druid. She was kind, loving, accepting, patient, beautiful. Through great loss, they had met. It didn't make sense to him, but it happened. Now he was, once again, engaged.

Guilt began to twist into his chest, like a frosted iron gauntlet gripping his heart. He felt as though he were betraying Mahkaia by taking on Mabuhi as a wife.

Like a javelin to the heart, regret pierced him with a terrible pain as scenes of her played out before him, scenes he wished he could forget, but found himself clinging to. She was everything in the world to him. Oh, how they would walk and talk for hours, enjoying one another's company. Finally, after ten years, she had consented to become his wife. She was killed a few short days later. Now, he walked alone. Taking a bite of his dinner, he found himself lamenting the longevity of his race.

On The Watch, after Mahkaia's death, he had become fierce, offensive, vicious and unmerciful against every foe that challenged his team. Why? For one reason: He wanted to die. Death was the gate that led to the afterlife where she waited for him.

Sekali's thoughts ventured to the many questions which built up in his mind. For instance, why had the Soul`Reaper been on the bridge at the time he needed to cross? Why, when a Sardakk battalion was hard pressed to take the Soul`Reaper down, had he succeeded, and only with Aria's aid? Yes, he had grown stronger over the decades -- but that strong? It had to be Aria; there was no other explanation for his victory. If it was Aria that turned the tide against his enemy, aiding him to successfully destroy that horrid apparition, she was a far more powerful Guardian that he could imagine.

Another thought plagued Sekali: If that horror had already been slain by his people long ago, why was it in the mountain? Was it not destroyed? If it was not truly destroyed, but only defeated, again, where was it now?

Looking over at Aria, Sekali watched her, desiring to speak with her. As he stared at the Eldishar Elf, her attention turned to him, catching his eye. Returning to his dinner, he finished it, avoiding further eye contact. Once finished, he set his plate down on the ground and stood.

“Aria, thank you for the meal,” he said, briefly placing his right hand over his heart. She was still watching him.

“You are welcome, Sekali. If circumstances permitted, I would have prepared something better.” Sekali threw her a half smile, then walked away to the

edge of camp.

Just within the light of the fire, he knelt, facing the mountains, his eyes rising to the stars as his thoughts turned back to the woman he loved and missed. The pain in his chest grew as he recalled the first time she kissed him. But that was all in the past now, lost forever. She was free as he remained a prisoner. Sekali shivered as his armor began to cool. Maybe, at this journey's end, she would come take him away into the next world, where they could be together again. Tears of regret and longing spilled from his eyes throughout the night as he silently prayed to Vannar for mercy. No matter how he desired to turn back the hands of time, such a desire was impossible.

Finishing this mission was dire for everyone. If the Sister City fell into the hands of the Veleighen, not only would Aria's people be threatened, but Finyat's, Uther's and Grisham's as well. This, he would not allow. He pondered the safety of his people. Ironically, the Wastelands were an effective barrier of deterrence surrounding Sardakahn Citadel. Even if the Wastelands failed to keep the Veleighen at bay, the survivors would face the fury of his people, many of which could deal out mass devastation upon foes.

There was also his master; a powerful Mystic. It would take an age for the entire Veleighen military to take down the Monolith – if they could manage it. In this, the Veleighen seemed no more a threat than the horrors of the Wastelands themselves. However, the Sardakk were vulnerable. If Gaunten, the capitol city of the Zurkel Mainland, and dwelling place of King Nishane Asmond, fell under Veleighen siege, a Sardakk Elf army would instantly come to her aid. An attack on Gaunten would not be tolerated. Too many plots, plans and counter plans began to swirl within his skull. Grimacing, he shook his head, banishing it all. “One thing at a time,.” he thought to himself. “Focus, focus.”

As the moon slowly descended into the horizon, it nestled into the tops of the trees, gifting him with a calm peace. Though he did not understand the words, Aria's song had drawn him deep into this forest, then up into the hills and

mountains where his mind took flight into the skies, eventually taking him into the stars above. Her song had meaning and purpose, he could feel it. Again, too many thoughts. The cold did not seem to bother him, yet he did not see Aria shiver and move closer to the fire.

Closing his eyes, Sekali meditated into blackness to escape the whirling maelstrom of his mind, and the biting chill that began to settle into his body, yet did not seem to do more than chill him. Feeling the comfort of its embrace, he basked in a void of darkness that had never failed to gift him with peace. Tranquility filled his being for a time, until a delicate hand slipped into his, startling him greatly. Slowly, the realization of who it was dawned on him. Tightening his grip, Sekali slowly opened his eyes and beheld his beloved Mahkaia.

“I miss you,” he lamented, tears suddenly clouding his vision. Mahkaia smiled.

“I miss you more,” she countered. Reaching over, he fixed a few strands of her long, black hair, tucking them behind her left ear.

“Are you free from the curse? I killed your murderer. Are you at peace?” Content, she nodded.

“Until recently, I did not know who I was. After, it all came back to me - what had happened - I was haunted for many years, tortured by the memories of who I was, and of losing you. But now, thanks to you, I am free.” Sekali felt a growing panic as he witnessed Mahkaia slowly fade before his eyes.

“Wait, Mahkaia, please. What am I supposed to do now? Wait!” But she was gone.

Darkness surrounded him.

Startled out of a dream in which his companions had left him to do the mission alone, Sekali quickly stood and looked over to see Finyat and Uther sleeping. Grisham lay close to the fire with his eyes closed. Aria stood nearby, watching him with an expression of sadness in her eyes. Stepping away from the Werewolf, she silently came before Sekali and wrapped her arms about his neck, embracing him.

“Who are you?” Sekali whispered, returning her embrace.

“Aria of the Eldishar, the Wielder of Burdens. You should know that by now.” Sekali shook his head, desiring to know more about her, as if by knowing more would somehow fix the gaping rent in his soul, or give him the power to protect others.

“Sekali, shielding, strengthening and carrying the burdens of others is a gift that cannot be taught. Since birth, it has been an innate part of who I am. Early in my life, after coming of age, I discovered that the path of the Guardian compliments this ability I was born with.” She stared into his eyes, holding them captive, waiting for a response. Not knowing why he did it, Sekali bent toward her slowly and kissed her. Not only allowing his kiss, she returned it, smiling. As their lips parted, she stared into his eyes happily.

“Sekali, do you truly love Mabuhi?” she whispered. Shocked, Sekali came out of the dream to find Aria sitting at his right, holding his hand. As he turned to her, she smiled.

“Sekali, she will need you, as you will need her, before the end.” He shivered, but not from the chill of the night air.

“Who?” Giving him a doubtful glance, she shook her head slightly.

“Mabuhi, who else?” In wonder, Sekali's looked upon Aria, staring at the Eldishar Princess, not quite knowing what to say. Aria rolled her eyes and squeezed his hand tight, a seriousness flooding into her illuminated eyes.

“Sekali, Mahkaia is dead and gone. You will not heal if you keep on in the path you have created for yourself. She is now free. Now, free yourself as well . . .

let her go. It does no good to waste away your mind away within dreams. Please, Sekali, let her go.” Shattered by her words, tears spilled down his face as he began to tremble.

Aria turned and embraced Sekali, closing her eyes, reaching and feeling for a connection that would permanently enable her to share the burden of his sorrow. Perceiving an emptiness, she touched upon it, tasting the misery of a harrowed soul that caused her to instantly recoil, as if suddenly burned. Hesitating for only a moment, Aria's resolution to help Sekali solidified. As if diving into deep, dark water, Aria plunged into true, unbridled despair, embracing and absorbing the heavy feelings of being lost and forgotten, forsaken and forlorn. In shock, Aria's eyes shot wide open as decades of pain and grief flooded into her soul. Crying out in Silence, Aria tightened her hold on Sekali, refusing to break the connection between them. Gripping him tight, Aria desperately absorbed as much anguish as possible, astonished at the pain this Sardakk Warrior harbored.

Long into the night, Sekali returned Aria's embrace, feeling the burdens of Mahkaia's loss, coupled with the plague of loneliness, lift. As the sky began to gray in the east, Sekali tightened his embrace for a moment, then released her.

“Thank you,” he whispered, suddenly aware of a great weariness inflicting her. “Are you going to be alright?” She nodded.

“Once I get used to this, it can be mastered. How about you?” Sekali thought about it.

“I don't know how you did it, but a great darkness has been taken from me. Thank you. I don't know how else to say it. Thank you.”

“You are most welcome, Warrior of The Watch. Would you do me a favor, and gather up the camp? I need to rest a little before we move on.”

“Of course I will,” he said. Picking her up, he carried her over to the fire and set her down. After adding four logs to the fire, he began packing up everything.

Surprisingly, Uther and Finyat awoke in high spirits. Not only that, they made breakfast for all. Without a sound, Grisham arose, stretched and went to

Aria, nudging her tenderly. They began speaking quietly with each other as Finyat and Uther finished up the morning meal. When breakfast was ready, they all ate. Grisham would not touch the food, but left for a short while to find a breakfast of his own. While Grisham was gone, they broke camp, heading north, and a little east. As they traveled, Sekali watched Aria, who moved along at a slower pace than usual. She was pale, and continually tightened her jaw. Slipping up beside her, he offered an arm, which she gratefully accepted.

“Do you need to stop and rest?”

“No, I’ll be alright.” Aria leaned on him heavily. After a time, she shook her head, perplexed.

“Never before have I felt such depth of despair. How did you bear this for so long?” Not only was she heavily fatigued, but he was the cause of it. Aria stumbled and quickly corrected her balance. Without hesitation, Sekali scooped her up into his arms and continued on. Aria half-heartedly struggled to get down, but Sekali tightened his hold on her.

“Please rest,” he whispered. “You have done so much for us. Now let me do this for you, please.” Aria hesitantly relaxed, laying her head against Sekali’s shoulder.

“Okay, but if I get to be a burden, let me down. I’ll just close my eyes for a little bit.” Aria was smaller and much lighter than Sekali, making it no burden to bear her. Soon, Aria was sleeping in his arms as they slowly distanced themselves from the mountains.

At mid-morning, Grisham caught up with them and fell in beside Sekali, a concerned expression filling the beast’s eyes.

“What happened?” he growled.

“Last night, she helped me with a burden of great magnitude. She is exhausted.” Sekali looked at Grisham. “She is quite amazing.” The Werewolf looked at Sekali.

“That she is, Sekali of the Wastelands.” Sekali bore her into the early afternoon before she opened her eyes. As she returned to consciousness, she

sighed in relief.

“Thank you,” she said, and kissed his armored neck. Sekali set her down.

“I am the one who is grateful. Thank you,” he returned, then fell back to the rear of the company. Aria drew close to Grisham, draped an arm over its neck and leaned against the Werewolf, still exhausted.

“I hope you don't mind, sir,” she said, throwing the beast a sentimental smile. Turning its great head, the Werewolf blew her hair back with a puff of breath.

“Never.” She began absently scratching the base of its ears as they made their way across a frozen creek and through a small depression in the earth. Halfway across, Finyat stopped and pointed, bringing a half sunken, rock structure to their attention.

“What is that?” he inquired, looking at Aria. Shaking her head, Aria motioned them on.

“An ancient dungeon, I think. On the way back, perhaps we can look into it. We cannot risk the delay, though I regret not looking into this place.” Finyat shrugged, took one last look at it, then continued walking. A year ago, he would have laughed at Aria and gone in anyways.

As they moved on, Sekali noticed Aria still looked exhausted, even though she was determined to travel. When she stumbled, Grisham instantly scooped her up into powerful arms and cradled her.

“Get some rest,” Grisham commanded, rising up on its back legs. Aria snuggled against the Werewolf's chest and closed her eyes as they moved on, instantly falling asleep.

At Grisham's request, each of the three told of their homeland, and the legends therein, reciting, in short, their history to a Norst`Kin Lycanthrope, a legendary horror, who curiously inquired.

Sekali would have never allied himself with any type of Werewolf. . . until now. Never in all his days had the thought occurred to him that there were any such thing as naturally born, or true-race Lycanthrope. He had always supposed

them to be created at the hand of a curse, to plague mankind, and to take the unwary into madness. Grisham was not infected; he was naturally born of a mother and father, who were in fact Werewolves. After walking for some time, Sekali moved up by Grisham.

“Once, when I was out in the wilds of the wastes,” he stated quietly, “we were attacked by a Werewolf. I never knew there were true-blood Lycanthrope. It never crossed my mind that there was such a race as yours. I honestly thought the curse of the Werewolf was brought down upon mankind, due to some crime committed against nature. I thought Werewolf was the creation of Ryagg, sent to punish us for our misdeeds.” Grisham adjusted Aria carefully in his muscular arms and raised his nose to the morning sky, sniffing.

“You are not wrong in that belief, Sekali. But, I am not part of that curse. My people have been around since the dawn of time, just as your people have.” Sekali thought about the words she had sung the night before. He looked at Aria, admiring her.

“That song is a true history.”

“Yes,” Grisham rumbled. “One day, I will tell you the tale. It is a lengthy history, and should be recited without interruption, or distraction. Focus, for now.” Sekali caught the fierce eye of the Lycanthrope, and nodded.

“I look forwards to hearing it.”

Guided by the Lycanthrope, they traveled, hiking steadily for many days to the center of Norst`Kin Forest; a grand and eerie woodland, the likes of which few had ever seen. About the floor of the great forest, were strewn a sea of boulders, both great and small. Great mists of flowing fog forever coursed across the land, like an endless host of phantoms in a never ending, eerie march. At times, the sun would find an opening in the mists, shining through for short while, then vanish, only to be shrouded once again. The large and sturdy trees of the forest, within the mists, appeared as ghastly apparitions, their branches stretching and reaching out as if grasping at the sky, begging for the light of the sun. At times Grisham would leap up onto a massive boulder and howl. Most of the time there was silence; at times somewhere off in the mists, there came similar cries.

One day, as they passed through the heart of the forest, they happened upon forty spears set in the ground. Atop every spear was piked the ghastly sight of forty Veleighen heads, their bodies lying forever frozen on the ground below. Sekali was compelled to stop and stare. A sense of foreboding doom filled his mind and heart as he gazed upon the scene, so silent, so final. Behind the spears lay the mauled and torn bodies of their powerful feline steeds. His eyes fell upon one of the cats with its head thrown back in an eternal, silent scream. Grisham drew close to Sekali.

“They came not one moon prior to your entrance into my land. I believe they were looking for the same thing you seek.” Sekali stared at the bodies for a time, as if he did not hear Grisham’s voice, nor feel the heat of the great Lycanthrope’s breath invading upon him again and again and again.

“Grisham, was there ever a time when the Veleighen were in harmony with the other races?” Grisham lowered its head and sneezed, almost violently. Growling, the lycanthrope bared its teeth.

“One other race is known to run with the Veleighen. They are known as the Zendahr, and are much like the Veleighen in their lust for conquest over all other

races.” Grisham pricked its ears forward and snarled halfheartedly.

“The Zendahr are pups as to the physical prowess of the Veleighen, yet they are brilliant, creating havoc among other packs prior to Veleighen conquest. Each time we take them down, we allow one in each pack to escape, unless they are too close to a critical point of knowledge. We cannot allow them to return to their people with such knowledge. If they have not discovered something of significance, we let one . . . escape. In this, more always come . . . the fools.” Again Grisham sneezed and idly pawed at the frozen surface of the ground.

“You bait them.” Grisham ripped a large rock up from the frozen soil and began playing with it as if it were the weight of a mere unfilled backpack.

“No, it is our way; a challenge offered. These are our lands but we do not track other races and hunt them down, unless they are a threat. If that be the case, as is our relationship with the Veleighen and the Zendahr, then we find our sport. Many moons ago they came in a great pack and tried to drive us out. It was a grand hunt, and a glorious battle!” Grisham looked over at Finyat, who appeared terrified, and growled softly.

“Again, we let one go, though he thought he escaped us.” Finyat shuddered and smiled nervously, taking an involuntary step back from Grisham. Quickly, Grisham turned on him, placing a great paw upon his shoulder. Delicately, the claws of the Werewolf wrapped about his shoulder and back, stopping him. Finyat trembled as the Lycanthrope’s great muzzle neared his face, breathing hot air upon him steadily and baring its teeth. Aria turned away, hiding a smile as Grisham backed Finyat into one of the spears, causing him to stumble over the body before it.

“Finyat of the Shallant pack, you are no threat.” Grisham released Finyat, turning to Uther.

“Fear, etched into the hearts of an enemy, makes for easy tracking, should they, Uther of the Kithrin Pack.” Uther nodded and growled, looking as though he suddenly saw the Veleighen from afar, and desired battle.

