

Norbavon the soulless one

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Prologue

Maczcksuxe turned into the passageway that would lead him to his final goal. He walked with an air of power, ignoring the multitude of traps that would have destroyed a lesser being. His mass completely filled the ample passage with a black aura as he ascended up the final inclines to the amphitheater. The hall groaned with a booming of disgust with every semen laden step. The fluid flowed out of his pours with his sweat, creating a fountain of lesser demons continuously developing in his path. The ones unfortunate enough to be fertilized beneath him were crushed by the wall of force on which his body traveled. He used his embryonic form for this excursion, one glance at this macro organism would have driven a battle hardened warrior insane. Only other demons and the greater beings could stand to view this cursed embryo. But no human being would have been able to get close enough to view this form, they would have simply witnessed the darkening of the hall and then been crushed by the wall of force, if the underlings had not already fed on them first.

The embryo was composed of almost entirely brain. The rest of the mass was comprised of the vital organs necessary to feed the brain blood. The semen was the by-product of the system and had to escape the body quickly through the pours or else the lesser demons that it formed would fertilize inside of the demon embryo and be killed in the veins by the acid blood. The semen was comprised of eggs which had the ingredients to fertilize as soon as they reach the epidermis, when this was done each egg gained consciousness. The egg would then try to engulf all of the other eggs that it could find beginning the mass feeding frenzy that would continue until the egg hatched and a lesser was created. The lesser would then eat all of its brothers that it could find, fighting each step of its life until it had developed enough to be independent from its parent's form.

The race to escape the body was a violent one, with only a fractional percentage of the billions surviving to face the outside. On escaping the pours, the under developed were quickly eaten by those who had already escaped the putrid form. A few underlings traveled close by, using the demon's natural form as nourishment for their initial mucus dependent bodies. They grew swiftly with their hunger, concentrating too hard on the endless supply of semen to worry about battles among themselves. Maczcksuxe noticed none of this, his mind was too preoccupied with the goal.

The closeness of the orb made Maczcksuxe's mind swim with ecstasy causing insanity. The call could not be ignored, he had been anticipating its conquest for too long. The screaming from beyond had implanted itself upon his mind. His thoughts were unfocused, his usual cunning was absent as the call reverted his being to the primal instincts of the demon. Walls crushed on either side of him. Passages fell asunder in his wake. He glorified in the darkness, the chase, and his ultimate conquest on this thing that had dared to call the immortal being. Soon it would be his and whomever dared call the demon would learn the true terror behind the myths.

The last portal lay ahead, the one that would bring him within sight of the prize. The source was so close that he moved with a carelessness unbecoming one of such power. All of his senses warned him of the trap which lay ahead, but he ignored the warning. Only the door, in all its majesty and glory, was concentrated on. The door rose up into the gloom above, with only a few steps to the rise. A platform there at the top of the stairs brought the handle within easy grasp. Doors did not bother the demon, already behind him lay doors on the floor blown to a million pieces by the slightest burst of will from his mind. Maczcksuxe was not prone to merely opening doors, especially in his present condition. But this door stood where others had failed, all of his concentration could not budge the entrance to the portal.

The Orb increased its call to a frenzied rate, driving the demon half mad with desire. The light of the Orb poured through the crevices and cracks in the door. He approached with an increased speed hoping that his force shield would nullify the barrier before he ever reached it. Only when he was within a few yards of the door did he realize that his unheeding speed may cause destruction. The symbols on the wood screamed out to him and the shield slipped from his grasp. The magical runes nullified all of his magic, sending his embryonic form crashing to the stone passage. The fragments of stone pierced his brain, he screamed out in agony, but did not falter in the change. Growing from among the pile of scattered tissue and brain, a shape started to gain form. The demon Maczcksuxe walked again. His skin hardened to the black of the darkest pearl, shining in the glow of the orb, sending any would be demons, created in the semen, back to the blood to be recirculated as nourishment. But in this form and without his magic, he was vulnerable to attack.

The slab came without warning. It had been plummeting from above ever since the demon bounded up the first of the stairs. A silent descent from the ceiling of the temple down through the darkness, targeted on the platform before the door. Gravity pulled at it, urging it forward with increased speed, calling out in urgency for it to meet with the floor below.

The demon finally heeded the warnings of his senses, but could not discern the danger. The simple trap could not be seen without his magic, the slab was such a small danger that it caught the demon by surprise. The runes laughed at the demon, his breathing increased, echoing off the close walls back at him. He felt the danger, but his lack of ability to find its source angered him even more. He looked around, gazing carefully at the walls surrounding him. The door was the only object of concern in the passage. He reached towards the door with an outstretched claw.

Such a trap was too simple to even worry a powerful being of the demon's potential. A force caused by a 10 ton block of ancient stone and a fall of hundreds of feet impacted squarely upon the helpless demonic form. The concussion waves caused by the impact brought down the passage. The parade of underlings were destroyed in a heartbeat. Thousands of tons of rock swarmed in the formerly empty passage and annihilated everything in the hallway.

