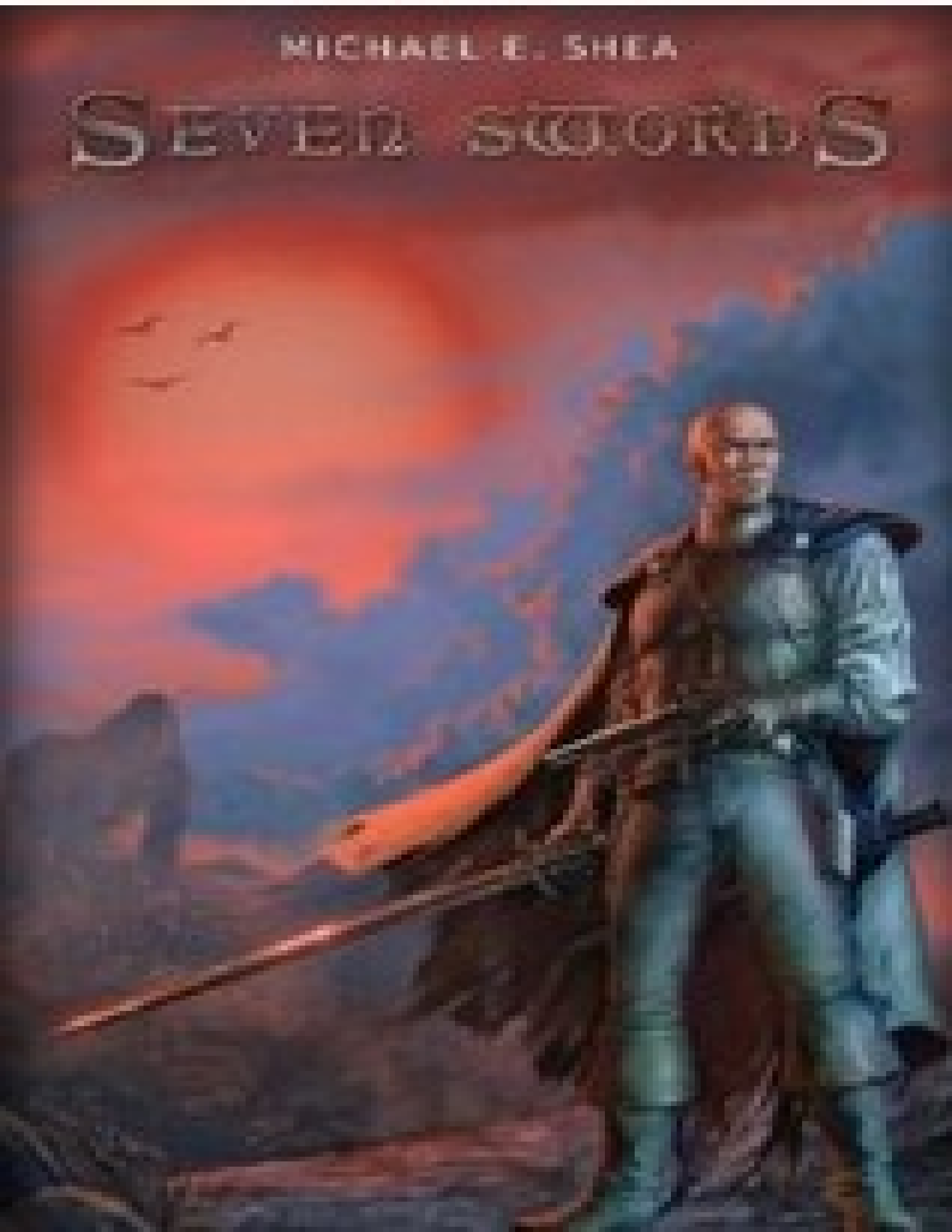
MICHAEL E. SHEA

SEVEN SWORDS



Seven Swords

a Novel

by Michael E. Shea

To my wife, Michelle Barratt Shea

who supports every strange direction I turn and

makes my life happier every day.

Part One: Ca’daan

Prelude

Someone would die tonight. Jon felt it deep in the pit of his stomach. It was something he felt before in the north as a young man when he and a thousand soldiers of the emperor faced an army of five thousand bewitched devil worshiping Voth. He lost his two best friends that night. Sket fell under a Voth axe that split his head in two and Daniel took four arrows in the chest when he ran to help. Daniel had died with blood pouring out of his mouth trying to say Jon’s name. Jon had felt it when they had all joked before the battle of the things they would do to the young Voth women afterward. Instead they died in pools of blood. They were all children back then. But not now.

Jon knew it now too. There was no boasting. Each of the Seven Swords was a veteran of battle. They knew the truth of combat. In any battle, regardless of the skill, there are only three options. Either your opponent dies, you die, or you both die. A good sword, high ground, or exceptional skill may push the odds but never by much. Jon had seen the best musketeers fall and cowards survive duels with masters lying in the dirt. Combat wasn’t about skill, it was about luck.

The Seven Swords knew that. Even Adrin had picked it up by now. Jon wondered if the northern boy would be the first to fall. Someone would.

Rain fell on Jon’s head and shoulders. It rolled over his eyes and from his lips. It ran down his arm and the shining steel edge of his rapier. He smelled the air and watched the burning dots of torchlight in front of him.

The Seven Swords had done well the night before but that was to be expected. Now the Sticks knew they were here and things would be much harder. Jon felt his stomach turn and felt lines of tension tighten in the back of his neck. He turned left and saw the Kal standing on another small hill, his huge war club resting on his shoulder. The Kal saw him and grinned, if one could call it a grin with that thing on him. Jon turned right and saw Vrenna under her cloak, rivers of rain running off of the hood. He knew she was aware of his stare though she showed no sign.

Jon looked down and met Susan's green eyes. Like Vrenna, the young girl was cloaked and had her hood drawn. Rain ran down her face and, though her expression seemed emotionless, the rain ran like tears. She turned away and they both watched the torches growing closer.

The Sticks were thirsty for blood and if Jon's instincts were right at all, tonight they would have it.

Chapter 1: Fena Set

Ca’daan had never been so scared. Only one other time was even close and it was a memory he buried deep down in his heart. Ca’daan crouched in the tall grass on the hilltop ridge of Fena Set. His four brill stood behind him, shifting uneasily on the huge pads of their feet. They had caught scent of the fires below, and the blood. Even the smell of water below didn’t drive them to get closer. The smell of blood and fire was enough to put panic into any animal. Right now, Ca’daan was one such animal.

The sight of horror continued to unfold in front of Ca’daan. Red fires bloomed and black smoke billowed into columns that filled the clouds above. Small houses of stone and grass cracked open into orange flame. Seven riders of the warband circled and set another house ablaze. Two women ran out, one older and one younger. A year past, the older one had served Ca’daan a stew and the younger one had smiled at Ca’daan and made him blush. He had thought of his wife that day and had turned away.

An arrow, fired from galloping horseback, caught the older woman in the stomach. She stumbled and gripped the shaft of the arrow. She pulled at it but the head was barbed. All she did was grind herself up inside. She fell, vomiting blood into the dirt. The younger girl ran screaming to her. Another horse roared by and she fell under a flash of steel. Half of her head gone, her body tumbled under the roar of the horses, torn and beaten until only ripped cotton rags covered in blood remained.

She was a lucky one. Two men with spears poked at a dozen women, villagers of Fena Set. Two women, more defiant than the others, lay dead. Two or three at a time, the demon bandits dragged the women into one of the few huts spared of the red flame. The screams from within made Ca’daan’s skin crawl. The women never came back out.

Ca’daan watched as the village elders of Fena Set were dragged from their homes on the western hills of the village. They were stripped naked and splayed out on the ground. Men in dark red armor, faces hidden by wide necked leather helms drove long pikes through the screaming men. Impaling all the old men took a long time and when the armored men stood the pikes upright, the sharp tips gleaming from the elders’ gaping mouths.

Down in the village square, two young men, locals of the village, held off nearly twenty of the crimson-armored marauders. Three bandits lay dead sprawled on the ground near them. One of the villagers held a blacksmith hammer and a wooden shield. Ca’daan could see tufts of hair still caked on the head of the hammer. The other swung a sword taken from one of the dead marauders.

The bandits parted with laughter as the man with the sword swung. The swing was clumsy and threw him off balance. Archers stood ready to fill the two men with arrows but they held their shots.

The crowd quieted as a new rider approached. He dismounted and Ca’daan saw he was smaller than the rest. He wore no helm. His head was bald and he had painted a band of scarlet across his eyes. There was a silence as he dismounted and stepped into the circle.

The two men turned away from the rest of the crowd and faced this new arrival. The villager with the sword shouted something. He rushed the small bald man and swung. The small man shifted back and avoided the swing easily. The villager swung twice more and the small marauder dodged each blow just as the blade approached him. Laughter erupted and cries echoed each time the man swung and missed. The village sword swinger brought the sword down hard in a powerful vertical cut. The bald man sidestepped and kicked the man in the groin. Another roar of laughter echoed over the hills.

The bald man waited until the villager recovered. The villager cried out and lunged but the small man twisted out of the way. He

grabbed the villager's wrist and Ca'daan heard the crack of bone. The small man continued the momentum, caught the blade, and spun. Ca'daan saw a jet of red blood spray across the small man followed by another as the man's heart pumped his lifeblood from his body. The villager fell into the dirt, blood streaming across the ground.

The villager with the hammer and shield shifted. The bald man dropped the sword and drew a shorter one from a leather sheath on his belt. Unlike the other villager, the bald man did not wait for an attack. He swung hard, cleaving a large gap in the villager's wooden shield. Another blow and the shield began to splinter. Another and another and large chunks of wood fell spinning to the ground. In moments the small man's onslaught left the shield hanging in pieces from the villager's bloody left arm. The villager swung his hammer but missed as the bald man turned away. The small sword cut low and the hammer wielder cried out, falling to one knee. The blade cut again and blood spattered from a gaping wound in the man's arm. The hammer fell. Again and again the blade cut until the man cried out no more.

The crowd began to chant as the small man stood back. It was hard to make out but as every man picked up the chant, it rang crystal clear in the night air.

"Stark! Stark! Stark!" they cried. Ca'daan grew cold.

Outside of the town's banquet hall, a group of the marauders gathered the remaining villagers. Young women were pulled away from their families and dragged into huts. Those that remained were lined up and, one by one, they were led to a stout barrel and forced to kneel. A huge man, bare chested and covered head to toe in blood, raised a wide blade and beheaded each of the villagers in turn with two or three cuts. Other marauders gathered and placed tankards under the gushing bodies. As the tankards filled, they

brought it to their lips and drank, letting it pour down their chins and chests.

Ca'daan's eyes shifted to the elders on the pikes. They had lit fires under the dead men and their skin blackened and crisped. The marauders, drunk on victory, cut at them with sharp knives. They tore away pieces of the men with their bare hands.

And ate them.

Ca'daan turned and vomited. He couldn't watch anymore. He still could hear the screams and smell the cooking flesh but he could not accept it.

He opened his eyes and looked skyward. He saw the smoke filling the air. He saw the fires burning deep red. He saw as close a vision to hell as any had ever seen.

Ca'daan's eyes fell to the small man, Stark. He stood relaxed, watching the carnage around him and smiling. A flicker of firelight caught the small man's eyes. Ca'daan saw hunger in them. All of the murder and rape and horror and this man was still hungry.

Ca'daan left the brill. He had hoped to spend the next three months in Fena Set avoiding the fall torrent. Had he attempted to take the brill back with him, he would be caught in the torrent for sure. Hail the size of rocks would flay him to the bone. The bones of escaped brill still littered the trails between Fena Set and Fena Dim as a grim reminder of the lethality of the torrent.

One of his brill snorted loudly as Ca'daan cut Whitebelly from the brill pack. The mare whinnied and Ca'daan froze. He listened for any sign of detection, a cry of alarm or a shout of new orders, but nothing came. He led Whitebelly down over the hill and only mounted when he could hear nothing from the village.

Ca’daan rode hard, too hard, along the trail north to Fena Dim. The familiar rock walls that seemed so benign to him in his twelve years of trade along the trail now seemed to grasp at him and crush him. For two days he watched the smoke columns rising into the clouds to the south. For two weeks he watched for riders over his shoulder. Halfway through the second week the sky darkened and the cold western winds drew hard through the valley. Soon the moisture would ride high into the mountains and slice down again in shards of ice like razors.

The huge red sun turned the dark clouds a deep violet and the wind felt like the breath of some ancient god long forgotten in the valleys.

Whitebelly panted and shivered, even at night. Ca’daan saw the damage he was doing to the horse but the visions of red-armored demon cannibals kept his feet kicking and the mare moved on.

In the beginning of the third week, Whitebelly fell. Ca’daan was at least four days away from Fena Dim, ten if by foot. He would not make it. He fed the horse, gave her water, and let her rest for a night he could not afford. He awoke from a dream of monsters tearing him apart and eating him as he screamed and watched.

That morning, Whitebelly stood and accepted his weight. He thanked the gods and the horse, whispering promises of a comfortable life for the rest of her days, though he wondered if he could fulfill the promise. Restful days seemed to be behind him, behind them all.

They were coming. It might take them three months after the torrent flowed back to the west, but they would come.

They would come and Fena Dim would die.

Chapter 2: Fena Dim

Ca'daan arrived at dawn three weeks after watching the slaughter of Fena Set. He caught sight of the Old One shortly before seeing the smoke of the village chimneys. The early shadow of the colossal statue covered the village completely. It would be nearly mid-day before the red sun crested over the huge statue's sightless head. All his life Ca'daan had marveled at Fena Dim's dark protector. His grandmother told tales to Ca'daan and his sisters of the titan who walked the planet leaving lakes of molten rock in his footsteps. The titan battled the eight other old gods in the days before even a tree took root in the earth. Soon the immortal titans tired of their wars and slept. The mountain statue, his grandmother would say, was the sleeping titan and should Ca'daan or his sisters make noise in the night, the titan would awaken and roar and kill half the world.

Though fantasy, Ca'daan loved to look upon the Old One and imagine the huge being crack free from millennia of rock and roar. Even knowing it was but a statue carved by man did little to reduce his wonder. How many did it take to carve a mountain into a god? Who would order such a thing and who would live to see it done? Ca'daan had traveled to the salt mines high in the mountain and had seen the growth and erosion around the carvings. It spoke of thousands of years, even before the times of the old empire. Other tales told of the jealous God-kings who wished the Old One torn down, lest the people gaze upon him and forget who they should worship. The attempt was futile. Seventy years of carving had barely scratched one massive trunk-like toe of the Old One. So the God-kings moved their empires east where the deserts had carved away the titans who might have dared to threaten their rule.

The Old One always comforted Ca'daan, except today. The shadow covering his town looked like the black clutch of hell. He could hear the familiar sounds of the village but in his mind the women and children from Fena Set continued to scream. He looked to the

cyclopean statue and shivered. So vividly did he imagine the massive head turning his way and opening its huge maw that he had to blink to ensure it didn't happen.

The town's militia greeted him as he arrived. The four boys cried out and swung thin sticks wildly. Ca'daan smiled but the oldest of the boys saw something was wrong and narrowed his eyes.

"What's wrong with Whitebelly?" he asked.

"She's very tired." was all the response Ca'daan could offer. He rode past the brill fields. The huge beasts thundered and belched as they grazed.

Jamus stepped from his cottage as Ca'daan passed. "You're not supposed to be back until spring. The torrent's started."

"I know," said Ca'daan.

"What's happened?"

Ca'daan considered the question. So intent was he on arriving that he had no plan for addressing what he had seen. He was so tired.

"I have to go home," said Ca'daan. "I will be back tomorrow." Ca'daan kicked Whitebelly who lurched forward. From the corner of his eye he saw Jamus look over the broken mare.

No one else stopped him. The day had started. The miners were in the western hills in the salt mines. The farmers tended their crops. Ca'daan headed east across the brook to his home.

He took Whitebelly to her stable, wiped her down, watered, and fed her. The mare looked at him as she grazed. The impact of his treatment of the beast fell upon him and Ca'daan let out a single sob. He stepped on numb legs back to his home, opened the door, stepped in, closed it, and collapsed on his stone floor. He wept and

cried out. He rolled to his side and hugged his knees to his chest. He was so happy to be alive, yet all of those dead haunted him. Within his grief moved an older sadness. He missed Anda. The grief fell upon him and he wept even more.

He awoke on the floor. It was dark outside. He stood, undressed, and slept in his bed until the following dawn.

In the morning Ca'daan dressed and headed to the carpenter's shop. Dunkan was there.

"Tell your father that I need word with the elders this eve."

"Yes, I wish you well in that," said the young man twisting a hammered nail in his teeth as he put together a thick-legged chair. "Severn is bringing the mining lords tonight. They run dry in the west and want to reopen the eastern shafts at the Old One's feet again."

"Dunkan, it is important," said Ca'daan. Dunkan gave him his attention.

"As you say," said Dunkan.

The day moved slowly. Ca'daan ate but got sick. He settled for soup. He had no idea what he would say that night. There was no way he could describe what he had seen.

Dusk crept in, painting the Old One deep red. The titan stared east with an eyeless face. Ca'daan dressed and walked in the cool night air. His stomach surged and numbness touched him when he thought of what he must say.

The elders sat in the addressing room of Alvic's home in the same seats they had sat in for three decades. Only one seat, that of Nonan, remained empty. The old man had died of a chill that had left him bedridden and coughing for three weeks. No new elder had

yet been selected but everyone expected the blacksmith Grado to take the seat. He was well liked and keen.

Severn was addressing the four old men stringing out lines of formality and false respect that left the four men baffled and confused. For four years Severn had asked the elders to open the old mines deeper in the hills but so far the elders declined. More salt mining required more salt miners. Enlarging the village was not desirable and most knew that Severn only desired wealth and a seat on the council of elders. He had been blocked for ten years.

"Uncle, I must speak," said Ca'daan. Severn scowled at him. Gauve looked at him and frowned.

"You may speak when it is your turn," he said. Severn cleared his throat to begin.

"Fena Set has burned," said Ca'daan. All eyes turned to him. Each face revealed either shock, anger, concern, or confusion. "Every man, woman, and child was put to the sword or burned. Red armored devils fell upon them and ripped them to pieces. Only luck saved me. One of the brill I had planned to sell had become impacted on the trip and slowed me down by a day. When I arrived, I witnessed murder and horror."

The visions he saw poured out of him. He spoke for a long time and their eyes stayed on him. One of the men with Severn left during Ca'daan's story and Ca'daan heard him vomiting outside. When he finished, no one spoke. Severn shifted and Ca'daan felt anger burn in him. Ca'daan knew Severn cared not at all for the horse traders of Fena Set. He cared only for his mines and the salt wealth it brought him.

"This is disturbing," said Oden, the second senior elder. "They were fair and honest traders. We will miss our relations."

"They are coming here!" shouted Ca'daan.

“Nonsense,” said Tyroid. “Why come here? The torrent has started already and many other southern villages surely draw the interest of bandits.”

“They will wait and they will come,” said Ca’daan. “All other villages are already burned. We are the only village north of Fena Set. I saw their eyes. They are not bandits or profiteers. They are murderers.”

“This is a grave concern,” said Emrold. The fat man’s belly hung from the bottom of his tunic like a white sack. “Perhaps we should prepare a militia.”

“The four Javis children?” asked Severn. Someone let out a chuckle.

“No, a real militia,” said Emrold.

“We have never needed one. The mountains shield us and our swords are the torrents. If they come, they will be cut to pieces,” said Oden.

“They will wait and they will come,” said Ca’daan. He was sure of it but he could not say why. Though surrounded by murder, he saw patience in the eyes of the one they called Stark. The way he played with the villager with the sword. “Uncle, believe me.”

Gauve kept his eyes on Ca’daan.

“We will discuss this matter and decide. Go and rest,” said his uncle.

No rest found Ca’daan. He lay awake staring at the beams of his wooden roof where a spider spun a thin web of silk. He walked through a thousand conversations that would or would not convince them. The next morning he went to his uncle’s circular home high up on the northern hill of the village. He knocked and entered.

“Are you all right, Ca’daan?” asked Gauve.

“No.” said Ca’daan. “I can’t sleep. I almost died. They ate them, uncle. They baked them on spits and ate them. They drank their blood from their own ale flagons.” He saw his uncle’s face turn ashen. “They will come here.”

“The council does not agree. They wish to keep watch and Severn agreed to arm the miners. If they come, we will defend ourselves.”

“They are going to come and we are going to die.”

“Ca’daan. I know you saw such horror that we cannot understand. I know your journey through the torrent’s edge was straining. You must trust us. We have weathered attack before. We can do it again.”

“Not against this,” said Ca’daan shaking his head. He was losing his uncle. “How can I convince you?”

“Of what? What would you have us do?”

“Flee. Pack the brill and go north.”

“And become nomads?” said Gauve. “Bandits may not kill us here but they surely will north. The tribes are as thick as flies out there. How many brill would it take and how long would we travel?”

His uncle was right, thought Ca’daan. It wouldn’t work. He had no idea what to do. A red sword swung for his home and he had no defense. He sighed and left.

Sleep came uneasy that night and though he worked himself hard the next day, tending to those brill that remained in his farm, his mind wandered. He watched the militia, the sons of Javis, run and swing sticks at each other. Three other boys joined them. He watched the seven of them duel and roll and march as tears flowed into his eyes. He worked into the dusk pulling huge bundles of grain for the brill and leading them to the water. Two of his females were

still pregnant. That, at least, would help him make up for those he lost at Fena Set. As the sun set Ca'daan walked home alone.

That night Ca'daan dreamed of Anda and woke screaming. He saw her torn apart by red-skinned demons as she looked at him, a single tear dripping down her face. The seven boys rushed in but the demons cut them down and devoured them.

The next morning, Ca'daan watched the four boys playing again. He remembered a story his grandmother had told him when he was very small. Four knights of a golden kingdom defending the villages from the sand king and his army. He rushed to his uncle's house.

"The knights," said Ca'daan.

"The who?" asked Gauve.

"The knights of the golden kingdoms, the Quara. The Swords."

"Ca'daan, that was a child's tale."

"Of course, but Fena Kef is full of warriors who may come to our aid. They breed them there like we breed brill."

"Fena Kef is a town of scum and villainy. You will find nothing but a dagger in your back and strange blisters on your privates."

"Swordsmen from all over the world travel through there."

"Yes. When they want to flee or hunt other men. They are not for us."

"Do you trust me, Uncle?"

Gauve hesitated. "Yes. I trust you."

"They are coming. Our militia will not stop them. I must do something. I will not lead bandits here. I will find good men of value

to teach us and defend us. I must do this."

His uncle looked at him for a long time. "We have no money to give them."

"This will guarantee we find men of value."

"Perhaps," said his uncle. Ca'daan felt a small surge in his skin. He was almost there.

"Let me go, uncle. I will return in one month. If I find nothing, I waste only my time."

His uncle considered this, running a hand over his thinning head.

"Go, my nephew." said Gauve.

For the first time since he saw the scourging of Fena Set, Ca'daan felt a purpose within him. He would pack and travel in the morning. He would find his defenders, his swords, men strong in heart and body. He would save his town or die fighting. Let fools like Severn pretend that life continued normally. Ca'daan saw what happened to Fena Set and knew such a fate would easily befall Fena Dim. He would save his town.

Ca'daan returned home filled with hope.

Chapter 3: The Northern Trail

Ca'daan slept soundly for the first night in nearly a month. He awoke and began preparing for his trip before dawn. He packed two weeks of dried meat and bread, two skins of water, thick wool clothes for the first part of the journey and lighter cotton for once he had passed the mountains. His bed roll and much of the rest of his camping equipment remained prepared from his journey south.

True to his word to his faithful mare, Ca'daan left Whitebelly in Fena Dim and borrowed Gray Cloud from his uncle. The black gelding had made the trip north before and wouldn't panic at Heaven's Highway.

Ca'daan left Fena Dim as the red sun painted the outline of the Old One in scarlet ribbons. Two dozen salt miners watched him pass, their lined faces still dusty from the previous day's work. Edlin, working his wheat farm, hailed Ca'daan.

"Good journey, friend. Return soon." If word of his journey had already spread, word of the attack must have also spread, but he saw no sign of panic in the village at all. Two of Edlin's daughters, lithe legs bare under their cotton tunics, ran to Ca'daan with fresh bread. He laughed and thanked them. How they had grown. Soon they would have children of their own. He felt a pang of jealousy. How Anda had wanted daughters. If they had had any, they would have been ten or eleven by now.

Ca'daan followed the trail north from Fena Dim. He enjoyed the first day's ride through the grass lands and the marsh. He crossed the mountain rivers that roared down from the mountains of the west. He looked for the black moon but could not find it in the dark sky of night. A good omen.

He awoke as the sky lighted into deep violet and began his trip through the crags. Many years past, Fena Dim sold brill to Fena Kef.

Fena Kef acted as a bridge to the southern deserts and the kingdoms within the dunes. Brill were ideal for the desert. They carried ten times their considerable weight in water and needed water only once every two weeks. They were slow, smelled awful, and had terrible temperament but Fena Dim made quite a profit on them.

Now the northern trail had become too perilous for the brill. Two years after Ca'daan had ceased his own brill trade north, choosing to sell south twice a year, his neighbor and his neighbor's sons lost an entire herd of six brill off of Heaven's Highway. Only one son had survived to tell of the disaster. The Fena Dim villagers who searched for them found the remaining son starved and feral a month later, drinking from rain puddles and eating carrion.

Ca'daan still made the trip north to sell salt. He mined none of it himself but his experience of the trail made him of use to the salt miners. The money helped him through the off-season. He brought two sacks of salt with him now in hopes of buying supplies for himself and any others he brought with him on the return trip.

Doubt started to sink into Ca'daan as he rode the ragged trail high into the western ridges. Could he really expect to find valiant warriors in Fena Kef? The town was a haven for bandits, whores, slavers, and the wasted souls who chewed the red lotus until they went blind and no longer cared. If he could only bring one or two, enough to properly train the rest of them, perhaps that would help. He had to try something.

Ca'daan spent two days in the high crags, winding through the join between the eastern and western mountains. The road was hard. He sat at night and gazed at the stars, considering whether his journey was heroic or folly. It made little difference. He was here now.

On the fifth day Ca'daan reached Heaven's Highway. A single rock path crossed a canyon thousands of feet deep. It was fifteen feet

wide but the edges tapered downward and the lack of any support made it seem much smaller. Ca'daan's father had taught him the secret to crossing the highway without fear. Watch the end of the road at all times.

Gray Cloud knew the path and did not stumble. Ca'daan had affixed the leather blinders his uncle had given him and across they went. Against his own advice, Ca'daan dared to stare off the edge once as they neared the end. He felt the cold wind rush over him. A deep chill ran through him as he stared down nearly a thousand feet to the razor sharp rocks peaking through the fog below. It was like staring into hell. Ca'daan's mind built a terrible vision. He imagined the train of brill tumbling and scraping off the edge taking a cart full of supplies, barrels of salt, and three men over with it. For a moment he could almost hear them screaming.

Ca'daan closed his eyes and let Gray Cloud take him the rest of the way across.

Two mountains soon passed and Ca'daan found the descent to the barrens soothing. High cliffs and plateaus rose from the rock-hard cracked mud. No trail presented itself but Ca'daan knew the way. Few others did and that fact protected Fena Dim from marauders or bandits. No large tribe would bother to navigate the small trail for a week or cross Heaven's Highway and few knew the trails that led through the crags. Those who would bother with any of those barriers would likely find themselves in the middle of a torrent where they could watch shards of ice tear the skin from their bones.

The next day Ca'daan's path led to a large road used by caravans traveling between Fena Kef and many of the other southern and eastern kingdoms. Half a day north along the road Ca'daan watched a slave caravan pass. Twelve whipmasters pushed nearly one hundred slaves. Two brill dragged an ornate wagon on huge iron-rimmed wheels. Ca'daan caught sight of an ivory face, beautiful eyes, and bare breasts of a woman from behind a silk drape. Beside

her sat a small man, the caravan master if Ca’daan had to guess, who barked orders at one of the whipmasters and squeezed the beauty at his side.

The whipmasters eyed Ca’daan as he passed and the caravan master laughed through the drape.

More and more caravans and riders crossed Ca’daan’s path as he grew closer to Fena Kef. More than one band of bandits rode past, eyes hungry for the sacks hanging over Gray Cloud, but they did not stop for him. His was a treasure not worth the effort. Soon small huts and tents dotted the landscape. He reached the town as the red sun stood high in the sky, baking the ground. Everyone covered themselves in white cotton or took shelter during the hottest hours. Dressed in a cotton cowl, Ca’daan watered his horse and waited for the heat of the day to pass.

Four men in black leather armor and bronze masks stopped in front of him. Curved swords hung on their hip and bows sat across their backs. One of them, cloaked in red, barked in a language Ca’daan didn’t understand and they left. Another cart of trade goods dragged by dark-skinned slaves passed. Ca’daan began to feel less and less sure of himself.

As the sun set, Ca’daan made his way into the town of Fena Kef. It had grown over the years, but not gracefully. Where once stood only tents and shacks of loose wood, now structures of hardwood, clay, and stone rose into the air. The streets were alive with trade and travel. People of all kinds walked in garments unfamiliar to Ca’daan. Yet there seemed no organization or plan for the town. The buildings seemed to grow against one another and dirt paths ended with no warning. Ca’daan looked nervously at a body laying face up on one side of the path. He was naked, old, and small. There were flies crawling on the man’s wide-open eyes.

From time to time, Ca'daan's father had told him, the town had nearly grown into a city. Soon someone would attempt to rule that city. War would strike, blood would flow, many hundreds, even thousands of people would die, and the city would be cut back to the small town once again. Over the years the town had been ruled by god-kings, warlords, dark priests, rich aristocrats armed with mercenaries, and bandit lords. None held the town for more than a year. Even now, with the armies of Dan Trex measuring over one hundred thousand, last time Ca'daan had heard, and the empires of Gazu Kadem and Gazu Tevel rising like monuments to the god-kings who ruled them, no one now dared to attempt to rule Fena Kef.

Beautiful women in silks ignored Ca'daan as they passed. Large men armed with swords and axes passed, giving Ca'daan narrow looks until he looked down and away.

Ca'daan rode to the eastern edge of the town, the trader's court. Canvas covered booths sold weapons of steel, fine cloth, thick muscled slave workers, sultry and beautiful pleasure slaves, and small leaf-wrapped packages of the red lotus. Ca'daan stopped at the end of the ally at a booth selling salted meats. A thin boy hung strips of meat from wooden supports. Near by, a thick man with a cleaver stood watch.

"Hello, A'deem," said Ca'daan.

"Brother!" the thick man said, smiling. He had changed in the last year. His arms had grown thick, his dark hair had grown long but had receded to halfway back his head. His skin was dark and as rough as leather. How much the man had changed in the six years since he traveled to Fena Kef, fallen in love, and decided to stay there. When the woman had robbed him and run off, he was too ashamed to return to Fena Dim.

"How do you fare?" asked Ca'daan.

“Well! The silver rolls in. I hired the boy here and can still pay the guards. Business is good!” He looked at Ca’daan and his mood shifted. “And you? You’re four months early, Ca’daan.”

“I need your help, my friend.”

Chapter 4: The Search

A'Deem left his booth to the boy with a strong threat and whispered to the mercenary who walked the lane. He took Ca'daan to an outdoor ship that sold sticks of shriveled birds and wood cups of murky water.

Ca'daan told his tale and watched A'deem's expression. They both ate but when Ca'daan remembered the impaled men cooking on pikes he could no longer stomach the bird.

"You're sure they will come north?" asked A'deem.

"I am," said Ca'daan. "These were no profiteers or bandits. They want blood and they will wait until they can go north to get it. There was reason to their murder."

A'deem considered this. He ran his hand through his hair as Ca'daan's uncle had done.

"I don't know, Ca'daan, but you are here now. I don't know where you'll hire enough veterans or mercenaries to go to Fena Dim. Not for two bags of salt. This is not a friendly or honest place, no matter what tales your grandmother told. If I hadn't paid both that boy and the mercenary, either would have off with my meat." A'deem clapped Ca'daan hard on his back. "Stay with me tonight and we will talk more in the morning."

Ca'daan accepted.

The sun fell over the horizon as A'deem and Ca'daan returned to A'deem's shop. Behind the storefront A'deem had a surprisingly large room. He piled up a stack of musty blankets into a bed and showed Ca'daan the way out the back to the trench that took waste out from the backs of the canvas and mud huts. They hobbled Ca'daan's horse, keeping it tied within the back of the tent to avoid theft.

A’deem trusted the mercenaries he paid, as did the others who paid them to watch the alleys, but one could never be too careful.

The next morning they ate dry bread, two strips of lean meat, and two eggs fried in animal fat on a skillet of black scorched iron.

“You’re not likely to find warriors willing to talk for free, much less fight for you, but the Warrior’s Court is where those who swing swords reside. Come back to the store at high sun and we will dine away from the heat.”