After Aria had recovered her strength, they continued their journey through

the forest of mists, Grisham leading them for many more days upon paths familiar only to the Norst`Kin. Snow and sleet fell in heavy downpours at times, obscuring their vision. Undaunted by the weather, Grisham knew the lands well, guiding them flawlessly to the far north-eastern edge of the forest without mishap.

One day Grisham stopped, raised up high and pointed north.

“I will say my farewells now. Aria, come this way on your return journey, and we will hunt the Veleighen together. Aria forced a smile, though it was obvious she was disappointed by Grisham's sudden departure.

“It will be a good hunt on that day, Grisham. Thank you.” As Aria embraced the Lycanthrope, she was gently lifted up into powerful arms and held close. Grisham placed his nose into her neck and inhaled long and deep.

“I have your scent Aria; I will always find you.”

“I miss you,” Aria whispered, and kissed the side of its head, nuzzling him sentimentally. The great Lycanthrope growled, holding her tight. She closed her eyes for a long while before letting go.

“And I, you. Good hunting, until we meet again.” Aria was lowered to the ground. Grisham turned to Sekali and his companions and began carving the ground with a right paw.

“May your hunt track a successful ending. If you should return this way, I will find you . . .” Uther interjected quickly, growling, as if he could not stay his tongue.

“And Veleighen blood will flow!” Grisham’s eyes narrowed at Uther.

“That, Uther of the Kithrin Pack, is written in the moon.” Uther bowed. Grisham turned to Finyat and placed a paw upon his shoulder. Less afraid now, Finyat wrapped his small arm about Grisham’s thick wrist.

“Finyat of the Shallant pack, tales have reached my pack that you have singlehandedly slain a weathered Hunter Dragon. Well met, Finyat! One so small should never be underestimated. It would be an honor to run with you, should the occasion arise.” Finyat beamed a smile up at the Lycanthrope.

“I would find it a pleasure to be at your side, hunting. Farewell.” Grisham sneezed and turned upon Sekali.

“The tale of your battle within the mountain rides upon the mists, Sekali. There is honor mantled upon you for this deed. I hope you weather it.” Sekali wasn’t sure what Grisham meant by that, but bowed and then saluted in the manner of his custom.

“May your Pack never fail,” Sekali replied. Grisham sneezed again and pawed the ground, lowering its frightful head to Sekali, eyes burning like blue gem-fire.

“I wish to have seen that battle. But we may yet hunt together one day.” Sekali nodded and looked at his companions and then to the north where lay their destination. Grisham spoke one last time.

“Your path now takes you up onto the great plateau of the Kedge`Noth Plains, where my pack hunts for sport. Follow it warily north and a little east. You will come to the other side of these plains in due time; descend the plains and your journey will take you to the great waters of the Northern Sea. When you reach the shoreline, follow it north until you come upon a lesser sea, set inland. There will be a small cave at its western edge. Within that cave is found the entrance to the Sister City. Take caution in that cave, for it has a shaft at the rear that will drop you to your death if you are careless. May the hair of your heads never fall!” Grisham howled long up at the sky above, then bolted, speeding back the way they had come. As Grisham passed by Aria, she held out a hand, brushing the Werewolf from head to tail. Aria turned as Grisham sped into the mists, vanishing in silence.

When the Norst`Kin Lycanthrope was no longer visible, Aria turned and looked at them. Noticing the Shallant holding his stomach, a sudden smile brightly flashing across her face.

“Let’s eat!” In silence they ate cold rations and leftovers. It wasn't much, but it didn't matter anymore.

Before ascending the narrow switchbacks, Aria produced four sets of extreme winter clothing. She handed each a set, took one for herself, then began removing her sword and belt. After setting her sword down, she began removing her armor, stacking it before her. Finyat looked at his snow suit and grimaced.

“This will not fit me, Aria.” Uther agreed, shrugging.

“If you have some twine, we can make them fit us.” Aria pointed to the many straps adorning the entire suit.

“Adjust these to make the clothing fit.” Uther snorted.

“Why did we not wear these before?” Holding her's up, she cringed.

“I knew this question would come up. Please, forgive me for that. You see, this suit is designed for sub-arctic conditions. It was not cold enough to wear until now; you would have been too hot.” Finyat snickered.

“The cooler temperature won't make any difference in your case,” he mumbled. The Eldishar Princess turned on Finyat.

“What did you say?” Aria asked. The Shallant pretended not to hear her and followed her example, removing his armor. Grinning secretly, she sighed and shook her head. She knew exactly what he meant, and was flattered. He was comparing her to a fire. Hiding a grin, she focused on the task at hand, wondering at the audacity of the Shallant. His race was different, unique, she had to admit.

“I could not risk these snow suits being damaged. This plateau is why I brought them. I also see, I could have brought lesser apparel. I hope you all will forgive me for my lack of foresight.”

“Well, I forgive you,” Finyat beamed. Uther grumped, saying nothing. Sekali shook his head, smiling.

“We are here, that is what matters,” Sekali reassured her. Walking over to him, Aria helped Sekali with his snow suit, adjusting every buckle and strap until it fit him perfectly. She then assisted in strapping his armor back on. Once all the adjustments were made, she moved to Uther and did the same. After the Dwarf was ready, she turned to Finyat, who looked like a snake, failing to shed its skin.

Raising a hand to her mouth, she laughed.

“I'm sorry, Finyat, these suits are not made for the stature of your race.”

Finyat gave her a serious look, narrowing his eyes.

“At least I don't have the curse of being exceptionally hot, and have to settle for a Werewolf boyfriend, because I can't secure a date otherwise.” Uther barked out a laugh that was instantly silenced by a knife-like glance from Aria.

“Well, I can look at a crow and not be jealous of the competition,” she retorted. Finyat rolled his eyes.

“Yeah? I'm glad I don't look like an over-sized pixie who lost her wings.” Eyes widening in indignation, Aria looked Finyat up and down.

“You are about the right size.” Quick as a snake striking its prey, Finyat threw it right back at her.

“But you have the right intelligence.” Aria hissed, narrowing her eyes dangerously.

“At least I have intelligence.” Waving her off with one hand, Finyat smugly countered.

“People with a low intelligence always say things like that, pixie girl.” Suddenly curious, Aria shrugged.

“Do ravens get upset when you enter their territory? I heard they started a petition against you.” The Shallant dramatically shivered, then neared Aria, as if trying to be confidential.

“Of course! All lesser species are jealous of my abilities. Isn't that why you are trying to outwit me?” Pushing him back, she growled.

“When you wake up to realize this is all just a desperate dream you have to be what all the other Shallants are naturally, I don't want to hear you whining.”

“Now, don't change the subject, you whistling leaf hopper. The other day, I heard the Gnomes were signing a petition to stop you from dancing on their flowers.” This comment caused Uther to look at Sekali and whistle. Sekali watched on, speechless. Aria stepped up to Finyat and puffed a breath of air in his face.

“Did your mother slap your father when you were born?” Laughing once, Finyat blew a breath back into the Eldishar Elf’s face, not giving in.

“Ha! At least I have a mother. You were born from bark, ya` tree hugger!” Unwilling to give in, both Aria and Finyat glared at each other.

Sekali could not believe what he was hearing. Never in his life had he witnessed such behavior, and from a princess! This coming from Finyat didn’t surprise him. He was sure Finyat would go to any measure and means to win such a confrontation. This type of chaotic disrespect would justify banishment from Sardakahn Citadel. Speechless, Sekali suspected Aria would have cut his head off, had not Finyat been wearing the amulet about this neck. Uther stood beside Sekali, his feet planted firmly apart, an wide grin splitting his face as he watched the two trade racial blows. It was obvious, the Dwarf was enjoying this contest as much as he craved battle. Relentlessly, Finyat pressed the offensive, digging it into the princess of the Eldishar Elves.

“I hear you are going to be the first Utaemian ice queen in history. All pay homage to the beautiful pixie ice queen of snow, whose children, being part Werewolf, will relate and play with wolves better than with normal flower-hoppin` Elf children!” Finyat knelt down and began bowing repeatedly to her as he made a deep humming sound.

Like a sudden crack of thunder, Uther snorted, bellowing in laughter as his buddy mercilessly drove a social dagger into her heart. Horrified, Sekali wanted to backhand the both of them. With a look of total, wide-eyed, surprise, Aria looked down at Finyat as he paid homage to her, then burst out laughing.

“I’m not going to win this, am I?” Finyat jumped to his feet and smugly folded his arms, the sleeves of his snow suit falling down over his hands. Shaking his head, he grinned in triumph.

“Nope,” he stated. Aria placed a hand to her chest and bowed dramatically.

“Then, I concede,” she said humbly. “I know a foe beyond me when I see one.” Stepping close to Finyat, she grabbed him by the arm and pulled him into a quick hug, provoking a smile from him, then began working on the straps of his

snow suit, beginning with the arms.

“Two out of three?” he challenged. Smirking quietly, she focused on the task at hand.

“Maybe later, but I warn you, I won't lose the next battle.” Finyat laughed at her, fidgeting, making it difficult for her to work the straps.

“Hold still,” she commanded.

“But that would defeat the purpose,” Finyat replied with a gleam in his eyes. Aria smiled.

“If you hold still, I'll take my time, deal?” Finyat went still, smiling from ear to ear.

“I lied about the Gnomes petition. They don't mind you hogging their daisies.” Laughing, Aria began cinching the straps of the snow suit. She adjusted all the areas until it fit him perfectly as Sekali aided Uther. She then aided him into his armor. Once finished, she rested both hands on his shoulders and looked him over.

“Are you ready to go up there?” He nodded.

“Bring it on,” Finyat replied. She turned, snatched up her magical backpack, trudged over to the base of the snow-covered switchbacks and looked up.

“Oh, Finyat?” The Shallant moved up beside her, looking up as well.

“Yeah?” Aria looked at him in all seriousness, resting a hand on his shoulder.

“I'm sure you are above crow jealousy. Raven, I'm not so sure about.” Finyat looked at her and smirked.

“It took a while to get over, but I'm past it, werewolfgirlfriend’.” Lowering his voice, he leaned into her and asked, “Is it a great kisser?” Punching him in the arm, Aria looked at the path before her and sighed. Finyat grinned happily.

“You know how you suddenly bite your tongue when you are eating? That is a rhetorical question. Well, it happens to werewolves as well. I'm just wondering, do you worry about that when you kiss him? You know, being infected by accident, and all . . .” Shaking her head, Aria ran her nails over his head, teasing

him.

“You ready to go up there?” Finyat, cringed.

“I'm ready to go home.” Scratching his head gently, she threw him a sympathetic smile.

“I know you are. Finyat, please remember you will always be welcome in my home. Please consider my home as your own, should you ever find yourself far away. You know, we could get this mission done without mishap. The Veleighen have not yet found the cave they have been literally dying for centuries to discover.” Finyat smiled at her, open admiration in his eyes.

“Thank you for lightening things up, Aria. I really needed the outlet. You really are amazing.” Embracing him again, she kissed the top of his head and the corner of his eye.

“I know you needed it. I'm glad I could be of service. And thank you for the compliment; it means more to me than you know.” Finyat hugged her back, then released her, reluctantly of course, looking at the beginning of the trail, switchbacks, leading up the side of the cliff.

“Let's get this done,” Finyat said, encouraged by the beauty standing next to him.

At length, the four set off, ascending the snow-covered switchbacks leading upward into heavily falling snow. As they ascended, the winds picked up, blowing in every direction.

At the end of a full day's struggle, they set their backs against the face of a sheer cliff to rest, slowly catching their breath.

"How far is it to the top?" Finyat inquired, contending against the voice of the wind. Aria thought about it, then shrugged.

"If the trail was clear, three days." Finyat made a sour face.

"Six days then. Six days. As long as you keep me warm, I'm good." The Shallant gave her a smile. "Kidding," he added. In all seriousness, Aria looked at him.

"That's too bad, handsome. I was going to take you up on that. Oh well, your loss." Uther laughed heartily as he tapped on the side of the cliff with the point of his dagger.

"I knew you were hiding something!" Uther accused the stone before him. Sekali's interest was drawn to what Uther was doing. Wiping snow from his face, he trudged over to him.

"Hiding what, Uther?" he asked, glancing curiously at the rock. Uther pointed.

"There is a cave beyond this rock, here, where the stone is thinnest." He stabbed the tip of his dagger against the stone and looked over at Aria, who was holding up a hand to ward off a snow flurry attacking her.

"Aria, I can easily create an opening here in the rock that will get us out of this weather. What say you?" Aria didn't give it a moment's thought.

"Uther, I would be grateful for the escape." Uther grinned.

"Got more kohakk in that pack of yours? I'll trade you that gratitude for a good, solid mug of Kithrin wonder!" Aria stood and moved closer to the Dwarf, nodding.

"Deal, sir!", she shouted, "I'm tired of eating snow!" He pointed at her pack.

“I’ll need my hammer and chisel!”

“Oh, right!” she shouted as the winds attacked them from all sides. Kneeling by her pack, she brushed the snow off the top and opened it. Reaching in, she quickly retrieved the hammer and chisel as Finyat watched.

“How did you know where those were in all that stuff?” Aria handed Uther the hammer and chisel, then turned, kneeling down by her pack. Uther began chiseling away at the rock face.

“All you have to do is think of the item you want and it will slip into your hand. Then you simply pull it out.” Finyat’s eyes widened in childlike wonder.

“That is the most awesome thing in the world! Can I try it?” Aria threw Finyat a grin.

“Here, put your hand in. Go ahead.” Finyat positioned himself over the pack and slowly lowered his hand in, savoring every moment of this new experience. Aria watched him and smiled.

“Okay, now, think of the item you want to pull out of the pack. Finyat, one of your items, not mine, okay?” Disappointed, he looked into the pack.

“What are you, a mind reader?”

“No, but you are a Thief, rogue, bushranger, pick pock-” “Alright, alright, I get it. Hmmm, okay, here goes. Wow, I can feel it in my hand!” Finyat pulled a barrel the size of his head out of the pack and raised it up before him.

“Now that was a worthy first pull,” he stated confidentially, lifting the tiny cask over his wide open mouth. He then twisted the spout. Out poured a black, frothy, liquid that spilled into his mouth and down his chin. Before Uther noticed he was drinking kohakk, Finyat twisted the spout shut and put the cask back into Aria’s pack. Wiping his mouth and chin with the back of his arm, he glanced at Uther, making sure he had not been seen. Amused, Aria watched Finyat for a moment, then walked over to the wall of the cliff, turned and motioned the Shallant to her.

“I’m cold Finyat. Lend me some of your warmth.” Putting their backs against the cliff wall, they slid down into sitting position, getting as comfortable as

possible. Aria slid up against Finyat and wrapped her arms about him as Sekali walked over and motioned them apart.

“Stay where you are, but move your legs apart so I can kneel between the both of you!” he yelled. After adjusting themselves, he knelt, facing two. Pulling his cloak up over them, he adjusted his position until it gave them a break from the onslaught of the wind and snow.

The sound of Uther's steady chiseling competed with the wailing of the wind in the rocks all about them. Resting her head on Finyat's shoulder, Aria slowly drifted off into an uneasy slumber. Happily, Finyat rested his head upon her's, exhausted. Soon he joined Aria in a light rest. For a long while, Sekali held his cloak in place as the two slept.

“Wake up! Do you all want out of this wind and snow?” Uther shouted, startling Finyat and Aria out of uneasy sleep. The three stood, turning to Uther, blinking the exhaustion in their eyes away. Sekali shook the snow free from his cloak as Aria and Finyat checked to make sure their possessions were accounted for. Snatching up her pack, the Eldishar Elf led Finyat and Sekali over to Uther.

“I think I can speak for us all when I say, yes, we do.” Uther grinned, turned and kicked the rock face, which cracked and split. A few pieces of hand-thick rock fell to the ground in front of him. Frowning, he shrugged.

“Well, so much for a grand entrance!” He kicked it again, this time with all his strength. Like thick glass, the stone before him splintered and fell inward with a loud thud, revealing an empty hollow in a blackness beyond. Cautiously, Uther entered, beckoning the three to follow, then vanished into the dark beyond.

“Vessen,” Finyat whispered. A steady, soft green light shed from the orb hanging from his hand, giving him the needed light by which to see. Sekali knew they did not have to worry about secrecy. If there was a predator within this cave, Uther's chiseling would have instantly given them away, and long before they entered. It could be lying in wait, so caution had to be taken.

“We should search this place,” Sekali whispered, looking up at the hundreds of stalactites hanging above them from the uneven roof of the cave. Sticking together, they explored it from one end to the other. At the back of cave, they discovered a massive wall of ice, clear as pure water, that blocked off an alcove beyond. Frozen within the ice barrier stood a huge creature with long, shaggy white fur, forever still, as if it had suddenly been frozen in time.

“Yeti,” Uther stated, resting a hand on the smooth surface of the ice. “This beastie would eat the triclops for breakfast, and quick.”

“What's that behind it?” Finyat asked, pointing behind the towering brute. Just past the Yeti, there stood an alcove which led into a natural tunnel beyond. To the right hand side of the opening set a crafted, oval gate of steel with a mirrored a reflective surface. Four steps led up onto a platform, in the middle of which the gate was centered. The stairs, platform and gate were fashioned from the same mirror-like steel, and was all one piece.

The gate itself was fashioned as two great vines, each set upon the surface of a large pedestal, intricately rising up, weaving together at the top. Each thick, silvery vine was set with hundreds of arm-length thorns.

“What manner of metal is that?” Sekali asked. Uther grinned, a gleam smoldering within his dark eyes.

“Nether`Frost Steel, a most rare and valuable ore. To make a gate such as this, one must be a master blacksmith, a master sculptor, as well as an adept enchanter. Only one person can forge a gate such as this at one time. It cannot be forged any other way.” Finyat whistled appreciatively.

“Why is that?” Finyat piped in. Uther strained his eyes to see past the ice

wall, cupping both his hands at either side of his head.

“It is said the steel is alive, and only respects and yields to one of true power.” Glancing at Finyat, Uther narrowed his eyes and grimaced. “Whether that is true or not, I do not know. But we have found a Nether`Frost Gate, or so it seems. If so, this is a rare thing indeed!” Turning back, Uther raised and cupped his hands again to each side of his head, looking in through the ice, mumbling something about timing. Grabbing his chin with a hand, Finyat stared at it with a calculating eye.

“So, how much is it worth?” he inquired curiously. Uther laughed.

“I didn't think you would get to that so quickly. Putting aside the value of the fashioned gate, and its enchantments, you could sell the steel alone for about fifty-million white-gold pieces. Finyat's mouth lost control, gaping wide.

“Is there any way to get it? Can the gate be dismantled?” Uther shrugged.

“That gate is fashioned from a single piece of steel, which is a rare and legendary find. It would be wise to stake and secure a claim on this land, then sell the site this gate rests upon. You won't find many buyers in all of Utaemia with such coin in their pocket.” Finyat smirked.

“So what you are saying is, this gate holds no value.”

“That’s using the ol’ noggin, Finyat my friend. Well done!” Finyat smirked at the Dwarf and gave the gate a desperate look. As they spoke, Sekali watched the creature within the ice, remembering back to a time when a certain Vahkrin was animated by Mahkaia. Coming to a conclusion, he suspected the yeti was not dead.

“Lay not a scratch to this barrier,” Sekali warned. “I have a feeling it would bode ill for us all.” Finyat’s sighed and turned away.

Picking a spot to camp, Aria produced a stack of wood and some kindling for Uther to build a fire with. As Uther made a fire, Finyat watched Aria pull out everything needed for a comfortable night's rest, then helped fix the usual meal of dried vegetables and fruits. Sekali knelt with his back to the fire, watching the creature within the ice. Something was not right about it. He felt like it was

watching him, and he could not shake the persistent feeling it was alive and aware. After dinner, Uther stocked up the fire as they settled into their bedrolls for the night.

“I’ll take the full watch tonight,” Sekali told them, kneeling on his bedding, positioning himself to keep an eye on both the opening and the Yeti. After Uther and Finyat were asleep, Aria got up and quietly came over to him.

“Do you mind a little company?” Sekali shook his head.

“Not at all.” It shocked him when she knelt beside him on his bedroll. Seeing that it disturbed him, Aria got up, retrieved her bedroll and laid it out beside his.

“Thank you,” he whispered. Smiling fondly at him, she knelt down close.

“I apologize. Even though I’ve studied your culture and language, I am ignorant of many things. I meant nothing by it. Will you forgive my thoughtlessness?” Removing his gauntlets, he reached up and placed a hand to the back of Aria’s neck, carefully massaging the muscles and tendons.

“Aria, there is nothing to forgive. Think nothing of it. I don’t know where you came from, or how you were molded, but you are a one-of-a-kind. I suspect you have an incredible story, should you wish to tell it. Sighing, she reached up and loosened her armor and snow suit from about her neck and shoulders.

“Thank you. Yes, I have an interesting story, to be sure. Ouch,” she mouthed, flinching. Sekali lightened up a bit and continued working her neck.

“This is an unexpected pleasure. I am in your debt sir. What will the payment be for such treatment?” Sekali smiled, suddenly feeling even more attached to this woman. He recalled the first time they met. One wrong move and she would have laid him in his grave.

“Payment, let me think about that. I’m sure I can come up with something.” Smiling, she rolled her head a little, closing her eyes. Sekali glanced over at the wall of ice and frowned.

“Aria, we just opened up a secret passage, uncovering a gate we know nothing about. What if the Veleighen find it? If it is a travel gate, the repercussions

could be disastrous.” Wincing, Aria tensed for a moment, then slowly relaxed as he worked a knot in the side of her neck. Holding the back of her neck with one hand, he wrapped his other beneath her jaw. Gripping firmly, Sekali lifted her head with both hands.

“Relax,” he whispered, “you have a lot of tension in your neck. I am suspicious that a good portion of that tension is supposed to be mine, Blood`Sworn.” She let out a deep breath, letting him work her skull and neck into a relaxed state. After a while, Sekali gently, steadily, released her head.

Turning Aria away from him, he laid her back into his lap, resting her neck in his hands, and began rolling her head back and forth, from side to side ever so gently, feeling the structure of her spine where it connected with her skull. In one quick motion, he twisted her head, causing a number of joints in her neck to crack.

“Now the other side,” he whispered. She relaxed and let out a breath. Again he twisted her head, cracking her neck, then began working her neck with his fingers for a while, then helped her remove all her armor. When the last piece was placed to the side, he motioned her to kneel, then moved to her shoulders and upper spine. Groaning happily, Aria pulled her hair up over her right shoulder.

“What are we going to do about the gate?” she asked, gritting her teeth as he worked a knot out of the left side of her upper back. He looked at the yeti, wondering if it was part of a trap, designed to ensure the gate's safety.

“Is the Yeti a safeguard?”

“I’m sure it is. Sekali, when I was close to it, there was no heartbeat, no movement, nothing. But, I assure you, that beast is perfectly intact; there is no decay.” She grunted and tilted her head to the side as he switched to the other side of her shoulder and back, surrendering to a rare pleasure.

“You are good at this, sir. Have you had formal training?” Sekali smiled.

“Yes, at the warriors guild. My master trained us to do this to each other after battle. It helps keep us relaxed.” Looking back at him, she made a face.

“Really?”

“No,” he whispered. She laughed.

“You sounded convincing.” Shrugging, he worked on a muscle being resistant to relaxation.

“I do my best, my lady.” After working her right shoulder and upper back, he moved to the center of her back, beginning to knead the muscles about her spine. As he worked her over, his mind wandering over to the creature in the ice.

“Well, *if* the Yeti is the guardian of the gate, is the gate safe from the Veleighen?” Her answer came too quick.

“No, nothing is safe from the Veleighen. They are proud, fierce, relentless and self-sacrificing. They do not give in, and they do not surrender. We will have to block up the entrance before we continue on. Hey, can you work your wonder right here?” She touched the hollow at the base of the back of skull. Obliging her, he pressed both his thumbs into the base of her skull, wrapping his fingers about the side of her head to give him leverage. Gritting her teeth, she groaned as he applied more and more pressure into the hollow. When she began to tense, he stopped pressing in, but maintained the constant pressure. For a long moment, he held it, then slowly released and began working the two major tendons at the back of her neck.

He then laid her on her back and continued. He could see she was thoroughly enjoying this work-over; a much needed release she had more than earned. After all she had done, just for him alone, he deemed this a lacking form of payment. Still, she needed to relax. Unlike before, Sekali began to notice Aria was resting more than usual, and to actually sleep. The effects of being Blood Sworn was beginning to take its toll on her. A part of him felt guilty for using her, but that was the path of a Guardian; their purpose in life.

After finishing, Aria turned to him, raising up on her knees. Grabbing him about the back of the neck, she pulled close and gave him a quick kiss.

“What was that for?” he asked in surprise. Aria turned and rested against him, closing her eyes. Sekali reached over and pulled Aria's bedroll over her as she quickly began to drift into sleep.

“Because I love you,” she mumbled as sleep overtook her. Sekali smiled.

That night, as she slept, and as he watched over her and the others, Sekali worked an elegant weave of braids into Aria's hair. After finishing, he slowly moved out from under her, gently laying her down. He then made sure she was covered and warm.

Rising up, he walked over to the fire and fed it more wood. When the fire was burning bright, he turned to go back to his bedroll, just in time to see Aria's feet slide down into the Yeti's mouth. It swallowed, looked his way, then lunged, its jaws opening wide after him. With no time to move, or call out a warning, Sekali felt half the bones in his body instantly crush as it chewed him twice and swallowed.

With a startled jerk, Sekali came to, instantly waking Aria out of a deep sleep.

“What is it?” she managed to get out, her words slurring. Sekali looked at the ice wall, making sure the Yeti was still there. It was.

“Bad dream, that's all. The night is still young, please, rest.” Aria looked at the ice wall, as if she too felt uneasy at the frozen monster's presence.

“When we get back, I'll have someone come and permanently seal this wall up,” she whispered. “Sekali, the Yeti will not attack if we don't touch the gate, I promise,” she stated, laying back down. Looking up at him, she smiled. “It can't.” Adjusting the bedroll over her again, he looked at the fire, quickly becoming lost in the flames.

In silence, he kept the fire burning hot all night, letting his friends sleep until later in the morning. They needed the rest, especially Aria, who, being linked with them, was taking on most of their fatigue. He knew she was keeping them as physically sound as possible. Truthfully, Sekali didn't think going to such length to ensure the success of this mission was necessary. *But try telling that to a Blood`Sworn Guardian.*

He retrieved Aria's backpack, not bothering to sneak. If he tried to be stealthy, she would probably detect the unusual movement and wake up. Guardians had the ability to sense movement and purpose. Sekali knew if he acted casual, she would probably miss him stealing her pack. He was right; she didn't even stir.

Walking back over to the fire, he knelt and opened the top of it, recalling Aria's instructions to Finyat how it worked. If he thought of a food, and it was inside the backpack, he could pull it out. He reached in and thought of potatoes. No, none of those. Too bad; potatoes were one of his favorite foods. He thought of carrots. Nope. This was harder than it seemed. Salt . . . something touched his palm. Pulling out a small pouch, he set it aside. Frying pan, yes; oil for cooking, yes; cups, plates, mugs, forks, all there.

Now, for the food. He wished he knew the names of more foods, but he was still learning them. Looking in, he spied out some containers. Every item within looked like tiny children's play toys. Thinking of the container he was looking at, Sekali reached a hand back in. Instantly it touched his hand. Pulling it out, he looked at it stretch and grow to full size. This enchanted backpack was amazing!

"Eggs," he thought. Again, something touched his hand. Pulling out a metal can, he looked at it. Good, it was labeled. The label read: Dried Egg. Slowly, he opened the can and looked in. He knew what it was, and it was pretty tasty. Before, Aria had simply added water and stirred them over a bed of hot coals. How difficult could it be to do the same? *I can do this*, he thought, feeling rather triumphant in advance. Everything had to be labeled, or he ignored it. Finyat's items were in the pack as well, and he didn't want to make a mistake. He knew what the Shallant carried around, and poisoning his companions was not on this morning's menu.

Soon, He had a few various foods open before him, and the skillet setting over the fire. He looked at the flames licking up around the side of the skillet and smiled. The thick leather of his gauntlet would be more than enough padding to

hold the hot handle of a skillet.

Opening the oil, he poured a good amount into the heating pan. Shaking a fair amount of dried egg into the oil, he stirred it in, then grabbed the jar labeled: Dried Onions. He poured some onto the dried eggs, then shut the jar and picked up the last container, marked Red Pepper. Shaking it over the pan, he poured a good amount onto the now sizzling food, then put it away. Next came a handful of salt, which he added to the mix, stirring it as it sifted through the bottom of his fist. After making sure each container was sealed, he put them away and began stirring the food in the skillet.

After a bit, it began to smell odd, but not bad at all. Still, something was missing. The food had expanded a little, like when Aria cooked. Stirring breakfast, Sekali thought about it, then suddenly realized what the missing ingredient was.

Water . . .

At a distance, Grisham watched them climb the first of the switchbacks, eventually vanishing up into the frigid mists. Their footsteps became more dim as they ascended, until he could no longer perceive them. The powerful Lycanthrope pawed at the ground, deep in thought. After a long moment, the Werewolf lowered his head and stalked after them, nose to the ground, a fierce gleam beginning to burn in within his slanted eyes.

The Werewolf kept a good distance from the four, not allowing them to discover they were being followed. Closing his eyes, Grisham meditated for a moment. As it focused, thick shadows gathered about, shrouding the Lycanthrope. For a full day it followed, tracking them to an opening in the side of a cliff. Peering inside, Grisham saw a fire. Turning from the opening, it bolted up the switchbacks, leaving no prints in the freshly fallen snow.

Deep within, Grisham began to sense a great danger, though he did not know specifically what that danger was. Rarely had he left his homeland without thoroughly preparing for a journey, but something smelled wrong . . . very wrong, and there was no time to go back and prepare for this.

The hunt began . . .

Aria could not stop laughing. Tears poured down her cheeks as she watched Sekali staring helpless at the violent blaze sputtering and popping before him. A small streamlet of creeping flame broke away from the base of the fire and began working its way out across the stone floor of the cave. Grabbing a flask of water, he popped the top off it and headed for the spreading flame.

“Stop,” Aria stated firmly, still laughing as she came over. Taking the flask, she sealed it, grabbed her pack and pulled him away from the flames.

“Let it burn out, Sekali. It's a cave. No harm done. Biting her lip, she looked up at him, her eye brightening. “Were you making us breakfast?” She asked. Nodding, he looked at her and sighed.

“I should've known better.” Slipping her arm through his, she shook her head.

“No, it was a nice thought. Thank you.” She wiped tears from her eyes with her free hand, trying to control herself as the fire suddenly, violently, erupted before them. Not seeing the humor in this situation, Sekali shook his head, clearly disappointed. As if accepting a challenge, Uther and Finyat began snoring, competing with the noise of the sputtering flames.

“How can they sleep through this?” Aria expressed, rather baffled. She tilted her head into Sekali's shoulder, trying the best she could not to burst out laughing again, and looked at the two. Shrugging, she snickered, then stepped back as another fiery combustion erupted.

“I have no idea. Maybe your cooking was so good, you knocked them out.” The look Sekali threw her made her grin from ear to ear. Well, at least she was smiling. Slowly, a grin spread across his face as well.

“Can you please teach me how to cook?” Aria nodded with a twinkle in her bright-blue eyes.

“I'd be happy to,” she said, then dropped the humor, becoming serious. “Sekali, do you ever wonder how the Wastelands came to be?” Thinking about her sudden question, he sobered.

“Always.”

“Well, here is a theory of mine. No Sardakks knew how to cook, and they burnt the region down around themselves,” she barely finished before she burst out laughing again. A mental image of a Sardakk Elf host, entering a lush forest, played in his mind. Instantly, he burst out laughing, joining Aria in making fun of his own people. He laughed so hard, tears began spilling down his cheeks as Uther’s snoring intensified two fold.

That morning, Sekali learned why it was important to wash red pepper from your hands before wiping your eyes; a lesson he never forgot. Soon, after helping him clean out his eyes, she placed a scrubbed out skillet back onto the coals and taught Sekali exactly how to cook a simple breakfast.

In the late morning, after eating a breakfast Sekali cooked - instructed by a very attentive Eldishar Princess - they departed. As he had expected, Aria never chided him for letting them all sleep in late. She looked refreshed, less stressed and more cheerful as they exited the cave.

Uther gathered up rocks and stacked them into the opening. He then sent the three out to look for more rocks. It was incredible how the Dwarf fashioned the entrance to appear as a mere shelf of rock. Their tracks would soon be covered in a fresh blanket of snowfall, hiding the last bit of evidence of their passing.

Slowly, time dragged the four into the sixth day. Reaching the top, they crested the ridge of a plateau that marked the boundary of the region known as the Kedge`Noth Plains . . . where the strange dwell.

The plateau lay high up over the Norst`Kin Forest on a flat land, where a consistent frigid wind flowed relentlessly across the surface of the region year-round. Upon reaching the top, the wind and snow struck them like a gale, as if trying to drive them back down off the plateau.