Ca’daan sold one bag of salt and used the strange silver coins to board Gray Cloud. The cost was horrible but it was that or the horse would be stolen. He sold his other bag of salt and wrapped the coins within the cloth ankle wrap of his left sandal.

Ca’daan made his way to the Warrior’s Court. Strange sights, sounds, and smells came in from all directions. He felt dizzy. A thin man with wild eyes and red lips grabbed at Ca’daan and screamed in a tongue Ca’daan could not understand. Ca’daan pushed him and the man fell, crawled upright, and fled.

Elaborate booths selling arms and armors of leather and iron lined the Warrior’s Court. Ferocious men with painted and scarred skin glared at Ca’daan as he passed. Four men in black scale armor, the same armor as the men who stopped Ca’daan the day before, marched with heads high. Everyone parted as they came. Ca’daan heard whispers as they passed but could only make out one word. “Trex”.

Ca’daan saw a man dressed with a circular bronze plate guarding his chest and a polearm strapped to his back. He had to begin somewhere. Ca’daan bowed to the man and kept his eyes low as he spoke. He could feel the man’s eyes burrowing into him as he spoke.

“Noble warrior. I beg for your service in protecting my home village from red murderers who threaten us.”

“How much?” said the man.

“We have food and shelter to fill your belly and warm the cold nights.”

The man struck hard. Ca’daan felt the side of his face go numb. He touched it and felt his skin swelling and growing hot. He realized that he was sitting in the dirt but didn’t remember falling there. By the time he stood, the man was well past.

Ca’daan’s lip swelled. The street felt darker and within each face he saw anger and violence. An hour passed before he worked up the courage to ask another man for aid. This one was tall and broad with a wide-bladed sword on his back. The man laughed at Ca’daan but at least he didn’t hit him.

As the sun set, Ca’daan realized that he had wandered throughout the entire day. His cotton tunic was drenched with the sweat of the day. His stomach rumbled. He hung his head and walked back to A’deem’s booth. His friend cheered for him when arrived, handing him a piece of wet meat for the swelling of his cheek.

Sleep did not come upon him easily that night. He stared at the top of the canvas roof above and reconsidered his decision to come. Young foolishness had always been his weakness. Nearly thirty five summers old now and still he traveled on a notion of nobility that did not exist in the world.

As his eyes closed, however, he saw the licks of red flame turning pink skin black on men who screamed for mercy and received none. If he should fail, those screams would come from his uncle or Edlin’s daughters. He must try again.

Chapter 5: Adrin

Ca’daan returned to the warriors court wiser than the day before. He kept his distance from the more ferocious men but even detecting that grew difficult. He approached a light-skinned man with long hair, a diamond tattooed over one eye, and two swords strapped to the back of his black boiled leather breastplate. Ca’daan bowed and asked for aid. The man’s cold eyes never changed.

“No.” he said and walked on. The word sounded like the edge of a knife. It made Ca’daan’s skin crawl just to hear it. He watched the man pass.

“Avoid that one, sir, or any like him,” said an older stout man polishing a bronze breastplate from a nearby booth covered by strange animal skins. “Sai Routha. Very dangerous. They assassinate kings and queens in their beds with a thousand guards surrounding the room. One of the old god-kings spoke of condemning them. He had used them to secure his throne but was so scared of them that he wished them eliminated. He was dead the dawn after the thought had entered his head and chaos met the desert for a thousand years.

“You’re not likely to find those willing to help for nothing here. Warriors come to make money here, not protect villages with the goodness of their heart.”

“Where, then, sir?” Asked Ca’daan. The man laughed at Ca’daan’s formality.

“Try the brothels and gambling dens. Try the parlors of the red lotus. Go where they seek play, not work, and you may find their hearts and minds softer than here.” The man smiled. “Don’t ask those on their way in, though. Get them on the way out when they’re relaxed. Also avoid those who lose at the bones or tiles. They may cut you

down just to appease their bad luck. Those who have just left their seed or those with a sack full of silver may have a more open view of your plight."

"I thank you, my friend," said Ca'daan.

"My own village was burned in a feud between two lords seven years ago. I wish I had done as you do to protect it. Good luck to you," the man smiled at Ca'daan again and Ca'daan smiled back, bowed, and started off. The man coughed and pointed the opposite way. Ca'daan laughed and started back the opposite direction.

The fine construction of the brothel and gambling district impressed Ca'daan. Not a single canvas shack lined this street. Buildings of wood and stone rose two and even three stories tall. A carved statue of a beautiful naked woman reached to the sky, palms pressed together and head low, a smile on her lips. Whispers of silk and crimson wrapped the statue but hot wind blew them continually revealing the statue's detailed virtues.

"Why not sample the real thing?"

Ca'daan turned and saw an older woman, legs bare under a short sarong. She shifted and a bare breast fell out of her loose wrap. Ca'daan felt his skin get hot and unable to come up with any suitable response, moved on. He heard laughter behind him as he walked.

The sounds of lovemaking and the cheers of the games filled the streets. Tradesmen and soldiers walked with the urgency of desire or the slow ease of satisfaction. Ca'daan worked up the nerve to ask a long-haired axe wielder for the aid he sought. The result was the same but the man's attitude was almost apologetic. The bronzeman had been right. This was a much better place.

A commotion from one of the gambling dens caught Ca'daan's attention. A crowd of people rushed from the entrance of a building

of sandstone and marble. They pushed and spread into a circle when a large man wrapped in strips of leather walked out and bared a long waved sword. He swung the sword easily in his left hand and cracked his neck. Ca'daan saw his muscles rippling as the man stretched.

"Barik will eat the northerner. I'd bet six to one," said a man in fine silks and a wide-brimmed dyed purple hat.

"Done!" said a man on his left and held up three silver coins.

"Eat him, Barik, and you drink on me!" said the man in the purple hat.

Another man stepped from the gambling den. He was light skinned and had hair of gold. He wore a black tunic and gray trousers tucked into the top of supple leather boots folded down at the knee. The man, the northerner, tied back his hair and handed his black leather three-cornered hat and cloak to a dark skinned boy who followed him.

The northerner drew a long thin blade from his belt and examined it. He cut through the air twice and the rapier whistled. Ca'daan caught sight of the rapier's hand guard. The guard was molded from silver in the shape of a woman, her back arched, touching the swords pommel with her feet and the guard with her hands. The crowd murmured and whispered when they caught sight of the jewels in the sword's twisted handguard.

The crowd grew silent as the two men faced each other. The large man, Barik, breathed deep and his large chest expanded. The northerner pulled on his leather gloves and held his rapier to his chest in a strange salute.

The duel began. Barik crashed into the northerner, his sword cutting hard into the rapier's handguard. They pushed into the crowd who pushed back. The northerner stumbled and Barik cut hard. The

northerner fell back, the waved blade just missing his side. He rolled as the blade came in again. The northern stood and stumbled.

“Ten to one,” someone shouted. “Done!” shouted another.

The battle raged. Barik cut, kicked and punched. The northerner fell back, a spray of blood from his lips. The guards of the two blades locked and the men pushed face to face. Barik cried out, kneed the northerner in the groin, and smashed his forearm into the northerner’s face. The northerner fell to the ground.

“Sixteen to one,” came a cry. “Done!” came another.

Barik waited for the northerner to stand, laughing as the man stumbled to his feet. The northerner breathed hard. Barik swung lazily, the northerner barely dodging the strikes or parrying with his rapier.

“Twenty to one!” “Done!”

Ca’daan saw the northerner smile. The man stood straight, his breathing relaxed. Something changed and everyone saw it. Even Barik noticed it. His reckless attacks became more careful. He swung but the northerner sidestepped easily. Barik feigned and swung opposite the feint but it fooled the northerner not at all.

Barik shouted at the northerner in a strange tongue. Ca’daan made out the words “mother” and “arse” and “flatbread” but none of the others. The northerner’s quizzical look clarified that he understood about as much as Ca’daan.

Barik roared and swung hard. The rapier flashed and left a line of blood on Barik’s hand. Barik’s sword clattered to the ground. The northerner waited for him to pick it up.

“Six to one for the northerner!” someone shouted. No one took the bet.

Barik roared again but caught nothing but air with his next blow. The rapier whistled and a stream of blood crossed Barik's cheek. Fear began to betray itself on Barik's face. He swung but fell to the defensive.

"Finish it," someone yelled. Barik roared in and the two smashed together. Barik's roar ended in a strange weak exhalation of air.

The northerner stepped past, pulling his leather gloves from his hands finger by finger. His rapier had disappeared until Barik turned and Ca'daan saw the shining silver hilt protruding out of Barik's chest. The large man tried to breathe but found each breath harder and harder. He turned and Ca'daan saw the tip of the rapier gleaming from Barik's back.

The northerner walked back and pulled his sword free. Barik died instantly.

Coin changed hands and cries of argument and foul language flowed. The northerner took his cloak and hat from the small boy and a leather sack of coin from one of the men in the crowd.

"All that over a two copper whore," Ca'daan heard over the bustle of the crowd. The crowd, including the northerner, went back into the den.

Ca'daan waited until the rest of the afternoon for the man to come back out. He came out at dusk, walking tall and pulling down the corner of his leather three-corner hat.

"Kind sir. Your skill with a blade is beyond words. I come from a poor family village to the south. Bloodthirsty murderers threaten us and we are defenseless. I seek valiant and powerful fighters like yourself to help defend our town."

"How much?" asked the northerner. Ca'daan's heart sank.

“I have nothing to offer but the food, shelter, and gratitude of my village.”

“Are there women included in that gratitude?” The northerner smiled.

“They are as beautiful of the stars.” A voice back in Ca’daan’s mind screamed out as a flash of this man with Edlin’s daughters fled through his mind.

“I have tired of this place,” said the northerner. “I accept.”

Joy flooded into Ca’daan. Relief followed. He thanked and bowed until the northerner held him up.

“I am Adrin of Faigon.”

“Ca’daan of Fena Dim,” said Ca’daan.

“Join me for an ale and tell me more of the women of your village.”

Ca’daan shared tales of Fena Dim and described the villains who threatened it. Adrin listened and drank. He described his history simply.

“I am an adventurer and sellsword from the north.”

Ca’daan felt uncomfortable in the gambling parlor but the crowds left them alone. They left that night agreeing to meet the following day to seek others who might aid them. No warrior would dare slap Ca’daan now that a blade as skilled as Adrin walked with him. Confidence bloomed within Ca’daan like a flower.

“He is the hero I sought since I first thought of defending the village,” Ca’daan told A’deem later. “He will train and lead us. We can win.” A’deem smiled at him as the two ate. Ca’daan’s head swam. His plan was coming together.

Chapter Six: Jon and Susan

Ca’daan was on his way to meet Adrin when he spotted the dark riders. They rode through the merchants quarter on black stallions, northern horses. Each of the two men wore black cloaks, black boots, dark gray chestguards, and the same style three-corner hat that Adrin wore. Perhaps it was this last article that caught Ca’daan’s interest. He followed after the two men, losing them as they turned down the metalworking district.

He saw them again, dismounted and talking to a thin man in tattered clothes. The man pointed and spoke. Ca’daan’ couldn’t see if the black riders said anything in return. Thick leather neckguards covered the mouths of both men and their long cloaks covered most of their bodies. The two men left their horses with the thin man and continued on foot. Ca’daan saw the man bite into a coin of gold. A hot gust of wind blew down the street and whipped at their cloaks. Ca’daan saw a gleam of steel under their cloaks.

Ca’daan followed them, keeping cover as they walked down the streets to the outskirts of the town. The crowds thinned and the tent city rose around them, mostly empty at this time in the morning.

The two men scanned the tents and pointed at a man guiding a desert donkey. A small child rode on the donkey’s back among packed provisions. One of the men shouted but the man with the donkey didn’t hear. The shorter of the two men pointed and the larger one moved off to block the man and the donkey.

Ca’daan moved closer. The donkey man had shoulder-length black hair and wore a green tunic of a merchant. The child wore a cloak of tan canvas, the hood pulled up to protect her face from the sun. When the shorter of the riders shouted, the child turned and Ca’daan saw the face of a young girl with red hair and green eyes.

As the larger of the two men came out in front of them, the merchant stopped the cart. The smaller man said something and the merchant turned. He shook his head and the black garbed man spoke again in a different tongue. The larger of the men closed in from behind them. The merchant looked at them and shook his head once again. The two men looked past him to each other. The smaller man said something else, nodding his head at the man. The big one stepped up behind him and roughly wrapped an arm around the merchant's throat.

The merchant moved fast and sure. Every move was precise, every shift of his foot hadd purpose. Even after having just seen Adrin's skill with his rapier, Ca'daan had not seen a man move so sure and so naturally with such devastating results.

The merchant locked his arms over the big man's own arm and stepped one leg between those of the big man and arched forward. Though considerably larger, the dark rider fell forward over the merchant. The large man's arm, trapped within the merchant's interlocked forearms, snapped at the elbow. The sound made Ca'daan wince and when he saw the horrible angle of the twisted arm he felt bile rise in his throat. The large man cried out and the smaller one cursed.

The small man drew a shining dagger from within his cloak but instead of attacking the merchant he went after the girl. Ca'daan saw the man in the merchant's garb, surely not actually a merchant Ca'daan now understood, reach into the twisted cloak of the groaning man at his feet. He drew a black cylinder encased in darkwood. The merchant cocked back a silver dragonhead resting on the back of the wooden handle and squeezed his index finger.

Ca'daan had heard of the northern weapons, pistols they were called, but he was totally unprepared for the experience of seeing one in action. It boomed so loud that Ca'daan put his hands over his ears. A cloud of white smoke exploded from the back of the gun and

swept into the hot wind. The small man's head exploded into a red mist.

Later, Ca'daan couldn't say why he did what he did. His first instinct was to flee but he found himself running to the man instead. The man crouched over the broken rider, and drew another of the pistols. He pointed it at Ca'daan and Ca'daan felt his bladder nearly let go.

"I can help you," said Ca'daan. The man's steely blue eyes did not blink. "My friend's shop is near by. You can hide there and take shelter." The man beheld him a moment longer before turning to the girl. She stood behind the man, her cloak pulled low over her face. She nodded.

"Show us," said the man. As Ca'daan turned, he saw the man draw a sharp knife from his leg wrappings, cut a pouch and belt from the man at his feet, and quietly ran the blade across the man's throat under his leather neck guard. Ca'daan couldn't see the man bleeding across the sand, but he heard him gurgling. This was a mistake, he thought. This man was a killer.

It was too late now, though. Ca'daan hurried while the man and girl ran with him. The man had cut out a pack from the mule, but left the rest. He understood that the mule and the two men would be stripped down and looted by the time they reached A'deem's shop.

Ca'daan took them through the alleys behind the shops and untied the intricate five-lace knot that held the door closed. He waved to the mercenary who glared at him but recognized him enough to not bother questioning him. A'deem was apparently not paying him enough for that.

Ca'daan closed the door behind them and retied the not. The man scanned the room as the dark rider had scanned the tent city.

"I thank you for your aid," said the man. "Even the bandits seem unafraid of robbing a merchant in daylight here."

The story was weak and they all seemed to know it. The man drew his knife from the folds of his pants and went to a plate of polished silver A'deem tied to one side of the wood hut. As Ca'daan and the girl watched, the man pulled his hair tight and cut it off with his knife. His hair fell into ragged tufts as he turned to Ca'daan and the girl.

"We are safe here," said Ca'daan. The finality of the way the man cut off his hair made Ca'daan uncomfortable. The man looked at the girl. She smiled and nodded to him.

"I am Jon," said the man, turning back to the polished metal. "This is Susan. Thank you for helping us." The man's accent was subtle but clearly northern. He was dark tan from many months, maybe years, in the desert but naturally fair skinned. His scalp, where he had cut away his dark hair, was pale.

"Who were those men?" asked Ca'daan.

"Bounty hunters from the north," the man, Jon, said.

Ca'daan grew nervous. "Bounty for what?"

"Deserted soldiers," said Jon. He watched Ca'daan, perhaps gauging his reaction. Ca'daan attempted none.

"Is she your daughter?" said Ca'daan.

"She is my ward. She is an orphan of the Voth war." Ca'daan hadn't heard of any Voth war. Jon scooped a handful of lard from a dish and spread it over his ruined hair. "She too is from the north but we met east of here outside of Tog Aru. I couldn't stomach seeing her serve in a pleasure den for sick nobility so we traveled here. I had hoped to gather supplies and move back north but it seems that didn't work.

Ca’daan’s spirits lifted. “I know a place you can go. A town of peace far from those who hunt for you.”

Jon paused, gazing at Ca’daan with eyes like frozen water.

“And what do you want of me in return?”

Ca’daan shared his tale as the man, Jon, ran his knife over his scalp. the knife was very sharp and Ca’daan’s skin crawled at the sound of it shaving the man’s head. By the time he had finished, Ca’daan had finished his story.

Jon stared off for a while, appearing in deep thought. Ca’daan turned to the girl and smiled. She smiled back and giggled. Jon looked to her and then back to Ca’daan.

“We will help you.”

Relief flowed into Ca’daan once again. This was going to work. He had an ex-soldier who would help protect his village. he had a swordsman to train his people.

Adrin. He had forgotten about Adrin. Panic replaced his feeling of relief.

“I forgot about the other.”

“The other?”

“I met a swordsman yesterday who agreed to help us, another northerner.” Ca’daan saw Jon’s eyes narrow. “not a soldier or a bounty hunter. He’s a gambler and an adventurer.”

“A what?” Jon shook his head. “As you will. How many more did you desire?”

“I’m not sure,” said Ca’daan. “Four or five.”

“We may be able to help. We will meet you back here tonight. We have one or two more things we must do first.”

Jon removed his merchant’s tunic and pulled on a grimy brown tunic from his pack to replace it. Ca’daan looked at the scars on the man’s body, strange wounds he could not understand. Jon replaced Susan’s cloak with a white robe and a head scarf, also quite dirty. Jon smeared some dirt and clay on her nose and cheeks. She giggled and he smiled back. Ca’daan saw both love and sadness in Jon’s eyes.

They left, fading into the crowds of peasants and beggars. With the shaved head and the new clothes it became very hard to recognize them as the pair Ca’daan had met just a few moments before.

Ca’daan rushed to the gambling and brothel district. He saw no sign of Adrin. His heart sank. He ran to the gambling parlor and found Adrin rolling finger-sized four-sided bones three at a time. There was a scowl on his face.

“You’re late,” he said, keeping his eyes on the table in front of him.

“I apologize, sir,” said Ca’daan unsure of the proper pleasantry. “I have found another to aid us.”

“And this other was more important than I?” Said Adrin, rolling another set and apparently losing.

“No, sir! We were attacked,” the story would not match up if checked but it was close enough and Ca’daan was desperate. He didn’t want to lose Adrin.

“By whom?”

“Dark riders of the north. This man is an ex-soldier. They wanted to arrest him or kill him. I do not know which.”

“He defeated them?”

“Yes. Unarmed. They had pistols and he took them from the men and killed them.”

“Pistols?” This seemed to interest Adrin. Ca’daan continued.

“Yes, with dragons on them. He threw one of them and shot the other. He was so fast.”

“And he will help you now?”

“Yes. He and his ward. A young girl.”

“Where are they now?”

“About the town. We’re meeting tonight.”

“Well, then I will see you with him tonight.”

Ca’daan released a breath he didn’t realize he held. He bowed low and left.

Ca’daan found A’deem and told him of his discoveries. A’deem seemed vexed at having strangers, possibly dangerous strangers in his home but he trusted Ca’daan’s judgment, he said, and brought spiced meat from his shop when they returned.

Adrin arrived first, wearing his three-cornered hat, a light violet tunic, and his rapier. A’deem admired the fine sculpted work of the nude woman on the swords hilt.

“It is a Salamonca rapier,” said Adrin. “There are only a couple of dozen such swords in the world. It is worth more than passes through this town in a year.” A’deem’s eyes widened.

“And you wear it in plain sight?” said A’deem. “I might take it from you right now.” A’deem picked up a pair of linked dried sausages and

swung them. Adrin laughed.

“Anyone who bests me with a blade is free to take it,” said Adrin, chewing on his tough meat.

“You have never lost?” asked A’deem.

“Sure. When I was twelve my brothers beat me bloody with sticks. My fencing master left me bruised and scarred my early teenage life. I was even bested by a woman.”

“You were?” asked Ca’daan.

“I found her in bed with my best friend. She stabbed me in the heart. And the groin.”

They laughed at this until someone cleared their throat. Jon stood at the tent flap. The girl stood behind him on his right side.

“Sir Jon. This is my friend A’deem.” A’deem bowed. “and this is Adrin, adventurer of the north.”

“Indeed,” said Jon. “Well met.”

“Well met, indeed.” said Adrin, rising. “What is wrong with your head?”

Jon smiled. “It will even out in a day or so. The sun will see to that.”

“You were once a soldier?” asked Adrin. Jon looked at Ca’daan and Ca’daan felt his skin grow clammy. He had said too much.

“Yes, long ago.”

“Indeed,” said Adrin. “Hello, princess.” Adrin knelt to one knee and smiled at Susan. She tilted her head, considering him, and smiled back.

“Have some food,” said A’deem. Jon and Susan sat with them.

Adrin grew quiet as they ate. He did not talk of his sword or his skills. Jon and Susan spoke little as well. Jon watched his food. Adrin stole glances at Jon. Susan seemed to watch them all.

A’deem talked. He was good at talking in silence. He talked of the recent attempt of a noble bandit lord to take the town. He talked of the blood crusaders who drew swords and cut down anyone who spoke of a god or goddess other than Suun, the single goddess of the north. He spoke of the rising rate for honest mercenaries and the falling prices of salted meat. He spoke and they all listened. Finally, when he had nothing further to say, Adrin spoke.

“Do you still have the pistols?”

Jon looked up at the adventurer.

“Yes. But they are fired and worthless. Some collector may like them but for weapons they serve little purpose now.”

“The bounty hunters had no shot or powder?” Ca’daan didn’t understand what they were talking about.

“We didn’t have time to check. The last thing we want is any more attention or any more bounty hunters.”

“So you run then?” said Adrin. Jon looked at him for a moment. Adrin’s gaze never left the bald man.

“Yes. We run.”

“I understand,” said Adrin. Ca’daan heard something in his tone that upset him. Apparently so did Jon.

“Do you.”

“You spoke of helping us find others,” said Ca’daan, hoping to change the subject.

“Yes. I think I know of a man who may be in need of a change. We will meet him tomorrow,” said Jon. “Time shortens. Susan and I must leave by tomorrow evening.”

“That is not enough time. It has taken me many days to find you two. We will not have enough.”

“Then you will go with what you have or you will go without us.”

Ca’daan’s heart sank. These two, even if they could not get any more, would help. They needed training and strategy. Jon, at least, might offer that. Yet two could not stop the demons Ca’daan had witnessed.

“Tomorrow, then,” said Adrin. He stood, put on his hat and tipped it at Susan. She smiled at him. Adrin left.

“He will be of little help,” said Jon. Ca’daan was stunned.

“What do you mean? He cut down a man twice his size.”

“A drunkard and a reckless bandit. Hardly a victory to build an entire reputation. He is fool-hearty, boastful, prideful, and a liar.”

“You are wrong, sir, I beg your pardon. He came to my village’s aid when no one else would. No one would help me but you and he.”

“I don’t expect you to listen but I wanted to tell you anyway. He may put on a fine show with that rapier of his but he cannot save your village.”

Ca’daan was speechless and Jon didn’t wait for a reply.

“We will be back tomorrow morn at sun up,” said Jon. He and Susan left.

“Strange company you keep now, brother,” said A’deem. “Let us hope the others are more accepting of one another.”

Jon and Susan came the next day at daybreak. Adrin came shortly afterwards. Jon wore a ruddy canvas tunic, light cotton trousers and wood sandals laced up to the knee. Susan wore a brown robe and a headscarf. both of them looked as they they had slept in the sewer trenches. Perhaps they had. Jon leaned on a crooked stick, limping on his left side.

“Are you all right? Are you injured?” said A’deem.

“Misdirection. Give them something to watch and remember and they will forget what you don’t want them to see,” said Jon. “Nearly all combat focuses on misdirection and redirection.”

Adrin snorted. Unlike Jon, he did little to hide his appearance. He wore a tunic of dark red, white trousers tucked into soft leather boots, leather gloves, and his rapier low on his left hip.

“You disagree?” asked Jon.

“I haven’t given it much thought,” said Adrin.

Ca’daan remembered Adrin’s battle with the large man, Barik, at the gambling den. What had that been if not for misdirection? If Jon hid his former occupation as a soldier by dressing as a beggar, what did Adrin hide by dressing as a swordsman?

Chapter Seven: Thorn

Adrin, Ca'daan, A'deem, Jon, and Susan walked through the tent city and the market square. The merchants, their guards, servants, and slaves prepared for the morning. They hung large sides of horse meat; stacks of milled wood still smelling of sawdust; bolts of cotton, and wool; and weapons of shining steel. The heat of the morning sun beat down and the smell of spices hung in the air. Life bustled around the men as they walked.

Near the center of the town, richer merchants sold gold and silk from the north and deep south empires. Caravans of nobility rode up with dozens of slaves and armored guards. They stepped from ornate carriages on soft feet and gazed at the golden idols, silk robes, and the finest slaves in the land.

A'deem spoke of it with contempt. He would not stoop to grovel at such false nobility, the spoiled children of corrupt kings and hollow princes.

"I do not want to sell food to those who cannot understand how good food, any food, can taste," he said.

They stopped at a large ironworks. Black soot covered nearly every surface of the stone building. Smoke poured into the sky from an iron chimney and Ca'daan could feel the heat of the place even in the mid-morning sun. The smell of burning metal filled his nostrils.

A mercenary leaned up against a massive wood pillar. A brown leather breastplate covered his chest and a pair of swords sat on each side of his hips with two more crossing his back. Why a man needed four swords was beyond Ca'daan's reasoning. The mercenary's skin was as black as night and a braid of hair hung down his back. As they approached, the man watched them with eyes of light almond. He paid special attention to Adrin.

“Him?” asked Ca’daan.

“No,” said Jon. He pointed into the smithy. A short pudgy man in dark clothes and a leather apron barked orders at a huge muscular man who hammered on a thick slab of orange iron. Sweat dripped from the large man’s chin. His long black hair hung down, obscuring his face. He wore a tan skin tunic with sleeves down to his forearms.

They watched as he hammered the metal, sparks flying into the black soot covered room.

“Who is he?” asked Ca’daan.

“It looks like a Voth,” said Adrin. Adrin looked to Jon. Ca’daan did not know the world.

“He was once a hero to them,” said Jon, keeping his eyes on the big man. “That was before we killed their king and broke their spirit in the wars twelve years ago. Now they are all slaves. Some sought escape and came down here like he did, but they found little improvement. Servitude is servitude. They were a noble people once, they just never found the weapons to match us. The ferocity of their warriors and the dark magics of their witches could not stop powder and shot.”

Jon turned to Ca’daan. “He will serve your needs well.”

No doubt the man was large and strong. The hammer he swung must have weighed fifteen stones. But how did Jon know him? How did the soldier know a barbarian could fight?

Jon knelt and whispered to Susan. She whispered back for a short time. He stood, looking at her and then to the huge man in the smithy. He nodded to her.

They waited and watched. The large man hammered on the molten iron until it cooled. He plunged the iron back into the white hot

flames of the furnace. The fat man barked at the barbarian as he wiped his forehead with his leather sleeve. He walked out of the smithy and around back for a large barrel of fetid water. Jon approached.

The man seemed to take little interest in Jon. Jon greeted him and began to speak. After a short time, the man looked up at Jon, his black eyes intent and filled with hatred or dread or both. Ca'daan shivered at the intense gaze. Jon spoke again, nodding his head slightly. The barbarian watched him as silence seemed to hang between them.

"What did he say?" asked Adrin.

"I don't know," said A'deem.

The barbarian nodded. Jon nodded back, turned and rejoined them.

"He will join us," said Jon. "His name is Thorn."

As they watched, the huge man, Thorn, returned to the Smithy. The fat man scowled at him and shouted. Thorn ignored him. He walked back to a small corner of the smithy where filthy rags made a floor bed. Thorn reached high above the rafters of the smithy while the fat man continued shouting. He pulled down a large bundle wrapped in dirty oily cloth. He ripped the claw away and the fat man's shouting ceased.

Thorn held a sword different from any Ca'daan had ever seen. It was huge, nearly four feet long. The blade was wide and thick, like a single slab of sharpened steel. Dark oiled leather wrapped the handle. Thorn rested the huge blade over his shoulder and walked out of the smithy.

The fat man followed, apparently gaining back some of his courage. "Stop him!" he shouted to the mercenary who continued to lean on

the pillar. Thorn turned and looked at the mercenary. The mercenary looked back, turned to the fat man, and shook his head.

“I think not,” said the mercenary. “You’re on your own if you want this one back.”

“I will have you marked and chained for this!” shouted the fat man.

“I think I’d rather suffer your wrath than his, fat one,” said the mercenary. “You’d be wise to conclude the same.”

The words apparently struck home. The fat one shouted curses but returned to the smithy as Thorn approached the group. Ca’daan felt fear flow into him. It wasn’t the man’s size or even the blade he held over his shoulder that frightened him. It was something in the man’s eyes.”

The man’s voice was deep and quiet.

“When do we leave?”

Chapter Eight: Vrenna

Jon led them through the warrior district.

“There is one other I know who may help. The mercenaries seek money. The warrior slaves seek freedom. There are few who care enough for a town they have never seen to risk their lives for it. You must find what they desire and give it to them.”

“What does this last one seek?” asked Ca’daan.

“Blood. And purpose,” said Jon.

Jon stopped them as the warrior’s court opened into a square where three streets meet. In the center of the square stood a statue of a nude man with a spear piercing the mouth of a large worm with the head of a grotesque woman.

A crowd had gathered in a circle on the opposite side of the square. Ca’daan and the others circled to see what the rest of the crowd watched.

Two men faced a woman in the center of the circle of people. The two men wore dark cloaks and buckled leather armor deeply creased from long wear. One of them, darker skinned, had hair braided into two lines. The other, lighter skinned and taller, had long hair tied back into a topknot. Both had diamonds painted over their left eyes. Ca’daan recognized the taller lighter-skinned one. He had asked the man for help a few days earlier and, if the merchant was right, had nearly died for it.

“Sai Routha,” said Ca’daan. Jon looked at him, surprised. Jon nodded.

“Yes,” said Jon. “And even more rare, a Sai Kadam.” He tilted his head towards the woman.

The woman wore a gray cloak and hood. Black hair fell across her light-skinned face. She wore high boots and high breeches that left her thighs mostly bare. A tight chestguard protected her chest but left her stomach bare. Her hands were covered under the gray cloak.

"The red witch wants her prize back," said the dark-skinned Sai Routha. A chain encircled his waist and ended attached to the hilt of a short curved sword sheathed on his side. "Give it to us and we can avoid this show."

"It is a rare thing for a Sai Routha to negotiate for anything," whispered Jon.

"The witch paid us a lot of money to retrieve it," said the taller Sai Routha. "And we will."

The woman didn't move and didn't speak. The dark skinned man growled low and deep in his throat. Silence rolled over the crowd.

The light-skinned Sai Routha drew his two swords with practiced ease. Each single-edged sword gleamed in the high red sun. The darker Sai Routha drew his curved sword and with a yank had the chain whipping around his waist and a small weighted dagger attached to the end.

The two men moved apart to opposite sides of the woman. Her gaze shifted between the two men but she did not move. The lighter Sai Routha reversed the grip on one of his swords, took a relaxed stance, and crossed the swords in front of him.

The darker Sai Routha began a series of rhythmic swings with the chain. The complexity of the weapon made Ca'daan dizzy.

The chain wielder kicked the dagger as it swung in and it shot towards the woman's eye. She turned a split second before it pierced her. So close was it that Ca'daan thought it had hit her.

Immediately the sword swinger was on her. His blades swung, cut, and twirled but they never touched her. She bobbed, arched, and sidestepped every attack, sliding in the sand on the heels of her boots.

The chain swung again and the woman twirled low, her gray cloak fanning out. It twirled over her head and the sword swinger ducked as well. His swords swung again, one in a wild arch, the other in a long stab. The woman sidestepped the stab and struck. Her open gloved palm smashed into his face and she kicked him hard in the chest. He fell back, sliding in the dust at the feet of the crowd.

The chain swung again. The woman moved but the chain's blade cut a long gash in her cloak. She twisted and the cloak fell away.

In a flash, the woman drew a scorpion-hilted saber. The red sun gleamed from the silver edge of the black blade.

The chain wielder drew back and began to swing the chain again in large overhead arcs that made the whole crowd duck. Silently the sword fighter stood and rose up behind her. The chain wielder smiled at her. The woman smiled back.