Marching along in silence, they began to hear strange noises on the wind all about them. The intense cold bit into their faces, forcing them to put on masks to block out the biting wind that tried to choke the breath from them. On they pressed.

As the predawn light of morning illuminated the eastern sky, Aria led the company through an area thickly dotted with crops of lengthy Kedge`Weed, thick bamboo-like shoots that extended up into the gale of flowing snow and frost, bending in the eternal winds.

On the same day, during the morning, as they struggled along the frosted ground, the sound of heavy grunting was heard off to their left. Freezing in their tracks, they turned toward the heavy impacts of something moving quickly through the area, steadily growing louder and louder. As they strained to see, a strange beast lumbered out of the frosty mists, directly toward Aria, bearing down on her. They did not see what it was before it was upon them, so swift was its attack. Snow-white, arm length fur hung in a thick blanket about its hunched and muscular body. Like a gorilla, it used its long, powerful arms and hands to speed it along the ground, giving it an astonishing swiftness. Its large, bloodshot eyes were filled with a determined focus as it struck Aria to the ground with two great fists, as if she were a mere child's doll. Continuing its attack, it began biting her and striking her with large, gnarled clenched fists.

Finyat sprinted away, as if retreating, then began to circle around behind it, two daggers in hand. Sekali focused his attention on Uther, waiting for him to launch his usual method of attack, which, of course, he did. Without a second's hesitation, Uther broke into a sudden rage, charging forward as he let loose with a furious bellow. Startled by Uther's sudden outburst, the creature jumped, spinning

about to face the challenge of the Dwarf. Clearly intimidated, it backed away, nearly trampling Aria.

With its attention fixed on Uther, the monster's back and sides were left unguarded, which is what Sekali needed. Quickly, he targeted the nearest opening in the creature's defense, leaving its back clear for Finyat, who preferred the element of surprise, especially from behind. Gripping the handle of his sword tight with both hands, Sekali brought the hilt of his blade just under his right armpit, point facing outward, and lunged into his enemy.

Striking true, the tip of his blade lanced deep into its side as Uther fell upon the monster, hacking and chopping at his quarry in a frenzy of blows, striking its arms and chest a number of times. Half panicked, half enraged, the great ape-like creature struck Uther with a powerful backhand that sent him backward, flying off the ground and out of sight into the sea of flowing frost.

Hanging onto his blade, Sekali managed to keep his balance. With all his strength, he ripped his blade sideways and out, opening up a terrible wound. With a terrible cry, the beast spun on him and backed away, holding its side as it bellowed in mortal anguish and rage.

Readying for another charge, Sekali waited, setting himself in between it and Aria's still body, blade dripping crimson red. Instead of attacking, the monster retreated, soon vanishing into the windblown sea of frost, crying out in misery. Standing his ground, Sekali waited, not daring to take his eyes from the direction the beast had gone for more than a short moment. It was swift and powerful for its size, so he would take no chances with such a foe. Worried, Sekali briefly glanced over to Aria, who lay upon the icy surface of the plateau, unmoving. Raising a hand to shield his eyes from the torrent of snow washing over him, he waited for his foe to return.

The limited distance of sight meant Uther, if he was conscious, might not find his way back. Initially, he thought Finyat was circling around, but he was nowhere to be seen. Maybe the Shallant had made the mistake of straying too far

in the mists, miscalculating the distance. Getting separated from the group, and lost, would mean almost certain death to any but the most powerful and skilled.

Risking the attraction of another creature, he began calling out for his friends.

“Uther, Finyat!” he called every few seconds as he warily backed up to where Aria lay, hoping they would hear and follow his voice. To his great relief, Uther came staggering back into the area, shaking his head. Growling like an animal, he pulled his mask down under his chin and wiped blood from his mouth with the back of his arm.

Sekali continued calling for Finyat as Uther quickly ran and knelt by the still form of Aria, deeply concerned. Removing his helmet, and pulling back his winter hood, Uther placed an ear to her mouth to see if she was breathing. As he did so, Aria snaked her arms up and around Uther’s neck and hugged him tight before he could recoil from her. Startled, Uther jumped up, a look of relief washing over his face. Suddenly, irritation was added to his relief as he realized Aria was faking dead. Aria opened her eyes and grinned mischievously.

“Since you did not accept a hug when I begged for one, I will steal one from you,” she yelled above the storm, laughing triumphantly. Uther scowled at her, until she winced in pain, grabbing her right shoulder. Sekali watched Aria, trying not to laugh as she slowly regained her feet. Uther growled, trying his best to look offended, but gave up as she staggered, nearly losing her footing. Instantly, Uther was there, steadying her with a strong arm as she looked about the ground for her blade.

“Are you hurt?” Uther inquired, deeply concerned. Aria shook her head slowly, then nodded.

“A little dizzy from the blows to the head. I had to play dead. That thing was too strong, and it surprised me.” At that moment, not far out in the storm, a deep-throated cry filled the air, followed by a muffled thump. Aria carefully raised her right arm and gently began circling her elbow a few times, gritting her teeth. Dividing his attention between calling for Finyat and worrying about Aria, Sekali

inquired, “How’s the shoulder?”

“I think it’s only a sprain. My armor took most of the impact,” she said, then groaned. Seeing their concern, she threw them a reassuring smile. “I promise, I’ll be alright. All I have to do is drink a healing potion, and I’ll be good as new.” Uther set his jaw and stared at her, waiting. Sighing, Aria gave in and reached within her Guardian robes, producing a potion from her belt. Popping the cork, she put it to her lips and elevated the bottom of the vial, taking a small mouthful. After swallowing the liquid, she sealed and put away the potion. With a frown, she looked about the area.

“Where is Finyat?” Uther shrugged suspiciously.

“Probably killing another dragon without me,” he grumped. As if given an entrance cue in a play, Finyat slowly appeared, jogging back to them through the flowing haze of frost, panting. Stopping beside Uther, he threw them each a sheepish grin.

“It’s dead. I could not risk it trampling you as I attacked. It was on top of you.” Heroically, he added, “I would gladly take the chance of being hit for you.” Lifting the back of her hand to his cheek, Aria half-heartedly smiled.

“Thank you sir, but it is my job to take on your difficulties while I am Blood`Sworn. You must understand this.” Lowering his eyes, Finyat nodded.

“I understand . . . but I’m rebellious and impulsive, see?” Rolling her eyes, Aria looked around, as if expecting another attack.

Three weeks passed slowly by with no more than the weather attacking them. At times, the noise of battle would break through the storm up ahead, or to the left or right, but they were never attacked. Twice they came upon the loser of a skirmish, lying mauled and twisted in a steadily freezing heap upon the earth. The journey through the Kedge`Noth Plains was frigid and windy. Their snow suits kept them from freezing, but not warm. Like a brutal animal, the cold began to seep into their clothing, slowly chilling them to the bone.

On the first day into the fourth week, the wind suddenly stopped, as if it was

not there. Aria froze and looked back at the three, alarmed.

“Get low to the ground and don't move,” she said, a nervousness in her voice that meant they were in trouble. As Sekali, Uther and Aria laid flat on the snow-packed ground, Finyat only knelt. To Sekali's astonishment, he saw Finyat shimmer, as if the Shallant was suddenly clear, rippling water. He witnessed Finyat's entire being flicker, and he nearly lost sight of him, as the Shallant reached to his side-pouch and opened it.

“I got you on this one,” Finyat whispered in the, now, still air. The once river of snowfall, now stilled, fell slowly to the ground, leaving a white, fog-like mist slowly descending after it. In the moment Finyat reached into his pouch, the dust-like mist falling all about them moved, followed by a rushing sound as the wind shifted into a different direction, and began to flow once again. Finyat froze, making it nearly impossible for Sekali to keep his eyes focused on him. Looking around, Uther whispered, panic in his voice.

“Where did Finyat go? Where is my friend?” Sekali was looking directly at the shimmering, shifting, Thief, as Uther's eye strayed over him without seeing the Shallant.

“He's here, in front of me,” he whispered just loud enough for Uther to hear. Sekali extended a finger toward the Shallant, but Uther still did not see him.

“Be still,” Aria warned, her voice dripping with annoyance. Looking at Uther without turning his head, Sekali noticed a look of utter concern on the Dwarf's face, as if he was about to forever lose a loved one. Looking back, Sekali missed Finyat; he was simply gone. He knew he was there, but could no longer see him. Lowering his eyes, Sekali watched the snow where he last was. To his surprise, there were no footprints to be seen. Finyat had vanished, leaving no sign of his passing.

It was a rare thing to witness the incredible ability of a master Thief. Never before had Sekali witnessed the likes of Finyat's mastery in action. Grisham had labeled Finyat with many names, synonymous with Thief, one of which he had never heard before.

“Wander Thief,” Sekali mouthed in silent wonder. When he had the chance, he would make it a point to ask Finyat what Grisham meant by that title.

Multiple cries and screams broke the ending silence, one of which drowned them all out in a deep, lengthy moan. Instantly, a chorus of others added their strange, animalistic voices to the air at various points all about them, some alarmingly close. As the wind picked up, and as Sekali noticed the current was not flowing in the same direction as when it stopped, a brawl to the death erupted close by in a fury of snarls and screams, sending tremors through the ground.

Straining his eyes, Sekali could barely make out the ghost-like silhouettes of three creatures. Two were huge, and worked together in unison in the attempt to take down another half their size. Watching the fray, Sekali wondered if the winner would find and attack his company as well, or if another monster would be lured in by the sound of the skirmish. Something had to be done about it. There was no other option, other than to destroy the victor. He would have to be swift, going straight for the kill. It would be risky. Sometimes the best way to victory was by doing the unthinkable; by stepping into the gaping jaws of death, a place your enemy never suspected you would go. Preparing himself mentally, he took in a deep breath through his nose and held it. When his lungs began to burn, he slowly exhaled through his mouth.

The battle lasted for only a short time as the offense of the larger monsters quickly turned to panicked defense. Shortly after engaging the smaller creature, the body of one thundered to the earth, shaking the ground. The second monster followed within three breaths time.

Sekali watched on in terrible fascination as the faint outline of the victor became still, unmoving. A loud sniffing sound could be heard through the rising wind. If he was to save his companions, it would have to be by the element of surprise. Sekali had to strike now! Leaping to his feet, he sprinted into action, pulling a dagger from his sleeve as he raced toward the barely visible monster, ignoring Aria's call for him to stand down as he ran with all the speed he could. Pulling the shield from his back, he threw it past the monster in hopes of creating a

distraction that would lend an advantage to his attack. As he swiftly closed the distance between he and his enemy, the silhouette grew more clear and distinct. Just before reaching his foe, Sekali skidded to a stop, eyes widening in astonishment.

“You . . .”

Aria waited, pacing back and forth before Uther and Finyat, her sword drawn, and her anxiety brimming dangerously. Neither of them said a word as they watched and listened to her chide Sekali, as if they were him.

“If you ever pull a stupid stunt like that again, I'll kill you!” she yelled, furious as a wounded lion. Glaring at Finyat, like it was his fault, she raised a fist and shook it at him. Finyat shrugged his shoulders, holding up his hands as if showing her he was unarmed.

“Don't you even say a single word! I don't care if the inhabitants of the Underworld hear me,” she frothed in seething anger. “Do you know what this could cost us? Do you realize the consequences which might follow your decision? Do you!” she screamed.

A white light exploded from within her eyes, blazing to life. Uther took a half a step forward and raised a finger, only to be met with a cold, hard glance. Without hesitation, he stepped back, abandoning the debate. Folding his arms, he stubbornly grunted.

Off to Aria's right came two eerie, echoing growls, followed by a padding sound that grew louder by the heartbeat. Unconcerned at the level of danger that might be approaching, she turned and stalked toward the sound, her eyes blazing like two brilliant stars as she raised her blade, preparing for battle. Uther pulled his axe and began to follow her, but was instantly rejected. Without looking back, Aria raised a finger to him.

“Stay!” she screamed in a rage the two had never witnessed in her before, which stopped the Dwarf in his tracks. Uther shot a look at Finyat.

“What did we do?” he grumped submissively. Again, Finyat shrugged, raising his hands to show he was still unarmed.

Through the mists lumbered a large humanoid, wolf-like, creature with silver fur and two heads. Stopping a few paces from Aria, it crouched and snarled, its hackles rising in a frightening display as it readied itself for a fight. Pausing, Aria struck her forearm with the flat of her sword.

“Thur vin intaris (Rage for vengeance)!” She hissed, and leapt at her foe, her ancient katana bursting with a power that rained liquid light from the blade. Instantly, the monster leapt back, turned and fled back out into the storm, vanishing so quickly, Aria could not overtake it.

“Fine!” She screamed in fury, then returned to Uther and Finyat and continued chiding Sekali again as she glared at them.

“Do you think you can just run off on your own? Do you? Answer me!” She screamed. A third time, Finyat showed her just how unarmed he really was, then glanced over at Uther, giving him a look that plainly stated, *she's gone mad*. Ignoring him, Uther stared at Aria with a blank expression on his face.

“Aria, I am here,” Sekali called, returning back into sight, his dagger dripping with fresh blood. As he neared, Sekali met an angry Eldishar Elf Guardian, who spun on him, yet in her wrath.

“Aria, calm down – we are not alone.” She stalked up to him and, without a warning, punched Sekali across the jaw as hard as she could. Sekali felt the impact of the blow as it connected, forcing his head to the side. It was painful, but only a little. Instantly, Aria's free hand shot to her jaw as she staggered, groaning in pain. Looking at her in astonishment, Sekali watched Aria quickly compose herself.

“You are Blood`Sworn,” he stated in an even, calm voice, not believing his own Guardian had struck him. A trickle of red ran down the left corner of her mouth as she straightened up, glaring at him dangerously.

“Do you wish to die? Do you wish innocent peasants, children and babies murdered by the thousands?” Stunned by such disturbing questions, Sekali stared at her, not knowing how to respond. She continued, not waiting for his reply. “If you die, we are weakened! If you all die, not only do we lose, but the inhabitants of the Zurkel Mainland, as well as this, the Northlands, die also! Does that mean anything to you in the least?” She wiped her mouth and spit blood. Without thinking, Sekali screamed back at her, desperate wrath kindled within him.

“I have to save you! I can't let that thing kill you! Why can't I just save you and let this be done, Mahkaia!” Realizing he had just called her by his dead wife's

name, Sekali threw his dagger and shield to the earth, breathing heavily, glaring desperately at Aria.

“Elves,” Uther muttered under his breath, as Aria’s eyes widened in surprise as she beheld the desperation in him. Before she could respond, Sekali leapt forward and scooped Aria up in a strong embrace, holding her tight, bursting into tears.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he whispered again and again. The tip of Aria’s sword lowered, then fell from her hand, landing upon a snow-packed ground that instantly rebelled against the heat of the blade, hissing and sputtering as if water had been splashed into hot oil. Calming down, Aria desperately wrapped her arms about Sekali’s neck and held on, as if by letting him go, she would lose him.

“Okay, alright. It’s over. You are safe, and that is what matters. I’m sorry for hitting you. It won’t happen again.” Sekali held her tight, slowly bringing his emotions under control as well. At length, he let out a quivering breath.

“I will forgive you, if you forgive me for my foolishness, deal?” Nodding, she tilted back her head, looking into his bloodshot eyes. She forced a smile and slowly ran a shaking hand over the five braids on the left side of his head.

“I really do love you, Sekali of the Wastelands,” she said, forcing him to smile, if only a little. He sniffed, tightening his hold on her.

“I’m flattered. Aria, I love you too.” Bursting into tears, she laughed and hugged him tight.

“Sekali, I’m not Mahkaia,” she whispered in his ear.

“Sorry about that. I think about her all the time. It just slipped out. I’ll try not to do it again.” Aria kissed the side of his head, the last of her tears mingling within his braids.

Uther rolled his eyes and spun his ax in his hands. A growl on the wind caused him to glance over his left shoulder. Finyat turned, brandishing two daggers in a flash. Aria ignored the possible danger as Sekali held onto her, as if he might lose her forever if he let go.

“We are lucky to have you with us,” Sekali said. Aria grinned shortly, that

light still burning within her eyes.

“Thank you sir. It is an honor to run with you.” Raising his eyebrows, Sekali looked down to the ground at his left.

“Aria, you dropped your sword.” She looked down at her ancient blade, now burning deep into the snow.

“If you put me down, I could get it.” He set his Guardian down and watched her pick up the sizzling katana. When the light faded from the steel, she took the hem of her guardian robes and began polishing the blade.