The sword swing nearly decapitated the woman. She ducked and parried another attack with her saber. The woman punched hard into the light-skinned Sai Routha's chest. The sound was deep and the man groaned. One of his swords dropped and he clutched at his chest. He fell back, his leg twisting at a wrong angle. Blood bubbled up in time with his racing heart beat from a triangular shaped hole in his chest guard.

The woman held up her fist to the man, showing him the triangle spike palm knife she held before he died.

The chain swung again, hitting her arm and sending the palm knife into the crowd. Someone cried out in pain but Ca'daan could not see what had happened. The chain twirled and caught the woman's

sword arm around her wrist and the guard of the rapier. She grimaced as the chain went taut.

The crowd went silent again as they heard the chain straining. The woman's feet skidded in the dirt under her boots. She clenched her teeth and the man smiled at her as he slowly pulled her closer, wrapping the chain around his forearms. The wicked sharp point of his curved blade shone in the midday sun.

The woman spun and released her grip. The scorpion-hilted saber shot through the air. The dark skinned Sai Routha nearly fell over. He twisted and went to one knee. The saber rang off of his chestguard buckle and then struck the ground past him, the chain still tangled in the claws of the scorpion guard. It quivered in the ground.

The crowd's silence hung in the air. The woman, disarmed, stood. She relaxed and breathed deep. The Sai Routha stood as well, his head dipped. Ca'daan heard something wet falling to the ground. He saw blood running from under the Sai Routha's armor into a puddle at his feet. The man fell dead to the earth.

Ca'daan couldn't make sense of what had happened, but he clearly saw the results. Immediately the carrion feeders of the city began to strip the Sai Routha bodies. One found a thick leather purse on the belt of the dark-skinned chain wielder but when he saw the look in the woman's eyes, dead blue eyes shining in the sunlight, he tossed the bag to her feet and raced into the crowd.

They left her sword alone as well. Buried tip deep into the hard earth. One bold fellow carefully unwrapped the chain from the scorpion claw guard and ran off with the strange exotic weapon. He was careful never to touch the sword.

Adrin whistled and the sound startled Ca'daan. The crowd began to break up and fade away returning to their business.

Jon, who had held up Susan so she could see the duel, whispered to her. She shook her head. The huge man, Thorn, continued to watch the woman as she pulled her saber from the sand and sheathed it under her cloak.

"I have to ask her," said Ca'daan, more to convince himself than confirm it with his companions.

"Is this the other one of which you spoke?" asked Ca'daan.

"No. I know nothing about her," said Jon.

"I have to ask her," Ca'daan said again. He took a deep breath and ran forward, falling at her feet. He saw the slight twitch of her cloak and thought he might already be dead.

Ca'daan's story came out in a rush. He told of his doomed village, the red armored demons who ate the flesh of the old men. He spoke of the other companions he had gathered. He dared to look up. Her cold blue eyes gazed upon him. Ca'daan saw the mark of the black diamonds on the side of her neck. Her gaze moved from him to his companions. Ca'daan saw Adrin tip his hat. Jon bowed his head. Susan smiled. Thorn stood impassive, his huge sword resting on his shoulder.

The woman looked back to Ca'daan, paused a moment, and then nodded. Ca'daan's heart jumped again and he bowed his head low. When he had first tried to find protectors for his village he had found none who would help. Now he had found four of the best warriors he had ever known. Ca'daan and the woman walked back to the others. He introduced them to her one by one. She said her name was Vrenna.

The woman, Vrenna, knelt down to Susan and their eyes met. Susan tilted her head and Vrenna tilted it like a mirror. Susan giggled and Vrenna smiled. She straightened Susan's hair and stood.

Adrin’s eyes crawled over Vrenna as she stretched, revealing her shapely ivory body under the gray cloak. She turned and looked at the swordsman with cold eyes. Adrin smiled at her and raised his palms up. Vrenna winked at him.

Ca’daan was no master of the fine art of bedding women. He had slept with only two women in his life. One, the daughter of his father’s farmhand, snuck into his room while their parents drank at the spring bonfires. She had never spoken to him before, during, or after the encounter. It took days of prodding and an embarrassing conversation with his cousin, Baglead, to clarify what exactly had happened.

The other was Anda.

Without experience of wooing ladyfolk, Ca’daan could only begin to understand the signals between Adrin and Vrenna. What message he did receive, however, was clear. Keep away, she had said to him. If I want you, I’ll come to you.

Chapter Nine: The Kal

Though quiet at first, Adrin spoke more and more as they walked. Adrin would point out various mercenary guilds and standards. He pointed to the booths selling the best weapons, describing each of the strange implements in vivid detail. Vrenna found a vendor selling a palm spike that looked suspiciously like the one she had used just a short time earlier. A silent bargain took place and she bought back the weapon with only a single coin of the dead man's purse. Adrin continued his monologue, describing the grizzly murders that took place in the deep of night in the brothel district.

"Have you been to the pit fights?" asked Jon.

"Once or twice, but they seem more show than battle," said Adrin. Ca'daan saw the smile on Jon's face but Adrin apparently did not. The young swordsman continued. "I saw two spearmen kill a horned and tusked war brill called Dunelord."

"Is that where we're going?" asked Ca'daan.

"Yes," said Jon.

As they drew closer to the edge of town, the pens of slave warriors grew thick. Huge men with golden skin stood next to smaller darker men of thinner build. They displayed tattoos of strange script and horrifying images on their arms, backs, chests, and faces. Some shouted obscenities, especially at Vrenna, who simply ignored them. Others watched them with cold eyes and expressionless faces. These silent killers frightened Ca'daan most of all.

"These come from the far pits of Gazu Kadem," said a slavemaster with a braided beard. "They can kill twenty of the local stock or will give you a bloody show if they fail."

Slavery had been eliminated from Fena Dim when Ca'daan was just a child. A collapse in one of the mine shafts had killed most of the ones Fena Dim had kept and the aftermath was so horrible the elders decided never to employ forced labor again. The village never spoke of it. Ca'daan always felt sorry for the men and women in bondage. What separated him from them? What if not the lack of being conquered in war or captured on the road? What made them deserve such a fate while other men grew fat from their labor?

In the distance, Ca'daan heard the ring of steel on stone and the cheer of a small crowd.

"I heard the fighting pits of Gazu Kadem are something to see," said Adrin. "Or Tog Veel. I would like to see them sometime."

"No, you wouldn't," said Jon. "They don't care much for northerners out there. You might just as likely find yourself in the pit instead of watching it from above."

Adrin shrugged.

Fena Kef had three fighting pits. Two minor pits sunk eight feet below ground. Sharp spikes lined the pit aiming both in and out. Gates on the two sides of the pits let combatants drop in and fight their battle.

"Once I heard of a fine swordsman who traveled halfway across the desert to fight his nemesis in these pits," said Adrin. "He had hunted down his nemesis for two years. He fought his way up the ranks and finally faced his eternal foe. Alas, he broke his ankle falling into the pit. The opponent laughed so hard that he couldn't get himself to brain him with his hammer. They had to haul the man out with a rope. How about that? You train all your life and cross leagues of barren desert to break your ankle on the way in. Hell, even you could fight better than that, Ca'daan."

They laughed, even Thorn who let out a deep “Hah!” that made Adrin jerk.

“The giant speaks!” said Adrin. Thorn smiled and clapped Adrin on the back. Adrin winced and rolled his shoulder twice.

Slaves dueled among the filth of the smaller pits. One man in a helm shaped like a snarling dog fought another taller dark man with a chain. In the other pit a big man fought a large dog in leather armor. The man appeared to be losing.

Most of the attention, however, focused on the largest of the three pits. This pit dropped down twice the height of a man and stretched more than fifty feet across. Dirt mounds surrounded the pit so that the spectators stood five or six people deep around the edge of the pit. As Ca’daan and the others approached, the crowd cheered. Adrin pushed through and the others followed to get a view, the crowd around them complaining of the jostle. When people saw Thorn, they stopped complaining.

Inside, a huge mountain of a man, even bigger than Thorn, fought with a huge two-handed axe. He wore a helm shaped like the head of a lion complete with a mane of real fur. He wore golden armor dented and splashed with blood.

As they watched he raised his axe and hammered it into the dirt floor of the pit. They saw his opponent roll outside the blow and come out on his feet.

Though dwarfed by the mountain, this man was quite large as well. Twin leather straps crossed his chest and he wore leather breeches cut above his knees. Leather sandals were tied to his feet with laces that ran up his muscular calves.

Strangest of all, his lower jaw appeared to be encased in a curved plate of iron. Leather straps held the plate in place, strapped around

the back of his bald head. Tattoos of snakes circled around his chest and shoulders.

As they watched, the two men circled each other. The man with the iron jaw carried a large knobbed war club. Black leather wrapped the handle and a leather strap held it to the man's wrist.

"He's not even trying." complained one of the spectators. "He hasn't swung a single blow."

Ca'daan saw it was true. The iron-jawed man dove as the huge axe swung in and shifted as the mountainous man advanced but he did not swing. Once, the huge man swung so hard he lost his balance and stumbled forward. The crowd went silent but the expected counter-attack never happened. Instead the iron-jawed man waited for him to recover.

"The Kal is awful," said one man, pointing at the man with the iron jaw.

The two men circled once again. It was hard to tell but the man they called the Kal appeared to be smiling. With only his upper lip exposed, it was difficult to look at.

The battle's end happened so quickly that Ca'daan almost missed it.

The mountainous man roared, the effect in the lion's helm being quite convincing. He kicked fast, catching the Kal in the groin. The Kal doubled over, his war club hanging from his wrist. The crowd cheered, seeing a killing blow coming soon.

The lion helmed man raised his axe high, red sunlight gleaming on the tip of the broad head. He swung down hard. The Kal shifted back and the axe buried itself to the shaft in the ground. It would take the mountainous man a long time to pull it free but he never got the chance.

Time seemed to slow as Ca'daan watched. The crowd was silent. The Kal straightened, the kick to the groin seeming to be much less debilitating than it had appeared. He leaped up, one foot planting off of the shaft of the buried battle axe. As he jumped, he swung his war club back into his palm.

The Kal soared into the air, war club back and high over his head. The moment seemed to freeze. The mountain with the lion's head looked up helplessly as the iron-jawed pit fighter hung over him with his club poised to crash down.

And that crash came down hard. Ca'daan's vision sped up as the club hammered down. The sound of wood and stone against the metal helm was deafening.

The man's helm caved in, the sculpted growl bending into a twisted smile. The eyes bent together in a strange look of sadness and confusion. All at once blood erupted from the eyes and mouth of the helm. It rushed down the man's chest and back.

Ca'daan didn't want to know what had happened inside that helm and thinking of it made his stomach turn.

Slowly the lion-helmed man's grip on the haft of his battle axe relaxed and he fell dead to the dirt in a pool of blood.

The crowd roared. The Kal stood tall, his eyes focusing first on the corpse at his feet and then on the crowd around him. Money exchanged hands and the disappointed walked away, heads low.

The Kal took a running leap and caught the lip of the pit's gated entrance. A small man in a tall hat opened the gate as the Kal pulled himself up.

It took a long time for the spectators to depart. Six men tied ropes to the dead combatant to drag him from the pit. Blood continued to stream from the helm's eyes and mouth as they pulled.

Jon led their group to the Kal as the large man talked to the man in the tall hat. The Kal's attention left the man and focused on Jon and then Thorn.

"No more fights today," said the small man.

"We are not here to fight," said Jon.

"Vrenna!" shouted the Kal. His gaze had found the woman in her gray cloak and hood. The Kal pushed Ca'daan aside with one powerful hand. Adrin's hand went to the hilt of his rapier. Vrenna looked nervous, taking a step back.

The large man stepped forward and picked her up in a hug. Ca'daan saw the shine of silver in Vrenna's left hand, a gleam off of her palm spike. She didn't use it, however. The Kal put her down and a strange look pulled the corners of his mouth. Ca'daan realized it was a smile. The sight made Ca'daan uncomfortable.

"I always hoped to see you again," said the large gladiator.

Vrenna smiled and shuffled. She still looked nervous.

Ca'daan looked to Jon. Jon shrugged and stepped forward.

"Good sir," Jon began. "Our group has gathered to protect the village of Fena Dim to the south. They stand threatened by flesh-eating bandits of great number. We have joined in this fight to protect the town. There is no pay, no reward, no fame, the fight will likely end in our deaths."

"Is she going?" asked the Kal, nodding towards Vrenna.

"Yes," said Jon.

"Then my answer is yes."

Chapter Ten: Leaving Fena Kef

Adrin and the Kal spent much of the walk back to A'deem's home in chatter. The Kal's performance in the fight seemed to change Adrin's impression of Fena Kef's pit fights. The Kal recounted many stories of his fights and those of other hero pit fighters.

"Longfang was tough," said the large man, his warclub resting on his shoulder and referring to the proper name of the mountain they had seen him kill. "He had held the championship for three years."

"But you only struck once," said Adrin. "You could have beaten him at any time."

"Untrue," said the Kal. He pointed at his bald head. "I struck a thousand times in my mind and none of them hit. Had I actually thrown any of those blows, he would have driven that axe through me. That one strike was the only one that would have succeeded and I am ashamed to have used it."

"Gods, why?" asked Adrin.

The Kal stuck one hand down the front of his trousers. His hand moved around while he swung his hips and grimaced. Ca'daan found the shimmy movements confusing and disturbing. Something snapped alarmingly. He drew out his hand and revealed a cup of iron with three straps dangling from it. Jon erupted in laughter.

"It was a ruse?" asked Adrin.

"Longfang was well known to kick the manhood when he grew frustrated. It was a gamble."

Adrin smiled. "Indeed."

“Now Grimblade, that one was mean. He was small but very fast. He should have been the golden sword. I’ve only fought one other as tough and as fast as he was.”

“Grimblade cut deep into my belly, here.” The Kal pulled down the top of his trousers and revealed a wide pink scar running across his abdomen. I had to fight the rest of the match with my guts out. I lost my club and had to pin him down and beat him with my elbow until they pulled me off him.”

“Gods,” said Ca’daan, feeling his stomach twisting and wishing he hadn’t heard about that fight.

“You said he was the second toughest,” said Adrin. “Who was the first?”

“She was.” The Kal pointed to Vrenna. The warrior woman shrugged and gave a smiled at the huge man, he gave her one of his twisted grins in response.

They reached A’deem’s tent and entered.

“I’m not sure I have enough food to feed him,” A’deem pointed to Thorn. “Much less the rest of you, but I’ll see what I can do.”

A’deem was being modest. He managed to cook a horse-stew that left Ca’daan stuffed like a pig. They laughed and talked through dinner. As they recovered, Jon spoke to A’deem.

“We will need desert horses and enough food and water to get us to Fena Dim.”

A’deem scratched his whiskers. “I know a man, but he is not cheap.”

“That shouldn’t trouble us,” said Adrin, drawing the leather pouch from his hip. He pulled it free and tossed it to the sand. Golden coins spilled out.

“Apparently not,” said A’deem.

A’deem’s horselord was neither cheap nor pleasant. He glared at the group, even more so when he saw the gold coins.

“No good ever came from selling horses to thieves and bandits in the deep of night, no matter the gold,” he said. “Who chases you?”

“Perhaps it is we who chase them, old man,” said Adrin.

“Perhaps not,” said the old man, glaring at Adrin with his one sharp good eye, the other clouded over. He stood silent a moment and then snatched the pouch from Adrin’s hand.

“Leave.”

A’deem followed them as far as the edge of the town. Each of them had a small desert horse save Thorn and the Kal who rode larger stallions of dusty red. Ca’daan rode Gray Cloud, well rested and well fed.

Ca’daan dismounted and embraced A’deem.

“You did it, brother,” said A’deem. “Take your warriors back to Fena Dim.”

“I can never thank you enough, my brother,” said Ca’daan. “I will see you in six moons.”

“You make some fine horse meat stew, A’deem,” said Adrin.

“You spill some fine horse manure yourself, young man,” said A’deem with a wink. Jon laughed and Adrin blushed.

Ca’daan mounted Gray Cloud. He saw Susan’s eyes on him from under her hood. He smiled at her but the look in her eyes made his skin grow cold.

As night fell, the six horses and seven riders rode south out of Fena Kef.

Chapter Eleven: Adrin's first lesson

Ca'daan awoke as the red sun rose. They had only traveled a short way out of Fena Kef but it seemed important to Jon that they leave the town in the middle of the night.

Jon and Susan ate breakfast. Ca'daan noticed that Jon's shaved head had grown as tan as the rest of his body. He looked completely different from the long-haired merchant as which he had first appeared. Thorn appeared to still sleep, a small wind-tent shading his head from the rising sun.

In the violet shade of morning, Ca'daan saw Adrin standing on the dunes in sword practice. He swung and pierced, dove and feigned. His technique was amazing and the complicated moves were beautiful. The sun shone off the bare breasts of the sculpted naked angel handguard.

"Fine swordsplay, young master," said the Kal, chewing on a strip of dried meat. "You will blind your foes with the spin of your blade."

"Thank you, sir," said Adrin, tipping his hat.

"Do not thank him," said Jon without looking. "He is having fun with you."

Adrin glared at the bald man. Jon continued.

"You swing like that and you will find an axe in your gut."

Adrin's jaw clenched.

"Perhaps your own blade has lost its shine, old man," said Adrin. "Perhaps you are more likely to blind only yourself."

“If you are going to travel with us and do battle, you are going to have to learn fast. We will not have time to coddle your ego.”

Ca’daan felt his heart jump. Besides Adrin, he appeared to be the only one surprised by Jon’s words. Vrenna watched Adrin’s reaction with cold eyes. Susan chewed her flatbread. The Kal shrugged. Thorn slept.

Adrin’s expression fell and his cheeks grew scarlet.

“I have trained with the greatest masters of the north,” said Adrin through clenched teeth. “I have killed lords and cutthroats across half the world.”

“If you actually believe that, I cannot help you,” said Jon.

“Old man,” said Adrin. “Maybe it’s time you taught me what an old deserter could possibly teach.”

Adrin stood, legs apart, and his rapier in his right hand. Seething under the brim of his three-corner hat. If that look of death had been aimed at him, Ca’daan would have wet his breeches.

Jon stood slowly, moving to the pack on his desert horse.

“So, you’re not too afraid to face Salamonca steel after all,” said Adrin.

“That is not a Salamonca,” said Jon.

“And how would you know?” asked Adrin.

“Because this one is.”

Jon drew a rapier from the pack on his horse. It shown crimson in the light of the low sun. The blade was like none Ca’daan had ever seen. Falcon wings arched up from the guard and a falcon’s head pointed out on the hilt. The sword was not as ornate as Adrin’s, but

Ca’daan could see the workmanship in the temper of the blade. He wasn’t the only one to notice. The Kal whistled and Vrenna’s eyes sparkled when she saw Jon swing it.

Even Adrin’s bolstered confidence seemed to waver.

“You are mistaken, sir,” said Adrin, his voice wavering. “This is Suun’s Kiss, hammered twenty six years ago and tested through the bodies of four men. I do not wish to test it on you.”

“I met Salamonca. As a boy I ran water to his forge. He was brilliant, an artist in the medium of steel. He would never stoop so low as to make a sword with teats on it.”

The Kal laughed and Adrin’s face grew a darker shade of red.

“Enough talk, old man.”

“Indeed.”

Adrin swung hard, aiming for Jon’s left arm. Jon hardly moved at all. He stood passive, letting the blade whip in. Then he turned and parried hard. His sword rang across the desert plane.

Adrin’s sword exploded. Shards of steel shot through the air. One cut Adrin’s cheek, sending drops of blood down his face. The rest fell into the dirt of the dunes.

The group was silent. Even Thorn had sat up to watch the short duel.

“You son of a whore,” whispered Adrin. He stared at the useless hilt in his hand.

Jon walked back to his horse and drew another sword. This rapier was plain, not ornate, with a simple dull handguard and a chipped blade. He turned and tossed it at Adrin’s feet.

“This isn’t a great sword but it is a good one. It is familiar to battle and strong enough to survive when its wielder does not.”

Ca’daan recognized the sword. He had seen the hilt on the belt of one of the dark riders Jon had killed. Adrin stared at the sword and then at Jon. Adrin walked away to his small camp and sat, facing away from the rest of them. Jon left the sword where it lay.

“We can begin tomorrow,” he said and then returned to Susan.

“That was a smart move,” said the Kal to Ca’daan. “If Adrin had picked up the sword in anger, he might have died.”

They ate and then they rode, taking a rest at the hottest parts of the day when the huge red sun hung bloated in the orange sky. In the late afternoon they began again until nightfall. They made camp at an ancient marker set in the days of the old empire. The stone was unnatural to the land around it and huge. Unfamiliar script marked the stone. Whether calls to the old gods, proclamations of kings, or simple geographical instructions, none of them could say.

The air cooled that night and each of the members of the party rested under woolen blankets with wind traps to push away the chilled breeze.

When they awoke at sunrise, Adrin was gone.

They ate and rode through the morning without speaking of Adrin’s departure. Ca’daan looked out over the desert, hoping to see the young man return. As they set camp, Ca’daan saw his chance to talk to the Kal alone. Ca’daan sat down next to the man.

“Why did Jon do that?” asked Ca’daan.

“He had to,” said the Kal.

“He didn’t have to humiliate him like that,” said Ca’daan. “I saw Adrin fight. He had real skill.”

“He was good, better than Jon let on,” said the Kal. “But he thought he was better than he really was. That would likely get him killed.”

“What did Jon expect? He fled and I’m not surprised he did,” said Ca’daan.

“Jon expected that as well, though he hoped for something else. It takes tremendous strength to throw aside a mask you wore most of your life and ask to get better. Jon had hoped for that strength,” said the Kal. “He was wrong and likely saved Adrin’s life.”

“Was it worth the loss?’ asked Ca’daan.

“Would you want Adrin defending your wife and children and then panic at the first sign of an enemy’s sword?”

Ca’daan felt his fingers go numb. How did this man know?

“My wife is dead,” said Ca’daan. The Kal looked at him for a moment.

“I am sorry,” said the man. “You’d think with my jaw of iron I’d talk less.”

The Kal didn’t know. Ca’daan bowed to the man. He turned and saw Jon sleeping in his half-tent. His arm was around Susan. The girl was looking at Ca’daan, her green eyes pale in the shadows under her hood. He smiled at her but she did not smile back.

Ca’daan spent most of the afternoon thinking about what the Kal had said. As he gathered the warriors, Ca’daan felt like he had some measure of control over them. Watching the situation yesterday spin so fast out of control scared him. He trusted Jon but had no idea what happened in the man’s mind. He had trusted Jon to defend

Fena Dim with no idea how he would do it. Seeing Jon take control of the group, to the point of banishing Adrin, scared Ca'daan badly. What if he was wrong? What if he was bringing danger to his town instead of salvation?

Later that night when he awoke, he felt the panic within his stomach when Jon's cold blue eyes beheld him as he awoke. He worried more during his watch while the others slept. So deep did he think that he neither saw, nor heard, nor felt anything until the tip of the blade touched the side of his neck.

Chapter Twelve: The Slavers and the Desert Ghost

A gloved hand covered his mouth and a husky voice spoke in a strange dialect Ca'daan could not understand except for two words; "speak" and "die". Ca'daan understood.

The man didn't move for a long time. Ca'daan saw the man's shadow in the red moonlight surveying the other sleeping members of the camp.

The man's other arm crossed Ca'daan's throat and the blade left. The man's other arm crossed the first and his hand cupped the back of Ca'daan's skull. Before he could cry out, the man squeezed. Ca'daan gasped but it was little more than wind on the air. His vision narrowed as the pressure increased. Little white flashes lit up the black edges of his vision. He was dying, he thought as blackness overtook him.

He awoke immediately, though in a completely different place. He gasped for air and his head throbbed. It was still night. Ca'daan appeared to be upside down, slung over the back of a horse. He coughed and spit up bile that burned the back of his throat.

Ca'daan looked up and saw a large camp. Dozens of men and women, each chained by one ankle, surrounded each one of seven fires. Huge men wearing boiled leather and armed with whips and

short blades walked among them. Two brill honked near a covered tent guarded by two large men in bronze armor, black leather masks, and bladed polearms.

A discussion took place to his right. Ca'daan painfully turned and saw a tan skinned man with a thick mustache and braided beard talking to a man in fine cloth and thick boots. They appeared to be in an argument. Near them were five other horses mounted by four men and one woman. The woman was dark skinned and carried a short spear. Each of the men wore leather armor and dressed in the style of heavy riders. Bandits and bounty hunters, thought Ca'daan.

The bearded man pointed up the hill and shouted at the noble. The noble shook his head. He turned to the riders.

"He won't pay for the location of the others," said the bearded man in a thick slurred accent. "He wants us to bring them all here."

"They're armed. Runaways or not, they will put up a fight. Two of them looked like pit fighters. We'll need some of his whipmasters if he wants us to take them." said one of the other men, this one with short hair and a bow strung across his back.

"They're not going to give us any more men. We either go get them or we only get paid for the skinny one Telek got." Ca'daan saw one of the riders, long-haired and young, nod. Ca'daan recognized his gloves.

The noble began talking again in his strange tongue and the bearded man returned in the same dialect. They went back and forth for some time.

The bearded man's head exploded.

Two of the horses reared up and the noble was showered in bone and blood. A loud crack echoed over the dunes. The man with the bow cried out, blood gushing from his thigh. Another crack echoed

soon after. The remaining riders rode off in different directions. Men cried out in the camp as the whipmasters ran toward the confusion.

The body of the bearded man fell quivering and convulsing to the ground. The bowman fell off his horse and put his hand over the wound in his leg.

Ca'daan heard hoof beats approaching. A horse rode past fast, a huge red stallion. Ca'daan saw Thorn on its back holding his massive sword high. He passed Ca'daan and his sword swing through the man in noble's garb. The man cried out and his arm fell off at the shoulder. He collapsed screaming.

Thorn was gone into the night. A spear flew past in his direction but hit nothing.

Something grabbed Ca'daan by the back of his belt and tunic. He was hoisted up onto the back of another horse.

"Hello, friend," Ca'daan felt relief at the sound of the Kal's voice. They were moving fast now, the gallop shaking Ca'daan until he thought his head might fall apart.

The horse underneath them shrieked and Ca'daan felt himself falling. With his hands and feet bound, there was no way to land softly. The impact took his breath away. Through dazed eyes he saw a black masked man rush towards him, a long curved sword in his hand. The Kal's powerful legs stepped in front of Ca'daan's view and, looking up, he saw the Kal dodge a sword swing and smashed his club into the man's side. Bone cracked in the man's chest but before he could react, the Kal crushed the side of his head, twisting the mask and headdress.

Something fast and sharp flew past the Kal's body and buried itself in the ground. The Kal sat back and covered himself behind his fallen horse.

“That spearwoman is good,” he said to Ca’daan. “Not many people could hit a horse on the run like that.” The iron jawed man breathed heavy. “We’re in a bad spot if she comes around us.”

Two of the whipmasters saw Ca’daan and the Kal lying along the dying horse. Seeing the advantage, they rushed in. The first charged, his curved blade high. The Kal turned and struck with his club. The man’s ankle folded over around the knob of the club. He screamed and fell, his face ashen in shock.

The other, more careful than his foolish companion, grinned and closed slowly. Ca’daan could see twisted decaying teeth under the man’s leather half-helm. The whipmaster shifted and reared back to stab Ca’daan. Ca’daan, still tied and twisted under the horse, could no nothing. The man dropped his sword and twisted as he fell. Ca’daan could see a wound as wide as his hand opening up the man’s back from his left shoulder to his right hip.

Vrenna stood behind him, blood dripping from her saber. Another black spear soared at her. Vrenna twisted and caught the spear in her cloak. Another rider came in from her opposite side, one of the bandits. Far more skilled than the slaver whipmasters, this rider nearly cut Vrenna in half. She ducked and parried the blow.

In a single motion, the bandit dismounted and rushed. His footing never lost stride as he went from full gallop to full run. The mercenaries were all very good. The bandit’s blade swung again but Vrenna countered.

A blur of motion took Ca’daan’s eyes from the warrior woman. Ca’daan saw the dark skinned woman ride past, a quiver of small spears hanging from her saddle. She wore a boiled leather chestguard molded perfectly around the shape of her bare breasts. A strip of leather tied back her hair in a high topknot. As Ca’daan watched, the woman drew another spear from her quiver and threw.

Somewhere in the distance, Ca’daan heard another crack and another man screamed. It was Jon’s pistols, Ca’daan realized.

The spear missed Vrenna by only a hand-span.

“My leg is trapped!” said the Kal. Vrenna was unguarded. Another spear would take her down.

Wind blew past Ca’daan and a shape, smaller than a horse but nearly as fast, rushed out of the night air. It was a man, dark skinned, thin, and wearing nothing but a loin cloth. The spear woman’s horse screamed and fell. The woman rolled and drew two spears before the horse had rolled and broken the rest.

The man stood, two blades in his hands. The woman snarled and threw. The man shifted slightly and cut the spear out of the air.

Somewhere on the other side of the horse, another man cried out followed by another crack of thunder.

Using her last spear in melee, the woman charged this new opponent. The thin man dodged one strike, parried another, and was soon upon her. His blades worked in rough and savage cuts. On the last, the woman’s throat sprayed a fan of blood into the air. Her last spear fell to the sand.

Another pair of whipmasters charged at them. The dark-skinned man stepped in front of the two men. One, brandishing a long polearm, stabbed at him. The small man turned, grabbing the thrusting polearm and burying the tip of it into the ground. He cut the curved knife across the man’s hand. The man cried out and let go of the polearm, putting his good hand over the wound on the other. The other whipmaster, carrying a heavy sword and small stretched leather shield, took more time.

Ca’daan heard the Kal grunt and felt the horse lift. Ca’daan pulled his legs up and turned. The horse fell heavily to the ground.

The Kal picked up one of the curved swords of the fallen whipmasters and cut Ca'daan's bonds. Ca'daan stood, his head throbbing and for the first time saw the full extent of the battle.

Fire had taken the noble's quarters and his carriage to the ash of the sky. Another man, small and scrawny, stood surrounded by four huge guards in bronze armor and leather masks. Two naked woman held each other behind him.

Cries of fear and confusion arose from the fires as the chained slaves worked against their bonds and unsuccessfully tried to grapple with the remaining whipmasters.

Ca'daan saw Jon riding through the slave fires, his rapier slashing at the whipmasters. He opened up the back of one who had been seconds away from cleaving his large curved sword into a cowering child. Madness had taken over the camp.

Ca'daan saw the dark-skinned man dive and turn under the swings of his shield-bearing opponent. The man thrust but missed as the knife-wielding man spun and stabbed into the whipmaster's back. He pulled the blade out and a gout of blood followed. Pushing against the man's back, the dark-skinned man drew his other knife against the man's exposed throat.

The bandit with the sword swung but Vrenna parried. He attacked with measured power, forcing her to dodge and parry. She cut free her cloak and danced as the bandit's blade swung. Soon he swung in a horizontal cut and Vrenna dropped and spun. Her blade caught the inside of his knee and a trail of blood followed. He fell to the ground, clutching his leg. Vrenna was already moving to the next opponent but the Kal walked to the wounded man and killed him with a single powerful blow.

Ca'daan heard a roar and turned to see Thorn, his horse felled by a sheaf of arrows, defending attacks from an equally large man with a warhammer. The man slammed his warhammer, missing Thorn by a

hair but kicked, connecting with Thorn's stomach. Thorn fell backward but when he saw Thorn's eyes, Ca'daan saw something inhuman. Thorn rolled to his feet as the hammer came in again. The huge bandit swung again and Thorn stepped inside the blow. He smashed the hilt of his wide-bladed sword into the man's nose, shattering it. The man stepped back, blood gushing through his fingers from his ruined face. Thorn's blade swung and cut the man's arm and opened his belly. He fell to the ground gasping and Thorn left him where he lay.

Ca'daan saw two whipmasters fleeing on horseback. He saw Jon draw a flintlock pistol from his belt and fire. Gray smoke blew into the night air and the crack sent Ca'daan to the balls of his feet in a crouch. One of the men fell off the horse and crashed screaming to the ground.

Vrenna and the knife wielding man had engaged the four guards of the camp's slave master. In seconds, the four guards were dead or dying. When only the pasty noble remained, Vrenna stepped back and raised her hand, offering the man to the dark-skinned blade wielder. He accepted the offer. He brushed past the man and turned, walking away. When he was ten paces away Ca'daan saw the deep gash flooding blood down from the slave master's throat.

The battle was over. The Kal stood next to Ca'daan while the others finished off the few whipmasters who had survived.

Ca'daan looked over the camp in shock. Dozens of whipmasters lay dead or dying. Another eight bounty hunters lay dead as well.

Vrenna spoke with the dark-skinned man.

"Are you hurt?" Ca'daan turned and faced Jon. Ca'daan had known why he had asked these men and women to do battle for Fena Dim, but to see the results here frightened him. He could do nothing but cower when the whipmaster had attacked. Jon, Thorn, the Kal, and the others had cut them down easily. They had saved Ca'daan's life.

“No,” said Ca’daan. Jon nodded. Jon was a changed man. His tunic was tied with a line of rope but a pair of fine leather belts buckled in silver hung low on his hips. In his left hand he held his rapier of shining silver steel with the falcon-winged guard. In his other he held a flintlock pistol, the barrel still smoking. The matchlock was shaped like the head of a falcon as well, the beak striking the firing plate.

The pistol was alien to Ca’daan. Before meeting Jon he had never seen anything like it before. The one Jon held now was not the same as the ones the dark rider had held. That one had a dragon’s head for the hammer. This one matched Jon’s own rapier. He had carried these all along, Ca’daan realized. What other secrets did the man hold?

Thorn and the Kal approached. Thorn had removed his shirt and for the first time Ca’daan began to understand this creature. A black webwork of tattoos circled Thorn’s body. In the center of his chest was a grizzly scar, wide and star-shaped. How could any man could survive such a large wound so close to the heart?

Thorn looked at the pistol in Jon’s hand and then up to Jon’s cold blue eyes. Jon holstered the pistol, the barrel still smoking, on his left hip. Ca’daan saw an identical pistol hanging on his right hip. The two men, Jon and Thorn, seemed to share a silent conversation. Thorn turned and left.

Jon nodded to the knife wielder talking to Vrenna.

“What do you think of this new ally?”

“He wears no armor, fights with knives, and moves like the wind,” said Ca’daan.

“Indeed,” said Jon. “When you speak to him, mention the possible enslavement of your people. He is a vindicator,” said Jon. Susan, standing behind Jon, looked up to Ca’daan.

As Ca’daan walked towards Vrenna and the dark-skinned man, they ceased their conversation. Vrenna smiled. The man was not large, perhaps as tall as Ca’daan himself. He was thin, with long muscles and a topknot of braided hair running down his back. The rest of his head was shaved. His eyes were gold-amber and shone in the moonlight when he looked to Ca’daan.

“I cannot thank you enough for your assistance,” said Ca’daan. “My foolishness got me captured by those bounty hunters and nearly sold into a life of slavery.

“My small village, Fena Dim, stands under the sword. I have asked these men and women to help protect my village from the slavery that will soon fall upon them by a large band of murderers most vile. I beg your assistance to help my town.”

The man looked to Ca’daan and then to the others.

“Your friends risked their lives for you and for these people,” the man gestured to the camp of slaves, now unlocking their bonds and raiding the food carts. “I am San’doro and I will help you.”

The man tucked his two knives into the back of his leather belt. Each blade was long and curved with hardwood handles worn and grooved from long use. Scars ran across the man’s back, long and wicked. A brand of burned skin stood out on his left shoulder. As they walked back to the others, Ca’daan saw the same brand on Vrenna’s shoulder as well.

“I’ve been hunting this slavelord for some time,” said San’doro. “It’s been harder and harder to hunt the slavers these days. They travel in larger packs than they once did and use mercenaries to capture new slaves along the way.”

“I have heard of you,” said the Kal. “You’re the Desert Ghost.”

“Who?” asked Ca’daan. Jon shrugged.

“The slave trade to Fena Kef used to be strong,” said the Kal. “Tens of thousands each season would come through. Pleasure slaves, workers, and pit fighters. It was a strong business. Some northerners brought Voth slaves from the north to trade for the slaves in the south.

“Then slavers started dying. At first they suspected rival slave traders or mercenaries hired by the other cities to corner the market on the trade, but all the traders were being killed one caravan at a time. The travelers in the south and east told of dozens of freed slaves building camps in the desert and the bodies of their captors rotting in the sun.

“Soon some spoke of not a warband cutting them down, but a single man. The Desert Ghost, they called him. He appeared from dust and faded into the sands leaving corpses in his wake.”

“The truth is not so exciting,” said San’doro. “They chose to steal children from their mothers in their sleep so I chose to steal their lives in return.” The man’s voice chilled Ca’daan’s skin.

They left the slaves to the desert. The brill were slaughtered for food and San’doro assured them that the slaves would find their way. The group found enough uninjured horses to mount. San’doro chose no mount, preferring to run barefoot. His heels and feet were as thick as aged leather.

They traveled south and then south west off of the main trail that led to the southern cities.

Chapter Thirteen: The Iron Jaw and Adrin’s Return

They rode into the barrens, Ca’daan leading the way and pointing out his familiar landmarks. On their second day, resting in the shadow of a large bluff, San’doro sat by Jon and spoke.

“A rider follows us,” he said. “I can take him if you wish.”

Ca’daan was relieved. Adrin had not abandoned them entirely. Ca’daan found it interesting that San’doro already marked Jon as the one to ask. None of the others complained. Perhaps something had happened when he was captured but now it was quite clear. Jon led this group.

“Nay, he will come to us when the time is right,” said Jon.

“I am sorry to ask,” said San’doro. His politeness sounded strange coming from a desert nomad. He addressed the Kal. “What happened to your mouth?”

“She happened to it,” said the Kal, turning to Vrenna. The warrior woman turned and looked away. “and it was the best thing that ever happened to me.”

The Kal unbuckled the straps and dropped the iron jaw to the dirt. A deep cleft creased his chin. He smiled at them and the sight made Ca’daan’s stomach turn. The Kal’s lower jaw moved in two parts, each pulling up on the left and right sides of his face. His mouth formed a grotesque triangle.

“Gods,” said San’doro. The Kal picked up the plate and refastened it.

“I used to be the best pit fighter in Tog Veel. I had fought in two hundred and ten battles, fifty six of those to the death. I had everything I could want. Food, water, wine, women, and freedom. I was famous all over the western desert. Pit fighters from the Gazu Kadem pits traveled weeks across the desert only to fall under my club in two breaths. I had everything a pit fighter could want and I hated all of it.

“Each battle left me unfulfilled. Each beautiful slave queen I mounted made me want to cry. They meant nothing. Every man I put down left me empty. I had no wants and no purpose in my life. Then she came.” Kal nodded to Vrenna.

“It depressed me to first see her in the fighting pit. This is what it had come down to. All my life I strove to fell anyone they put in front of me and had succeeded in that. I was the best pit fighter in the western desert and this is what it got me, a novelty fight. They had taken a pleasure slave, given her a club, and sent her in against me. The audience wanted to see her struggle. They got aroused to see someone like me torment and beat someone like her. I was a joke.

“And then the gong rang and my life changed forever. I never even saw her move. I woke up a week later unable to talk or eat. I had forgotten most of that day but, with lots of time to think, I remembered the strike. I remembered how fast she was. She had feigned an attack with barely more than her eyes. It was a feint so perfect that I saw it as truth. It would have been easy to cry foul. I wasn’t ready for a real fighter when I saw her, I could have said, but that would have been a lie. If our battle had raged for the entire afternoon, the results would have been the same.

“My jaw was split in two, held together by my lips. I couldn’t talk for half a year. They wouldn’t be sure I could ever eat again much less fight. The slave girls I used to bed now fed me bread-ale and chewed meat and wiped drool from my useless lips. I was angry for a while but I found strength in that anger. I wasn’t numb anymore. I had to fight to even stay awake now. I had a lot of time to think about my life.

“I left the sickbeds with no money and half the weight I once had. I found work as a hauler in the trade district. One day I killed a bandit who was extorting one of the local iron smiths. He made me his bodyguard and hammered my new jaw for me.” The Kal tapped his iron jaw.

“He funded my return to the pit fights. There were still a few who remembered me and the odds were against me, but I found my fire again. It was wonderful to have to fight my way back up again. My

body was different. My style was different. I had to relearn everything. I lost as many fights as I won but I was alive again.

"I left Tog Veel and came here to learn more, to find a purpose other than just the pit fights. I began to find myself in the same circle that I was in before. I walked a path that would lead once again to the place I was in before Vrenna came. Only this time it would be an axe that would hit me instead of a club. I would not survive it.

"Then she came again." The Kal looked at Ca'daan and gave him one of his strange twisted smiles. He turned and smiled at Vrenna. She smiled back. "Now I have purpose once again."

"An amazing story," said San'doro.

They ate in silence, enjoying the cool shade of the bluff. The red sun painted the land in cool light, turning the sky to a deep shade of amber.

A figure stopped at the bluff's edge leading a horse. They continued to eat as he came closer.

Adrin's appearance had changed. His hair was dirty, tied back with a string of leather. His rich tunic had been replaced with a leather chestguard from one of the bandits Vrenna had killed at the slave camp. He was unshaven and his eyes were cold. He sat a short distance from them, his eyes on Jon. Ca'daan grew nervous, would they fight? Had he come back for revenge? A long moment came before he spoke.

"I am glad none of you were hurt," he said. "I am sorry I was not there to help."

"You're with us now," said Jon. "And we have many battles ahead. Welcome back."

Chapter Fourteen: Adrin's Second Lesson

They had agreed to take a day of rest in the barrens. After the battle against the slave lord, the group needed it. Thorn and Vrenna hiked to the top of the bluff during the day. The Kal rested and helped Ca'daan reset the provisions after the battle had thrown them into chaos. They had enough food and water for the eight of them, but few other comforts and little room for further loss.

Susan sat on a bedroll near the rise of the bluff on a large slate rock that had fallen centuries ago. She watched Jon and Adrin intently. The day gave them time to practice.

Though he worked with the Kal, Ca'daan listened to the words of the two men as they talked, circled, and dueled in a clearing of the brush grass near Susan's rock.

"Who taught you your fencing?" asked Jon. There was no sarcasm or spite in his voice.

"Sigmund Del'Rosa," said Adrin. "He was an easterner who taught the fourth emperor."

"I know Del'Rosa," said Jon. "A brilliant duelist. He was the master of the left-hand, right?"

"Yes," said Adrin. "He used to stab me with his parrying dagger. I still have the scars." He had a new one too, Ca'daan could see. Though scabbed and partially hidden by his beard stubble, the scar from the shard of the teat sword would mark him for the rest of his life.

"There is a key lesson here," said Jon. "All combat comes from deception. The divine art of subtlety and secrecy they called it in the south. They had shadow gods devoted to it. Draw your sword and dagger."

Both men drew their rapiers and daggers in a single quick motion that made Ca'daan's heart leap. "I wish I was that good," he whispered. The Kal nodded. "I wish I was that good at anything."

Both men had donned leather breastplates. Deep scars ran across the boiled brown leather of the bandit chest guard Adrin had taken from the site of the slave lord. The collar rose high on the left side, protecting his throat when in a left-foot-forward stance. Plates of iron reinforced leather guarded his left shoulder. Jon's breastplate had been taken from his saddle pack. It was black leather with a high collar that closed around the front. Buckles crossed at the softer leather midsection.

Adrin held his new rapier, the one Jon had given him. The hilt was a web of steel bars and the blade, though plain and chipped, shone in the morning light. In his left hand he held a long dagger with a U shaped handguard meant to trap an oncoming blade. It was thin and sharp with a wire-wrapped hilt and a weighted spike on the tip of the hilt.

Jon's rapier still sent a shiver through Ca'daan whenever he saw it. He had seen Jon stab one of the whipmasters with it the night before. How easily the blade had ended the man's life. Jon fought with it as though it were a natural extension of his body. Every part of him appeared designed to stab the blade through that man as if it were the only action he could take. As the man had fallen, clutching the wound in his chest, Jon had seemed to forget about him completely. His focus had shifted and his purpose was now to stab the next man who stood against him.

Ca'daan saw that in him now, though the purpose had softened. Jon's own offhand dagger also shaped like a falcon, wings raised on each side of the sharp blade, sat comfortably in his left hand. Ca'daan marveled at the two men, machines built for the art of war. How these men had come into his life remained a mystery. Some

force brought them together. A god who cared little for the ways of man but whose breath shifted their lives like wind through grass.

Jon swung his rapier in a wide arc and then redirected it into a thrust. Ca'daan would have been run through but Adrin parried easily. Another feint and stab from the other side, again easily deflected.

Jon stepped back and smiled. "I spoke poorly the other day. You're skill with the blade is good."

Jon swung again. Two feigns and two attacks. Adrin kept up easily, using his offhand dagger to trap Jon's rapier and take a swing of us own. Jon shifted and the sword tip slid past. Jon took three steps away carried on the momentum of his shift. His body was totally relaxed.

Adrin attacked. He swung and stabbed twice. Jon parried with his own rapier. Adrin shouted, pivoting on his left heel and came around in a full reverse swing. Ca'daan saw Jon's offhand ready to stab him in the side as the young man spun. When Adrin's rapier came around Jon parried low on the blade. It sent a shock into the sword and seemed to send a bolt of electricity into Adrin's hand. The blade shook out of Adrin's hand and quivered on the ground. Adrin grasped his right hand with his left.

"That we'll need to work on," said Jon. "Keep it simple. Those flowery moves may blow up the underskirts of young noble women but they will get you killed out here. I hit you with my rapier but imagine if Thorn had parried with his blade. It would have broken your wrist."

Adrin stooped and picked up his rapier. They began again.

"Tomorrow we work on simplicity. Today deception. What did Del'Rosa teach you about the shadow style?" asked Jon.

“That the offhand is the real weapon. The rapier is for misdirection,” said Adrin.

“Correct,” said Jon. He swung again and Adrin parried with his rapier. They crossed swords in a blaze of shining steel. Both men had sped up without discussion. Now Ca’daan saw the sword mastery of the two men. The complexity of the style, each sword and dagger stabbing, weaving, and striking. Ca’daan turned and saw Susan and the Kal watching intently as well.

Jon stabbed hard, aiming for Adrin’s left side. Adrin could have easily parried with the offhand dagger but instead twisted and caught the point of Jon’s sword in the guard of his own rapier. Adrin turned and locked Jon’s arm and then stabbed in with the offhand dagger. Ca’daan’s blood rushed. For a moment he thought he saw the hatred in Adrin’s eyes that he had seen the day he had left. He’s going to kill him, thought Ca’daan. But the blade stopped. The tip rested against Jon’s cheek, angled to slip down under his leather neck guard. Adrin smiled and Jon smiled back.

“Good,” said Jon. They stepped back again and Ca’daan saw the spring return to Adrin’s step. He wasn’t that bad after all. Ca’daan saw confidence flow back into the young man.

They stood again, tips to the sky and left hands out in salute. The deep red sun hung overhead, painting them in light. They were two weapons of the same forge. They were beautiful. They both stepped back into identical stances. Adrin’s smile never left his lips.

They started again. Ca’daan couldn’t say who begun the exchange this time. The blades swam together. The feint, parries, counters, ripostes, and stabs blended together, making Ca’daan dizzy. The duel stretched until the breath of the two men ran quick.

Jon swung in, Adrin parried and countered. Jon caught Adrin’s rapier tip in the points of the falcon wings of his rapier’s guard. Jon’s offhand came in, tip aimed for Adrin’s exposed throat. Now Ca’daan

saw a fury, a bloodlust in Jon's eyes. The tip of the dagger came in and it wasn't going to stop. Jon would not hold back the blow. Adrin's own offhand dagger came up, the tip and guard catching Jon's blade. Adrin threw his elbow over the entangled blades and pulled back. Jon's offhand dagger spun into the sand. Adrin spun his dagger and aimed it for Jon's eye. But a click made him stop. Jon had drawn one of his falcon-hammered pistols and had the barrel up under Adrin's chin. He had used his disarmed hand to draw the pistol as Adrin had assumed the disarm had succeeded.

"You have to be joking," said Adrin. Jon pulled the trigger and sparks flew from the flint on steel. It made Adrin and Ca'daan both jump. "Which fencing instructor taught you that?"

"The Voth did," said Jon.

"A fine display, old soldier," said the Kal.

"Indeed," said San'doro. He had backtracked their trail during the day and reported no followers.

Vrenna and Thorn walked down from the path of the bluff. Ca'daan considered how well the man and woman complimented each other. Dark hair, light skin, though the desert sun had baked Thorn brown. Vrenna was lithe and beautiful. Thorn was brutal and ugly. Something in their eyes put Ca'daan on guard. He felt Jon tense as well.

"Welcome back, friends," said the Kal. "It is time the sun set upon us as one."

Thorn and Vrenna stood in front of Jon.

"We think it is time you told us about Susan," said Thorn.

Chapter Fifteen: Susan

Ca'daan remembered that moment clearly the rest of his life. Susan sat on the same red rock that had fallen from the wall of the bluff. She wore tattered tan robes and her hood protected her from the sun above. Her eyes were calm.

Jon looked at Thorn and Vrenna for a long time and then turned to Susan. She didn't move for a long time and then nodded to him.

"I met Susan six months ago." Jon sat down on the ground cross legged. He sat the rapier down next to himself. San'doro began gathering and lighting a fire. "I had just left the service of the Emperor as his hand in the South. There were only a few of us still around back then. The Emperor's handlers weren't pleased at my departure or the circumstances surrounding it, so I went into hiding. I was with a woman, a woman they nearly crushed between the manipulation of the north and the barbarism of the south. I will share her story another time as it has little connection to Susan other than to say I used to work for them and then later I did not.

"There is a small village between Gazu Kadem and the western desert known as Fena Rait. It's a mystical town, older than the old empire, where wizards pull fish from caverns so deep in the earth that the water in which they live boils. The secret of these fish is so well kept that no emperor has dared to take control lest this secret become lost. And the fish are very tasty.

"My trade is swords and secrets, which is a difficult trade to deal in when men more powerful than you, men who trained you and rebuilt you from the ruins of war and the bottom of a barrel of wine, come to hunt you. I worked in the fish market, loading casks of the golden winged fish on their way to the kings of the cities in the far corners of the desert. My new trade allowed me to hear of the whispers and rumors of the land. Once a spy always a spy.

"An old crone came to the village in a cart that practically fell apart as the dying mule who pulled it dragged it to a stop. She built a shack of deadwood in the wizards' district and soon new rumors spread that she was a witch, a fortune teller, an alchemist, and a sage. The fish wizards ignored her. There was no real magic in the land since the days when the old gods began to sleep and the old empire collapsed.

"I had seen the Voth witches during the war. I had seen what they could do to men," From behind him, Ca'daan could feel Thorn stiffen. Jon's eyes moved to the large man before continuing. "I had to know if her magic was real.

"I entered her shack, opening the painted door covered in runes of warding. The old crone, Sakes was her name, sat behind a table of old oak. She had skins of beasts and men on her walls. The skulls of the dead grinned from ropes that hung, candles burning in their eyes.

"'I hear you tell of men's futures,' I asked her. She looked at me a long time, her black eyes unnerving. 'Twelve saltcoins or one of those tasty golden fish,' she said.

"'You will have it on the morrow.' It would cost me five saltcoins to buy one of the fish, but five was better than twelve. 'Then tomorrow you will see your future,' said the Crone.

"I turned and as I left I saw Susan for the first time. She wore a simple canvas shift and she was desperately thin. She looked at me with those green eyes of hers as if she saw into my soul. The Crone had cut off all of her hair. Her appearance sickened me.

"I returned to work but my mind continued to wander to the old crone and the young girl. I slept not at all that night, every time I dozed I saw the war. I saw my friends killed. I worked myself hard the next day and didn't return to the Crone's shack until that evening. A dust storm had formed in the west and the sun seemed

to take up half the sky, painting the rest blood red. The streets were quiet that evening, I call them streets but they were little more than foot paths.

"The shack felt different. The door was the same but I felt something in the air.

"I opened the door. The candles were out. There wasn't any light in the hut. The smell assaulted me, thick and musty and oily.

"She must have been behind the door. I felt the wind shift or saw some tiny shadow or dust mote move. I've come close to death four times in my life, really close. That was one of them. She had a dagger of stone obsidian. It wasn't long but it was as sharp as glass. Her wrist broke when I grabbed her and threw her over her large oak table. Some bottles of colored liquids broke and the smell of the place turned rancid.

"The crone was on her feet in an instance. 'You will not have her,' she screamed at me again and again. 'She will not go back there. She will die first!' I had no idea what she was talking about. She stopped screaming and smiled, her teeth a ruin of decay. Her arm was all twisted where I had broken it but she didn't seem to care. 'I know what you did, Gray Wolf,' she said. That frightened me most of all. I got mad. I get mad when I'm really scared. I threw that table over. It wrenched my back so bad that I missed my work at the fish wizards the next morning and never ended up returning.

"I drew my offhand dagger. I kept it on me all the time wrapped in my leggings, and I cut her, just a little at the throat. I've known a lot of big men that will piss themselves if they feel their own blood rolling down their neck but she didn't. She just smiled. I didn't know what I was going to do. I put two golden fish on a side table. 'The girl gets one of them,' I said. 'If you eat them both, I'll know and I'll come back and kill you in your shitty hut,' She opened her mouth

and hissed at me. I've never heard that sound come from a human being before. I can still hear it to this day

"When I left, I turned and saw Susan there beside the shack. She smiled at me and it was like the sun had risen over my life. I smiled back. I slept soundly that night though I couldn't move at all the next day because of my back on that table.

"Two days later Marcus Root came to town.

"Marcus and I had fought together in the last days of the Voth war. Like me, he had been driven nearly mad from the bloodshed and battle. There were fourteen of us. We put villages to the torch to route Voth armies from their original path.

"You did far worse than that," said Thorn. His words drove a chill through Ca'daan's bones.

"Yes," said Jon, looking at the big man. "I did far worse than that." Vrenna put a hand on Thorn's shoulder and the big man relaxed. Jon continued.

"Marcus was older than us, a captain during the war and our leader when they started calling us the Gray Wolves near the end of the war. He had two men with him when he came into town. I didn't recognize them. One was huge, dressed in black plate armor, a high neck guard, black cloak, and a leather three-corner hat. He had a wide-barreled scattershot on his back and a broadsword on his hip. Scars crossed his face. One of them had opened his mouth halfway across his cheek. It looked like a twisted frown.

"The other man wore a black hood and cloak. He had no visible weapons and looked softer than Marcus and the other. He had a gold eye fastening his cloak around his neck. When I saw that, I knew that I was in bad trouble.

"What did it mean?" asked Ca'daan.

“It meant he was an agent of the Eye. Not just an errand boy like Marcus, like I used to be, but an actual inner circle mindwalker.”

This brought a dozen questions to Ca’daan all at once but he didn’t know where to start and so he let Jon continue.

“They went straight for the crone’s hut. Marcus took off his own tricorn hat and put it on the horn of his saddle. He had a pair of pistols, the same skull-hammered ones he had nearly ten years previous. He always liked knives more than swords and he had about three on him, big ones with heavy blades.

“I watched them kick in her door and the big man fired the scattershot. The roar sent the entire village screaming. That tended to be a strategy for us in the old days. They usually didn’t kill anyone firing a gun like that so fast but seeing what a gun like that can do takes all the fight out of anyone who sees it.

“Then I heard Susan crying.” Jon paused a moment. “She wasn’t near by. In fact, I knew that she hid outside the shack in some barrels in the high grass. Still, I heard her crying as if she were next to me. I wanted to help her. I needed to help her. They would find her and send her back. I didn’t know where but she did and she told me. I didn’t understand it, I don’t really understand it now, but she spoke to me from half the village away as though I were right next to her.

“I went to the shack I had built with the meager money I had made from the fish wizards. I had buried a pit where I hid my guns and blades. I didn’t have time for my armor. I strapped on my guns and went to the crone’s shack. I didn’t know what I was going to do when I got there. One of the fish wizards saw me with my guns and sword and I knew, one way or another, I would leave the town that evening.

“Her cry made me want to weep. I would have done anything for her. By the time I got to the crone’s shack I knew I was going to

have to kill them.

"I drew my pistols and kicked in the door. They had the crone naked and hanging from the beam of the shack by her feet. Her arms were bound behind her and I could see her twisted arm bending at a sickening angle.

"I shot the agent of the Eye first, the hooded man. He had been standing and reading a black leather book he had found. While Marcus poured vials of the crone's strange liquids over her naked body. Her skin bubbled and smoked. She wasn't screaming. She was moaning softly and it was worse than hearing her scream.

"The agent of the Eye spun after my shot hit him in the face. He fell into the corner of the hut with a hole smoking out of the back of his hood.

"'Kill the witch first,' they had taught us in the Tower of the Eye, 'lest they command you to kill yourself.' I figured what was good enough for the witches of the Voth was good enough for the agent of the Eye.

"The big fellow was reloading his scattershot. Lucky for me or I might have walked in and been ripped apart the moment I shadowed the door. Instead he was hammering down the packing and I had a couple of breaths. I smashed him with the butt of my other pistol. His nose caved in but it didn't do much to slow him. I closed in on him and we wrestled for his scattershot. I wasn't going to out muscle him so I settled for firing it into his foot. His boot and the foot inside blew apart. That slowed him a lot more than the broken nose.

"I pulled my offhand dagger and pushed it up under his chin into his brain.

"'Hello Jon,' Marcus said as though not a single day had passed since we were both Gray Wolves hunting Voth. I aimed my loaded gun at

him. He still held a vial of dark orange liquid in his right hand. A stream of the stuff dripped down the crone's breasts, eating the skin away where it ran. I wanted to vomit. I shot him in his left eye instead. This was a man I knew well. He had saved my life before. He was never a good man, none of us were, but I once called him a friend and I shot him in the face without even thinking about it. Thinking back later, I realized that he could have killed me while I was wrestling with the big man, but he didn't. I will never know why.

"I took one of Marcus's pistols and shot the crone. I don't know if it was mercy or vengeance. I just did it. I went out back. Already the town gathered. I reloaded my pistols and found Susan in the tall grasses. I picked her up, she was so light, and we took one of Marcus's horses. I collected my remaining meager possessions from the shack and we left.

"I realized a lot of things as we traveled. I never should have survived that fight. The agent of the Eye should have felt me coming, should have known I was there. The others depended on it. He also should have known Susan was there. They shouldn't have needed to torture the crone. The agent should have been able to rip it from her mind. It was Susan. She blocked them, not just from herself but from me. They only saw what she wanted them to see.

"We didn't talk much as we traveled. She's never talked much. Jon looked at Susan and smiled. "I saw a lot of things those nights. I can't even talk about some of them. I've been through a lot in my life but the things Susan has seen scared the hell out of me. Other things she showed me had more beauty than I have ever known."

"So we traveled to Fena Kef but they found us there too. I don't know how far we'll have to go to get out of the sight of the Eye but we're ready to go there."

The group was silent. The red sun had set and the huge red moon had risen. Cresting on one side was the darker black moon, the

demon moon. Ca'daan felt cold.

"What does that mean?" Ca'daan asked. He felt sick.

"It means she's a mindwalker," said Thorn.

They continued to sit in silence. Ca'daan kept his eyes down and he was aware that others did the same. No one looked at Susan. Adrin broke the silence.

"You can read people's minds?" His voice sounded different, there was no cheer or bravado. He was frightened.

"Yes." Her voice was small and high, it was a child's voice. It made Ca'daan want to cry. San'doro stood. His movements were carefully measured. Ca'daan saw Jon's eyes on the little dark man. One of Jon's hands moved under his cloak. The fire San'doro had made cracked. It painted them all in orange light. Ca'daan glanced up and saw Susan's face, round and smooth, with her red hair spilling out of the sides of her hood.

San'doro approached her and sat down, his hands in his lap. The man smiled at her but she did not smile back.

"What am I thinking now, child?" he asked the question quietly and without sarcasm or anger.

"You're thinking about making love to a woman. The air is warm. You are near a small rock in the middle of the desert. There are caves in the rock with other people. She's on top of you, moving forward and back. She's smiling but her eyes are closed. She's calling someone else's name. She's calling you Dainan."

San'doro looked at her a long time.

"Gods below," whispered Adrin. He looked to Jon and then turned to the Kal instead. "What do we do?"

The Kal shrugged. His eyes were on the child.

“There are some other things you should know,” said Jon. “She walks through minds, entire lifetimes in some cases. She learns from them. She’s probably smarter than any of us. She’s been to every city in the north and south. She can recognize the emperor of Faigon and the king of Gazu Kadem by sight. Her memories stretch back over one hundred years. But she is still a child. She knows these things but she doesn’t understand them the way we do.

“These things also hurt her. Touching over the surface of someone’s mind is one thing. Going deep is another. Projection and manipulation is a third.”

“Wait. Projection?” asked Adrin. “She can talk to us?”

YES.

They all heard it. Ca’daan saw Adrin and San’doro jump. The word had filled his head as though the girl had whispered directly into both ears. Ca’daan felt his whole body start to shake.

Adrin’s eyes were on the girl. The young swordsman was completely off balance. Of all of them, Vrenna and Thorn seemed the most calm. How did they know? What had they discussed that caused them to come down and confront Jon about her?

“How far can you do that?” asked San’doro. In the corner of his eye, Ca’daan saw Jon smile. San’doro was on to something.

“Anywhere I can see. Further is harder or if I can’t see them, that’s harder too,” Susan spoke more words than she had since they met.

“Can you only speak or can you show us things too?” asked San’doro. They were quiet for a moment and then San’doro jerked.

“Bathala’s breath!” said the dark man.

“What did you see?” asked Adrin.

“I saw Jon. It was two nights ago when we killed the slave lord,” San’doro said. He stared at the ground and then turned to Jon. “You were on a hill. You had your pistol resting on your knee. You fired. It was deafening. A whipmaster fell a great distance away. That was an amazing shot.”

Jon turned and looked to each of them.

“It is important that you understand this. Susan can see and hear your thoughts. The masters at the tower of the Eye have ways to stop it but it would be very hard to stop one as strong as she. We have no such training. Her ability would have her shunned or burned in most of the cities in this desert. North she would be captured by the Eye. They would take her to their dungeons where they would drive a metal spike into her brain just above each eye. They would put leeches on her that they fed off of strange mushrooms to control what is left of her mind. They would cut off her arms and legs. They would use her as a conduit to speak across the land. They have done this before. This is how they won the Voth war. They would tell you it was rifles and pistols that won the war but it isn’t true. The ability to command multiple armies at the same time, the ability to communicate across the land instantaneously, that won the war.

“The girls they use, the girls like Susan, don’t live past sixteen or seventeen. They stop eating. They go blind. They can’t function. At the end they are taken apart while still alive so the Eye can study how they work. What is left is fed to the new ones in the hopes that some part of their power is absorbed.”

Ca’daan vomited. The taste of bile hung in his throat. The others looked ashen.

“You saw all of this?” asked San’doro.

“No,” said Jon. “She did. She saw it in the minds of the men at the tower. She fled and she showed it to me.”

“If you tell anyone about what she can do, they will find her. You must keep it secret. If I find out that you told anyone, I’ll kill you.” The threat hung in the air, not spoken with anger or boast but direct and full of truth.

Jon turned to Ca’daan.

“You brought us together,” said Jon. “You brought together six fighters in the south desert to defend your town.” Jon pointed at Susan. “She is the most powerful of all of us. You saw maybe one hundred to one hundred and fifty of them. Six of us cannot defeat them. With her, we can.”

“You know what you know now,” said Jon. “If you want us to leave, we will be gone tomorrow. If you want us to stay and others want to leave, they can leave. If we stay together, we can kill them all. We can save Fena Dim.”

Jon turned and beheld Ca’daan for a long time. Silence hung over the eight travelers. Ca’daan took a deep breath.

“I want you to stay.”

Part Two: Fena Dim

Chapter Sixteen: Adrin's Third Lesson

Jon awoke as the red sun began to rise over the eastern horizon turning the sky a deep violet.

They didn't kill us, he thought, and they didn't send us away. Few in this hellish desert would have done that for us and I must remember that when they ask me to die for them.

Jon stood and walked a short distance to relieve himself. When he turned, Thorn was there. Jon had known many good fighters and he had trained very well, yet he never heard Thorn arrive.

Jon looked into the huge Voth's eyes, black pupils and irises. He looked down at the tattoos that crossed the large man's chest. He saw the line of small scars that ran down Thorn's left breast, each one marking a death by his hand in battle. There were over one hundred and thirty of them. Few outside of the Voth tribes knew what the scars meant, but Jon was one of those few.

"The mindwalkers don't just show you something or speak to you," said Thorn.

"I know," said Jon.

"The Voth used their art on commanders in your army to bend their will, learn of your plans, and make them betray you," Thorn continued. He paused and narrowed his eyes at Jon.

"How do you know that she isn't doing that to you right now?" Thorn said. "How do you know that she didn't twist your will to force you to kill your friend? How do you know that you are not a puppet

for a young girl? How do you know you act on your own? How do you know if you really love her?”

Jon looked at the man a long time. He was painfully aware that he left his gun belt at his bedroll. He felt the offhand dagger’s weight in the small of his back. The feel of it reassured him. Thorn’s words, however, did not.

“I don’t,” said Jon. “I can only know how I feel right now. Perhaps she twists my mind. perhaps I truly love her. Does it matter? Either way the results are the same. I’d die to keep her out of the tower of the Eye.”

“What do you think?” Jon asked Thorn. “Do you think she is manipulating us for her own goal?”

Thorn stared at Jon for a long moment before speaking.

“No, I don’t,” Thorn paused again. “But I wanted to be sure.”