“Sekali, you dropped your shield and dagger,” she said, a smile playing at the corner of her mouth. Looking down at his dagger laying on the snow to his left, and his shield on the right, he shrugged.

“I better get those.” Aria shook her head.

“What would you do without a shield?” she asked. Picking it up, he slung it over his back, then retrieved the dagger and began cleaning it on the snow. Once the blade was clean, he sheathed it, then turned to Aria, looking her up and down. Amidst two other names, he saw his name on the border of her robes. Gratitude swelled within him for the guidance and support she selflessly gave.

“Well, if I lost my shield, I'd probably fail. Reaching up, he then touched his shield. “I can lose this old thing, and get another.” Focusing his full attention on Aria he placed a hand on her shoulder. “But, if I ever lost my shield, I would miss her nearly as much as I miss Mahkaia.” Aria was truly surprised by his words.

“Well, sir, you best never lose your shield,” she returned, placing her hand on his. Sekali stared at Aria, in all seriousness.

“I hope I don't lose her.” Uther suddenly scowled.

“Are you going to make a habit of this?” Sekali suddenly turned on Uther, instantly smiling. He struck the Dwarf on the back, making him stumble.

“Uther, if she was a Dwarf maiden, would you?” Uther practically spit his teeth out in protest.

“Of course! But she's an Elf!” Quickly, the Dwarf looked to Aria. “No insult intended, Elf.” Looking at Aria, the Dwarf's noticed she was smiling

brightly his way, an act that caused him to scowl all the more. Slowly, his scowl melted away, replaced by a broad smile. Uther lowered his head and mumbled something about the flowery dancing Elf race, then harrumphed` under his breath. Finyat fidgeted, throwing a smile at the snow-pack beneath his feet. Sekali turned his attention to him and pointed.

“I’m not the only one who seems to attract the young ladies, am I? Finyat, would I be mistaken if I assumed you had a future date with the Captain of the Harbringer?” In shock, Finyat’s jaw dropped. Looking up at Sekali, he shook his head, his face turning crimson.

“Yes, well, no,” he said, refusing to make eye contact with Aria. Sekali slapped him on the back hard.

“I believe you two would make a good team. You both have a sense of endless adventure, a unique quality two rarely share together in a single lifetime.” Aria walked past Finyat, playfully running her fingers over his arm.

“Let’s get out of here before that two headed dog comes back, shall we?” Sekali grabbed Aria by the shoulder, stopping her.

“It’s that way,” he pointed. Giving him an odd look, she turned, facing him.

“How do you know that stranger in a strange land?” Shrugging, Sekali waited to see which way she would take them. After a moment of silence, Aria threw him a look of suspicion.

“I will trust you on this one.” The three fell in step with Aria, who changed course and continued leading them across the plateau.

After traveling in silence for a while, Aria's eyes abruptly widened. Reaching down, she grabbed Sekali's hand, raised it to her nose and sniffed. Pressing up against him, she whispered in his ear.

"Grisham's up here." Raising an eyebrow, he squeezed her hand.

"Why do you think that?" Sekali inquired.

"I can smell him on you. But the blood on your dagger-" "Was supposed to throw you off his track. He's been watching over us this entire time." Brightening up, she looked around, hoping to spot the Werewolf. Biting her lip, she groaned in disappointment. Suddenly enlightened, she grabbed her head in both hands and laughed.

"The fighting all around us, the slain in our path. He's been clearing the way before us."

"That beast is deadly in love with you, you know that, don't you?" Bearing her teeth, she nodded, eyes brightening even the more.

"I do," she stated happily.

"How long have you known Grisham?" he pressed.

"About one-hundred and fifty years. He did not like me very much when first we met." Pursuing the subject, he pressed her for more history on the subject as they moved on.

"How did you meet?" Aria cringed, as she recalled that day.

"He caught me coming down the mountain trail, the same trail we descended after encountering the Triclops. It was the first time I ever laid eyes on such a creature. Sekali, I was so terrified. He must have waited in the tree line, out of sight, until I was far past midpoint in the trail. He knew I would have nowhere to go, and no time to get back into the mountain before he overtook me." Aria snickered. "As if hiding in a hole would have done me any good." Sekali rolled his eyes.

"What did you do?"

"I drew my blade and prepared to kill or be killed. I had no other choice. He

stopped not ten paces from me and snarled, chilling my blood. The next thing I knew, I woke up to a fire warming me. I realized I'd fainted." She looked at Sekali. "Don't laugh. I was green then." Aria sighed heavily, becoming silent, reliving the memory of the past. After a while, Sekali touched her shoulder, snapping her out of an obvious daydream.

"Aria, tell me, what happened after that?" Touching the five braids in his hair, her eyes sparkled.

"I knew I was in real trouble when I awoke. My feet and hands were bound in strong cords. As my eyes focused, I saw Grisham holding my blade, curiously looking at it. I was gagged tight, so I could not speak. I thought I was going to die, so I carefully wrote two words in the snow behind me. I then rolled over, maneuvering my back to him and pointed at them, hoping the creature would understand. The Werewolf did, and faster than I thought it would." Sekali's curiosity peeked.

"What were the two words?" Aria's silence caused Sekali to protest. "Don't leave the story untold," he said, his eyes begging her to continue. Aria looked out into the sea of flowing ice mist.

"Gag off." After a moment of silence, Aria shrugged. "Standing directly over me, the beast beared its teeth. 'If this is a trick, I will kill you', it spoke . . . to which I nodded, not daring to disagree. Slowly, the Werewolf flattened me on my back as it removed the gag. With a large paw on my chest, I could feel the points of its claws working their way into the chinks of my armor. In fear, I looked into those overbearing eyes and told Grisham I was on the trail of a band of twelve Veleighen scouts who sought to raise the Sister City to use its power to begin the overtaking of many lands. Sekali, it was all or nothing. It had captured me, and no matter what I told my captor, I thought I was going to die." Just then, the Dwarf's voice broke the suspense of Aria's story.

"Are you watching the direction, or are we now lost?" Aria looked back and raised her eyebrows twice at Uther, causing him to scowl. She then continued her tale.

“At the mention of the Veleighen, Grisham backed off. 'Go on,' the monster stated, openly suspicious as I told my story. After hearing my tale, the Werewolf howled, nearly driving me insane. Then more came, and quickly. Apart from me, a pack of them formed a circle, speaking in their deep, guttural voices.” Pausing, Aria sighed, as if beholding the man of her dreams.

“Grisham sent them out to investigate my story. For three days, I lay bound helpless before a fire Grisham kept burning. Occasionally, the creature questioned me, trying to catch me in my own words, turning them to lies. Of course, I told the same story repeatedly. Finally, I no longer spoke. All that I could have said, was said. On the morning of the fourth day, his pack returned, three of which bore the wounds of battle.” Reacting to a distant growl, Sekali's hand shot to the hilt of his blade.

“What then?” he asked, his curiosity peeked.

“Well, after my claim was proven, Grisham released me and returned my blade. He then took me under his protection. At my request, Grisham then began to teach me his language, how to survive in the wild and to hunt.” She laughed again, as if recalling a punch line to a joke.

“Grisham was my first successful hunt outside the Forest of Utaemia, the only home I had ever known.” Sekali smirked at her jest, then waited silently for her to continue, thoroughly enjoying her story.

“The remainder of my story is history really. Our friendship grew until, well, you can guess the rest.”

“You know, Aria, until meeting Grisham, I had no idea Werewolves could be good. I thought they were savages, bent on killing every other creature but their own, or infecting them to increase their own numbers.”

“One thing you need to know about Grisham, he is not infected with Lycanthropy, the disease contracted by a Werewolf's saliva upon entering the bloodstream. Lykkinnin is the general term for such a creature, whether it be wolf, wolverine, timber wolf, or any other canine-like species. Grisham is Norst`Kin Lykkinnin, meaning he is what he is, and was born to it. He is not infected, though

he can infect another, if he wills it to be. If Grisham infects another, it would sever the bloodline link, meaning the infected of his bite would become a raging Werewolf . . . the uncontrolled horror of which so many label all Lykkinnin as. The Norst`Kin are a race, just as you are Sardakk Elf, and I am Eldishar Elf. Do you understand?” Sekali nodded. He had this conversation with Grisham already.

“The Living World holds a wealth of knowledge,” he replied, loving the sound of her voice, and the attention she was giving him.

“There is much to learn,” she continued. “Lucky for us, we live a very long time.” In silence, they continued on, fighting the wind and snow that fought them back. After a time, Aria pulled close to Sekali again.

“You said, 'Living World'. I know you mean the green world outside the Wastelands. Sekali, there are other areas, outside the Wastelands, you would not call 'living'. Some are more dark and deadly than where you were raised.” Raising an eyebrow, Sekali thought about it as his eyes were suddenly struck with a blast of mist, temporarily blinding him. The obvious death-cry of some creature split through the noise of the torrents, noisy, gale.

“When all this is finished, will you show me?” Surprised, Aria, shrugged.

“I've collected maps in my travels. I'll make you copies of the ones you would need to find the Deadlands, and Dreadlands, as I call them. Then, Sekali, Warrior of The Watch, you can go risk your neck to discover just how little power a Gorolith Vahkrin possesses, compared to the greater terrors of the Earthen Plane.” Stunned, he shot her a dark look, fighting off a sudden, dark memory.

“What do you know of the Gorolith?” Sighing heavily, she rolled her eyes.

“Talking in your sleep afflicts me with the dread you feel when you slumber. Blood`Sworn does have its drawbacks.”

“I am sorry for that, Aria. I am learning the path of the Guardian takes on more than I can imagine.” Gripping his cape in his fist, Sekali wrapped an arm about Aria, shielding her as best he could from the wind.

“Well,” she stated in a positive tone, “you do have a bit of information to take back to your master.” Sekali was reminded of something she told him while

in the deep of the mountain.

“Aria, you once told me we should talk sometime.” Aria looked at him, her brow creasing.

“I'm glad you reminded me. I'm going to say this quickly, with as few words as possible. Your ancestors were the Honor Guard, or Border Guard, during the Age of Conflict over twenty ages ago. Why the Sardakk departed the king's service to dwell in the Wastelands is a mystery none have discovered. I have a theory, based on my own studies, as to why.” She stopped speaking, gathering her thoughts as Sekali contemplated her words.

“Aria, what is your theory?” Sekali pressed.

“That your people were not banished, but willingly entered into the Wastelands to be strengthened and tempered by its constant hand of death, to one day come forth and render service to the king in a time of great need. Sekali, do you not see what is happening here? We are about to open two gates, both of which are linked with each other. The Veleighen seek the same, which is why we must beat them to it. What frightens me, is my own theory. Why would the Sardakk be called out of the Wastelands to serve the king?” Sekali pondered Aria's question.

“Aria, if your theory was my own, I would suspect the Veleighen to be conspiring to invade, conquer and take control of the Zurkel Mainland. The fact that they fervently seek the Sister City seems as solid evidence in this. The only logical reason for capturing a sunken, living city with a travel gate, would be to get to the other side, the City of Knowledge. From what I've learned, they avidly seek domination over everyone, and everything. Would they invade without controlling the gates?” Disturbed, Aria agreed.

“Yes. They have an armada of warships easily five-thousand strong. Yes, they would. I believe they are about to launch a war that has been planned out for a very long time.” Sekali felt awakened to a sudden urgency to get to their destination.

“Then we need to press forward, push to our goal. When we succeed, both the Sister City, and the City of Knowledge will become a great strength to both our

people.” Aria looked at Sekali, her eyes filled with admiration.

“Are all the Sardakk instilled with such conviction?” Pulling her tight, Sekali pressed forward in silence, suddenly immersed in deep, dark thoughts. After quite some time, he looked down at her, grinning.

“So, what do your parents think of Grisham?” The question caused Aria to instantly puff air into his face, or try to.

“They don't know, and never will. Right?” Sekali nodded at the unspoken threat.

“Of course.” Aria narrowed her eyes at him.

“Would you make an oath to keep that promise, honorable Sardakk?” Sekali shook his head.

“Aria, I love you.” Breaking into a wonderful grin, she patted Sekali on the cheek.

“I'll take that as an oath. I love you too.” Satisfied, she parted from him, taking the lead alone.

It felt as though the weather had turned against them, trying to keep the company in confusion as to which way led to the opposite side of the great plateau. Amazed at the constant threat of danger this place harbored, Sekali began to wonder if there were not just as many threats here than in the Wastelands. He pondered the scene they would witness, should this river of ever-flowing frost, along with the obscuring fog, be suddenly lifted.

Aria led them through the region. Sometimes they quickly backtracked at her signal, or followed her lead, crouching low, waiting in silence for a time before moving on. And so they traveled on for another fortnight.

On the morning of the thirty-second day up on the plateau, their trek across the Kedge`Noth Plains suddenly came to an end. Having reached the ledge on the far side of the plateau, they stood upon the brink of a great cliff, overlooking a vast sea filled with great, drifting mountains of ice which lazily drifted upon the Northern Arctic Ocean.

After a day of searching, they found the way down. Cautiously descending the long, steep switchbacks, they carefully made their way toward a mountain slope. Below, the slopes and the sea were connected by a wide snow-covered beach upon which broke an ever-constant freezing tide. Once off the plateau, the wind had ceased its relentless attack on them, leaving a welcome, steady breeze.

For two days, they descended into a new region, grateful to be out of the frigid, merciless, wind. As they stepped foot off the last of the switchbacks, they stopped and gazed out at the snow-covered seashore. Turning due north, Aria led them along the top of the mountain slope, up by the base of the mountain. Knowing they were not the only ones in search of the Sister City, they avoided a shoreline that paralleled the enormous cliffs of the plateau.

For two weeks, they traveled, concealing themselves with all care, as the great cliff side transformed into the wreckage of a jagged mountain range, spanning as far as the eye could see. Steadily and carefully, day by day, they made their way along the northeastern border of the northlands, searching for the inland sea Grisham had spoken of. Following the coastline through a more penetrating cold, they pulled out extra cloaks and put them on in hopes of staying as dry and warm as possible. At times storms would roll in, striking the coastline with heavy blankets of snow and sleet, making it difficult to stay dry. Even with multiple layers protecting them, it was cold and wet and miserable.

In the early afternoon of the fifteenth day, as they skirted the upper foothills of the unfriendly mountains, the distinct sound of bubbling came to their attention. With a quick hand-motion, Aria signaled everyone down. Doing so, Sekali and his companions crouched, half-buried in a bed of freshly fallen snow, giving them excellent cover as they watched the sea.

Up from the water arose what appeared to be a half-wolf, half-dragon. Its thick, snow-white fur coat rivaled the beauty of its shimmering, flawless, diamond-like eyes. Vigorously it shook from head to tail, ridding itself of the freezing seawater trapped within its fur. It yawned, exposing a mouthful of impressive arm-

length fangs, then stretched out its massive body upon the snow. Lazily, it began to groom its paws, as if it had no care in the world. Just the distant presence of this creature was intimidating. Sekali suspected this creature would be one of the top list of predators, should it exist within his Wasteland home.

Aria smoothed the snow between them. Taking her finger, she wrote two words: Dreganox Wolf. Sekali nodded slowly, then continued admiring the great animal as it stood and stalked up the shoreline away from them. As it moved up the beach, it suddenly froze and sniffed the air multiple times. Slowly, it lowered itself into the snow, becoming still as stone. Had Sekali not seen it hide, he might well have been caught in its trap.

Scanning the shoreline ahead, Sekali spotted riders on large, snow-white cats come into view, slowly making their way down the beach toward the danger. By the serrated lances held high, and the cats they rode upon, Sekali knew they were Veleighen. The Veleighen were a mighty race of fearless, warlike, people who courageously challenged all who stood in their way. Sekali respected them for their bravery, but criticized the arrogant choice of failing to send scouts up ahead as they traveled. He also despised their lack of honor.

Sizing up the riders, who ignorantly approached the Dreganox Wolf, he shook his head in disbelief. Today, their bravery might well turn to foolishness and their undoing. He counted ten of them, making their way up the shoreline in single file, heading directly into the path of the massive predator lying in wait. Finyat grinned, his eyes riveted on the scene before him.

Soon, their great feline mounts became agitated, hackles rising frightfully. The two cats in the front snarled and readied themselves for battle, crouching and screaming dreadfully. The foremost leader of their company held up one hand, giving the chain-like reins a quick jerk in the attempt to subdue his feline mount.

Without a sound, the Dreganox Wolf leapt in an arc down over the head of the lead soldier, who had no time to react. Ripping him from the saddle, the massive predator raised its head, chewed once and swallowed him, armor and all. His cat leapt up, latching onto the underside of its neck with its front two paws, and

began raking furiously with its back feet, cutting into the Dreganox Wolf.