Jon and Thorn turned back to the rest of the group. Adrin still slept. As did the Kal. Vrenna stretched her body. Gods, she was beautiful, thought Jon. San’doro started a morning fire. Ca’daan awoke and hid behind a bush to move his bowels.

Throughout the morning their eyes moved to Susan. She ate quietly, eyes on the ground. Jon sat by her and ruffled her hair. She squinted and grimaced. She was such a child in so many ways. Yet the glimpses of the things she had seen, the things they had done to her, they gave Jon nightmares for weeks. Thorn had moved to Vrenna and the two spoke briefly and then began to eat.

“Are you ready to train before our ride?” Jon asked Adrin. Adrin looked at him as he took another bite off his spit.

“I’m still sore from yesterday,” said Adrin.

“You’ll be even more sore tomorrow,” said Jon. “Today you’re going to fight the Kal.” The Kal smiled at Adrin. Jon hated that smile but Adrin clearly hated it more and that worked for Jon.

The Kal stood a head taller than Adrin, thicker, and clearly stronger. He took a cloth belt and wrapped it around a sturdy stick. Though less sinister than his war club, two hits on Adrin proved that it served the job well.

The information Jon had shared about Susan shook Adrin and his confidence lagged. That served well. He would learn more if he wasn’t so worried about impressing them so much. Still, it took a while to get near his normal speed. The Kal didn’t help much. Adrin stood ready, offhand dagger in front and rapier in his rear hand. The Kal feigned and Adrin reacted. The padded club hit Adrin’s forearm close to the elbow. The offhand dagger went to the earth. Adrin bent to pick it up and the Kal hit him in the head sending him flat.

“Shite!” shouted Adrin. Keeping his eyes up, he stood and readied himself. The club sailed in, head over tail. Adrin cursed again and brought his arm up. The club fell harmlessly but the Kal was there. He palmed Adrin in the chest, taking his wind. Both rapier and dagger fell. Jon shook his head.

“What in the hells,” said Adrin, picking himself up again. “How do I fight this barbarian?”

“I’m sorry I’ve never had the proper schooling to not so quickly kick your arse,” said the Kal. San’doro laughed.

“What advantage do you have over him?” asked Jon. “You’ll have to get used to the lack of any fighting style out here. You could be dueling beautifully until an arrow hits you in the back.”

Adrin stood and prepared again. The Kal shifted and moved, feigning both a throw and a swing. Adrin was watching his feet. That was good. It wasn’t enough though. The Kal swung in and Adrin caught

it with his offhand dagger. The Kal kicked low into Adrin's thigh. Adrin grunted and went down to one knee. The Kal tangled both of Adrin's arms, keeping the blades far away. He hit Adrin hard in the head with the back of his arm. If he had hit with his elbow, Adrin would be unconscious.

Adrin picked himself up again, a look of anger and frustration. Jon smiled. He went to the fire and picked up a pair of sticks, both charred black. He went up to Adrin, took his sword and dagger, and gave him the sticks. One he broke back to about the length of his forearm.

"There's no good defense against a man of his size fighting the way he does. Don't worry about defending against him. Think about cutting him. I want you to mark him. No matter what he does to you, mark him. Keep the moves simple. If you cut him it won't matter."

Adrin got the point. If he attempted to block or parry with the charred sticks, they would break. He still defended however. The Kal charged, stopped short, and kicked. The kick connected but not hard. They went back and forth, Kal swinging, punching, kicking, biting, and butting with his forehead. Adrin bobbed, dove, spun, ducked and fell bruised to the ground.

Adrin grunted and the expression on his face continued to fall into frustration and hopelessness. But he stood again. The two sticks hung loose in his hands. His knees were bent. The Kal came at him, club swinging high. Adrin ducked underneath, spun, and the two men grappled again. The Kal whirled and Adrin went skidding across the ground. But when he recovered, he smiled. A black line of ash ran across the Kal's stomach.

They dueled again and again. Most often Adrin ended on his back in the dust but a few times he ended on his feet and each time he left a new mark of ash on the Kal's large body.

As the morning matured, the two men stood facing each other. Adrin was breathing heavy but a dozen or more lines of black ash covered the Kal's body.

"You're getting it," said Jon. He handed Adrin his sword and dagger.

"You fight better with those sticks than you did with the teatsword," remarked the Kal, grinning his awful grin. Adrin scowled. They returned to the camp where their horses had been packed for the journey south.

They spent two days crossing the barrens, the bluffs rising high above the flat plains. Jon watched in wonder. He had spent many years in the south desert but never had he seen such a place. The air was cooler and even the sky lightened as the dust clouds left the dark orange sky leaving it a beautiful amber. They camped the second night in the barrens, keeping fires sheltered in a deep pit. Ca'daan spoke of the bandit tribes in the barrens and, as well as they had done against the slavers, Jon had no desire for further battle.

Adrin fought San'doro the next day. The brown man both fought and instructed as well as Jon so Jon simply watched the exchange. The small desert man fought with both his daggers held backwards which confused Adrin, but San'doro fought just hard enough to keep Adrin moving but not hard enough to put him into despair. In this, San'doro was a much better instructor than the Kal who had trouble holding back his skill.

Both men stood facing one another. Adrin with his long stick and short stick, San'doro with two short sticks held in a reverse grip. Adrin saluted, long stick to his nose, short stick out to his side, palm open. San'doro smiled, crossed both his sticks in front of him and bowed. Jon saw hell in San'doro's eyes.

Adrin fell back into a more relaxed version of his traditional fighting stance, much less graceful but much more functional. He held his

offhand dagger higher and his rapier lower than he normally did. He had made the stance his own now, not the strict stance of the duelmasters of the north but his own relaxed stance prepared for any attack that might come his way.

San'doro spun low and threw one of the daggers twirling end over end. Adrin parried it away with his rapier-stick. The move was smooth, relaxed, and very impressive. San'doro followed the dagger with his own body, grappling Adrin's legs, lifting, and throwing him hard to the ground. Adrin struggled for position but San'doro straddled the young man, keeping control of Adrin's hips. San'doro roughly gripped Adrin's chin and pulled Adrin's head up, exposing his neck. San'doro's other stick came in, point toward the hollow in Adrin's throat.

"Think for a moment," said San'doro. "What is open to you."

"I'm not even standing," said Adrin.

"Sometime you may have to fight hanging upside down with nothing but your teeth," said San'doro. San'doro didn't make it sound hypothetical, thought Jon. Adrin cocked his head, moved his elbow, and slid his offhand stick across San'doro's exposed belly. Had the blade been real, Adrin would have disemboweled the man. "Good," said San'doro. He helped Adrin to his feet.

The two men dueled as the rest of the group watched. San'doro fought with slow precision, attacking with unique techniques and a variance of styles. Jon was continually impressed with the small man. Jon wasn't convinced he would win a duel against the desert native. Yet San'doro left openings, some clear and some very subtle. Adrin missed some and found others. As they continued San'doro fought harder and left fewer openings. Adrin found those few more.

When they were done both men stood, criss-crossed with dozens of stripes of black ash. The Kal laughed and Ca'daan laughed with him. Jon looked at Susan and smiled. She smiled back.

“How are they doing?” said Jon as he sat down next to her, chewing on a strip of salted steak.

“They don’t trust me, but they don’t want to hurt us,” she said. “Ca’daan doesn’t really understand yet.” Jon could not get used to her adult vocabulary. He hadn’t known so many twelve-year-olds but none he knew spoke the way she did.

“What about Thorn and Vrenna?” asked Jon.

“Thorn cares little. He thinks about a woman he was with recently and a woman he knew long ago. Sometimes he thinks about a family he killed in a castle in the north, a young boy still clinging to his mother’s breast. He thinks about another boy he saved from the Eye the way you saved me. That seems to make up for how he feels about what you did to the Voth. He is very dangerous but not to us.”

“And Vrenna?”

Susan turned and looked at Jon for a moment.

“I cannot read her at all.”

“Nothing?” Jon asked.

“Nothing.”

That worried Jon a lot. He didn’t think Vrenna was a spy for the north but very few knew how to block someone like Susan.

“I’m not worried bout her,” said Susan, reading his mind. Jon looked at her and smiled, roughing up her hair. He loved her.

“Swords,” Jon shouted. “Mount up.”

Chapter Seventeen: Heaven's Highway

The weather grew cool enough that they didn't have to stop in the afternoon. They rode through the barrens and shortly before dusk they found Heaven's Highway. Jon hadn't seen anything like it in his whole life. The path was so long and narrow that it appeared to taper like the blade of a sword across the chasm. The Kal crawled to the edge and peered down. It took him clear effort to crawl back.

"It goes down forever," the huge man said to Jon. "We have to cross that?"

"I fear so," said Jon. "Ca'daan says it's safe. It's been there for millions of years."

"It could fall any time," said the Kal. "Another million years or today."

"True," said Jon. Jon heard the Kal whisper in a language he didn't recognize.

They sat on the edge of the gorge discussing whether to cross before the sun set or in the morning. Ca'daan, concerned for his village, wanted to cross now but seeing the Kal so nervous did not convince Jon that it was a good idea. They spent the night on the gorge's edge. The red moon painted the alien landscape the dark color of blood. Jon saw Ca'daan watching Susan as she ate.

"He feels guilty about the death of his wife," Susan had replied when Jon mentioned it to her. Jon studied the man's dark eyes and graying hair. Gray stubble sat on Ca'daan's cheeks. He was a smaller man, only slightly taller than San'doro. He had a body of a runner, muscled calves and well muscled legs. He was a good man. He would never be like them, killers and soldiers. Jon envied that.

"We're going to try something different this morning," said Jon. "Susan's talent can help in many ways. She has helped me avoid a

cutpurse who had clearly intended on robbing us and did it well before he came close. Against Marcus and his men, she blocked the agent of the Eye from seeing me. Susan can pass impressions between people. She can do it fast enough to show a fighter what his opponent is about to do."

Jon stood, his armor strapped on and his weapons on his hips. He drew his falcon hilted rapier and his offhand dagger.

"Come, Adrin." Adrin donned his own bandit armor and drew his rapier and his dagger. The two men fell into their stances and faced one another.

Jon tested Adrin with a series of cuts. Adrin skipped the easier parries and attempted to put Jon off balance. He fought much better than he had their first time. His training was working.

They continued their duel, piercing, parrying, dodging, spinning. It impressed Jon greatly.

"Now, Susan, feed him my intent." Susan watched them, her green eyes blazing. Adrin jerked a moment and wobbled.

Jon started again, slowly. Adrin was clearly off balance at first. They fought again. Jon swung, stabbed, riposted, and kicked. Soon Adrin's eyes narrowed in confusion. Jon sped up. He doubled and tripled his swings and guards. His blade snapped on Adrin's own sword in rapid succession. He heard Ca'daan gasp and the Kal whistled. Jon wasn't holding back.

Adrin's own sword moved just as fast, parrying and dodging every attack. Jon was fighting at full speed, sweat forming on his brow. Sparks flew from their blades. Adrin's eyes focused sharply but then relaxed and seemed to watch something far away.

Jon saw the exact moment, the moment when Adrin's sword and dagger and body moved in response to Jon's attacks before Jon had

yet thrown them. Every counter was there before he swung. He fought his fastest but nothing got through. Adrin smiled. His own attacks came in with accuracy beyond anything Jon had seen. Jon's defense began to weaken and slow. Soon he felt Adrin's blade slap at his flank or pierce into his arm. The boy was holding his attacks but, had he not, Jon would be dying.

"Enough." Jon stepped back. Both he and Adrin breathed heavy and smiled. The Kal banged his war club on the ground in cheer.

"What a display!" he said. "Does it work both ways?"

"I don't know," said Jon. He looked over at Susan. She shrugged. "Why don't we find out."

The Kal and Adrin faced off. The Kal stretched his body and cracked his neck. Adrin took off his armor and tunic. They did little to protect against the Kal's attacks anyway.

They began. The Kal attacked strong, as he always did, but Adrin was prepared. He rolled under the Kal's huge swing and avoided a straight kick. The Kal stood out of reach from Adrin's blades. The Kal rushed and took Adrin to the ground, sending his rapier flying. Two pats with the flat of his offhand dagger on the Kal's lower back made the large man laugh and Jon smiled. He learned very well.

They continued to fight and Jon nodded to Susan. The Kal stumbled and Adrin slowed. His eyes unfocused as the flashes of the Kal's intent flowed into his mind. Soon the Kal's eyes too went out of focus. The two men looked distracted but they fought strong and fast. The Kal swung and then pulled back to butt Adrin with the end of his war club's handle. Adrin had already dodged. Adrin swung, pulled back, stabbed, spun, and stabbed again. Each attack in response to a blow or defense from the Kal that never happened.

Both men moved faster and faster. Jon's head hurt to follow it. Then the two men slowed. They shifted and moved but did not strike or

block. Soon they both stood, staring past the other, bodies jerkling slightly. Blood ran from Adrin's nose. He cried out and fell. The Kal grunted. He sat down, his head in his hands.

Jon turned to Susan. She lay still, blood trickling from one ear. Jon felt his own heart stop.

Susan awoke an hour later. She remembered nothing of the battle and it frightened Jon almost as much as seeing her unconscious. What frightened Jon frightened her. Adrin had described it as cascading images of a battle between the Kal and him. A battle that never happened. The fight became more and more brutal in these images. Adrin saw his rapier pierce through the Kal's stomach. The Kal saw his war club cave in Adrin's skull. None of it had happened but it seemed as real as life to them.

Susan remembered none of it, however, and Jon knew he would never have her do it again.

Before the high sun, the group began to cross Heaven's Highway. The Kal clenched his jaw and stared straight ahead. Ca'daan had given his horse, Gray Cloud, to Susan to ride. Gray Cloud was the only mount that would easily make the journey. The gray horse had done it before. They led the other horses through on foot, blinders keeping their eyes on the path in front of them. Wind rushed at them from above and below. Shortly after stepping out on the bridge, Jon felt the entire walkway narrow. It was as though they crossed the end of one world over to another. Clouds rolled and shifted below them within the bottomless gorge below.

They were halfway across when the Kal's horse turned its head, saw the gap, and lurched. The horse had likely already felt the large man's fear. It tugged hard on its reigns and the Kal pulled back harder.

"Kal, let go," Jon said but the big man still struggled. The horse turned and still the Kal fought with it. The Kal's sandals skidded on

the path. He grunted as the horse pulled again. Jon looked down and saw the horse's hoof one step from the gorge.

Jon drew his rapier and ran forward. The horse began to tumble over as Jon cut the reigns. The Kal stumbled back but San'doro caught him and pulled him down. The horse went over the edge. It screamed as it fell, leaving a trail of bedrolls, water skins, and food wraps in its wake.

The Kal was on his hands and knees, panting hard. He looked up at Jon with tears in his eyes.

"I can't do this." The huge man sobbed.

"You can and we will help you, my friend," said Jon. He knelt next to the big man. The falling horse had rattled them all. They moved slowly along the path, keeping their eyes front. The other horses were as frightened as the rest of them. They whinnied, eyes wide. Hot and cold wind blew on them, whipping their cloaks sharply one way, and then the other.

"Take as long as you need, there is no shame in crawling," said Jon. There, kneeling next to the big man, Jon crawled with him across the natural bridge. When they had finally crossed. The Kal laid prone and kissed the earth. Dust clung to his moist lips as he whispered prayers in an unknown tongue. When he rose, the group continued out of sight of Heaven's Highway before they took a much-needed rest. The air cooled considerably on the opposite side of the gorge.

"Those clouds look menacing," Jon said to Ca'daan. On the mountain crags to the west, far out from their trail, dark clouds swirled and surged. The sharp tips of the crags pierced through the clouds like the grasping chipped fingers of a skeletal hand.

"That's the southern torrent," said Ca'daan. "We have two torrents each year that cut our town off completely. They last for about six weeks. One doesn't want to get caught in them. That one should hit

in another week, maybe two. We'll just make it to Fena Dim before it hits."

They rode the high trail into the northern mountains. Cold air blew and Jon marveled at the snow caps above them. They crossed streams of fresh water that made Kal and San'doro nearly weep. They had never seen water run like this, Jon realized.

"The eastern kings would pay more than man can possess for a stream like this," said San'doro, dipping his face into the chilled water. By desert instinct they refilled their waterskins but they needn't have bothered. Another stream crossed their path later in the day. It was at the banks of this stream that they decided to camp.

The cold air and the abundance of water gave them all good cheer that eve. They shared tales and laughed. They even smiled at Susan and she smiled back. They seemed to forget or chose not to think about her secret, instead treating her like the little girl she was.

They slept easy that night, drunk on water and filled with peace and friendship and good cheer.

Jon awoke late into the night, his bladder full. He walked a short way behind a rock and urinated. Looking up he saw a figure sitting above on an outcrop of ancient rock. The man's body was silhouetted against the huge red moon, the blood moon. He watched San'doro silent in his thoughts. Jon looked for a path and saw a series of rocks that the man had likely climbed. Jon was no seasoned climber but he did his best not to wake the rest of the group as he climbed to the outcrop. His silence didn't matter to San'doro. The man had probably heard him urinating or maybe even noticed the change of his breath as he awoke.

Jon sat next to the man and followed his gaze to the stars above and to the red moon that painted the land. He looked for the demon

moon in the sky, the black orb of nightmare and ill omen. He did not see it. That was a good sign.

"The best night of my life was a night like this," said San'doro. "It was sixteen years ago. The scars of the whip were still fresh on my back. I was eleven when they sent me to Trex's keep. My life before that was in the pits. I never knew a mother or a father. I only knew the other slaves in my den, my chain brothers. They used to force us into cubbies carved into the rock only slightly bigger than we were. There were maybe twelve in a cubby, stacked so we fit perfectly. You couldn't move. You couldn't help but relieve yourself and know it drenched everyone. Someone was always sick and the stench of that sickness saturated all of us. On the good nights no one died. On the bad nights everyone wailed with illness and you woke up nearly drowning in their waste. One night I awoke and I was the only one still alive out of twelve of us."

"One day a guard, a slave whipmaster, tried to test me for a pleasure slave. He left gelded and bled to death a day later. They beat me. They broke my arm slowly in the spokes of a cart wheel. I didn't scream and that alone saved my life. They sent me to the fighting pits and when I killed a bigger boy than I with my arm still broken they bothered to spend the time to train me as a scout. Myself and a spear of forty men, all slaves, with a single commander, raided the eastern villages.

"I know the smell of fear and blood as you do, my friend, and I still miss it. I have since learned the way of peace but I will always hunger for war. And how I drank of it back then. I scouted villages for the spear and reveled in the carnage we sewed as our blades and spears tore into them. The ones who fought us were entertaining but the ones who ran and cowered, we loved them more. I am not proud of the things I did but I did them. Susan knows of this, I am sure. And I know you and I are brothers in bloodshed.

"One day the spear commander had my brother, a scout brother whom I had fought beside for three years, staked and burned for a small error in his report. I saw my friend's eyes as they ran the spike through him and I knew I must leave.

"There were no chains for the slave army. If you ran, you starved and died. Once or twice we came upon the remains of slaves who ran. They had been picked clean and baked under the sun for days. I spent a month preparing for my escape. I rationed water and smuggled food. I planned my route. I was a scout and I had trained well, but it wasn't enough.

"I fled into the west and within five days I was lost, out of water, and delirious with exhaustion. I saw what I thought to be a rock on the horizon but before I came anywhere near it, I fell facing the red sun and knew it would take me.

"It didn't. I awoke looking up at stone lit by fire. A man bent over me, his face carved by age. He had no teeth and his eyes were as black as night. He smiled and it frightened me. We were not alone. There were some fifteen others and when they spoke, they spoke in a language I did not know. There were dark paintings on the wall, paintings of beasts of nightmare. There was an altar of black stone with three skulls on it. The altar scared me.

"Then I saw Enka. She was small, like the rest of them, but full breasted and with wide hips. She was lighter-skinned than the rest of them but dark of hair with those black on black eyes. She wore nothing but a wrap of skin around her hips. I was aroused by her and they laughed at me when they saw.

"They fed me and gave me cool water from a spring deep within the caves of the rock. They fed me strings of bird flesh and a moss that grew inside the cave. I was soon strong enough to move. The old man took me about. All of them slept in one cave on animal skins, a

single large clay pot cooked all of their food. The old man spoke to me. He was named Rendu, which meant Old Uncle I learned later.

"The girl, Enka, showed me around the rock with two other men. She spoke in their same tongue, showing me crevasses and juts in the rock where more altars had been placed. Even if she spoke Galaressen or Vex, I wouldn't have paid attention. I watched the way her breasts swayed and bounced. I watched her hips shift in and out of the sides of her wrap. I lusted for her but soon I loved her even more.

"I learned much of their language and skills in pottery, hunting, and even some of their religion, which dated back at least five or six thousand years.

"One day I walked outside the caves and saw a ring of young men watching two more fight with knives. They were amazing and my lust for battle took me over. They gave me two knives and faced me against a younger boy who weighed much less than I. He defeated me easily. Enka put a herb wash on my cuts that stung like the third hell but I wanted more. I couldn't farm herbs or make pots or seek water, but this was a trade I understood.

"I spent two years with them, learning their religions and philosophies of the cycle of life. One day a young man fell and broke his leg high up on his hip. He died a week later painfully. They buried his body but cleaned his skull and placed it on the altar to their goddess, Stiva the Traveler. My nightmares of the human skulls left me.

"One night I sat on top of the rock watching the blood moon rise. I heard the whisper of bare feet on the stone. Enka sat next to me and placed a hand on my leg. She kissed my neck and pushed me to my back. I watched her as she mounted me and began to move like waves of sand on the wind. The red moon made her skin glow. She was a goddess. We climaxed together, rested, and began again.

Afterwards I lay there looking at her smooth face in the deep night. It was the best night of my life.

"The next day they were gone. They had left food and the clothes they had found me in. The cave paintings were gone. The altars were gone. Had it not been for two things, I might have dreamed the whole thing." San'doro drew his two daggers, the blades shone red in the low moon.

"Not a single day goes by that I don't think about Enka."

Jon placed a hand on San'doro's shoulder and stood. He carefully climbed back down and rejoined his other sleeping companions. He looked back up at San'doro, who sat watching the red sun set in the northern sky.

Chapter Eighteen: The Guns

Jon awoke with the warm sun on his face. Cool breezes blew down off the mountain and he marveled at the steam of his breath. The sound of trickling water made him turn and see Adrin urinating near by.

“I have a treat for you today,” said Jon. Adrin’s face fell and paled.

“Hells, please,” said Adrin. “My body feels like a bag of gnarled sticks and my head still throbs from Susan’s trick. Please, I need another day of rest.”

“You’ll like this one,” said Jon. He went to his saddle bags and took out a bundle of gray cloth. He dropped it near Adrin, who buttoned his trousers. Adrin bent over, hand on his hip like an old man. He unwrapped the bundle and his eyes widened. He put his hand into the unwrapped bundle and lifted the pistol into the sunlight. The red sun shone off of the silver dragonhead hammer.

“I thought those were lost,” said Ca’daan behind them. “I thought you had left them.”

“I would never leave guns in the hands of madmen,” said Jon. “I awaited the right time.”

Adrin was speechless. Jon enjoyed the wonder and excitement in the young man’s eyes. It reminded Jon of the day Renold had given Jon the falcon pistols he wore now.

“Let’s go shoot,” said Jon.

They spent the morning discussing the mechanism, loading, cleaning, and use of the two pistols. Adrin listened intently.

“The trick isn’t shooting with these but reloading quickly enough to shoot again.” Jon showed Adrin how to wrap the cartridges and how to load both guns at one time. He taught him how to reset the flint and clean the barrel. When Adrin could stand no more, they began to shoot.

Adrin had the eye of a hawk and the steady hand of the dead. It took him five shots to hit what had taken Jon five hundred. Adrin learned to reload both guns simultaneously. He understood the importance of the ball spinning down to up instead of up to down.

The art of gun and sword took longer. They dueled with rapiers and daggers, learning to accept a disarm for the gun. Adrin had trouble with the concept of switching from one style to another. His draw was slow with his rapier in hand.

His fast two-gun draw, however, was deadly.

When they walked back to their camp, Adrin wore the dragon hammered guns on his hips as Jon wore his own. The Kal smiled at him and San’doro bowed.

They mounted up and rode hard in the crags, down into the valley and two days later they came to Fena Dim.

White smoke ran in calm trails into the cool mountain sky. The smell of burning cedar brought back memories of a childhood long lost. One of warm fur blankets, hot breakfast, and loving parents in the stone walls of his father’s keep in the high moors.

Stone huts dotted the green hillside. Brill grazed in huge fields of golden wheat. A stream of crystal water ran through the town from the western snow-capped mountains. A single road led north and south with trails leading into the lower hills at the base of the mountains.

None of that compared to the cyclopean statue that dwarfed the throne of mountains upon which it sat.

Jon's mind had trouble measuring the scope and shape of the behemoth. It was other-worldly. Jon had seen features of the titan in idols and paintings of the old gods but nothing he had seen compared to this. The featureless head, sunken and brooding, opened a mouth wide in a silent roar.

The titanic colossus presided over the most beautiful town Jon had seen in the south. He pulled his cloak tighter and wished for a moment that he had not shaved his head. The others were as speechless as Jon. They stared up at the colossus as he had.

"We call it the Old One," said Ca'daan, smiling at them. The brill trader told them of the amazing site as they continued their ride.

They rode in single file down the path leading to the village. Jon could smell baked bread on the air and his stomach rumbled.

Four boys ran from a nearby house, across the bridge, and to the main road.

"Our militia," said Ca'daan and the Kal laughed.

From somewhere a woman screamed and ran from another nearby house to the boys. She lifted the smallest and clutched the arm of another. Screaming at the remaining two she pulled the boys back into the cottage.

Susan looked at him and his heart sank. There would be no welcome here. As if confirming his fear a group of twelve men gathered and crossed the same bridge. They carried crude pikes and knives in their belts.

"Who are they?" said Adrin.

“The salt miners, but I don’t know why they’re here. They should be mining.”

The twelve men stood at the end of the bridge waiting for them. A smaller grim-looking fellow scowled at Ca’daan. Ca’daan dismounted as he arrived.

“Hello Severn,” said Ca’daan. The man nodded. Ca’daan turned. “These are the seven swords. They’re going to save Fena Dim.”

“From what?” said the man. “Our food? Our livestock? Our women?” Jon felt Thorn stiffen and so apparently did this man Severn. He shifted from foot to foot. “In any case, we need no protection.”

“Severn. You cannot defend against what I saw. These are the best fighters in the world. They traveled two weeks to get here with no desire for money or plunder. These are men and women of noble spirit.”

“For your travel I am sorry. We can bring you fresh provisions for the return journey,” said Severn. “For now you can turn back and away from the town.” The man’s hand squeezed the shaft of his spear so tight that his knuckles went white.

“Listen, whore’s son.” Adrin galloped forward. Jon held out his hand to stop him. The men reacted, drawing their spears point forward. It may have been the most poorly performed martial maneuver Jon had ever seen. Apparently Thorn thought the same thing. His laugh sent the spear men to the balls of their feet.

“Friend,” said Jon. “Thank you for the offer of your food. We will camp up the road and meet you in the morning.”

“I need to speak to my uncle,” said Ca’daan.

“Your uncle has been removed from the council,” said Severn. Ca’daan’s mouth hung open.

“How?” Ca’daan said, stunned. “Who took his place?

“I did,” said Severn.

“Let’s go,” said Jon. He turned his horse and rode away. The others followed.

They lit their fire as the red sun fell behind the western mountains. The shadow of the Old One was as ominous as it was in the daylight.

Ca’daan was stunned into silence.

“A town of fools,” said Adrin. “We’re here to save them and they treat us as the attackers.”

“What do you see in a town like that?” asked Jon.

Adrin shook his head.

“Peace,” said San’doro.

“Indeed,” said Jon. “There is no place for people like us in a town like that. We are alien to them and unwanted.”

“So what? We leave?” asked Adrin.

“No,” said Jon. “If there is no place for us there is no place for those who would attack them. They will be as unprepared for the red demons as they were for us. Our place is here.”

“So what do we do?” asked the Kal.

“Ca’daan should go find out what is happening. The rest of us will stay here. They will not want us but they may need us. That is why we’re here.” said Jon. He turned to Ca’daan. “Go to them. Find out what has happened and find out how we can help.”

Ca’daan left at night and San’doro followed. The dark man would have no trouble scouting the town, the militia had no real experience. It was a risk. If the villagers saw a knife-wielding desert ghost in their town, it would be difficult to ever get them to trust the seven swords again.

Jon turned to Susan. “What did they think?” Susan seemed to think before answering.

“They don’t like Ca’daan, the small man especially. They think he will be an elder of the village some day,” said Susan.

“Do they believe him? Do they think their village will be attacked?” asked Jon.

“No.”

“What if they’re right?” said Thorn. He didn’t raise his head as he asked. His long hair hung in his face covering everything but his mouth. The others looked to Jon.

“They’re not,” said Susan. They all looked at her; Jon, Thorn, Adrin, Vrenna, and the Kal. Silence flowed over them.

“Show us, Susan,” said Jon.

Susan looked at him with her green eyes.

“Whoa, wait,” said Adrin but it was too late. The world ripped apart around them replaced with a world of fear and blood and fire.

It was horrible to see the sacking of Fena Set as Ca’daan had seen it but Jon learned much.

“Gods below,” said San’doro. Adrin vomited. Vrenna looked at Thorn.

“They’re not human,” said the Kal. He meant the phrase as a metaphor but Jon wasn’t sure he was wrong. The images alone

weren't enough to tell him for sure but something was very wrong about those monsters.

"They're demontouched," said Thorn. "They have tasted the blood of the five hells." The others, save Vrenna, looked lost. Jon thought he knew what the man meant.

"Tell us, friend," said Jon.

"No. Have her show it," said Thorn. He looked at Susan. She cried out a little and it frightened Jon. She closed her eyes and Thorn's story crashed on his mind like a rock through glass.

Chapter Nineteen: Thorn and the Demon Blood

Thorn and fifteen others had been selected by the wolf lord of Thorn's tribe and, seeing the power and skill of the other men, Thorn was proud to be among them. They had practiced with axes, hammers, swords, bows, and their bare hands. Each of them had no fewer than thirty death marks on their chests. They had ridden against each other and been beaten until they cared not. Each of them was as tough as a thick tree and loyal to the death. This made them perfect for what the wolf lord had planned. After two weeks a scarred general, hair streaked gray, came and spoke to them in the chill of the morning.

"The godless north has guns that kill us from afar. They have commanders who speak through the air to one another. They have weapons of shining steel. We will lose this war if we do not find another weapon to defeat them. You are that weapon."

They took Thorn and the others into the heart of an ancient wood. Black stones formed a ring around a platform of carved rock. On the platform stood an altar and a large stone pillar. They were joined by two men, armed and armored in sharp black iron. They wore helms of twisted horned skulls. They accompanied three women one robed in gray and scarlet and two younger women in rags, both

blindfolded. The armored men tore the clothes from the two younger women leaving them naked and shivering. Their breath came in clouds in the cool night air. Thorn and the others lusted after them. They grinned and tensed their muscles. They were not the only ones to lust after the women that night.

The two armored men took one of the girls and tied her to the altar. The robed witch began painting runes and symbols the woman's naked skin as the large skull-helmed men chained the other to the pillar.

The woman on the altar began to scream. Smoke rose from the runes on her body. The other woman began to cry in fright. The witch moved to the ground and poured a clay jar of some thick fluid on the ground. It smoked and the smell made Thorn gag. Moving back to the altar she drew a wicked dagger of red steel. With slow precision she began to cut open the woman on the altar. Thorn felt his skin grow cold. The horror in front of him was too much to bear. He closed his eyes as the woman's screams turned into wet gasping. Soon she fell silent, leaving the screaming to the woman chained to the pillar.

Thorn heard something tear, deep in the earth. As he watched a three fingered claw tore out of the earth from the circle of vile oil the witch had poured. A beast from the worst nightmare crawled from the unhallowed earth. The witch and her armored men stood back as the demon surveyed them with eyeless sight. The beast centered on the other woman, her screams echoing in the dark forest. With terrifying impossible speed it was on her.

It began to devour her. She screamed until her throat seemed to tear apart. As the beast finished, the armored warriors struck. One of them reared back with a wide-bladed greatsword and swung hard. The blade hit the demon in the back. When it screamed, Thorn and the others fell to the ground. A thick agony tore into their skulls.

The demon spun and grabbed the sword by the blade. With a twist the blade snapped like a stick. It reached forward and gripped the attacker by the throat. The armored man howled in his helm as the hand enclosed, twisting metal and crushing bone. With a single jerk the armored man's head tore free.

The other armored man stabbed hard, piercing the demon and pinning it to one of the other black stones. Holding the blade steady, the armored man drew another heavy blade from his belt behind his back. He swung hard, cleaving deep into the demon's arm above the shoulder. The mental cry hit them all again. Another cut and the demon's arm fell twitching to the ground. The demon gripped out with its other arm and buried its claws into the man's shoulder. The man roared out and cleaved off the demon's other arm.