Annoyed, it pulled the snow cat off its neck, clamped its huge jaws about the screaming cat's mid-section and shook it from side to side, breaking its spine. Dropping the body of the cat, it then launched at the nearest rider. Sekali was surprised to see the Veleighen spur their great cats into action with no hesitation, engaging the massive beast as one. As a bloody battle ensued, Aria punched each of them in the shoulder, getting their attention. Beckoning them to follow, she pointed into the woods.

“Let’s go,” she mouthed, leading them toward a forest tree-line. Entering, they found cover as the battle raged upon the shore. Aria stood and shook all the snow from herself. As luck would have it, the currents of the wind, changed when they had moved into the trees. Realizing they were suddenly upwind from the battle, Sekali looked at Aria in alarm. As if reading his thoughts, she nodded.

“We had better get away from this place,” she said urgently. The death-screams of the Veleighen and their cats were terrible to bear, even if they were the enemy.

“We will be tracked by this thing, or I’m a fool. We should run for it now before -” “Wait!” Finyat cut in. In haste, the Shallant removed a pouch from an inner pocket. He opened it quickly, searching for a certain vial in a pouch full of vials. In no time, an expression of *Aha!* crossed his face. He put a vial between his teeth, returned the pouch, then took the small container from his teeth and opened it.

“Hold out your hands.” They each did as they were told, even as the last cry of death split the air. The great predator could be heard screaming in triumph, as Finyat poured the greenish liquid into the palms of their hands. The Shallant’s hands shook slightly as he focused on giving each of them an equal share. “You’d think I’d get used to this,” he whispered, then began patting himself all over, especially his feet. Then he licked his hands and swallowed, gagging once. His companions followed his example, not enjoying the taste any more than he. Finyat winked at Aria. “Don’t you love me?” Aria threw him a most serious grin and

turned, leading them into the forest in a northwest direction. Finyat preceded her, slowing their flight considerably, whispering to them; teaching them to mimic his movements and speed, warning them of the danger of being visually tracked, that, if the Dreganox Wolf had any brains, it would do just that.

They followed Finyat in silence, angling their flight back northward through the trees. After traveling for a while, they heard a distant roar behind them to the southeast. Finyat stopped and turned.

“It has brains. We have to move quickly now.” Sekali drew his blade and waited for the three to pass him up, then followed after as they moved along the gentle slope of the foothills. Uther drew out his axe, his eyes changing to a solid black as they always did just before a fight.

Their flight took them along the mountain’s slope, through a thickening forest of massive pines and cedars, painted white by recent snowfall. After a long run, the waters of the sea came into view below as they slipped and slid downward toward the shore. Still, they did not run out into the open, for fear of being spotted.

Onward they raced along the shoreline, not daring to lose track of the sea as clouds began to darken above them, moving in from the west and the north. As they fled along the shore, keeping just inside the border of the trees, two great storms met, clashing above the company, sending winds and new snowfall in every direction. Fearing the deepening snow, they hastened their flight about a great bend in the coastline to discover the beach continued to curve back northwest.

“This has to lead to the inland sea,” Aria called out, her voice contending with the storm. Their hopes and fears rose as they continued to follow the beach, still remaining just within the forest for cover. Uther pointed through the thickening snowfall, drawing their attention to an anchored warship out on the water. Scores of lifeboats were being loaded with armored men, their great cats and provisions.

Aria broke into a full sprint through the woods, leading the way. If they were seen, a second pursuit would hinder them in finding the entrance to the Sister City. It was at this point that Sekali found a place in his heart just for the

Veleighen; he hated them. Steadily they moved along, keeping a lookout for a cave that would mark the entrance into the last leg of their journey. They had to find it quickly, or all they had struggled for would be lost.

As they searched, the snowfall intensified, beginning to deepen the blanket of white over the land, even as the vicious howl of the Dreganox Wolf broke the silence of the woodlands closer behind them. Aria ignored the approaching terror as she kept to the base of the mountain, urging them forward in search of the entrance to the cave.

The predator's howl split the air all too often. Each time, its unnerving cry sounded, Sekali spun about, expecting to see it charging across the slope toward them. Desperately they searched out every crevice and possible area for an opening, the suspense raking like claws at their nerves. At one point, they had to stop for a minute to catch their breath. Sucking in a few breaths, Finyat glanced over at Uther and smirked.

“Isn’t it funny how time flies when you are enjoying yourself? On the other hand, isn’t it hilarious how time crawls when you are not enjoying yourself? It’s crawling.” Uther opened his mouth to say something, then shrugged and spun his axe between the palms of his hands, looking back. The sudden scream of the beast startled them all, causing them to jump. Aria looked back the way they had come. It was closer!

“Shhhh!” she hissed at Finyat, then bolted on, continuing the search. The snowfall deepened all too quickly, hindering Uther and Finyat considerably. The creature was closing in on them fast, evident by its howl that grew noticeably louder each time it shattered the air behind them.

The snow was slowing two of the four considerably, so Sekali took the lead, forcing his way through the heavy knee-deep snow, carving a path for them to follow. Next, Aria followed Sekali, clearing the path he was cutting through the deepening blanket of heavily falling snow. Uther follow Aria, and Finyat brought up the rear. In this formation Uther and Finyat were able to follow at a quicker pace.

Though none of them saw it, Finyat let something fall from his hand as they ran. They also missed the wicked grin that played across his face, and the stench that permeated the area a few moments after they were gone.

Over the next while, the snowfall grew even thicker, and the wind picked up, relentlessly pushing its way inland. It seemed to Sekali as though the storm was sent to hinder them. Maybe a Veleighen Elementalist from the ship had spotted the four and had cast a spell to turn the very hand of nature against them.

As exhaustion began to set in, Aria produced a clear vial of greenish liquid from her cloak. Biting down on the cork, she pulled, unstopping the potion. Spitting the cork out, she placed the open end to her lips and lifted the bottom, drinking the entirety of its contents. Dropping the empty vial, she began to chant. As she chanted, the weariness in their legs eased, and their breathing became easier. Refreshed, they picked up the pace and continued on.

Not a moment later, Aria stopped and pointed out a darker, shaded, spot on the mountainside. Squinting, through the torrent of wind and snowfall, Sekali saw the opening of a cave. It was well-concealed by the shape of the hillside itself. Had they not been looking for it, and had Grisham not told them where to look, they would have easily missed it.

Stopping at the entrance, they stared in, not sure whether to risk entering and finding it preoccupied, or to slowly enter, using precaution and risk that which stalked them from behind. Sekali turned to them.

“Remember, do not go to the back of the cave. There is a shaft.” At the moment they decided to enter, there was a snarl from behind. Sekali looked to see the silhouette of the Dreganox Wolf at the bottom of the slope, running toward them at full speed and closing in quick. Without hesitation, he grabbed Uther and Finyat, and pulled them into the cave with all his might. Aria followed, pushing them with one hand and drawing her blade with the other. Once they were within the cave, she turned and backed in as the beast furiously slammed its mouth into the cave's opening, desperately snapping and clawing after them. Its bulk would not let it through and so it began digging furiously at the entrance, tearing away the snow and rock and soil, causing the cave to shudder and frozen earth to loosen and fall about them.

“Vessen!” Finyat’s yelled, his voice quivering in terror. The cave lit up with a brilliance that surprised their hunter. The beast backed away for a moment, blinded, shook its head, then lunged back at the hillside, strands of muddied saliva, stained pink, dripping from its great mouth as it desperately tried to get at them.

“Where does this creature come from?” Finyat asked, visibly shaken. Uther

threw him a narrow-eyed glance.

“It's mother?” Finyat shot an annoyed glance at the Dwarf, but said nothing.

“Woa!” he exclaimed, freezing in place and pointing. Had they run any farther in, they would have fallen into a vertical shaft at the back of the cave; the only known entrance that led to their destination. As they peered down into the hole, the ground shuddered and part of the entrance collapsed, only to be pulled free and excavated.

“Voracious creature,” Aria stated, admiration in her voice. Uther looked at her in disbelief.

“What, are you studying it? It's going to get in here!” Finyat turned and knelt, retrieving a blowpipe from within his cloak as another section of the cave fell, blocking the monster out. Again it began pulling the debris out from the opening, flinging soil and rock behind it, slowly but steadily gaining ground on them. Finyat raised the blowpipe to his mouth, balancing himself with his free hand. Frustrated, he lowered the mouthpiece and looked at Uther.

“Uther,” he shouted, “wound it! I need it to open its mouth wider!” Greatly startled, Uther glanced at Finyat as though he were mad.

“Wound it!?” He looked back at the creature in doubt.

“Here!” Aria pulled one of the large jagged blades they had gotten at the ogres camp from her Storing Backpack and handed it to him. “We found it in the ogres lair. Throw it at it! You are the best at throwing weapons!” Uther dropped his axe and gripped the sword's hilt with both hands and raised it back over his head as another part of the cave collapsed. Uther staggered, steadied himself and . . . he lowered the blade as their attacker backed out of the cave, turned its head and snarled.

A sudden volley of arrows struck it in the face and neck, piercing it many times. Uther turned to Sekali, a sudden look of trepidation twisting into his face.

“The Veleighen are here!” he yelled as a battle instantly erupted outside the opening of the cave. Aria knelt, reached into her storing pack and began pulling out rope.

“Sekali, help me pull these ropes out!” she yelled above the din of the fray. Sekali leapt to her side, grabbing the end of the rope as the chewed remains of a Veleighen Warrior struck the opening of the cave, falling just within the entrance, jerking and twitching in her last throes of death. Sekali grabbed the rope and began pulling hand over hand as quickly as he could until the end came out.

“Quickly, give me the end!” she shouted. Sekali did as she commanded, handing Aria the end of the rope as she pulled another rope’s end from the pack. Hastily, she tied them both together as three arrows hurled through the opening and struck the wall at the back of the cave. All three projectiles bounced off the rock and fell into the depths of the shaft.

“Pull, Sekali, pull!” In a sea of cries, Sekali listened to the sounds of flesh tearing and bones splintering as the battle intensified. He could hear many voices barking out orders, followed by the enraged cry of the predator turned prey. As he came to the end of the second rope, Aria reached in and quickly pulled out another. This was repeated a number of times as the battle raged on outside.

“Okay, that’s the last one!” Aria looked around for a place to tie it off, but there was none. A sudden silence seemed to take over the small cave, although Sekali could still see movement outside, mingled with the violence and terror of mortal combat. Aria looked at Finyat, throwing him a grin. She twined the rope three times about her waist and tied a quick knot. Laying down, with her feet facing the opening of the shaft, she lodged her heels into a crevice in the stone floor, then tossed him her magical backpack.

“The pack is yours, Finyat, until I return to claim it, understand?” A look of shock and surprise smote Finyat's face as he shook his head, but Aria screamed at them all.

“Just go! Go! Save my city!” Finyat burst into tears as he violently kicked the rope down the shaft and reached down to grab it. Without looking at anyone he began to sob and lowered himself into the vertical tunnel, vanishing from sight. From within the vertical tunnel came Finyat’s cursing amidst his sobs. Uther growled, threw the sword down, picked up his enchanted axe, hastily securing it to

his back. Just before he lowered himself down, he turned and looked one last time at Aria.

“Try to follow!” he growled, then slipped down the rope after Finyat. Sekali saluted Aria, a twisted look of grief carved into his face.

“I love you, Aria,” he said, emotion overwhelming him. The Eldishar Princes smiled brightly at Sekali.

“I love you, son of Sardakahn. Now go, save our people!” Saluting Aria, he turned and grimly followed his two companions down the rope, not looking back.

They lowered themselves down, hearing Aria grunt with the strain of their weight, as Finyat held her orb out, its brilliance lighting the way to the bottom. Once the three were at the bottom, they looked up hoping beyond hope she would find a way to tie off the rope and follow.

Time seemed to stand still as they looked up, waiting, hoping. But all that descended was the entire length of rope, snaking its way down into their midst from above, coiling into a large pile. Far above, the echo of battle raged on. Then, abruptly, there was silence. The three stood, deathly still, listening, just listening.

Sekali looked at Finyat, who was looking up and weeping bitterly, gritting his teeth. He knew they could not stay; the Veleighen would follow.

“Uther, Finyat, come, we must finish this for all our kindred . . . especially for Aria!” Without a word, Finyat turned and began to lead the way, his face darkening. As they departed the area, a scream echoed down through the shaft. Within a few short moment, a body struck the rocks behind them with a bone-splintering thud. Finyat turned, holding up the light orb to reveal the body of a decapitated Veleighen soldier.

Finyat suddenly screamed in rage, withdrew a thick glass bottle from some inner pocket and threw it at the base of the hole. It shattered upon impact, splashing its contents over the rocks. Shaking his fist at the dead Veleighen he screamed in rage.

“Forever, I hunt your people!” He turned and, again, took the lead through a cavern tunnel that began to slope downward into knee-deep, icy-cold, salt water.

The way was not difficult, but it was cold. The chilled water soaked and numbed their legs as they moved through it quickly, silently, assailed by the horror of what they knew had become of Aria.

When Aria knew the three were down, she pulled the rope, feeling only the weight of it. They were safely down. Jumping to her feet, Aria heard the enraged scream of the Dreganox Wolf outside.

She looked down at the rope tied about her waist. If she did manage to tie off the rope, and join her companions, the Veleighen would also have a way down. That is why she had secretly gone through all their belongings. Discovering the grappling hooks, she had disposed of them. There could be no mistakes; no windows of opportunity for an enemy she knew all too well. But, in all the confusion, they had not remembered them. Good.

Closing her eyes, Aria took in a deep breath and let it out slowly, whispering a prayer to Vannar as her hands settled over the knot. Untying the rope from about her waist, she slowly opened her hands and let it slip from her grasp. As she watched it slide toward the opening of the deep shaft, and vanish into it, she closed her eyes, knowing she had just lost her only way of escape. Maybe not. There was still one hope.

Aria drew her katana, held it up before her and opened her eyes. Looking at the runes on the blade, she pondered her mission as the scream of the Dreganox Wolf, and the cries of the Veleighen, continually sounded. She had successfully brought them to the doorstep of the ancient city, but they needed time, and she would buy them just that. Now it was up to them. Focusing on one particular rune set in the blade, she took a deep breath.

“Alai ahm keshalen (bring me victory),” she whispered. Like the burning of a falling star, her blade flashed, filling the cave with a brilliant, white radiance. The natural, silver light in Aria’s eyes grew quickly to match the glory of her katana as the power of the Eldishar filled her being just as a Veleighen soldier leapt through what remained of the caves entrance. With all the speed and might he could summon, the soldier attacked, but she was a weathered combatant, and easily dispatched him, sending all but his head falling into the shaft. Without hesitation, Aria turned and charged out of the cave, meeting the Veleighen in her fury.

It appeared as though a Herald in her wrath had emerged from the cave. She noticed many of the Veleighen were already cut down by the Dreganox Wolf as it faltered before a swarm of arrows and blades assailing it. Ignoring the beast, she pressed her attack upon the Veleighen between her and the forest's edge.

Hacking and slashing with perfect accuracy, she cut a path of devastation among their ranks as she forced her way toward the trees, cleaving armor and helm, flesh and bone. As she cut through their ranks, she heard the beast scream. Its mortality was coming to an end; it would soon fall. After that, the Veleighen would turn their full attention upon her. In the cover of the woods was her best chance to lose them.

But her foes were a hardened, warlike people, and were not deceived at her sudden attack, even though they fell before her might and power like sheep before the wolf. Forming a shield wall before her, they frustrated her offense as she began to tire, then quickly routed her into a great circle. As one would fall, another would move in to take the open space, thus bringing her to a standstill, containing her in a large ring of shields.

Others slipped through the shield-wall from all angles of the circle, attacking two at a time, systematically, always flanking her. As one would fall, another would take his place. In this, they wore her down, until, exhausted, she felt her blade becoming heavy. The light began to diminish from her eyes and blade as she fought desperately to survive.

Realizing she had lost, Aria screamed at them in frustration as her blade was struck from her hand. Her side burned like fire as the blade of her enemy slipped past her defenses, piercing her. Ripping a dagger from her sleeve, she pulled free of the blade and ended his life swiftly, even as another blade lanced her shoulder.

It was finished; she had tried, and though many lay dead at her hand, many more pressed down upon her in a sudden rush. She felt a weariness weighing down upon her as she cut the throats of two more. But, it was not enough. She had failed to reach the forest. Aria thought about Sekali, Uther and Finyat. At least she had bought them some time. In that, she grinned and coughed, staining the

snow red with her own blood.

It was at this time when a deafening howl broke upon the wind, drowning out the sound of the battle. From the forest rushed Grisham, leaping into the ranks of the Veleighen, even as two more blades pierced Aria from behind. The sudden, vicious assault of the Norst`Kin Lycanthrope was so intense the enemy instantly scattered in fear.

With the swiftness of a viper, Grisham launched into the thickness of their ranks, howling in rage, ripping them to pieces with both tooth and claw, rending their strong bodies, sending them screaming for mercy before him. With every blade that pierced Grisham's hide, fifty Veleighen lay dead and scattered. His wounds only spurred him on to greater wrath and fury in the violence of his onslaught.

As the Werewolf spotted Aria falling to her knees, his wrath exploded, transforming his attack into a terrible frenzy. In a rage the Veleighen had never before encountered, Grisham leapt toward a Veleighen who was snapping out orders to his men, cutting through their ranks, instantly driving him to the ground and twisting him instantly to a lifeless sleep.

The Lycanthrope's attack was so swift and sure, the Veleighen fled from before him in disarray. Swiftly, the Werewolf pursued one mounted Veleighen who bore down on Aria, intent on finishing her. Leaping an incredible distance, the Werewolf intercepted him, landing upon he and his steed, beheading him with a dire swipe of razor-sharp claws. As quickly as he slit the cat from neck to mid-section, Grisham leapt from it and sprinted back to Aria, snatching her, and her blade, from the bloodied ground and headed for the tree line. Just before entering the thickness of the forest, the Werewolf turned and snarled, filling the mountainside with a terrible cry, challenging any who would dare follow.

None did.

Grisham, dripping with his and the blood of his enemies, looked down upon Aria to see her struggling for breath as she clutched at him in shock. She tried to smile, but burst out in tears, her lips and teeth dripping red. She was dying.

Lowering his head to hers, Grisham whispered something . . . then bit her arm, sinking his teeth into her flesh. Aria's bloodshot eyes shot open wide. She weakly screamed and gripped the side of Grisham's face. After a moment, he released her and waited. Aria's hand fell to the ground, and she slowly closed her eyes.

Sheathing her blade in sadness, Grisham cradled her body, bearing her steadily into the shrouded forests of the northlands.

Kneeling upon the soft grass, Mabuhi closed her eyes and nodded. She then lowered her head as Asira, in her full majesty and power, placed a hand gently upon the back of her head.

“I am ready, Mother,” she whispered. The Herald smiled and closed her eyes, lifting her face to the dense canopy of trees above. Mumbling quietly, as if to herself, she began to tremble as a power filled her being and then cascaded over Mabuhi, who gasped and drew a katana from a sheath that lay across her lap. The blade sprung to life as though fire had been set to it. As it did, she stepped back from the Druid, staggering slightly, catching her balance on the trunk of a nearby tree.

Mabuhi groaned as if suffering, and then fell onto her back, gripping the flaming blade tight. She could feel herself slipping away and accepted it fully; Sekali needed her assistance, or he and his companions would die. As her breathing ceased altogether, she slipped away as though she were dead.

The image of Aria, a rope tied about her waist, her feet lodged in the crack of the stone floor of the cave, caused his eyesight to dim to a blood-red haze. He felt the bloodlust welling up within him, and yearned for a confrontation. Sekali glanced over at Uther, who stalked along in silence, ceaselessly spinning his axe within his hands, his jaw set hard. It seemed he was about to break out in the battle rage of the Kithrin.

Finyat mourned the loss of Aria, weeping in silence, vehemently cursing the Veleighen through his tears. At this point, Sekali doubted Finyat's ability to guide them safely into the Sister City, should there be any hidden measures to stop trespassers from entering. At this point, it no longer mattered; there was no time to slow down for possible dangers.

Determined to finish this mission, Sekali silently vowed he would see them through this nightmare, just as he had seen his team through much more while upon The Watch. This is what he did. This is what he was trained for. They would raise the Sister City to its former glory, or die in the attempt.

In the distance behind them, the cries of many voices suddenly echoed, turning to moans of agony as a fresh chorus of screams echoed into his ears, filling the air, breaking a long silence that had accompanied their travel through a now-upward slope. With tears glittering in his eyes, Uther laughed darkly amidst his sadness and rage.

Alarmed by Uther's sudden, dark laughter, Sekali looked over at the Dwarf, apprehensive, wondering if he was still in a state of mind to do this. It seemed all three of them were at the end of their sanity rope. Yet, at this point in time, to press on was their only option.

As they approached the end of the tunnel, a truly astounding sight revealed itself. Unfolding before their eyes, lay a city in magnificence and splendor. They could not see far, for the darkness of the cave obscured the range of light shed by the orb. Sekali saw further than they and gripped the cave's entrance to balance himself and his mind at the scene above him. It was not the roof of a cavern that

barred all light, but sea water, held back as if it were by some great, invisible force. Looking at Sekali's reaction, Finyat held the bauble high, cupping his hand beneath it.

"Vessen!" he shouted, as the distant screams behind them continued in an ongoing morbid chorus. Light, brighter than ever, blazed forth, revealing more of what Sekali was seeing. Overwhelmed with sudden fear and wonder, Uther involuntarily staggered back as he beheld the great deep of the Navarian Sea above.

In wide-eyed fear and wonder, Finyat gazed up for a moment, swallowed hard, then threw Sekali a look, as if asking him to make everything right. All three shared the same instant dread; that the waters might break loose and wash down upon them. Overwhelmed, speechless, Uther stared upward at the phenomenon. The three took in the scene, distracted from the danger closing in from behind them. Above, the great shadow of something in the water glided over, rooting an even greater fear within their minds.

Hearing distant shouts and cries behind them, Sekali was the first to gather his senses. Slapping Finyat and Uther on the shoulder, he pressed forward.

"Come, come, our enemy is upon us!" Leading them, Sekali descended a small embankment of broken up earth, leading the two down onto a broken and shattered cobblestone road.

As they ran through the grand streets of this once mighty city, they beheld spires ascending upward, as if to pierce the waters held at bay above, as if each structure were reaching desperately for the outside world.

As they progressed, Sekali felt dread begin to creep into his heart. He could not place his fear; it was more than merely the pursuit of the Veleighen. His companions must have felt it also, for they drew their weapons in unison. Without hesitation, and with great caution, they raced forward, Sekali leading them through the main avenue with its many cross streets branching off this way and that.

A myriad of abandoned shops and structures arrayed the decaying street on either side of them as they ran. Sekali surmised this place to have once been a

grand civilization, where many came to trade and deal one with another; where an Elf King sat upon a grand throne in a grand palace of exquisite workmanship.

Onward they hastened for quite some time before they neared what Sekali thought to be the city's center. A reverence settled within him, coupled with that growing dread, as they broke out into a large public square before a grand palace with doors flung wide. Before them, lay the long-since dead bodies of hundreds of armored Elves and Humans, pierced with weapons and arrows, their skeletal remains filling the large entrance to a great castle rising up, nearly touching the great dome of water above.

"There, he called, pointing. They approached the great double-doors, riddled with arrows, warped and twisted with the passing of many ages. Finyat stooped and touched the shaft of an arrow, held upright by a gaping skull. As his fingers wrapped about the arrow, it crumbled like char in his grip, followed by a section of the skull. Ignoring the scene laid before him, Sekali urged them on in silence. Past the great doors they sprinted, the bones of the dead they trod upon crumbling and splintering beneath their feet like the burned out, charred husks of a dead campfire.

To him, as they made their way into a large hall, covered with a sea of the dead, it felt as though they were desecrating a tomb. Uther stopped.

"A shrine; we seek a shrine," the Dwarf stated, openly disturbed as he trespassed into the midst of a long since dead battle, turning a full circle. "Where do we seek a shrine in a city unknown to three strangers?" Finyat shrugged and lifted a foot, wiping tears from his eyes.

"Well, we must be in the right place, Uther, why else would such a scene lay out before us?" Finyat stated, cursing under his breath, then broke out weeping. In sympathy, Uther looked upon his friend, placing a hand upon his small shoulder in support.

"Stay with me, Finyat. Stay with me now. Let us hope they don't still defend this city." Finyat's face paled at his words.

"Don't say that. Why did you have to say that? Do you always have to always say such things?" Uther laughed nervously and shrugged.

“Sorry.” During their conversation, Sekali scanned the entire chamber, that feeling of dread now turning to a presence of doom. Something was coming!

“Be silent, both of you. Do you not feel it?” Both Uther and Finyat froze, suddenly sensing what Sekali spoke of. As they did, the two double doors to the entrance moved, splintered, then crumbled to the stone before their eyes. A presence filled the area that stole the beating of their hearts.

Into the great hall stalked the skeletal remains of a dragon, a dull, sickening, green shimmer glowing from the surface of its entire skeletal structure. Deep within the large, slanted sockets of its head seethed a darkness that gifted them with instant horror. Less effected than his companions, Sekali stepped between the great undead dragon and his companions.

Upon its back rode the figure of a skeleton in tattered, shredded robes, ruined by the passing of time, hand raised high. A ball of green fire ignited from its skeletal hand as it spoke, as if a thousand unnatural voices uttered words in unison.

“Who dares enter the Sister City!” it demanded. It held its fire, and waited . . . motionless. Sekali glanced at Uther and Finyat, who stood speechless, gaping in fear at the terrible presence of the dead as the distinct sound of many iron-clad feet began to be heard in the distance. How the Veleighen had gotten there so quickly, he could not imagine. All the same, their enemy was upon them once again. What was more, this terror before them seemed about to do the dirty work for the Veleighen.

With no other choice, Sekali withdrew his section of the key, showing it openly to the dread rider. Taking in a ragged breath, he shouted.

“We come to raise this blessed city, the blessing of the Eldishar Queen preceding us! Stand aside that we may accomplish its rebirth and bring it to oneness with the City of Knowledge! Their former glory will be reborn, and you will not hinder us in this, our appointed task!” With conviction, Sekali's eyes hardened as he gripped the hilt of his sword and tore it from its sheath.

Taking a defensive stance, he readied himself to evade the imminent strike

of this terrible visage of the dead. For a moment, he waited, and as he did, every rune upon his blade and armor began to glow in a silvery light.

His heart felt not the usual paralyzing fear the dead held mortals bound by. He was ready to lay low this horror . . . just as he had done before in the Wastelands; just as he had done upon the bridge within the deep of the mountains. He wished he had Mahkaia and his five brothers backing him. It would have made this so much easier. Here, he only had a master Thief and a battle-worn Kithrin Dwarf. In this, there was reassurance. The only thing he lacked was Mahkaia.

Leaning forward upon a rotten, wasted, dragon saddle, the dead lowered its hand . . . for only a moment it looked down upon him, becoming motionless for the space of three breaths. Throwing back its head, it broke out in a ghastly laugh that filled the entire area with a dark dread. The rider raised itself up in worn stirrups and beckoned Sekali to it.

“Come to me. You need not fear my wrath if you indeed hold what you claim. Come now!” Sekali wasted no time. Sprinting foreword, he slid to a stop, displacing the layer of dead beneath him, holding up the amulet as hope began to fill him. The presence of this undead was overwhelming, but he endured it as it leaned down, briefly studying the amulet. The darkness in the skeletal dragon's eyes vanished, replaced with a green flame as the rider pulled on the reigns and turned its back upon him, facing the shattered entrance. Without looking back, it pointed a ghastly finger back, past them.

“On the left, take the far stairs which ascend into the center tower.” Its voice echoed like a battalion of the dead, whispering in unison. “My sister has sent you to redeem this blessed city, and to finally redeem my soul . . . go!” Without hesitation, Sekali spun about and raced back over the disintegrating skulls and bones and grabbed Finyat and Uther, who stood motionless, mesmerized by the presence of the dead.

Pulling them toward a set of grand marble stairs at the back of the chamber, the sound of the dead magician's voice echoed, filled with wrath, followed by a concussion blast of energy that threw them forward into the long since slain upon

floor.

As they scrambled to their feet, they heard the hissing of many arrows and dove to the floor again, into the thick layer of the deceased beneath them. After arrows struck the stairs and rails over them, they leapt up, wasting no time. Up the ancient stairwell they sped as arrows bit the marble all about them. Sekali felt one pierce his right arm below the elbow and staggered. Growling in anger, he broke the arrow off and dropped the shaft.

A ghastly moan filled the chamber behind them, followed by an intense feeling of being cursed and forgotten, followed by a rumble that shook them to the stairs. The arrows ceased, as behind them, men and women screamed and died. As the battle raged behind them, the three ascended a great stairwell that spiraled steadily to the left and upwards, leading them upward and into a great chamber.

Sekali gripped the head of the arrow piercing his arm and pushed it through, freeing it with a cry. Feeling blood began to seep steadily down his arm, and pool within the leather of his glove, his eyes fell upon a greater scene of death. Uther scanned the area in haste, then pointed toward an object set before a grand and bone-strewn gate.

“There, just past the center, in front of the gate!” The Dwarf bellowed, breaking into a run for it. At the far end of this ornate chamber, were steps all about a massive oval structure, its surface deeply etched with runes. It was of the same make as the one they had discovered as they ascended the switchbacks. One could simply walk up the stairs, through it, and down the steps on the other side. Yet, this was not their destination. It was the shrine that set before it, covered in a thick layer of dust, upon which lay the bodies of many. Sekali sprinted to the center of the room, passing up Uther.

“Your amulets!” he cried. “Quickly!” Sekali pulled his third of the key from about his neck. Uther and Finyat did likewise as a great moan was heard echoing about them. The floor beneath them shook, driving them to the ground. There was a great cheer and the thunderous battle cry of many that followed.

Then to their great fear, the sounds of many iron-clad feet began thundering

throughout the halls, shortly filling the stairs below. Sekali pulled himself to the shrine and struck the skeletal remains of the dead from it, then began wiping away the dust of twenty ages from its marble surface.

He looked at his piece, comparing it to the surface of the shrine, it was plain to see where it needed to be placed. Quickly, he fit his section of the amulet into place. As he did, there was a great sound, as though a giant had struck an anvil with a great hammer. The entire structure heaved, as though it suddenly struggled for breath.

Sekali pushed himself away from the pedestal and turned to the entrance, readying his blade as a quiet began to settle upon him, a tinge of violet beginning to overtake the haze of red filling his vision. His part was finished. Pointing at the shrine, he urgently motioned them to do the same, then turned and raced toward the entrance, bent on killing every Veleighen desecrating this blessed place.

As he approached the doors, there was a shimmer to his right, as if a cluster of fireflies had suddenly shed their light. Mahkaia emerged, stepping from the light, wielding a flaming katana. Sekali did not see her, for the blood lust of battle was upon him. The clear iron-shod footsteps of his enemy were near at hand. As he neared the entrance, Mahkaia silently passed into Sekali, becoming one with him.

Something touched him! Thinking the enemy had somehow gotten behind him, Sekali spun in a circle, striking out with his blade as he screamed in fury, but there was no one there. His sword began to illuminate, radiating a white light, as he stopped just within the great doors of the chamber. Ignoring the enchantment of his blade, Sekali focused on the opening, waiting to murder the first Veleighen to show his face.

His senses focused upon every physical detail about him; every sound and smell. He knew no fear, no pain, no hesitation . . . his entire purpose and existence was only the death of the Veleighen. Uther bellowed out behind him, as if he were far away.

“Just turn it that way, Shallant! You’d think you were a master Thief, but

you can't even figure it out!"

"I'm trying, I'm trying! There! Got it!" Again the structure expanded, and the very stone of the chamber seemed to grow, enlarge, accompanied by the same deafening sound that threatened to shake Sekali to the floor amidst the dead. A great dust instantly arose from the floor of the entire structure, obscuring Sekali's vision as the second key was fit into its resting place upon the shrine and activated. In a shrill voice, Finyat screamed, "Your turn Uther, hurry!"

One step ahead of his enemy, Sekali pulled his blade to the left, behind him, as the first of the Veleighen Warriors turned the corner in full sprint, blades drawn, instantly focusing on him. As his enemy's blade fell upon him, Sekali moved in underneath his powerful stroke, pivoted, bringing his sword down upon the back of his enemy's neck. There was no emotion, only blood now. They had declared war on he and his people, his friends and companions. They had killed Aria, and would now reap the consequences of their actions. Sekali's hate was filled beyond measure for the Veleighen.

Piercing through both chest and back-plate of the second, he ripped his blade sideways from his frozen quarry, spinning into three more, instantly relieving them of both their weapons and arms in a single arc. As they fell back before him, he danced among them, fluently, without mercy, sending another seven into the next world.