The armored man fell away, blood pouring from his torn steel shoulder. The witch approached the demon, a black clay bowl in one hand and her wicked knife in the other. With a single cut she opened the demon's throat and black thick blood ran into the bowl. Soon it overflowed with the thick liquid and ran down her hands. Thorn saw the grin of ecstasy on her face.

She turned to the sixteen men and the gleam her in her eye scared him more than any of the horror he had witnessed that night.

"Drink," she said to the first man. The command could not be physically disobeyed. Her voice sunk into them, forcing their bodies to her command. The man drank, as did the others.

As did Thorn.

The substance coated his throat and stained him like black ink. The taste was more awful than any he could imagine. He felt it moving in his stomach, turning like boiling oil. He grew cold from the inside out.

The next day they were all dead but Thorn. Their bodies lay bloated and black in the rising sun. Some had torn themselves open. Others had twisted in spasm until their backs had broken. Thorn lay on the ground staring up at a sky he no longer recognized.

“Now you are a god,” the witch had said to him.

That was the first time Thorn had died.

The images broke free and Jon vomited his dinner onto the rocks. He looked up at Thorn’s black eyes and imagined the dark life the cursed man must now live.

So that is what it is like to be a demon, thought Jon.

Ca’daan returned later that eve.

“They are fools,” Ca’daan said. “They see no threat and assume they can face any that might come. I am sorry, my friends.”

The Kal turned to Jon. “We are not of this place, are we, old man.”

Jon thought a moment and then spoke. “Let’s take the morning to ponder the matter at hand. For now, let us rest.”

“I brought this. My aunt baked it this afternoon for my return.” Ca’daan took out a loaf of round bread wrapped in white linen. The smell of it made Jon’s eyes water.

“Oh my gods,” said Adrin. “Give it here.”

“What is it?” asked San’doro poking it with his knife.

They each ate a chunk of the bread, enjoying every crumb. It was a little piece of heaven in long years of purgatory for Jon. Each of them ate in silence.

“If we have to turn back tomorrow,” said the Kal. “It was worth the trip for that.”

They slept soundly that night under the red moon. When they awoke, Jon found the answer to their problems.

Jon, Ca’daan, Susan, and the Kal approached the town’s main road and once again they were met by Severn and the spear wielders. Jon knelt to Susan.

“I don’t want you to show them. I want you to spark their minds. I want them to see it themselves. If they sense treachery, or worse, if they sense what you can do, they will kill you.” Susan nodded. “Just give them a small taste,” said Jon.

Jon stood and the men closed in on him.

“You and your friends are not welcome here,” said Severn.

“I understand, friend,” said Jon. “You have a peaceful village here and you have no need for men like me. You and your men can protect the town just fine. And who are we but thieves, brigands, murderers, and rapists? How would you know what danger we might bring?” said Jon. Severn looked confused but nodded.

“Yes. Meaning no disrespect, sir,” said Severn. The other men shuffled. “We appreciate your desire to help but we can take care of ourselves.”

“And who knows if these men will even come,” said Jon. “We have traveled with your friend, Ca’daan for some time now. Perhaps he was mistaken by what he saw.”

“Indeed,” said Severn.

“And if they did come, as remote as that is, you and your men look strong enough to handle anything. Even us if you needed,” said Jon.

“Indeed,” said Severn.

“Which of you is the strongest?” asked Jon. The men looked at one another and then to a large young man to their right.

“That would be Barnam,” said Severn. Jon looked at the man. He as tall as Thorn and his cotton shirt bulged across his chest and arms. His nose was crooked and his skin looked as tough as leather. He wore his hair in a small topknot. As Jon looked at him, Barnam puffed out his chest. This would be easy, thought Jon.

Jon unbuckled his belt and handed his guns and rapier to Ca’daan. Reaching around back he drew his offhand dagger from the sheath at the small of his back and another blade from the top of his left boot. The men of the militia shuffled nervously. Ca’daan clutched the weapons in his arms. Leaving them behind made Jon feel naked but this had to be done right.

Jon approached the big man. Barnam stood tall, his jaw clenched.

Jon slapped him. He didn’t hit the man hard but it was loud. All of the men shifted and gripped their spears. Barnam looked at Jon in shock. Jon slapped him again, harder. The man’s face was bright red and anger flashed into his eyes. Barnam shoved hard with his left hand. Jon bent around the blow and slapped with his other hand. Welts grew on each of the man’s cheeks. He turned to look at Severn and Jon hit him again. The last one did it.

The man’s rage boiled and he rushed Jon. Jon sidestepped and threw his leg out low. The man sailed over it and into the dirt. He was up quickly. He tried to butt Jon with the end of his spear but Jon pushed it aside and kicked the man hard in the thigh. The man went down again. When he came up the tip of his spear came up with him. He stabbed at Jon. Jon caught the spear, guided the tip into the earth, and stomped the shaft. The spear snapped in half.

The big man, face puffy from Jon's beatings, dropped the broken spear and drew a heavy slaughtering knife. He charged Jon, knife high.

Jon waited until the man was nearly on him and then stepped in. He grabbed the man's arm and tunic, turned left, and threw the man hard over his hip. Jon fell with the throw, landing all of his weight on the man's ribs. Jon felt the air go out of the big man. Jon twisted the man's wrist. The man let out a high pitch wail and the knife fell from his hand. Jon twisted, putting the man's arm between his legs and arching his back. With his hips as a fulcrum and using all of his strength against the man's elbow, Jon could have snapped his arm. He held the position for a moment, the man wailing softly, and then rolled back to his feet.

"That was your best man and I beat him unarmed," said Jon. "That man behind me," Jon pointed to the Kal. "He is twice the unarmed fighter I am with twice the strength. Your man wouldn't have remained conscious after the first blow.

"The bandits, murderers, demons who destroyed Fena Set are as tough as we are. They are seasoned and thirst for blood. They will impale you on your spears and burn you. They will eat your children. When they come here they will kill you all. They are real and they are coming."

Jon let the statement hang in the air a moment.

"My friends and I can help you. We can defend your town. We ask nothing but food and shelter. We ask that you listen to us and understand what is coming."

"We will stay one night. Tomorrow we are leaving. May the Gods watch over you if you choose to let us go, though they seem to care little for the life of men."

Jon did not wait for nor watch for a response. He turned, took his belts from Ca'daan, and walked back to camp. The others followed.

"What do we do now?" asked Ca'daan.

"You will go back to them. Do not talk. Only listen. Do not defend us. Do not try to convince them that they need us. In fact, do the opposite. Understand their view. Tell them that you fear us but you fear the raiders more," said Jon. He knew it was true.

"And then?" said the Kal.

"Then we wait," said Jon. He turned to San'doro.

"Go scout the town tonight. Get an idea of how we could defend it," said Jon.

"I am no commander. I helped sack villages not defend them," said San'doro.

"That is why I want you to do it. You are better suited than any of us to know what vulnerabilities we have." He was here less than two days and already he thought of this town as home, something he wished to protect. San'doro nodded and faded into the darkness as silent as death.

"If they do not accept us, what do we do?" asked Thorn. He and Vrenna sat together by the warmth of the fire. To the right, Adrin cleaned one of his pistols.

"We have a choice. We can circle the village and make camp on the south where the bandits will come or we can leave. If we choose to stay, many people will die but we can hopefully bite into the bandits on their way in. Without a proper defense it will be bloodshed in the street. If we leave, they will all die."

Jon awoke the next morning, the sun shining over the eastern mountain wall. He saw Adrin standing on the rocks above where San'doro sat two nights past. A cool morning breeze caught Adrin's cloak and whipped it around the man. Jon saw the gleam of the pistol in his left hand and the shine of his rapier in his right. How far the boy had come. Jon climbed the rocks and sat down in the same spot he had two nights ago. Adrin spoke without turning.

"I killed a child."

Chapter Twenty: Adrin and the Council

"It was two years ago," said Adrin, the wind whipping at his cloak. "I had left the estate of my family. The boredom and tedium of noble life tore at me. I left with dreams of becoming a brigand, a highwayman. My father had me instructed by Del'Rosa. It cost quite a lot and I resented it at first but it helped me win my share of bar duels and enough money to sleep with a roof over my head.

"I was in Graydawn walking the street late at night. A young woman was struggling with an older man. She saw me and I was struck by her beauty, or maybe it was the wine in my blood and the way her corset held her breasts up. The older man glared at me. When I asked of the lady's health, the man insulted me. My upbringing is one of honor, the sort of honor that binds you to improper action when such an insult flies. I drew, stabbed through the man's shoulder, and took off his left ear. I took the girl and fled.

"She was amazing. I never felt anything like her at the time. I saw her then as an angel but now I understand it for experience. She was a noble's daughter and the horrid man I left in the street was her betrothed. She was as much a rebel as I. We spent the week together in bliss, in bed. She told me of her dreams to run off with me and become a princess of the south. Her foolish child dreams bored me until I felt her mouth on me again. I grew tired of her as young men do when the gold always shines over the next mountain.

"I left her and left the city, heading west. They caught up with me in Salvora. I was in a tavern drinking with two women on my lap when my name was called. A man in leather armor, cuffed and guarded for dueling, stood at the door. I had infected his sister with the spawn of my loins, he said. He would cut off my manhood and deliver it to her father to prove his intent that no other face the horror of my seed. Again the instinct of action against insult took over. The whores fell

off of me when I stood. He walked out into the street and I followed.

"He was dead before the tavern door stopped swinging. He turned and drew his rapier. I drew mine. His thrust was slow and weak. I disarmed him easily and before his rapier touched the dirt my own had pierced him through his breast and out his back. I let the blade stay in his chest as I pulled off my glove and slapped him with it. The blade had pierced his lung and it was only a few seconds until it filled with blood and suffocated him. A tear ran down his cheek as he stood there. He had not a stubble of hair on his chin. He couldn't have been more than thirteen years old all dressed up in dueling armor. I didn't even see how small he was until he was dead. I pulled out my blade and he died. This kid. Her younger brother. He wanted to make his father happy so he went off looking for me and now he died outside of a whore's inn in the dirt.

"His family had lost a son and a daughter now. They hired every man with a blade to find me and kill me. So I fled south where the meager money of a small noble house couldn't afford to kill me no matter what I did to their son and daughter.

"But I can't escape them, can I," Adrin turned to Jon. Jon saw the shine of his eyes under the shadow of his three-cornered hat.

"No," said Jon. "But you can live with them."

"Ca'daan's back," shouted the Kal. "The council wants to meet with you." Adrin turned and smiled at Jon. "He has more bread," said the Kal. Before Jon had opened his mouth, Adrin had rushed past him in a flash of his red cloak.

For many people standing alone in front of a council of village elders may have many people nervous. Jon had overcome such things. The old man looked at Jon for a long time. He had debated whether or not to bring his guns and blades and ended up deciding to bring them. It was important to show strength. He didn't really need

them. His strongest weapon was at his side holding his hand and watching the old men with her own green eyes.

“You assaulted one of our militia men yesterday,” said the fat one, Emrold. “Explain yourself.”

“I felt a demonstration was needed of what danger your town faces,” said Jon.

“From you, perhaps,” said Tyroid, a thin man with a few wisps of gray hair on his bald scalp. “There is no other danger but that which stands in front of us.”

“We do not need your help,” said Oden. “The torrents protect us as they have for centuries. And we have the militia.” He turned and pointed to Severn. Severn lowered his head.

“These are powerful warriors,” said Severn. “We could use their assistance should it be needed.”

The other men turned and stared at the salt miner.

“We need to discuss this matter alone, sir. Please give us a moment.”

Jon bowed and left. Outside the early day breeze brought the smells of grass and leaves. Jon closed his eyes and enjoyed the comfortable warmth of the high red sun that had burned him so often.

A man approached from the trail to the large house. He was older and leaned heavy on a shaft of oak.

“I am Gauve, Ca’daan’s uncle,” he said. Jon bowed. “I thank you for coming and I am sorry I cannot be more of service.”

“Your nephew risked much to find us,” said Jon.

“The council hides under their own skirts. The villagers are worried. I hope they see reason.”

The door opened and Severn stepped out. He and Gauve shared a look Jon could not decode.

"It is agreed. You and your friends will augment our militia and protect our south road." The statement was absurd and idiotic but it was a victory none the less. Jon bowed and accepted. He turned to Gauve.

"I have one condition for our service," said Jon. Severn grew tense. "I must have more of your wife's fine bread."

Jon returned to the camp with good tidings and two wrapped loaves of Gauve's wife's bread. They ate and they talked of the meeting. That afternoon the seven swords walked through the town to the south road. At first not a single face was seen but Jon saw the elders and a few others lined up on the road. Soon, four boys took up their west flank, sticks in hand, marching as they passed.

I can only hope we can save them, thought Jon.

San'doro led them to a clearing high on the eastern mountain wall. Below them, to the west, they could see the road and the fields on the southern edge of the village. North of them, a glacier stream flowed past and into the heart of the mountains to the east.

As the others ate, Jon and San'doro stood on the edge of their camp surveying the city.

"What have you learned, my friend?" asked Jon.

"The town cannot be defended," said San'doro. "There is no wall, no natural choke point. We know they will have to come from the south but that gives them a space as wide as the town in which to launch their attack."

"What of the stream?" asked Jon.

“It is shallow enough and calm enough for riders to cross. They may choose the bridge at first but there is no reason they can’t cross the stream later if they wish.

“How about further south? Can we build a defense further away from the town?” asked Jon. As they watched, dusk fell and the light of oil lanterns began glowing yellow through the shuttered windows of the village homes.

“The ground is a lot rougher south. Chasms and large boulders scatter across the area but there are dozens of ways through for a long distance. He pulled on his leather cloak, a gift from Ca’daan for the cooler climate of the town.

“So what choices do we have?” asked Jon.

“Do you remember what Ca’daan told us about the salt mines in the west?” said San’doro. Jon nodded. “Perhaps that way may be more easily defended than the town itself.”

“Perhaps,” said Jon. “The townsfolk won’t like hiding in some mine while demontouched bandits burn their houses and slaughter their animals.”

“It is better than being cooked and eaten,” said San’doro.

“It is at that,” said Jon. “Take the Kal and have Severn show you the mines today. I’ll send Vrenna and Thorn south to keep watch on the mountain passes there. Adrin, Susan, and I will visit the village again and keep watch here. What do we know of the storms?”

“The torrent,” San’doro corrected.

“Yes, the torrent,” said Jon. “Do we know if it still rages or will the bandits now be on the move?”

“I don’t know. Ca’daan could tell you,” said San’doro.

“Indeed. I’ll ask the townsfolk as well. Good luck today, my friend.” Jon placed a hand on San’doro’s shoulder and the two men joined the others for their morning breakfast.

Vrenna and Thorn, dressed in hide cloaks and hoods pulled tight, went south to the mountain crags. San’doro and the Kal met Severn at the town’s southern bridge. He looked quizzically at San’doro and then at Jon on the request to see the mines, but agreed.

Jon, Susan, and Adrin walked into the town thoroughfare. Adrin wore his read cloak and his leather three-cornered hat. Both of them wore boiled leather armor, Adrin’s the brown leather of the bandit from whom he took it and Jon’s the black hard leather of the Gray Wolves. Jon chose against his own three-corner hat, instead keeping his hood up against the red sun. Susan wore a dress of burgundy, another gift from Gauve’s wife.

As they walked, the four boys, the town’s militia Ca’daan had called them, joined on their eastern flank. One of the boys, the smallest, smiled at Susan. Susan smiled back, the smile of a child, not a being who read the thoughts of everyone around her but the child she used to be; the child she should be.

“Go join them,” said Jon. Susan looked up at him. He nodded and she smiled.

“I’m sure, go have fun,” said Jon, answering her unspoken question. He would need her at the council’s meeting but she needed to be a child more. There may not be much fun left in the world. It was important that she seek it when she can.

Susan smiled and went to the boys. They greeted her and she smiled shyly back. One of them offered her a tour of their town and she accepted. When the boy held his arm out, a gesture he must have learned about in tales of knightly courtship, she took it. Jon felt tears well up in his eyes.

Ca’daan met them on the path to the house of the elders. He saw Susan with the militia and smiled at Jon.

“My uncle would like to talk to you,” said Ca’daan. “He was removed from the council but he is still popular with the rest of the village. He can help us if we need him.”

“We probably will,” said Jon.

They traveled down a small path to a stone and wood house. A wood stick symbol of marking hung over the door, a symbol of religions belief Jon did not recognize. It reminded Jon of the Voth.

Gauve’s wife had prepared a lunch for them. Thick slices of meat, potatoes, roots thick and white and slabs of steaming brown rye bread. Jon’s mouth watered. It was a meal the likes of which he had not eaten in years. He was beginning to love this town. At this moment he wanted nothing more than to rest here for the rest of his life.

“Gods below, what a meal,” said Adrin, staring wide-eyed at the table full of food. On his mention of the gods, Gauve’s wife made a sign in the air with two fingers held out at a right angle and she whispered something under her breath.

“Are you well, sir?” Gauve asked Jon. Jon’s feeling of age and weariness must have shown.

“Yes. It has been a long time since I had a meal like this,” said Jon. “Thank you.”

They spent much of the meal in silence. Jon savored every single bite, feeling the juices warm his mouth and roll down his tongue. Adrin ate like a bear on a fresh kill. Gauve’s wife, Celeste, refilled his plate, laughing at his blush. When they had slowed, Gauve began the conversation.

“How do things look to you?” asked the older man.

“The town proper will be difficult to defend. There are no walls and and no natural choke points. The bridge would work for a very short time but the stream isn’t a clear defense. We can spike it to slow them but it will not stop them very long. If they get into the village and the village is populated, many will die. Perhaps everyone.”

This grim news made Gauve’s face fall. Celeste made her strange sign again and whispered to herself.

“What choices have we?” asked Gauve.

“We can flee north but your nephew tells me that the torrent will soon cut off that path. I have another idea but I think it will be unpopular,” said Jon. “The salt mines.”

Gauve, Celeste, and Ca’daan stared at Jon.

“They will burn the village,” said Gauve. “We will live like rats in holes. Is there no other choice?”

“None that I can see. None that we can accomplish soon. When is the southern torrent stilled?” asked Jon to Ca’daan.

“It ends within the week. You will see the southern gray clouds turn white and recede into the mountains. They roll north as the air cools and then the torrent rakes the northern trail for two months. Only our valley here is spared,” said Ca’daan.

“And it takes two weeks to cross from Fena Set to Fena Dim?” asked Jon.

“Yes, if you have no caravan and a good horse. Normally it is three to four weeks,” said Ca’daan.

“That gives us about two to three weeks to prepare. We should start by spiking the river. Do you have a blacksmith?” asked Jon.

“Yes,” said Gauve. “Pedemont. He is a friend.”

“I have a simple job for he and his apprentices if he has any. It is a simple construction but we’ll need a lot of them,” said Jon.

“I will introduce you,” said Gauve.

“Two of us are in the south hoping to find some advantage but I don’t expect to find much. We have to prepare for people to go to the mines. We’ll need food, water, and shelter. We may have to stay there a while,” said Jon. Gauve’s face looked grim.

“I’m not leaving our home,” said Celeste.

“Woman,” said Gauve. “If you stay here they will rape you, kill you slowly, and eat you on this table. We can rebuild whatever they destroy. We cannot rebuild our lives.” Celeste quieted but seethed. Jon did not expect better reactions from most of the town folk. They would not want to leave and the river spikes would not be enough.

“Stock the caves anyway,” said Jon. “When the torches appear to the south and they ride in, people may change their minds.”

“I will talk to some folks,” said Gauve.

“Ok. Adrin will go with you.” He saw Adrin nod. He was learning well. “I will wait at our camp in the clearing on the east side of the southern road. Gauve laughed and Celeste blushed.

“What,” said Jon.

“That is where our older boys and girls go to be alone and away from the watchful eyes of adults. I can’t count the number of children sired up there. We call it the Lover’s Lap.” They laughed.

Jon met Adrin outside.

“Stay with Gauve. Learn what and who you can. Be nice and put on your charm for them as a nobleman and a romantic. Don’t talk of bloodshed at all. Meet the blacksmith and tell him we will meet him tomorrow to show him what we need.” Adrin nodded at Jon. Jon saw something new in Adrin’s eyes. Respect. Not just respect for battle. Jon had won that weeks ago, but respect as the leader of the coming battle.

“Come back tonight and we’ll plan for tomorrow.”

As Jon headed south, Ca’daan walked with him. “Can you get Susan? I’m not yet sure they want me knocking on doors around here.”

“Yes,” said Ca’daan. He walked up to one of the village houses, the house of the boy who escorted Susan. He returned a few minutes later empty handed.

Panic rose in Jon and he became conscious of the weight of his guns on his hips. For a moment he had a vision clear and terrible in his mind. They had killed her. They found out what she could do and they had already killed her for it. He saw himself draw his pistol and shoot Ca’daan in the face. He saw himself kill the family that had taken her in. He saw himself kill every man, woman, and child in the town. It was easy to see it, easy to feel it. He had done it before.

Ca’daan’s smile broke the dark vision, however.

“Susan was invited to stay with Alek, the younger boy. His mother is with them, Elise. Susan said she would like to stay,” said Ca’daan.

“Is she safe?” asked Jon. The look on Ca’daan’s face made it clear that he saw and understood Jon’s concerns.

“Yes,” said Ca’daan.

YES

The voice flowed warmly into his mind and he smiled.

Jon looked at Ca'daan standing in front of him. He was nervous, but he was not lying. Jon made one of the hardest decisions he had ever made in his whole life.

"Ok," he said. "We will get her in the morning."

Let her have an evening as a real child with people who do not wish her harm or force her to their whims, Jon thought. People like me.

"Go home and sleep in your own bed, my friend," said Jon to Ca'daan. "Come meet us at dawn in the Lover's Lap." Ca'daan smiled at him.

"Thank you. Thank you for all of this," said Ca'daan. Jon saw something unfamiliar in the man's eyes. Hope.

It made Jon sad that he had little hope of his own.

As the sun set over the bulk of the Old One, Jon once again marveled at the titanic statue. What could have built such a monstrosity? What purpose did it serve? What secrets had it seen? If only Susan could read the visions of such a rock, what might they learn of them?

When Jon returned to the camp, San'doro and the Kal were waiting for him.

"It's amazing," said the Kal. "Shafts as deep as the earth and caverns as large as small towns carved into perfect squares. Pillars like the legs of titans and blocks of salt larger than ten men could lift. It's a fortune down there. We could carve salt coins to fill out saddlebags and take kingships anywhere in the world."

“How will it serve for defense?” asked Jon.

“It serves well,” said San’doro. “You should come see yourself. Deep tunnels that narrow to less than two men across and hundreds of these tunnels in which to escape. One could get lost in there for a year and never step on the same ground.”

“It sounds perfect,” said Jon.

“There are dangers as well,” said San’doro. “The walls and pillars break apart if water touches them. Severn spoke of cave-ins in the higher tunnels near the feet of the Old One. A river rerouted and collapsed a shaft trapping two hundred men. If that should happen or if our enemies use this, we could be trapped.”

“Or we could use it ourselves,” said Jon. San’doro nodded.

A dark shape entered the camp. The black hood pulled back revealing Thorn’s grim face. Blood flowed from a gash on his left arm.

“Come with me,” said Thorn in a voice that left little choice. “We have something you must see.”

Chapter Twenty One: The Scout

Adrin joined them as they descended and headed south. Thorn led them in the dark night. The red moon hung low overhead with the orb of the demon moon cutting in from below. The sight chilled Jon's skin.

They walked for a long while past huge slate boulders that collapsed centuries ago. Jon examined the landscape along the way. No clear defense existed but it was a good place for lightning ambushes. They had been successful in the Voth war, creating enough fear and anger to route the enemy where one wished.

Thorn led them into a copse of dead trees, thick branches clutching for life in a canyon that provided none.

They saw Vrenna, her hood pulled low over her head, staring at the back of one of the huge trees.

The sight they saw when they rounded the large gnarled tree shook Jon to the bone.

"Gods help us," said Adrin. He pulled off his hat and held it limply at his side.

"There are no gods here now," said the voice of the monster in front of them. "They are all dead."

They all stared at the man, if he could be called that, in silence. No one spoke.

He was ageless, neither young nor old. Like Jon, his head was shaved. His scalp was lined with tattoos of an old script. When Jon looked at the script, it shifted under the man's skin. His entire body, naked from the waist up, was covered in tattoos depicting every

demon or devil in the five hells. Large knobs protruded from under his skin along his collar bone and a small ridge lined his forehead.

A deep cleft of a scar cut through his left pectoral, very deep and as long. Another old wound had deformed the muscle of his left arm.

There were many things that disturbed Jon as he stood in silence and observed the scout. The man's eyes were solid black orbs. They stole the light of Thorn's torch instead reflecting only the light of the blood moon overhead. The demonic tattoos shifted and wreathed in the shadows of the torch.

What disturbed Jon most of all was the saber Vrenna had buried in the scout's chest, pinning him to the ancient gnarled tree and the fact that the man seemed very angry about it.

That he lived at all shook Jon's perceptions of humanity. The man should have died instantly. The wound was fatal. The man's right arm had been broken and completely twisted around. The other was pinned to the other side of the tree by Vrenna's hand spike.

The man's sword sat on the ground nearby. Jon picked it up. It was heavy and wide-bladed, all forged from a single piece of steel. The tip was hooked towards the edge, the same way the tips are hammered for knives used for slaughter. The hilt was wrapped with light strips of oiled leather. Jon nearly dropped the blade when he realized the leather was human skin.

Jon looked back at the scout and the scout grinned revealing teeth sharpened to points and a tongue split down the middle like a snake.

"Where are the rest of you?" asked Jon. The man continued his black-eyed stare. Jon repeated his question in two other languages before the man answered. His voice rasped like glass and gravel.

"We will make your women whores for days before we roast them screaming on spits," said the demon scout. It would be hard to get

anything valuable out of a man who already had his arm broken and a sword pinning him through his heart to the tree behind him. Jon continued to examine him instead. Somehow this man had crossed the torrent. His clothes, thick leather, had been shredded to tatters by the ice and winds of the storm.

Thorn handed Jon a skin bladder, now mostly empty. Jon unplugged the cork and turned it over. A stream of blood poured to the dirt in front of them. The man watched the stream fall.

"Gods help us," said Adrin again.

"No Gods," said the horror in front of them. "Only us."

"We're going to kill you, you know," said San'doro. The calmness in his voice gave Jon a chill.

"What a pity. The pleasures I would have given your women will be lost," said the scout. "But my brothers will make up for it. The Sticks pay attention to everyone."

"What do you want?" said Jon. The man's face fell from a smile into something more terrible.

"Justice," said the scout. "We will feed on your young and enslave the rest of you as our cattle. We will feed you to each other making you fat on your own until it is our time to feast. When we have tired of you we will bury you in your mines and leave you screaming in the dark."

"Within the week," said the horror. "Fena Dim will burn."

He knew the name of the town, thought Jon. How did he know?

They stood in silence, staring at the man. His breath came in rasps. Fluid from Vrenna's cut filled his lungs. His eyelids fell but soon flashed open.

“I will tell Stark to pay special attention to your little one, the little bitch with the red hair. We’ll bugger her with a spear and…”

The demon scout never finished the sentence. Jon would not have known Thorn to be so fast for a man his size. His heavy blade swung hard, beheading the scout and cleaving deep into the tree. Jon stared at the head, the scout’s tongue lolling out on one side, split like a snake.

Gods, help us, he thought. One hundred and fifty of those fiends were coming here in a week. They were out of time.

Jon collected the head and wrapped it in the scout’s leather cloak. Vrenna drew out her saber, one boot on the scout’s stomach as she pulled it free.

“He fought like fire,” said Thorn. “Vrenna and I both fought him and he nearly took us. He didn’t even stop fighting when I broke his arm and Vrenna pinned him to the tree.”

“If they’re all like that, we’re in trouble,” said the Kal.

“Likely not,” said San’doro. “A scout who travels through a storm like the torrent with nothing but a skin of blood to sustain him is likely to be one of their better men.” San’doro turned to Jon. “What did he mean about justice?”

“I don’t know,” said Jon.

“I wish Susan were here,” said Adrin. “I would like to know and she could have told us.”

“I am glad she wasn’t,” said Jon. “I don’t want her going inside the head of a man like that.”

Jon tied the cloak around the head and slung it over his shoulder. He took the wicked blade as well.

“What is that for?” asked Adrin.”

“To show the elders what we face.”

The head served its purpose. It sat on the floor of the elder’s council room - the sitting room of Alvic’s home. The senior, Emrold, vomited and Oden whispered to the same forgotten god as Gauve’s wife. Severn just stared at the head.

“He came through the torrent, alone, with nothing but a skin of blood and this sword. It took two of us to stop him and he lived with a sword in his chest for much of the night. I asked you to convene because we must act now or Fena Dim will fall to men like this one and it will happen within the week.”

Jon let this sink in before he continued. “We must stock the caves and prepare for every man, woman, and child to flee within. Adrin and I will work with Severn to map out the caverns for defense. We will also need any able bodied men to help us spike the river. Blacksmiths and carpenters will have to work throughout the week to make enough spikes to matter.”

“San’doro and Vrenna will scout south. Thorn and the Kal will help prepare the spikes. This has to be done, friends, or this village is lost.”

“How can we defend against such men?” said Alvic.

“With trickery and deception,” said Jon. “Rest now while we can. Tomorrow we begin.”

The elders looked ten years older than they did when Jon entered. They all nodded.

Rest found few of them that night. Jon fell in and out of sleep until the huge red sun rose and painted the Old One in scarlet. He, Thorn, and the Kal went to the smithy.

“I need long plates or crossed beams of iron. Cheap and soft is fine. Nails must be hammered into them, big ones. Jon saw the look of confusion on the smithies face. He slowed. “Two beams in a cross or a plate wide enough to not fall over. Nails welded or hammered facing up. It shouldn’t be any longer than four feet or it will be too heavy.”

“How many do you need?” asked the smithy.

“About two hundred,” said Jon. The smithy’s jaw dropped “We need them,” said Jon. “Or they’ll cross over the river like the torrent.”

The carpenters reacted much the same way but the job was easier. Two split logs studded with large nails would work nicely. It might not stop them completely but it would slow them the first night. Something had to be done to their numbers.

“There is little else we can do to defend this place,” said San’doro.

“The rest will be sneak attacks, flanks, and luck,” said Jon.

The two men met Severn in the town square and hiked into the low hills to the salt mines. They had to hunch to get in the first tunnels but deep within they rose into high square caves and finally into the open mines. Titanic columns held the mountain up above the mines. Shadows hid the size and depth of much of the tunnels. Severn spoke with pride at their achievements. Salt kept the town fed.

Dozens of tunnels led to deeper chambers and a few led to other exits. Jon drew a careful map on a sheaf of vellum with a charcoal pencil.

“Tell me about the water,” said Jon. Severn paled and didn’t speak for a moment.

“It is dangerous and forbidden. A barrel of water can collapse a tunnel or eat away one of the pillars. Many men have died due to

collapses. All of the western mines are now closed due to water collapses or weakened tunnels.

"We may have to collapse some of the tunnels if we need to route attackers," said Jon. "Show us how."

Salt-stone pillars held up many of the tunnels and a single barrel of water could collapse a pillar and break down the tunnel. There was a lot of danger in such an operation, since the water could continue to saturate the walls and floor, collapsing even more.

One of the chambers deep in the mine was so large that it could hold the entire population. Two tunnels led in with another in the rear moving up through the upper chambers and finally out in the open air above the hills. It was as good as they could expect.

Jon sat outside the mine looking down at the town below. He watched the river flow. He watched the farmers, tradesmen, herders, and children finishing their day. He was of two minds, one reveled in the peace of this village. He dared not hope to spend his days here with Susan working on a small farm or working for the blacksmith. So much was at risk.

In his other mind, Jon saw choke points and routes. He saw alcoves for ambushes and high points to control the field of battle. He saw which buildings would burn quickly and which slowly. He saw the trails leading into the hills on both sides of the town, trails in which to bait traps

Jon walked back to the town to the smithy. The old man, beard down to the middle of his chest charred from rogue embers, showed Jon the first ten stream spikes. It was crude but strong and wicked. It would do the job well. The carpenters were likewise effective. Between the two shops they would have enough to spike the whole river in a week.

The week moved quickly. San’doro and Vrenna watched the south road for signs of the demontouched bandits. Thorn and the Kal helped spike the rivers. The villagers protested but under the voice of the elders and the rumors of the scout’s head, they helped move barrels of water and carts of food into the deep mines. Few had any intention of actually going in but resistance was more difficult than complacency so they proceeded.

Jon and Adrin continued their practice and Jon left Susan to enjoy her new friends. She should have the time to be with a real family if even for a short time.

Jon was about to require a lot from her.

Chapter Twenty Two: Blood and Rain

It was mid-afternoon and beads of sweat fell down Jon's brow. He and Adrin had dueled at half-speed and half-power for much of the afternoon. Jon ordered everyone to avoid any risk of injury. If they lost even one man or woman, all could fall apart. So they rested and observed and planned in their camp. The Kal swung his heavy warclub. Vrenna stared south, her face hidden under her hood. Thorn slept, his heavy blade within reach.

Jon saw San'doro riding hard on the back of his gray stallion. Jon could see the look on his face. It had begun.

"They're coming," said San'doro. "They ride hard by torchlight from the south. They made some sort of camp half a night's ride from the rocks." San'doro was clearly nervous but still in control. Jon glanced at Adrin and saw his pale face. He can fill himself with fear and panic now as long as he swung and fired when the time came.

"Kal, go tell Gauve and the elders that it's time," said Jon. "Thorn will go with you. Get as many into the caves as will go." Jon turned to San'doro. "How much time do we have?"

"They're twice the distance to the dead trees to the south," said San'doro. Jon turned back to Thorn and the Kal.

"Get them in the caves," said Jon. "Use the ones who don't go as bait. We'll cut off the first twenty or so. You are to cut down those twenty. Use the houses, the villagers, and each other to flank them whenever you can. We have the advantage tonight. They don't know we're here.

Jon turned to Adrin, Vrenna, and San'doro. "We're going to stay on the other side of the river, south of the village. Adrin and I will be on either side of the rocks. With four shots they will have no idea how

many of us we really are. Vrenna will guard Adrin. San'doro will guard me. If we keep up, they'll route. If they don't route, we're going to die."

"Will Thorn and the Kal handle twenty of those things?" asked Adrin.

"Some will try to cross the river. We'll shoot them down on the bridge to block it. Hopefully some of those twenty will fall crossing the river."

Jon let the plan sink in for a moment, watching each of them.

"This is where our greatest surprise exists. If we do this right, we can cut their numbers by a third and not lose any of us. Be smart, not brave. Run when attacked. Attack on their backs and sides.

Jon continued. "I'll see you tonight. Expect Susan's call. Good luck, my friends."

A short time later Jon sat on the western rocks south of the river. Night fell over the village. He looked up to the hulking shadow of the Old One silhouetted against the blackening sky. He watched for dots of torchlight or the sound of hooves or any other sign.

San'doro waited near him, his knives still sheathed. Jon's life would depend on this man, a man he did not know a month ago. Across from him, on the eastern side, Adrin waited as well. He had shown Jon how fast he could reload the dragon-hammered flintlocks and it impressed Jon. Whether he could do it or not with a rider bearing down on him was unknown but they would both find out. Vrenna stood near Adrin, relaxed and ready. She was still a mystery to Jon but her skills were never in question. Jon and Adrin would have to be close to those they shot. In the dark of night, their aim must be true.

"Have the villagers gone to the cave?" thought Jon.

MANY OF THEM, replied Susan's voice in his head. She sat huddled under her red cloak near the mines, high up on the western mountains. From that spot she could see all of them and, should she need to, she could see through them as well. She was the conduit of the seven swords. If Thorn or the Kal should fall or become pressed, Jon would know. As the chaos of battle unfolded, she alone would keep them coordinated enough to fight together.

The sound of a deep rumble vibrated in the rocks around them. Jon saw Adrin tense and hold his pistols up, back to his rock. High overhead the blood moon painted the village in the color of blood. The demon moon sat directly in its center, a black pupiled red eye stared down on them. The old gods watch us tonight, thought Jon. Vrenna drew her saber and San'doro drew his knives.

"Tell them to get ready," thought Jon.

THEY ARE READY, returned Susan's voice in the back of his mind.

Don't shoot first, thought Jon. Please. He had told Adrin to hold his fire until Jon had fired first, but that would be a hard instinct to fight. If Adrin fired, the entire horde would fall on them. Twenty must pass first.

The rumble grew and shapes formed out of the mist. Jon caught the shine of torchlight on steel and on sharp white teeth in the smiles of devils. Jon hid behind his rock.

The first rider passed and Adrin didn't fire. Jon could smell the rider's horse and see the red light on his boiled leather armor and deeply worn boots. He had painted a band of black warpaint across his eyes. Three more rode past holding swords and axes and spears. Scalps of braided hair hung from their weapons and armor. In all of them, Jon saw the rush of blood fury, the Sticks were hungry.

Stark rode forth in the line. He was smaller than the others and wore no helm. His bald head was tattooed and ridged like the scout they

had beheaded. Like the other riders, Stark had a band of black warpaint across his eyes. Unlike his other riders, his expression was calm.

Stark turned and saw Jon. Their eyes met and Stark's eyes opened wide, shining black orbs of a demon. But it was too late. In the middle of their charge, Stark could not stop.

The Sticks roared in. Five, six, ten, fifteen, twenty riders passed, weapons high and the shout of their blood cry on their lips. They cried for blood and dreamed of the chaos of their attack. They would ride in, kill the men, rape the women, burn the buildings, and eat the children. Only seven stood in their way.

Jon stepped out and fired.

The first man he shot had his mouth open and long ragged black hair blowing back from his face. Jon's shot caught him in the mouth. Black blood, brains, and teeth sprayed on the two riders behind him. All three of the horses reared and dropped their riders. San'doro raced in, slashing through the downed men. Jon caught a glimpse of the ruined twisted leg of one of the fallen riders and his throat sprayed from San'doro's wide cut.

His next shot split open the forehead of another rider with spiked hair washed dark brown with blood. San'doro slashed open the belly of the horse of the rider behind the one Jon had shot. The rider drew a wicked serrated blade but his horse collapsed and San'doro ripped him open with a violent backward tug on his left dagger.

Jon leaped behind the rock and called for San'doro. His hands moved, twin ramming rods held between his little finger and his index finger. Cap in, powder in, plug in, ball in, seal it in, ram it down. Only as he cocked back his hammers did he realize that Adrin had not yet fired. Jon grew cold. He considered sending San'doro to find out what had happened but the air shattered to the east and a body and horse fell hard to the crunch of bone on stone.

Thank the gods, thought Jon, staring up at the red moon with the black moon inside. Another pistol crack and someone howled in the night. The howl quickly cut short. Vrenna had followed through.

The entire plan hung on their ability to keep their numbers unknown. Two pistoleers were manageable but unknown shooters killing man after man would shake the best commander.

Jon waited and came around the other side of the rock. He shot a man in the side. As he rode on, a river of blood flowed and the man slumped in the saddle. Another shot blew the head off of one man, showering the rider next to him.

"Jon," said San'doro. Two riders wheeled around the rock. Jon holstered his right pistol and drew his rapier. A huge man grinned with a mouth full of long black teeth. He raised a battle axe high over his head. Jon ran his rapier through the horse's flank and into the man's groin. The horse toppled and Jon stabbed the huge man through the eye. The man smelled like spoiled meat.

San'doro cut open the thigh of another rider, the smaller of the two. The man screamed and dropped his scimitar to grab at the gushing wound. San'doro pulled him down and tore him open.

Jon reloaded his guns as he heard another pistol fire in the dark. He peeked around the rock to see Vrenna dancing between three dismounted riders. She swung once and two of the men sprayed fans of blood into the night air. Another cut and the third man's intestines splashed to the ground. Behind her, Adrin aimed and fired another shot into a rider's chest. His back blew out and he fell over the back of his horse as it rode past.

"How are Thorn and the Kal," thought Jon.

THEY HAVE KILLED SIX AND SEVENTEEN REMAIN. ONE HOUSE BURNS AND THREE FELL TO THE SPIKES IN THE RIVER, said the child's voice in his head. THE KAL IS MAKING A LOT OF NOISE AND

THORN CUTS DOWN THOSE WHO GIVE CHASE. SIX VILLAGERS ARE DEAD.

Jon gave grim thought to the villagers. He wanted to save as many as he could but the chaos of their first flight would aid Thorn and the Kal. Checking his rear, Jon chanced a glance at the river. He watched the Kal cave in the skull of a fallen rider in the river. Jon smiled and turned.

His next two shots landed in the chests of two riders carrying long bladed sticks. One fell dead immediately but the other swung hard. Jon ducked and San'doro's knife hamstrung him. He fell near Jon and Jon stamped his skull twice hard under his boot heel.

San'doro moved like wind, cutting saddles off of horses, cutting the arms that dared to attack him, and the throats of the fallen. The brown man was covered in blood. Across the road, Vrenna climbed the rocks and cut a man off his horse on the fly. Adrin reloaded like he had been born to it, twin ramming rods sliding down the barrels and dragon hammers cocking back.

THE KAL IS WOUNDED, came Susan's voice in his head. A line of nervousness crept in. If they did not begin to route now, the swords would be in trouble.

One of the sharp-toothed monsters cried out in a low desert language. Jon stepped out and shot him in the face. The man next to him fell and the two behind them. Adrin glanced over at Jon and smiled, smoke pouring from the barrels of his guns.

The demon touched raiders began to turn.

"Shoot only the ones that face us," Jon had told Adrin. "Cut down only those who raise arms." It had nothing to do with mercy and everything to do with the contagious nature of fear and panic. Run and live was the message Jon wanted them to learn. Stay and die.

Two more straggled. Jon shot them both and San'doro cut down the one who survived. The others fled.

Four or five from the town rode past, routed by their diminished numbers and the fury of the Kal and Thorn. One of these rode past, eyes blazing in controlled fury. Stark. Jon's guns were empty. San'doro lunged but Stark's short blade kept him at bay. The demon faded into the shadow of night.

"They will come back quickly," Jon told San'doro. "We must move."

"Can Thorn and the Kal take another twenty?" asked Jon to Susan. Silence sat for a moment followed by a single word.

FIFTEEN.

"Fifteen it is," said Jon. "Tell them to move to the bridge."

Jon, Adrin, Vrenna, and San'doro moved south to the line of fallen boulders. The route would not last long. Jon figured that twenty to twenty five fell in the first charge. That left many to return.

"Get ready," Jon told Adrin. The man nodded under his three-cornered hat. A splash of black blood streaked one cheek. Jon listened to the hooves as they approached. This time they would go for Jon's last location. When they reached it, Thorn and the Kal should run, give them a taste. Then they get cut off again.

The rumble of the horses came again. Again they rushed past, wary of the rocks further north. Fifteen passed and the rest, feeling the confidence of unmatched hostilities, rushed forward.

This time Adrin shot first, dropping one of the horses of the riders. The man toppled and Vrenna cut him down as he tumbled through the air. The woman was amazing. Jon considered himself a good swordsman but he could barely follow her cuts. Men raged and rushed at her only to fall stumbling away clutching slashed throats or

eviscerated bellies. One of the better swordsmen parried her saber, catching the black steel sword in his own sword's guard only to catch her palm spike in his temple. He fell away, teeth chattering and limbs shaking as blood squirted from the hole in his head.

Jon shot into the flank of a horse and then another, building a wall of flailing, kicking beasts to separate the charge from the group they had let through. Jon reloaded as San'doro cut down the riders.

Jon turned and saw more horses flailing in the spiked river among the hewn bodies of their riders. He saw Thorn on the end of the bridge, cleaving into the thighs and flanks of those riders who chose to cross it. In the distance, Jon saw a loose dismounted rider turn around the corner of a building only to have his face smashed in by the knobbed war club of the Kal.

A cry went up in the night, a cry horrifying to Jon and unfamiliar to the riders. The cry formed again and the riders turned and began to thunder away.

"What was that?" asked San'doro.

"Our salvation this night," said Jon. "A retreat." Jon aimed and fired another shot into the back of a retreating rider. There was no honor in the shot but it further reduced the odds. There would be little honor in this battle or the ones to come.

Jon waited and watched. The rumble of the horses rode into the darkness of night.

Jon considered keeping San'doro on the watch, later he would regret his choice not to, but they all needed the rest after the fight. Jon crossed the bridge, stepping among the twisted and cleaved corpses. At least ten of the demontouched riders had been cut down on the bridge. Another five lay in the stream among their maimed horses. Within the dirt roads at the town thoroughfare lay twelve

more, heads and chests crushed by the Kal's club or flayed by Thorn's sword.

Thorn stood, blood covering his body and soaking through his hair. A dozen minor wounds crossed his forearms and body. Bloodlust still filled the huge man's black eyes until he saw Jon. Thorn's body sagged and he sat on the body of a felled horse.

The Kal crossed the town's main road, favoring his left side. His hand held onto his flank where he had tied a wide strip of dark cloth, growing darker as Jon watched. The man looked pale.

"How bad is it?" asked Jon.

"A spearman pierced me from behind," said the Kal. "The tip went through."

Jon saw the dark blood staining the cloth around the Kal's waist. He didn't want to look.

"How do you feel?" asked Jon.

"How do you think? It hurts like the five hells," said the big man. He lowered his head. "I'm tired."

Worry filled Jon's head. If the spear had put any holes in the man's organs, he would be in agony by morning and dead soon after. Jon had seen hundreds of men die hours after a stab from the festering of the wound. And who knew what the demonic riders did to their spears before battle.

"How is Susan?" Adrin asked Jon. Jon didn't know.

"How are you?" thought Jon.

WELL ENOUGH, said Susan's voice in his head. If it was humor, he didn't get it. THERE IS A LOT OF ANGER AND SADNESS IN THE

CAVES. THE ELDERS HOLD THEM TOGETHER BUT NOT BY MUCH.

Jon looked to the two burning houses that filled the night sky with black smoke. They would burn to the ground by morning. On the dirt roads of the town Jon saw at least six corpses of villagers. They had a right to their tears and their anger but the Seven Swords had killed nearly a third of the raiders on the first two attacks and the village lost less than a dozen in response. That alone was reason for celebration. The rest was about to get much worse and much less popular. How would they act when they saw the whole village burn?

"Are the rest in the caves?" Jon asked the Kal. "If any are left, we need to move them in." Jon looked to Adrin who cleaned his guns the way Jon had shown him. Jon felt a surge of pride at the boy until he saw the hollow look in the boy's eyes.

"What now?" asked San'doro.

"Now we lose the village," said Jon. "If they come back tonight we let them have it, burn it, and wonder what ghosts had cut them so hard."

"The desert ghosts," said Adrin. San'doro didn't smile.

"Adrin and Thorn will guard and watch the caves," said Jon. "If they learn of the caves we're going to be fighting with our backs to the wall. If we can keep the caves hidden, we can cut into their flank again and again, eating away at them. Vrenna, the Kal, San'doro, and I will do that. For now we eat and we wait."

But no food crossed their lips. They sat and stared at the black-eyed sharp-toothed monsters who littered the earth.

"Let them sit," said Jon when Thorn had tried to kill time by tossing the bodies into a pile. "We don't want to show them anything that might tell them something of us."

What did they think of us, Jon thought to himself. Why did they think we were here? Who do they think we are? What will Stark think of us and what will he do? What did he expect us to do next?

Jon sat on an overturned trough, feeling the heat of the blazing houses warm his left side. Stark had expected no resistance. Had Ca'daan not been the one to see it, had the Brill farmer not been the one to travel to Fena Kef and gather the Swords, the Sticks would have already slaughtered every one in the town.

Jon closed his eyes and tried to imagine himself looking through Stark's eyes. The small man led the Sticks not with strength or brutality but intelligence. No doubt strength and brutality flowed in the man as well but it took more than that to lead men like these.

Stark would have seen nearly a third of his men fall in a very short time. That second wave wasn't his decision, the pain and shame of retreat forced them back again - Stark would have known that was a mistake. He saw the ambush the moment he and Jon locked their gazes at one another before the battle began.

He would be back in control now. He might kill whoever led the second charge. It would ease his own frustration and show strength in a time of weakness.

But what then? They didn't know how many warriors there were in Fena Dim. Any stories would keep the number small. They wouldn't attack the same way again. They had the advantage. They could take their time, scout it out, and learn what they could.

A voice broke his concentration. It was Susan in his head. YOU NEED TO COME TO THE CAVES, she spoke. CA'DAAN'S UNCLE KNOWS WHO THEY ARE AND WHY THEY ARE HERE.

Jon looked at San'doro.

“What is it?” said the brown man. Streaks of clean skin crossed the blood that caked him everywhere else.

Something shifted in the shadows behind the man.

Adrin was talking to the Kal and Thorn cleaned his blade with a torn dirty cloth. The shadow shifted again and a gleam of silver slashed in the darkness.

Vrenna’s sword flew end over end, crashing into the wide curved sword of the Reaver. The villain’s blade would have taken off San’doro’s head had it hit. Instead, San’doro had jerked at the sound and it drew a line against his left shoulder blade.

As San’doro spun away, Jon saw the demontouched assassin clearly. He wore black leather armor, a black cloak, and a black cloth over his nose and mouth. His head was shaved and coated in black blood. His black eyes flared in the red moonlight.

Jon drew and fired into the assassin’s face. San’doro fell away, clutching his right ear from the concussion of the blast. Another shadow shifted and Jon drew his other pistol. As he shot, the man twisted away and the bullet tore a hole in his cloak. Jon had only seen two people move that fast in his life; Vrenna and San’doro.

Now the shadows shifted all around them. At least seven more of the assassins surrounded them. One pressed Vrenna hard, swinging his short blade at her throat, stomach and legs. She danced and twisted away but with her own blade thrown, she could do little but run.

Two seemed intent on cutting down Thorn, slashing wildly at his thighs. He held them back with powerful cuts from his own sword. The Kal hammered at one with his war club, putting the wrath of the demontouched assassin on the defensive. Adrin had his rapier and offhand dagger out, parrying the attack of one while another closed in.

Vrenna managed to slip into the attack of the black-garbed killer who attacked her. She punched her palm spike up under the chin of the assassin. Blood spattered to the dirt as she pulled the spike free but the demon fought on. He let the blood pour from the hole in his neck as he cut at her. She sidestepped and kicked the assassin's knee with her hard boot. Jon heard the man's kneel crack as he fell. Vrenna snatched the curved sword from his grasp as he fell and cleaved his head in two.

Jon had just managed to reload one pistol when a new shadow broke free and rushed Jon. Jon drew his rapier and twisted, the sharp tip of the sword piercing through the assassin's armor. It did not slow him. The assassin lunged forward, letting the blade pierce through his back. He raised a wicked heavy jagged sword and swung. Jon barely managed to draw his offhand dagger and parry the blow. The force of the attack numbed his arm.

The assassin closed in, his face up close to Jon's. Jon smelled rancid breath and saw the insanity in the man's eyes. This man was not the same as the others they had fought. He was faster, fearless, felt no pain. Like the Voth barbarians drugged on the smoke and liquid poisons of their witches, what stood in front of him was a machine of murder.

The assassin's forehead smashed in, sending Jon reeling and falling back. Something hot and wet ran down his mouth and chin. His eyes blurred with tears and he tasted iron in the back of his throat.

Jon heard a pistol fire and half the assassin's face blew apart. Jon stood and saw Adrin in melee with one of the assassins, a smoking gun in his left hand. Adrin had fired left handed and in combat. He far underestimated the boy.

Adrin threw his elbow over the entwined blades in front of him and smashed it in his opponent's temple. The assassin stepped back, dazed. Adrin spun his rapier and stabbed it through the assassin. He

let go of the blade, drew his remaining pistol, and shot the assassin in the head.

Jon heard a cry and saw the Kal reeling from a blow to his wound. He had torn off the assassin's mask revealing a lipless mouth cut wide across the man's cheeks filled with razor sharp teeth. The assassin struck with a pair of hand axes. The Kal caught the first incoming axe with the shaft of his warclub. He caught the shaft of the other axe with his left hand as it came in and kicked the assassin in the chest. Both axes tore free from the assassin's hand and the Kal, with a cry of pure rage, crushed in the demon's head. The sound made Jon's stomach turn.

Thorn continued to parry the heavy two-handed scimitar of the last assassin. The huge blades rang as they crashed together. Sparks flew into the dark of night. Each of the large men fought with equal strength and power. Gods help me, thought Jon, Thorn looks like one of them. He could have been one of them. Only when Adrin slashed at the huge assassin did he delay, opening the opportunity Thorn needed. Thorn cut low and hewed into the assassin's thigh down to the bone. The man fell forward and Thorn cut downward hard, through the assassin's shoulder and deep into his chest.

The battle ended and Jon breathed hard, his breath coming in mist. Jon looked down. The black-garbed villains fought so fiercely. There was a smell off of them, musky and sweet. It made Jon gag.

"Red Lotus," said the Kal. "It saturates them. If you chew it you see heaven. If you inhale the smoke of it, it turns you into something from hell. Who knows what it did to these monsters."

San'doro found a small skin of liquid on one of the men, he poured out a thick oily liquid into the ground. "That is not the only thing that gave them such strength." said San'doro. Jon looked to Thorn and saw recognition in the big man's dark eyes.

So that is what Stark will do. No doubt his eyes watched the battle against the red lotus assassins. “Take measure,” he would have whispered. If the assassins had won, the barrier to Fena Dim would open. If they lost, at least Stark would know what he faced. What now? Wait and plan? Jon could not say. He stared at the dead assassin at his feet, mask fallen and wide lipless mouth open revealing the sharpened fangs of a beast.

“I tell you, I’ve had about enough for one day,” said the Kal. The fires from the burning houses soon died down, painting the town in dark amber.

Jon looked at the corpses of the red lotus assassins and a shiver dug deep into his spine. What other beasts does Stark have in his stable? What will he do next? Time was on the demon raider’s side now. He would wait and he would learn.

“Adrin,” said Jon. “You and Thorn should stay in the town tonight. Take shifts and don’t fall asleep. If you see them coming, light a torch and spin it in a circle. Either Susan or Ca’daan will watch for it. We should be back here before dawn.”

“What will you do in the caves?” asked Adrin.

“Susan says they know who these creatures are,” said Jon. “I need to know if we have any chance of defeating them.”

Jon looked at the Kal. “How are you doing?”

“Good enough,” said the Kal. He grinned his half-iron grin. Jon hated that grin.

Chapter Twenty Three: Stark

Jon, San'doro, Vrenna, and the Kal made their way slowly in the shadow of night to the mines. They brought no torches and Jon saw San'doro check over his shoulder for any sign of the Sticks behind them. If eyes were upon them, there was no hint. They wouldn't be able to keep the mines secret very long, but the longer the better.

Ca'daan met them at the mouth of the lowest mine. He sat watching the smoke of the two burning houses rise into the night air. The sky grew violet on the east and dawn began to shine as it had for millions of years whether men battled men or titans walked the earth.

Susan slept wrapped in a bundle of blankets. The evening had clearly exhausted her. Her skin was pale and clammy to Jon's touch. What was he doing to her? What cost was there for her amazing abilities? He would need them again if they hoped to defend the mines but for a moment he considered refusing them. How could he ask her to help them when it clearly hurt her so? How was he different than the Eye?

Jon lifted Susan into his arms, his muscles sore from combat. They walked into the caves and Ca'daan lifted a lantern.

Those who fled from the town recently made camps in the outer chambers while the rest of the town had gone deeper.

Men, women, and children, faces covered in ash, looked to Jon and the others. Large birds and heavy pigs complained loudly at the new world around them. Such creatures did not do well in caves.

The eyes of the villagers filled with both fear and anger. They had yet to understand the marauders who attacked, few would have seen them and survived. They focused their anger on those

strangers they could see, Jon and the others. None of this happened until Jon and the others had arrived. It was easy to understand their anger.

Susan stirred in Jon's arms. She looked up at him, her emerald eyes filled with dull weariness.

"I didn't tell them yet," she said. Jon did not understand. "Gauve was outside with Ca'daan. They saw Stark and Gauve recognized him. I could feel it. I didn't dig, though. I can if you need."

"No," said Jon. "Sleep. We'll need you later." Jon took Susan to the mother of the boy who had befriended her. Things could go poorly in these caves. Susan needed to be safe. The woman's eyes looked weary and she feared Jon when she saw him. Dark blood still stained his leather armor and dark cracked patches coated his hands. The woman nodded to him when he handed Susan to her. Jon had never bothered to learn their names.

Jon turned and saw the angry questioning eyes of the villagers around him. He turned to Ca'daan.

"Do you have a herbalist or sage? Who heals your sick?" asked Jon.

"The Wither," said Ca'daan. "Alyse Witherspoon. She uses herbs and spices to cure the ill."

"Is she here?" asked Jon.

"Yes," said Ca'daan. "In the rear of the mine. She didn't wait long to come here."

Ca'daan took them to the back of the mines and the weary eyes of the villagers followed. Jon saw Gauve in consult with the other elders. He would speak to them soon.

The Wither had clearly gotten her name from something other than her looks. She was beautiful, slightly on the far side of middle age. She had six children, all alive after the first assault, and a tiny husband of a man who kept quiet. Clearly the Wither commanded the family. Jon liked her at once.

"I thank you for what you have done," she told Jon. "Many here do not understand it but I do. We would have died last night if it were not for you."

The Wither's eldest boy, one of the four of the town militia, saluted in the old style with his stick sword. Jon smiled and bowed to the boy.

"Thank you for the words, m'lady," said Jon. "They soothe a weary heart. I need your aid. My friend, the Kal, a spear has pierced his side."

Jon left the Kal with the Wither while he, Vrenna, and San'doro went to Ca'daan and Gauve.

Ca'daan's uncle looked ten years older since the day before. His hair was disheveled and dust covered his face and body. He sighed visibly when he saw Jon but tensed when he saw the importance in Jon's eyes.

"What is it?" asked Gauve.

"Who are the Sticks?" asked Jon. "Why are they here?"

Gauve was silent for a long time. His face went white and his ears went red. The man hid something. Jon didn't need Susan to see a man preparing to lie.

"It is as Ca'daan feared. They traveled south along the undefended towns," said Gauve.

“They know you and they know this place. We have bled and killed for your town. The scout we killed said they came for vengeance. Of what did he speak?” Jon felt his anger growing. “Don’t lie to me again.”

Gauve looked at Jon again, his face looking even older. He looked away as he spoke.

“Much of our town’s prosperity comes from these mines. Salt is desired all over the desert. For centuries it was our primary trade. Fena Dim was destined to one day grow into Gazu Dim, a city with its own king.

“The mines were the key to this growth but the mines are a rough trade. Tunnels collapse. Shafts fall deep into chasms under the mountain. The dust fills a man’s lungs, stealing years off of his life. Even now our miners work for only five years and are paid the rest of their lives for it. It is expensive and such a system permanently keeps us limited in profit and growth. There was only one way to mine more and build Fena Dim into something greater.”

“Slaves,” said San’doro. His voice cold and guttural. Gauve saw something in San’doro’s eyes and grew even more pale. He nodded.

“We began trading salt for the captured enemies of the desert tribes. Only a few at first but more as salt production increased. They worked much longer and harder than our own workers. Ten or twenty years.”

“Before they died,” said San’doro. “And what of their children? Were they born into freedom?”

“No,” said Gauve. “They too supported the mines.”

Jon tried to imagine the conditions in these tunnels. Dark and cramped, crawling and chipping at an invisible wall in front hoping

the mountain didn’t collapse. Poison dust filling their chests, stealing life with every breath.

“But you soon came to your senses and freed them, right?” Jon didn’t hold hope for the right answer. Jon had lived around slavery his whole life but seeing a town as beautiful as this one perverted by such inhumanity chilled his heart. Perhaps San’doro’s views had grown into him. Again Gauve shook his head.

“No,” he said. His voice had quieted. “The richest deposits grew thinner and we began digging deeper. It got harder, the salt burned the skin of the miners.”

“The slaves,” San’doro corrected.

“Yes, the slaves,” said Gauve. “We went higher in the hills to the feet of the Old One and dug new tunnels. It was rich up there. We had about three hundred and fifty slaves at that point, all working deeper in the mines than we ever had. Some of them got really sick or went mad down there. They didn’t see daylight for months.

“One day a wall collapsed and killed six of the slaves. When they were dug up they found an antechamber under the rock. It was a palace, huge and carved inside out. Halls as large as open fields and statues of unknown gods and demons. No one was there, no bones at all.

“The place scared everyone who saw it. They claimed they could feel a hum or whisper, deep and powerful. They called it the voice of the Old One. No one wanted to go in, even when forced.”

Gauve paused for a moment. He feared his next words.

“We made examples of a hand full of them. The slavemasters showed them worse things than bad dreams or scary statues. We sent them all in to explore and find anything valuable.

“Then they disappeared. We didn’t see them for most of the day. Then a hand full came running back, covered in blood and screaming. They spoke of a pool that called to them and promised to quench their thirst. They spoke of a statue of a woman with long twisted arms and the head of a beast. Some drank and when they did they went crazy, mad with blood lust. They tore each other apart and feasted on the dying and dead. They drank the fresh blood of the weak.

“No one believed the stories until we saw them. One of the whipmasters went in to beat them into submission. They ripped him apart. We didn’t have any choice. We saw the murder in their eyes and the blood on their hands.

“We collapsed the tunnels. We broke four barrels on the supports and pulled the mountain down on them. Only six of us knew. Only two of us were there. Nearly a full generation has passed and none of us who lives in those times speaks of the days when the slaves bled for our town.”

“Now we accept our standing and limitations. We will always be a small town. Slavery is outlawed here and the mines at the feet of the Old One are banned.

“Who is Stark?” asked Jon.

“Many of the… slaves came from a single tribe that had been broken and sold. They were a quiet bunch of strong miners. Stark was some form of commander or leader in this tribe. They always looked to him for advice and he worked hard. Every so often one of our whipmasters would end up murdered, strangled, or throat cut, and we would suspect Stark’s hand in it but we worried about revolt if we punished or executed him. He was one of the men sent into the antechamber.”

“Why did they burn Fena Set?” asked Jon. Gauve paused again.

“They sold us the slaves. It was the hunters of their village that had captured the tribes.”

Jon was sickened. He could feel San’doro’s tension behind him. He did not say another word. He turned and put his hand on San’doro’s shoulder. Jon, San’doro, and Ca’daan left. They picked up the Kal and Susan on their way out.

The Wither had given the Kal a strong herbal drink that made him gag and wrapped his wound with dark blue crushed leaves. Jon smiled at her but had no stomach for further conversation.

Ca’daan started with them as the five of them made their way out.

“Leave us,” Jon told Ca’daan. He saw the hurt in the man’s eyes but he had to talk to the Swords alone. Ca’daan nodded. Jon turned with the others and left.

Jon told the Kal and Susan of the Sticks as they made their way back to the town, careful to avoid any of Stark’s spies. Jon had no idea what to do.

They sat and took lunch as the sun rose high in the sky. Jon told Thorn and Adrin the tale of Stark. Silence followed. San’doro stood and looked east at the cyclopean statue of the Old One.

“I want to kill everyone in that cave,” said the Desert Ghost. His voice was even and calm, not a hint of rage.

“What will we do?” asked Adrin.

“We can leave them and let them die,” said Thorn. “This is the result of their sins.”

“Most of the men, women, and children in those mines now had nothing to do with the enslavement,” said the Kal. “Leaving them to die is a harsh condemnation.”

“So is collapsing a mine on three hundred people,” said San’doro. “We’re fighting here because those men want their revenge. And they deserve it.”

Jon paused for a moment before speaking.

“There are some times where a man does something unforgivable. All his life he will live with what he has done, knowing that act, no matter how good, will ever wash the blood from his hands.

“I am damned. No one could ever forgive me for the acts I have done and nothing I do will ever make them do so.” Jon looked at Susan. “But that won’t stop me from trying. They have committed an unforgivable act, but so have I.”

His words hung in the night before Adrin spoke.

“I didn’t come all this way to leave and let them kill all those people,” said Adrin. “I’m staying even if I have to fight them alone.”

Jon felt a surge of pride.

“I am staying as well,” said the Kal.

San’doro looked at the man and then at Jon. “Will you stay, Gray Wolf?”

Jon nodded. San’doro kept his eyes on Jon for a long time.

“I will not let you die here because of those people,” said San’doro. “I will stay and fight for you.” Jon wondered how many men died with such brave ideas in their heads. He turned to Thorn and Vrenna. They both nodded.

Fena Dim had kept its protectors. Jon turned to Susan.

“Tell Ca’daan we’re staying.”

Susan nodded. Jon stared at her for a long time and ran a finger along her cheek. He saw Stark buried under the earth, screaming for a mercy or death that would never come and crawling out of the rock decades later. What sort of anger would that spawn?

What would they have to do to stop it?

Chapter Twenty Four: The Second Night

The rain fell as the sun dropped behind the western wall. A deep fog rolled through the valley. The setting sun and blood moon painted the sky in dark red. The fog stole the sound of the valley as well. No tree rustled. No animal could be heard. It was dead quiet.

Jon watched San'doro cut a black cloak from one of the Red Lotus assassins. He pulled the black cloak over his shoulders, tied it, and pulled the hood up.

San'doro and the Kal both looked to the sky, letting the rain fall on them. These men had never seen rain before, Jon realized.

Jon watched each of them. Vrenna pulled her hood over her head and loosened her saber. Adrin let the rain pour over the corners of his hat. The Kal held up his cupped hand and drank from it. Jon smiled. Thorn stood impassive, his sword on one massive shoulder. San'doro's new black cloak blew back in the wind. Jon saw the cold steel in his hands and in his eyes.