Seven abreast, the Veleighen filled the full length of the stairs before him, grim determination etched in the features of their stone-hard faces, surging forward without fear of the death he so surely dealt out to them.

A deep groan suddenly filled the air, as if the earth beneath them was waking from a deep sleep.

Energy filled him as he cut line after line of the Veleighen down with ease, his blade unhindered by the steel of their armor. Shattering both armor and weapons, blood-lust pounded like a great and deep drum within his mind, his heart, his spirit. Sekali gave no thought to the ease in which he conquered the evil surging forward, falling to the power of his might. Energy filled him with

strength and endurance, focusing a sure hand against his foes beyond comprehension. Pressing into their ranks, as the harvester reaping a field of wheat, they fell before the splendor of his blade, taking them off balance. Pressing into them, with all the energy of his soul, this Warrior of the Wastelands laid low his enemies.

Falling back, the Veleighen created a shield wall that instantly hindered his powerful strokes. Bending his iron will upon them, both shield and arm gave way. Yet even so, more of their ranks rushed foreword, taking the place of the fallen as the dead were pulled back and thrown over the banister of the great stairwell.

Through the haze of dust behind the wall of shields before him arose bowmen with bent bows, intent on taking him down in a fluidity of motion that rivaled the greatest of soldiers known to Utaemia. Not giving them the chance to loose the sting of arrows upon him, Sekali threw out his free hand, a terrible rage bursting to life within him as a white flash of blinding light ensued.

“Shrakka! (Lightning)” Sekali screamed. All about him the air blazed to life as energy filled his being; unbelievable power! Multiple bolts of lightning leapt from the palm of his hand, striking down every foe before him, followed by a crack of thunder that shook the walls of the entire structure about him.

The silent throes of his oppressor lasted but a moment as their bodies charred and blackened as they were flung back and over the stairs to fall amidst their own below. The metal of their armors carried the lightning among them and down the stairs where the Veleighen marched up in their ranks, undaunted by the sudden storm they faced, pressing fearlessly up the ancient steps with a furious battle-cry. More archers entered into sight, loosing arrows upon him, as they moved in for the kill.

Sekali did not feel the arrows pierce his shoulder and side, so intense was the power within him. Throwing his arms out wide, he brought the fist holding his blade into the open palm of his other hand, even as three arrows were deflected by the enchanted plate armor the Knowledge Master had gifted him with. Darkness, like the void, surged from between both palm and fist as his sword darkened with a

terrible power, seeming to steal the breath from all within sight. In a voice of thunder, Sekali raged against his prey.

“Morgruin (Disintegration)!” he screamed. A wave of shadowy darkness burst from his blade, flooding the entire stairwell with three waves of a darkened energy, smiting them all upon the stairs and chamber to powder. Undaunted, the Veleighen appeared, raging up toward him, bent on his destruction.

Ripping out the arrows piercing his body, Sekali snarled, his voice changing to that of an enraged dragon in its wrath. In anger, he threw the arrows down and charged, meeting the Veleighen head on in a flurry of strikes which cut them down like a wolf before a flock of lambs.

Three more arrows struck him, as a third deafening sound hammered through the structure, louder than ever. The walls about them all contracted with a strange force that brought all but Sekali and his companions to their knees.

The long and drawn-out gasp of a woman filled the air, inhaling deep and long. Then, to the dismay of the Veleighen, there issued a scream that filled them with pain and despair. As the dreaded, legendary, Banshee, her cry pierced every part of the Sister City. Sekali felt suddenly heavy, even as the sensation of being lifted came upon him.

“It is done!” he cried, backing up the stairs until he once again stood before the doors of the chamber. Looking in through the great set of doors, he beheld Uther and Finyat, who stood just within, both staring at him in disbelief, a look on their faces he knew all too well. He was dying. Catching Finyat's eye, Sekali shook his head and growled viciously, bearing blood-stained teeth. The fierceness of his countenance compelled both the Shallant and Kithrin Dwarf to retreat a step.

“It is done! It is finished!” Sekali cried with a loud voice. “Tell Mabuhi I love her . . . I always will . . . ,” he choked, gritting his teeth as a sudden wave of pain, like fire, overcame him. Sekali staggered, even as the Veleighen began to organize for yet another assault. Fighting to remain standing, Sekali focused upon keeping his balance, even as a deep exhaustion flooded through him, overwhelming his vision that steadily collapsed in on him like an unstable earthen

tunnel. Falling onto his back, he growled viciously and choked.

As Sekali lay upon the thick marble floor, Mahkaia separated and arose from him, turning to hover just within arm's reach. Taking him into her gaze, she glided close and gently kissed him. In wonder, he beheld his once living bride, then convulsed as his heart began to stab him in the chest. In shock, he gasped, his blade falling from his hand as he gazed in wonder upon her.

"Don't leave me," he whispered. Take me with you." Happily, Mahkaia took his hand.

"I will never leave you, I have spoken. Well done Warrior of Sardakahn," she whispered, then stood. Struggling to his feet, he saluted Mahkaia, pride burning within his fading eyes. In return, she saluted him, as was their custom, her eyes suddenly ablaze, shining like two radiant stars.

Satisfied with the idea of joining Mahkaia in the after life, he could not help but smile, even as his knees buckled out from beneath him. As if in a dream, he fell to the floor as Uther charged past he and Mahkaia, followed by many men and women in golden armor, weapons drawn, arrows suddenly hailing down upon the Veleighen, who, pressed foreword, refusing to accept defeat.

Staring at Mahkaia, Sekali thought he was dreaming of the Witch he was so in love with. It didn't matter now. She was here, now, standing before him, her eyes burning proud and fierce. Holding out a hand, Sekali pleaded with her.

"Take me with you, Mahkaia!" he cried out to her. "Don't leave me!" With a calm voice, undimmed by the din of battle, and the rushing of iron-clad feet all about him, Mahkaia grinned, as she always did.

"Sekali, this is not your time. You still have many things to do. Seek audience with King Nishane Asmond, our High Sovereign and true master. Too soon shall great trials will be laid upon the backs of our people. Help them, Sekali, help them." Mahkaia saluted him again. Drawing close, she placed a gentle hand upon the left side of her head, touching the six braids she had never removed from her hair. She then touched the five new braids in his.

"She is worthy of you. You are indeed worthy of her." To Sekali's dismay,

Mahkaia began to slowly fade.

“Ita sevor min,” she whispered.

“Ita sevor min,” he bitterly wept, watching her vanish before his eyes. She had made an oath to never leave him, yet now she was. Confused, he tried to sit up, to stand and be strong. Maybe he did not understand a greater meaning in all this.

Falling to his back, Sekali lay struggling to remain conscious, while battle raged on, now all about him. Within that battle, he could hear the familiar voice of a Dwarf chanting a battle song, and the distinct strokes of his axe, and the penetrating of steel, flesh and bone. Sekali's ears dimmed until, finally, he could no longer hear anything, anything but the voice of a woman very near his ear.

“Hold on, hold on, hold on. Don't you leave me now. Be strong . . . be strong . . .” Then, Sekali, Warrior of The Watch, defender of Sardakahn Citadel, fell in to deep darkness. As he fell, he could feel something soft fall about his face. The last word he uttered, before leaving the care of his quest, was her name.

Mabuhi gasped, suddenly coming, as if to life, clawing at the air above her in shock and horror, her blade falling to the ground beside her. Asira, who had continually watched over her throughout the duration of the spell, quickly knelt beside her pushing the flaming blade away.

Taking Mabuhi up into her arms, she held her tight and closed her eyes. Within seconds, the brilliance of her being expanded, flooding the physical body of her daughter with the holy light of Vannar. Slowly Mabuhi calmed, her breath returning to an even, steady rhythm. Parting from her, Asira looked down upon Mabuhi, a love like no other filling her heart and soul.

“You are safe now, child. Death has no more power over you. Now, open your eyes – come back to me,” she gently commanded.

Mabuhi instantly came to, seeing a woman holding her, smiling down upon her with the kindest eyes she ever beheld. She was so familiar. Yet, like a dream that evades the mind during the waking hours, she could not place that familiarity. For a long moment, she stared at her, struggling to remember. As her mind cleared, Mabuhi raised a hand to the side of her face.

“I know you,” she whispered, confused. “I know you.” Raising a hand over her's, Asira smiled with unspeakable admiration in her eyes. As the Herald rested her hand upon Mabuhi's, the glint of the diamond ring she wore caught the Druid's attention. A slow grin spread across her face. Instantly, she knew who this woman was. “Mother!” The Herald nodded, raising her eye brows and tilting her head slightly, as if waiting for more. Memories began to multiply, familiar scenes forgotten, now once again her own. Curling her smallest finger about the diamond upon her mother's hand, Mabuhi's countenance brightened.

“Mother, it is done. She is raised from the deep, alive!” Mabuhi suddenly struggled out of her mother's arms and sat up, her eyes falling upon her katana laying close by. Grabbing the hilt of her blade, she frowned. With trembling hands, she sheathed and secured it, then returned her attention to the Herald before

her.

“He is badly wounded. I need to go to him,” she stated urgently. Asira nodded, as if she had expected this.

“Daughter, I give you what strength remains within me to bolster your mortal frame.” Lowering her head, Asira began to softly chant. Reaching out, she touched Mabuhi's hand. As she did, Asira groaned as her strength departed, entering into Mabuhi. While strength filled her entire body, her Mother's countenance darkened. With some effort, the Herald stood and set Mabuhi upon her feet.

“I will send you directly into the Sister City, for she is alive and can now receive you.” With her fingers, she wove an intricate pattern into the air before her, then touched Mabuhi upon the forehead.

“Think of the Sister City now,” she whispered, paling with the strain of the spell. Mabuhi's thoughts turned to a destination she had never seen. With all her will, the Aldarian Elf Druid focused her mind upon a city her mother had told her stories about ever since she was a child. As she did, the earth beneath her feet melted away, instantly sending her into a spinning free-fall as confusion and panic twisted her thoughts in a jumble of chaos that tore away all logic and reason.

Asira staggered, catching her balance upon the trunk of a nearby oak. Raising a hand to her forehead, the Herald knelt upon the ground, closed her eyes and began to rest. As her strength slowly returned, a slight smile raised both corners of her mouth.

“Adan,” she whispered, smiling.

Perceiving a cold stone beneath her, she grasped the meaning of it, slowly coming to recognize it as the reality of a marble floor. As the confusion in her mind subsided, she cried out, startling the many Elf soldiers within a large, ornate, chamber. She heard the clash weapons, and the cries of a battle raging nearby.

Opening her eyes, she looked about, quickly locking her attention upon the great double-doors which led out of the chamber. Mabuhi cried out again as she struggled to her feet. Without hesitation, an Eldishar soldier reached out and steadied her.

The area about her slowly locked into place, ceasing its spinning and twisting. Shaking her head, she pointed at the doors, not yet in control of her tongue. Comprehending what she was asking, he pulled her arm up and around his neck and made his way toward the doors in haste.

As they both left the chamber, she quickly spotted him, lying upon the blood-stained floor between the great double-doors at the top of the stairs amidst many of the fallen enemy. Pulling from the soldier, she stumbled to Sekali's side, falling to her knees as her mind cleared. Snapping his fingers, the Eldishar Elf quickly called for a healer. Mabuhi felt panic taking her as she tenderly brushed loose hair back from Sekali's blood-stained face.

"Hold on, hold on, hold on. Don't you leave me now. Be strong . . . be strong . . ." Sekali came to, feeling something soft fall about his face. Opening his eyes, he looked up into hers.

"Mabuhi?" he whispered, then choked as a robed figure quickly approached and knelt next to them, his eyes falling upon Sekali as he hastily began to chant a spell that would heal him, that is, if he was not too late.

All about him faded to black . . .

Sunlight warmed his face as he opened his eyes to Finyat and Uther sitting beside the bed upon which he lay. Finyat snapped his fingers, gaining Uther's attention.

"Well, well, the hero awakens from blissful dreams of dragons and wolves in pursuit. So you think to adventure without us, eh? Typical Elf!" Sekali focused on Uther's voice and smiled slightly. Uther briefly placed a hand upon Sekali's arm and grinned. "Good to see you weren't killed, Elf." Sekali sat up a bit, noticing he was in strange surroundings. Confused, he looked at them both.

"We did it," Sekali marveled, "didn't we?" Finyat nodded solemnly, a haunted expression in his eyes, then lowered his head for a moment.

"Yes, we did, thanks to you. You slew many of those foul Veleighen, Sekali. We didn't know you studied the magic arts. We saw what you did," Finyat whispered, absently playing with a glass orb hooked to a long silver chain. Sekali reached out and gripped Finyat by the shoulder.

"Aria made it out, I'm sure of it. Uther, Finyat, I never told you this, but Grisham was clearing the way before us upon the Kedge`Noth Plains. He continued following us after we came down from the plateau." Finyat looked at him, a spark of hope burning to life.

"I hope so, Sekali. She was a one of a kind." Sekali threw Finyat a reassuring look, then winced, resting his head back against the soft pillow behind him. Falling into a light rest, he began to recall the amulets, the shrine, the lightning!

"Where is Mahkaia?" he inquired in earnest, coming to and raising himself from the bed. The two remained silent, not answering. As if in a dream, he made his way to the door. As he reached for the handle, Mabuhi entered into the room. Instantly, she pointed a finger at him, driving him back to the side of the bed.

"Lay down, now," she said, tightening her jaw just so, signifying her seriousness. Uther stood and grunted.

"Typical Elf!" Finyat looked at the floor, frowned, then looked to his best

friend.

“Uther, I challenge you to a drinking contest.” He didn’t say it with enthusiasm and feeling, but the Dwarf instantly brightened.

“I accept your challenge! Prepare to lose!” With that, both of them departed. Once alone, a silence fell upon the room as Mabuhi and Sekali looked at each other. She stepped closer to him, giving him a slight smile, then pointed at the bed.

“Please lay down. Please.” Sekali did as she asked. When he was comfortable, she took his hand in both of hers. Sighing in relief, she shook her head.

“You did it; you really did it.” Sekali looked about a room wholly designed from living trees. It was then that realized where he was; he was in Mabuhi’s personal home.

“We did it, Mabuhi, not I,” he stated quietly, his thoughts straying to his beloved Mahkaia. He had seen her again, and it re-opened many memories, and pain. The misery of her loss had not been dimmed by the passing of many years. Mabuhi’s eyes filled with glistening tears as he continued.

“I saw her again, Mabuhi; she helped us.” Mabuhi raised an eyebrow at him, a stream of tears breaking loose from her left eye. Pulling up a chair, she set it beside the bed. Gripping his hand tight, she could not refrain from weeping. Not bearing to see her in such a state, he did his best to comfort her.

“Do not cry, Mabuhi. I will soon let her rest in my heart, no longer speaking of her. I do not mean to make you sad.” His statement caused her to weep all the more, and it confused him.

Throughout the remainder of the night they talked, until both ran out of words to say. Sekali began to fall more deeply in love with her as they quietly enjoyed the company of one another. She was loving and caring, so gentle and giving. She always said the right things, and a solid conviction for life was evident in her communication. It was almost as if she were . . .

“Mabuhi, I would like to see the Sister City. I would like to see the City of

Knowledge, but not now. The sorrow of loss is too near my heart at this time. I want to go home. I miss my mother and father. There is much to report to my master that concerns my people.” Squeezing his hand tight, Mabuhi nodded.

“Take some rest. I will arrange everything. I will gladly go with you, if you wish my company.”

“I would love to introduce you to my mother and father.” In response, Mabuhi began to weep again, giving him the strangest look.

“Why are you sad, milady?” She shook her head.

“I am not sad, milord. Truly, you are mistaken. I thought I lost you forever. No, there is no sadness in me this morning, for you are here.” Without realizing it, Sekali began to whisper, as if suddenly in a daydream.

“You are life and light; a true Healer. I would give all I have and become to learn your ways. Instilled within you is a peace I desire to share. I do not wish to leave your forested home, and I would do it all again a thousand times to find the peace and serenity you radiate.” Genuinely flattered, Mabuhi stood, a look of relief flooding across her beautiful face.

“Sekali, take some rest,” she whispered, “I will see you shortly.” Wiping her eyes, she exited the room and closed the door, leaving him to himself.

Sekali lay back, watching her go. There was something about her he could not anchor his thoughts to. To him, she was a breath of fresh air, yet more . . . much more.

Looking down, he stared at his hand, for the first time feeling something in it. Curiously, he uncurled his fingers . . . to reveal a golden chain of woven links that held a round pendant, fashioned into the form of a silver, now empty, acorn shell.

His eyes widened in astonishment for only a moment before Sekali launched from the bed after her.