Looking down, Jon saw Susan. The rain ran down her face and it looked like tears. She alone would give them the chance to survive. Six warriors stood no chance but three pairs of two, each fully connected to the sight and mind of the other, could kill one hundred. At least that is what Jon hoped.

"We will fight in the town. Hold no ground. Shift and move as you need. They assume we protect the town but we protect nothing here. When pressed, we fall to the western trails and to the caves." No one replied to Jon. They stood ready. "Thorn and Vrenna, take the west. Adrin and the Kal, east. San'doro and I take the north. Let them fall between us and close in on their exposed flanks."

They got into position and Jon stood on the rock overseeing the town and the mist beyond. The fog would hide much from both sides but with far inferior numbers, the favor went to the Swords.

Dots of torchlight burning green in the fog appeared in the distance. Jon knelt and placed his hand upon the rock on which he stood. It vibrated under his hand. The Sticks were coming.

"Give us the sight," said Jon to Susan. She closed her eyes and Jon's vision expanded. It was nauseating at first but he soon got his bearings. He had his first sight, his own clear vision of the world around him, and his second sight, that of San'doro. One vision moved and one stood still but Jon soon came to understand it and use it. Strangely, San'doro saw the world differently. The colors looked different, blues appearing as green. It disoriented him a little. Also, San'doro saw much further and with much greater clarity than did Jon. He should have given him the pistols, thought Jon.

The green fire grew closer. Jon felt the rumble through his boots. Adrin would soon begin firing and Thorn's huge blade would cleave in.

"Give me their sight as well," said Jon. Now two more visions flowed into the sight he had already. One stood a head higher than Jon was used to. He saw Vrenna, cloak billowing around her lithe body and the hilt of her scorpion sword in her gloved hand. In the other sight he saw Adrin's hands cocking back a pair of dragon-hammered pistols. Nearby, the Kal twisted his waist, wincing, and pinwheeled his arms. His muscles cracked and loosened.

A deep and shrill cry rolled out of the fog. The sound was sad and haunting. It took Jon a moment to realize it was the sound of the brill being slaughtered. It would seem the Sticks, denied the villagers, took out their blood lust on the beasts left behind. Jon felt for the doomed beasts.

The green torches grew into large arcs in the fog, landing on the roofs swinging end over end into the doorways of the houses and shops of the town. Even in the rain the houses burned. Green flames, appearing blue in San'doro's second sight, rose through the roofs and exploded out of the shuttered windows. It tore into the cloak of fog that surrounded them.

The rumble continued but it was not as strong as the night before. Something had changed.

A flash of steel in the green and orange light of the night, painted by the burning houses and the blood moon above the fog, flew towards Thorn. Jon saw it through the big man's eyes. Thorn had clutched just in time, grabbing the masked figure who cut at him. The Stick had red leather armor and brown cloth over his mouth and flowing back behind him. Thorn pulled him against the strong wall against which he held his position and cleaved deep into the Stick's skull. The black eyes of the Stick rolled and he fell in a heap.

The tip of a spear stabbed towards Adrin but the Kal's club splintered the shaft and then crushed the ribs of the wielder. Adrin was prepared to shoot but doing so against the enemy on foot wasted the advantage.

In Thorn's vision Jon saw Vrenna beginning her dance, parrying at her opponent's wrist instead of crossing blades. Two Sticks fell away clutching gushing wounds deep in their forearms.

Now Jon understood the lack of the full charge. While some rode in across the bridge most of the Sticks attacked on foot. They waded across the stream, sliding their feet across the bedrock to avoid the spikes that had hobbled their horses the night before.

The green flames of the burning houses scorched the sky. Thorn, Vrenna, Adrin, and the Kal soon lost their cover. The hot air would cook them if they remained too close.

Jon could not see this new battlefield but he could imagine it. Forty or so Sticks on each side, west and east, cutting north. In between was a column of riders, lighting fast and able to cleave into any resistance the two groups of foot soldiers ran into.

"Susan, go to the caves," said Jon. He looked at her and she looked back. Jon ran a finger across her cheek, wiping away the rain. He smiled at her and she smiled back. Then she turned and left.

Jon and San'doro moved forward until they could see the riders cutting through the middle of the town. Time seemed to slow as he moved in, his mind moving faster than the battle unfolded. Jon fired, red flame and white smoke exploding slowly from his pistol in his hastened mind, killing the first rider immediately. The others pulled left and right, avoiding the flailing horse and fallen rider. Jon fired again, seeing a satisfying gush of blood explode from the hard leather armor of the left rider.

Then Jon and San'doro were on the move. In his third vision Jon saw Adrin moving east until he saw the flank of the riders. He shot two near the end of the column and then fell back to the Kal's furious defense as he reloaded. Jon too reloaded on the run, seeing San'doro behind him parrying a sword thrust and stabbing into the thruster's thigh.

Jon ran behind a building not yet aflame, the house where Susan had stayed a few days earlier, and prayed to any god who might be listening that they would not find any enemies behind it. He finished reloading and turned around the corner. A rider had knocked San'doro down, Jon saw his vision blur in his view through San'doro's eyes. Jon shot the horse in the head and it crashed down before it had overran and trampled San'doro. San'doro rolled to his feet, cloak spinning behind him. Another rider bore down on him with a barbed lance. San'doro stood firm. Jon shot the man in the side of the head. San'doro rolled and dashed out of sight before the horse rode him down.

They were hard pressed, Jon saw. Stark had planned this well. Jon reloaded his guns again and holstered one to draw his rapier. Hopping up on an overturned cart, Jon slashed the throat of another rider as he passed. The sword bit deep and Jon saw him riding with streams of blood flowing back behind him.

The world appeared on fire. Much of the fog had evaporated and even the rain had stopped. Vrenna continued her dance, kicking one man in the chest and cleaving into the flank of another. Men squirmed around her and she pinned the knife hand of one wounded Stick before cutting deep into his neck.

Thorn swung hard, shattering an incoming greatsword and cleaving deep into the chest of its wielder. Another came up behind him but Vrenna's saber slashed both his legs behind the knees and dropped him screaming to the ground.

"Where is Stark," thought Jon. He focused his vision first into San'doro who tore open a raider wielding a large warhammer, then to Thorn who hewed a man from the horse, then to Adrin who pinned a wounded man under his boot and stabbed his offhand dagger into the Stick's eyes. None saw Stark.

The riders twisted and wove through the burning houses while the foot soldiers continued swarming the east and west. They would soon lose their ground. Jon stepped into the open and fired both guns into two separate riders. Each fell with the crack of bone under the iron shoes of their horses. Two foot soldiers rounded the horses on Jon's right. Jon dropped the pistols, hoping to scoop them up later, and drew his rapier and dagger.

Jon parried an axe with the offhand dagger and blocked the man's left kick with his own raised leg. Jon stabbed into the man's eye and, drawing it out, across his throat.

The second footman stabbed at Jon with a blood stained spear decorated with a half dozen long-haired scalps. Jon circled the spear,

parried it to his right, and pierced the footman under the chin and deep into his brain. A third came around the corner with a two handed sword. Jon spun, grappling the man's arms before the sword had time to swing, and ran the sharp edge of his rapier from hilt to tip across the man's throat. Blood splashed on Jon's face and armor.

From his second sight Jon saw San'doro grappling with a much larger man. Jon worried for his friend until he saw San'doro's right dagger cutting deep open gashes in the man's torso. A final stab in the low flank of the man with his left dagger killed his opponent.

Jon scooped up his guns and reloaded.

Adrin and the Kal were back to back. Adrin fired shot after shot into the riders. When they turned, he and the Kal retreated and moved to another open area. Jon wondered for a moment how lucky they had been to pick the right spot for their retreat until the answer came to him. Susan had showed it to them.

As Adrin reloaded, the Kal turned and crushed the leg of a Stick dressed in ringmail and a studded leather helm shaped like the head of a dog. The man's leg bent sideways and his body folded over the hideous wound. Another slam of the warclub caved in the dog helm in an explosion of blood.

The attack cost Kal his life.

Jon, still looking through Adrin's eyes, saw a wicked sharp blade burst through the Kal's chest. His warclub, caked with gore, fell loose from the pit fighter's hand and hung from the leather strap. The blade withdrew and blood sprayed from the wound in the Kal's chest. He was dead before he fell to the ground.

Behind the fallen Sword stood one of the red lotus assassins. Mask down, the assassin licked the Kal's blood from his blade as he stared at Adrin with black on black eyes wild from the smoke of the demon-blooded leaf. Adrin stepped forward, put the barrel of his pistol

against the man's forehead, and fired. Smoke exploded in a red mist from the man's shattered skull.

Adrin stared at the Kal's body and Jon stared through Adrin's eyes.

"Adrin!" shouted Jon. "To me!"

Susan must have pushed his voice into Adrin. It shocked him out of his stunned gaze. Adrin, Jon realized, had never seen a friend die.

"Susan, tell Thorn and Vrenna to move back. Adrin's alone." Jon turned to San'doro. "Get Adrin to us." San'doro looked at Jon from under his hood, a line of blood drawn across one eye. It was an impossible order, a suicidal mission. The desert ghost nodded and disappeared in a flutter of his dark cloak.

Jon reloaded his guns, holstered them, and drew his rapier and dagger. Life was about to get very difficult until Adrin and San'doro came back to him.

Four riders and half a dozen foot soldiers turned around a building burning green into the night. Their leader, a brute with a massive axe, pointed toward Jon. He was alone and they knew it. They would descend upon him like a pack of blood thirsty wolves. Jon would have to take down their alpha.

The axe wielder had learned of Jon's guns, it appeared. He sent two of his riders in first. Jon didn't take the bait by shooting the two men. He stood his ground and waited. One of the front riders drew a large curved scimitar and the other pulled a short spear from a quiver of them on the side of his saddle. The spear came in and Jon ducked, letting it pass over his left shoulder. The big sword swung in and Jon rolled. He jumped up, planting one hand on the charging horse, and came at the brute with the axe. The axe brute's arm came down hard, numbing Jon's shoulder. Jon stabbed hard, burying his rapier to the hilt in the axe brute's chest. Both men landed hard.

Jon planted his hands and got quickly to his feet. The axe brute stood too, green fire reflecting in the black orbs of his eyes. The man grinned with sharp bloody teeth as he drew out Jon's rapier from his chest and threw it on the ground. Behind him, Jon heard the riders he had leaped over turn their mounts and saw the other foot soldiers hold their attacks.

The huge axe wielder raised his axe over his head but did not swing. Instead he kicked hard and circled low, swinging the wicked axe at Jon's stomach. Jon spun and got behind the man, planting his offhand dagger in the big man's side. Like the rapier, the small blade did little to stop the huge man. The giant spun again and Jon felt the blade of the axe swinging overhead. Jon stood up, drew his pistol, placed it under the man's chin, and fired.

Jon rolled and stood, fetching up his rapier. The six foot-soldiers drew swords and axes and spears. They grinned and closed in.

One fell screaming as his legs fell out from under him. Vrenna, stood behind the fallen man, blood dripping from her saber. A flash of heavy silver and another fell into two pieces. Thorn stood behind the halved man. Pistols rang out and the two riders fell dead from their horses.

Adrin and San'doro came around the building on Jon's right. San'doro grabbed one of the other foot soldiers roughly by the chin and cut his throat open down to the spine. A fountain of blood sprayed up into the night.

"I thought I was dead," said Adrin when he and Jon fell back to back, each with pistols in hand. "I've never seen anything like San'doro. He carved his way through to me like a scythe through wheat. He saved my life."

By now, every building, farm house, and shop blazed like a green torch. Thick smoke filled the air. The rain had stopped, but the green glow painted everything around them.

“We need to get to the caves,” said Jon. They ducked behind a large rock as a dozen more riders roared past silhouetted against the blazing village.

“They’ll cut us off and then cut us down if we try,” said San’doro. “Stark planned this well. We’re trapped.”

“No we’re not,” said Thorn. Jon looked at the huge man. The Voth stared out at the packs of marauders racing through the ruins of the village.

A wild stallion kicked and bucked down where Jon had killed the axe brute. The axe brute’s large horse kicked down one of the Sticks who attempted to control it. Two more tried unsuccessfully to hold it.

“Take them to the caves, Jon,” said Thorn. Then he was gone. Jon watched him run to the men and the berserk horse. Two of them saw Thorn coming. The third did not and caught Thorn’s sword hard in the back, breaking his spine.

The second managed a scream before the huge blade hewed into his skull. The third pulled out a bastard sword, blade ragged with long battle, and held it to parry Thorn’s massive blade. Thorn roared and shattered the sword and the man standing behind it.

Thorn grabbed the horse’s mane and mounted in a single fluid motion. He kicked hard and the horse calmed but still quivered in fury. Thorn kicked again and the horse exploded into action. Jon saw him ride into the smoke. He caught sight of Thorn again silhouetted against the green flames, horse rearing and Thorn’s huge blade cutting another rider in half at the waist in an explosion of blood and gore.

That was the last time Jon saw Thorn alive.

Chapter Twenty Five: The Mines

HE KNOWS. Susan's voice was faint in Jon's mind and made him shiver. HE KNOWS ABOUT THE MINES. HE KNOWS THEY'RE IN THERE.

San'doro stood, his face hidden under his black hood. Vrenna flicked her saber, blood and rain droplets flew off of it in a mist. Adrin beat the rain from his hat and wiped the blood from his face leaving red streaks over his eyes. Then he pulled his hat on tight and refastened his leather neck guard.

"We have to go," said Jon. "They know where the villagers are." Something exploded in the village, a sealed house or a barn, sending a pillar of green fire into the night air. Jon saw it illuminate the Old One, the titan god watching their struggle like the swarming of ants. What battles had this titan seen? What secrets did it keep hidden in its depths?

The Swords began their trek west under shadow avoiding the eyes of the demons below.

"Do they follow?" Jon asked Susan in his mind. She did not reply. He panicked for a moment. What was happening to her? What was this battle doing to her?

NOT YET. Susan replied just when Jon thought she had not or could not hear him. THEY KILLED THORN.

Jon stared at the green fires below. The bodies of the fallen Sticks littered the ground. How many were left? How many more must they kill?

"Susan, move into the caves," thought Jon.

They reached the summit and the mouth of the northern mine shaft. Ca'daan waited for them.

"They've gone insane in there," said the brill farmer. "You will not want to go in there. They do not understand. They are panicked. They saw their lives lost in that burning town."

"The Sticks know the villagers are in the mine," said Jon. "They will be here soon." Ca'daan looked at Jon and then the others. He nodded.

Jon turned to Adrin. "You and San'doro will go to the north passage. Vrenna and I will hold the south. Fight them at the mine entrances and pull them into the mine. When they reach the support shaft, shoot or break the barrel. Severn dug trenches and holes near the support. It will only take a moment for the shaft to collapse so run to the main chamber as soon as you break the barrels."

"What then?" asked Adrin.

"There is another deeper tunnel that leads higher on the mountain. We can escape from there. We can hope most of those that remain are caught in the mines."

"Buried once again," said San'doro.

Jon looked at the desert ghost, unsure of the look in his eyes. "Yes," said Jon. San'doro held his gaze and then nodded.

Adrin and San'doro began the hike to the north passage. Jon turned to Vrenna. She donned a boiled leather breastplate with a high collar guard on her left shoulder. She slipped her palm spike into her right glove and put long daggers in each thigh-high boot. She had strapped two short swords to her back, one over each shoulder. Her scorpion-hilted saber hung low on her left hip. In each hand she carried a small war axe. She had thrown away her cloak and tied her

hair back into a topknot to keep it out of the way. She looked at Jon and smiled. She looked like she could face all the Sticks by herself.

Jon checked his guns and reset the paper capsules of powder and shot at his sides. His two ramming rods were set, each ready to slide a fresh paper capsule into the guns in a mere moment. It would give him four good shots before he had to spend any significant time reloading.

THEY'RE COMING, Susan's voice spoke in Jon's head.

Below, a string of green torches began snaking its way up the hills. They would be here soon. Vrenna climbed into the rocks and faded into the shadows. Jon looked for Adrin and San'doro but saw neither. They were too far up on the rocks, he thought.

Jon waited.

Jon saw a stream of green torches trailing up the northern path as well. Jon had hoped that Adrin and San'doro would face no other man but it appeared both would be busy.

Jon could hear them riding on the path towards him. Thick leather boots fell on the gravel next to iron-shoed hooves. How many came? A dozen? Fifty? How many were left?

Jon saw the shadow of the first horse and the white sharp teeth of the first rider shining in the night. Jon wasted no time. He replaced the white sharp smile with a black ball of lead. the man toppled over backward and rolled down the rocky slope. Jon fired again and a horse reared, throwing its mortally wounded rider.

Three more riders came behind them. An axe whirled through the air, cleaving into the deep muscle of the first rider's shoulder. A second axe planted itself into the skull of the second. The third turned and hurled a spear into the shadows from where the axes

had come. Jon heard the sound of metal on wood as Vrenna had cut the spear out of the air.

Jon saw Vrenna hurl herself at the fifth rider, both short swords held across her chest and over her shoulders. When she hit the horse she pulled each blade across, scraping them together and shearing the rider's head from his shoulders. She landed beautifully, knees bent low and one leg out in front, swords ready. The footmen attacked her three at a time. She dodged a halberd strike, parried another spear, and broke the tip of her left sword off in the breastplate of another. Her second blade locked cross guards with a Stick broadsword. Vrenna drew the dagger from her left boot and buried it in the sword wielder's temple.

Jon had taken Vrenna's amazing diversion to reload his pistols. Now he fired them into the mass of Sticks that continued to charge up the trail. There are many, he thought, but not enough. Some are missing. Regardless, he decided, they must fall back.

"Vrenna, we move," said Jon. Firing into a screaming noseless fiend who charged him with a heavy wide-bladed sword.

Vrenna parried another sword strike and planted her remaining short sword under the chin of her opponent until his cap came off and balanced on the tip. She then kicked him hard into the swarm of Sticks that remained. She scooped up the broadsword, a fine blade of waved steel with an ivory skull on the base of the hilt. Then she and Jon fled into the mine shaft.

Torchlight painted the walls orange and shadows shifted in the darkness. The mine walls were smooth and square given the ease of shaping salt rock. The ceiling of the tunnel rose two heads taller than Jon, arched near the top.

Jon turned and fired twice out of the cave's entrance. Then he and Vrenna ran down the tunnel. An alcove had been carved twenty

steps from the main support and the barrel. Vrenna looked it and smiled.

“Stay in the alcove until I fire, then cut down the first two on your right to block them from your escape. Then fight your way to me. I’ll yell before I break the barrel so be ready to run or it will collapse on you.” Jon reloaded as Vrenna slipped into the alcove.

“Susan, how is Adrin,” thought Jon. There was no answer. “Susan,” he thought again and again nothing. Jon looked back deeper into the mine almost considering running down to find her. Panic welled up in him. He felt alone, a loneliness he hadn’t felt since meeting the young girl. Gods, he thought, protect her. He did not know which god would even bother to listen but he prayed anyway.

A deep rumble awoke in the mountain, a shake that warped the ground under Jon’s feet. The Old One awakens, thought Jon. I called and he will awaken and scream and kill everyone in the world.

No. Adrin had collapsed his tunnel. Jon looked down the tunnel and saw the shadows of men approaching. He saw their white teeth shining. He saw the gleam of torchlight in their black eyes. He saw the shine of steel in their hands. Jon saw them and fired.

He fired his first two shots quickly and saw Vrenna strike right afterward. The tip of her skull-hilted broadsword burst from the chest of a huge Stick holding a warmaul. The blade withdrew and a spray of blood from another Stick gushed against the salt wall.

Jon holstered his guns and drew his rapier. The feeling of the wire woven hilt in his hand reassured him.

“No matter what you do in life,” his fencing instructor had told him. “Your hand will always want your sword again.”

Jon hid the rapier behind his back and the first Voth rushed in, a scimitar held high. Jon twisted and stabbed from behind his back.

The rapier punched a hole in the man's chest. Jon drew it out and stabbed again in the man's throat.

Jon parried the next blade that came in and planted his offhand dagger into the man's groin. As the man reeled, Jon slid his rapier across his throat.

More men attacked and Jon cut them down. One blade cut sharply across his armor scratching his bare back. He didn't know how deep the wound was but figured he'd know soon one way or another. Jon impaled the attacker and kicked him down. More swarmed in.

"Vrenna, now!" Jon kicked the barrel and it broke open. Water rushed out and seeped into the ground around the support pillar.

"Vrenna!" shouted Jon. Three men rushed Jon. He stabbed one through the eye and kicked another with a powerful skull crushing round kick. The third caught Jon's offhand dagger in the mouth.

The ground rumbled around him and trails of dust fell. Far back he saw a flash of black steel surrounded by the screams and howls of the demontouched Sticks. He could not call for her again. He had to go.

Jon ran as the tunnel collapsed behind him.

Eyes of sadness and suspicion met Jon when he entered the main chamber of the mine.

"We must speak," said Gauve, standing with Odeem the elder. Jon had neither time nor patience for them. If they had hurt Susan, he would kill every one of them himself.

"Where's Susan," Jon asked Ca'daan. The man was silent but pointed. The family she had stayed with cared for her now. He rushed and knelt next to her.

Susan’s skin was clammy and yellow. Beads of sweat formed the moment her brow was wiped. Dark rings formed under her eyes and the eyes themselves nearly sent Jon into a panic. Her pupils took up nearly her entire iris, leaving only a thin ring of emerald. Her right eye had a ring of blood around the iris, thick and swollen. Her left hand was limp in his own like the hand of a corpse.

Adrin and San’doro arrived. Dust covered their bodies and faces. A long gash on San’doro’s chest dripped blood. Their eyes looked haunted. Jon could not imagine what they had faced in their own tunnel.

“Vrenna?” asked San’doro.

“She was in the tunnel when it collapsed,” said Jon. Adrin lowered his head.

The three men looked at Susan. Jon felt his heart throbbing in his chest. Her blood-filled eye turned to Jon.

“He knows what happened,” she whispered.

“Let go, Susan,” said Jon. Who knows what it was doing to her to touch Stark’s mind. She didn’t listen.

“He doesn’t care about coming in here to kill us. He is happy to bury us here. He thinks it justice,” she said. Jon’s skin grew cold. “He knows about the rear of the tunnel. He’s going there to collapse it.” Susan’s voice stopped and her eyes closed.

He stayed a moment, running the back of his hand on her forehead.

“We must go, Jon,” said San’doro, putting his hand on Jon’s shoulder. Jon stood, taking a last look at Susan, and left.

The three men, the last of the Seven Swords, walked through the mobs of villagers avoiding their looks of fear, confusion, doubt, and

anger. Severn led them to the narrow tunnel of the rear mine and, feeling the mountain weighing down on them, they half-crawled, half-walked out and back into the night air.

Stark was waiting for them.

The sky had cleared and the blood moon hung overhead. The black orb of the demon moon crested below.

Stark sat on a brown stallion painted in stripes of red blood. He wore a simple leather breastplate with a single red glyph over the chest. A gold-hilted short sword hung on his hip. A band of red painted the lower half of his face from the nose down. Like Jon, his head was bare.

Around him stood the remainder of the Sticks. Just short of two dozen men, six on horseback and the remainder on foot.

"Why did you do it?" asked Stark. His voice was raspy but filled with power and confidence. "Why bother to sacrifice your lives for dirt farmers and slavers?"

Jon, Adrin, and San'doro said nothing.

"They buried us alive in there," said Stark, pointing to the flank of the Old One. "We had no food and only the black water, the blood of the Old One, to survive. It took us twenty years to dig our way out of the mountains and the world we found out here was worse than the hell inside." Stark pointed at the cave behind them. "They did this to us. They made us who we are. And now you are going to die to defend them. A pointless act."

Before Jon could react, San'doro was on the move.

San'doro darted through the foot soldiers. Blood exploded from some. Others fell, grasping at their exposed organs. An arrow

whistled past, planting in San’doro’s shoulder. It’s barbed tip pierced through. A spear followed but San’doro cut it out of the air easily.

San’doro leaped, both daggers high, but Stark was fast. Jon had seen very few with such speed and accuracy. Stark drew his golden short sword and impaled San’doro on it. San’doro remained motionless as Stark lifted the desert ghost one handed above him. San’doro’s blood ran over Stark’s blade and into Stark’s other cupped hand. He drank deep.

Then the knives came down. Each one planting itself in the sides of Stark’s neck. San’doro stabbed them deep, twisted, and then pulled apart in opposite directions. Both blades ripped through Stark’s throat and black blood gushed as the demon touched general’s head fell backward to the spine. Both men crashed to the ground dead.

Silence filled the clearing. The whimpers of San’doro’s wounded foes cried out in the night. A large man in iron armor pointed a spear at Jon and Adrin and roared a command to strike. Though not with the ferocity they once exhibited for Stark, the remainder of the Sticks charged.

The huge man’s cry ceased when a lead ball from Adrin’s pistol crashed through his skull.

Adrin and Jon stood, pistols in hand and swords at the ready as they faced the last of the Sticks.

Epilogue

Adrin ran his hand across the brill's thick flank, feeling the heat underneath. The huge beast bellowed and farted.

"One more of those and we won't have a problem," said Adrin. Lummox was his first brill, a gift from Ca'daan, and he didn't want to lose her. She had birthed three of Adrin's five brill and, if this blockage didn't kill her, would be ready to market at the next caravan north.

"Ade!" Adrin heard Selana's voice from the back of their stone cabin. He looked past the brill's enormous rump to the dark skinned beauty at the door. She smiled at him and he smiled back. He was lucky to have her and thought about it every time he saw her.

"Ca'daan's here," she said. Adrin smiled again.

"Great! Tell him I need some help back here," said Adrin. Now I just have to figure out how to make it Ca'daan's arm up to the shoulder in Lummox's arse instead of my own, he thought.

"He says men are here."

Adrin forgot about his impacted brill and thought instead of the leather cloak in his shed. He pulled off his gloves and placed them over the split log fence of his brill pen. Cara, his youngest female, belched at him as he left. She was the most vocal of all of them.

Ca'daan sat with a ceramic cup of coffee in his hand. His face was ashen. He looked up at Adrin and stood. They shook hands in the Dim style, fingers interlocked into a pair of cooperating fists.

"Three men from the north," said Ca'daan. "They asked for you by name. Jon too."

“They’re of the Eye?” asked Adrin. He was aware of Selana’s concern behind him. He turned and smiled at her, doing his best to hide his own concern.

“Yes,” said Ca’daan.

Adrin thought about the leather cloak in the shed wrapped around the rapier, dagger, and the two pistols. He considered getting them. Jon had shot his way out of situations like this. But he was not Jon. Jon had told him this might happen and Adrin had to trust him. Adrin had assumed after his first year here that they wouldn’t come. He never would have married Selana if he had known this was going to happen. Selana’s father was right to object.

“Did you do what Jon told you to do?” asked Adrin, Ca’daan nodded.

“Where are they?” asked Adrin.

“At my home. I gave them water and ale. They wait for you there.”

Adrin nodded. He stood and gave Selana’s hand a squeeze before he left. He put on his floppy hat over his shaved head and headed out onto the road.

It was late afternoon and the red sun hung behind the Old One. The beast’s shadow overtook Adrin and he whispered a prayer Gauve’s wife, Celeste, had taught him. He didn’t believe in it but it made him feel better.

Adrin saw the horses first, huge black stallions ill-suited for the desert. Then he saw the men standing outside of Ca’daan’s house.

They were huge men towering over the few villagers who walked past. Each wore a cloak of black and leather armor with high neck guards that went up past their chins. Black leather three-corner hats shaded their eyes. One held a massive scattergun over his shoulder with one hand, his other hand rested on the hilt of a wide-bladed

greatsword that hung from his belt. A demon's head, twisted and screaming, capped the leather-wrapped hilt of the sword.

The other, smaller, had a bandoleer of small flintlock pistols running across his chest with two more on each hip. A longsword gleamed from the sheath on his back. Each of the eight pistols was shaped like a tiger in attack.

The two men watched Adrin as he approached. Adrin kept his hands visible and out at his sides. When he got close he looked at the smaller man.

"I am Adrin," he said.

"I know," said the pistoleer. "Please go inside, sir."

Adrin could see the dust of the months of travel on the leather boots and clothing of these two men. "They will never stop looking for her," Jon had said. Only now did Adrin believe it. These men or men like them had hunted the desert for years to find one little girl.

Adrin stepped past the two men and pushed open Ca'daan's door.

A small man stood by one of Ca'daan's windows looking out over the fields and mountains from the west. The man wore a simple tunic of ivory and dark trousers tucked into the folds of a pair of soft calfskin boots. His blond hair was short and neat. A light cloak, the color of sand, hung over his shoulders.

"This is a beautiful land," said the man, turning and smiling. There was no villainy in his smile, no intimidation. The smile disarmed Adrin. His voice soothed Adrin's worry. This was no hunter or killer, this was a good man. Realizing how easily this man's smile had disarmed him, Adrin grew even more nervous.

The man's blue eyes watched Adrin as Adrin's eyes scanned over the man's clothes.

“You’re looking for the Eye, aren’t you,” said the man. “I don’t wear it. It is useful for intimidation or for bypassing the riff-raff but counterproductive most of the time. Especially when we all want the same thing.

“My name is Gabriel. I’m a friend of Jon’s.” The fright began to build inside Adrin. He wished he had brought his guns though he doubted the monsters outside would have let him keep them. The man continued. “He and I worked together in Gazu Kadem about three or four years ago. He left us shortly after. That is fine. We do not keep slaves. He was free to go. But then he took something from us, something very dangerous. We need to find him and we need it back.”

Adrin said nothing and Gabriel continued.

“I know of the battle that took place here. I know of the men and women who defended this place. I know your part in it. You are a hero to these people even if they don’t say it. I know he was with you and I know she was with him. What I need to know is where they are.”

“He’s gone,” said Adrin. “Jon didn’t stay. He was too distraught. He went north. He said he was going home.” The man smiled his warm smile again and Adrin thought about how easy it would be for this man to unleash the two monsters outside. How fast they could kill him, Selana, and everyone else in this town.

“Where is Susan?” said Gabriel. He spoke his words very carefully and deliberately.

“She’s dead. She died during the battle,” said Adrin. “Something broke inside her, something in her head.”

Gabriel looked at him for a very long time. Adrin didn’t move.

“I am very sorry,” said Gabriel. “We could have helped her, could have taught her how to control herself.” Gabriel looked out of the window and Adrin saw real remorse in the small man’s eyes. Gabriel turned back to Adrin.

“You said he went north.” Adrin nodded. “Do you know where?”

Adrin shook his head. “No.”

“Well, we will find him,” said Gabriel. The man looked tired. “And you? What will you do?”

“I am staying here,” said Adrin. “This is my home.”

Gabriel looked at Adrin, smiled, and nodded.

“The next time I see the emperor, I will let him know his nephew is happy and healthy.”

Adrin beheld the man’s gaze and nodded.

“Tell your friend thank you for the coffee,” said Gabriel. “It is the best in the south.”

Ca’daan and Adrin watched the riders leave, heading north with fresh provisions.

“Do you think they know?” said Ca’daan.

“I don’t know,” said Adrin. He turned and looked at Cybel’s house. Two of the boys were fencing with sticks. One performed a decent disarm. A girl with red hair of about fourteen looked out at the window at them. The evening wind blew her hair.

Jon had been gone for three months before Susan had woken up. She was frail and couldn’t move her left side. She had nearly died from the lack of food. She could remember little of her old life but

sometimes awoke filled with black nightmares. She spent much of her time staring at the old one.

Two years later she could walk and talk again, even playing with her brothers. If she had any of her other previous abilities, she never spoke of it and they saw no signs. Her life would never be normal but it would be as good a life as they could give her.

She would live the life she had as Adrin lived his. There was no glamour in the enormous droppings of the brill but he had helped rebuild the town even when many made it clear that he was not wanted. Even Selana's father told him to leave. Selana's uncle had been one of the dead. But the council had allowed it. Severn had embraced him after the declaration. Selana had fallen in love with him as he rebuilt the town and helped clear the collapsed mines.

Yet, as good as his life was, Adrin's hand sometimes ached for the rapier.

That night, like many before it, Adrin sat cross-legged on the mound of the Seven Swords. They had found Thorn's sword next to the huge man in the burned city. He had been surrounded by the decapitated, disemboweled, and dismembered bodies of a dozen Sticks. Now his sword stuck point down next to the Kal's warclub and a post holding San'doro's daggers on the hill. All three sat on the mound where their bodies had returned to ash. They never found Vrenna's sword, nor her body. Adrin heard of a young king in the south who fought against slavers and had an ivory skinned raven-haired swordswoman at his side. Some day he might meet her again.

As the red sun set, Adrin sat on the mound with his three friends, imagining the will of the Old One and what the titan might know of impacted brill colons.