Maczcksuxe was an immortal and could not be destroyed by physical means. He lay under the slab. One of his eyes had been shot from his skull and lay clear of the body where it could survey the damage. His horns had been implanted up through the slab and down through the floor. Brains bubbled in their purple puss around the stone trying to regain some form that could be used effectively. Crawling together, his brains attempted to form small masses of mind so that some type of conscious thought could be regained. All of the limbs lie crushed under the slab with the bone fragments flowing freely through the puss and semen. The skull that had been the mind's container had been neatly divided into two halves which were now being licked clean by the sole surviving underling. The eye marked that one with a fury that made the lesser demon pause and turn towards the main vein that was uncut by the blast. Then the eye lost all sight as the lesser demon bit through the nerve that had been connecting it to a pile of brain matter. Maczcksuxe saw only darkness.

Book I
The Calling of the Four

Chapter 1

It was a time when men were content to live with the emptiness churning inside their hollow souls. Like ships sailing the seas, they never changed course for fear that the end of the world lay just over the horizon. They sat in the taverns recalling the timeless deeds of their fathers and grandfathers, but never of themselves.

They would work their jobs during the days and go home at night in a never wavering path that would end ultimately with their deaths. Few these days sought for something more, to seek out and doubt the divine order that had taken control of the world they lived in.

The tavern was warm with friendships renewed after a hard day at work. The men came from the docks to this particular tavern, sitting not far from the harbor itself, where the great ships were left alone for the night. They came here before they had to trudge through the dark slums to go to their homes. Still dressed in the garb of the daily work. Burlap pants, tied at the waist with discarded sail line, complemented by leather jerkins smelling strongly of the sea provided the most comfort. The tavern reeked of the sea, but its patrons were immune to the odor and if approached on the subject, they would admit their love for the smell. Scratchy beards covered most of the faces, providing an animals fur type of protection against the cold gusts of wind surging from the ocean waves up to the harbor city. These were the grunts of the docks, the peons. They labored endlessly, carrying supplies back and forth between the ships, the docks, and the city. They were the lowest link on the chain of command, being even the youngest sailor's slave. But the nights were theirs, they flocked to the tavern to forget about cruel cards that life had dealt them.

In small groups they sat around the hard oak tables, made mostly from the salvage of wrecked ships. The trade dotted the walls of the tavern, speaking of the glory of the port in ways that no story could adequately relate. A soft music set the background. The fingers of a mandolin player danced upon the strings of his instrument, providing a platform for the lull of conversation emerging up from every table. A tremendous fireplace roared in the rear of the building. A black cauldron, filled with potatoes and the catch of the day, boiled in its great basin. Scullery girls ran from pot to the tables, with side trips to the great kegs lining the walls, keeping the patrons happily drunk so that they would not hold back any of their hard earned money for the evening's enjoyment. The more drunk that the men got, the more their hands would wander, groping the girl who could not move fast when serving to avoid their touch. The second largest industry in the city, boomed more heartily at the harbor tavern with the coming of the night. While the port and the business of the sea ruled the day, it was the women and the fulfillment of men's desires the claimed hold when the sun left the sky. The women who only came out at night swarmed to the tavern, for this was pay day for the men, and that meant heavily lined pockets to spend on women.

They came in, dressed in their best garb, pleasing to the eye, but sultry to the desire. They laughed at the crude jokes, playing the role that would be most pleasing to the men. One night a woman would be the shy innocent girl to satisfy one man's pleasure, and the next she would tell her own jokes, even harsher than her host's to please another man's. They were the ultimate actresses, getting so caught up in becoming whomever people wanted them to be that sometimes they lost touch with their own identity, forgetting the person who really dwelt within the confines of the body.

The tavern seemed a warm, friendly place. Each table laughing out loud, causing a brash general noise of merriment to come forth when the doors to the tavern where opened. But one table did not raise its voice. In the corner of the room, close to the fire, between it and the musician, a lone man sat covered in a great Gronath fur from head to toe. A bowl of stew sat in front of him, hardly touched. Next to it stood a metal mug, clutched in an old and gnarled hand. The desire by this man to be alone was so overwhelming, that only the need to get to the fire and its stew, would bring people to within a close proximity. His breathing was hoarse, and he ordered his food in a harsh whisper. His coin flowed well though, the musician kept his post close to the man, playing whatever he wished, taking immediate payment for the hushed music of the Mandolin.

The man was waiting for something, a sign. Something was going to happen this very night, something that would change the course of the world. Something that would probably go unnoticed by most, but he would notice and then he would tell them all.

Each day he stood by the market, preaching the words of his God to the people. They usually just ignored him, but sometimes a person would stop to argue with the man. This usually ended with the beating of the prophet. He faith was untainted though, the next day, broken ribs or not, he would be back at the market, giving away his wares freely, where so many charged for what they sold. He was a Gazer, one who

reads the night sky, a cleric who could not make it through the rigorous training required. He had left the temple and forged ahead on his own, searching for God in his own way, and finding him.

He brought the cup to his lips with one hand, while the other summoned a girl for more. The warm ale rolled down his throat, he felt its trip through his frail body finishing in his stomach. He drained the mug and paid the girl for the refill. He clutched both hands around his new drink, gripping with an intensity that turned his knuckles white. His eyes peered from beneath the cowl, watching the others enjoy themselves. Anger planted its seed inside of him, wanting to stand up and curse these people for not seeing the obvious. Self control took hold of his heart, calming the heavy breathing and thrusting heart beat. These people could not be blamed, they had no say in the ways of the world. It was the others, the ones in the great temple, the king and his clerics. If any were to blame it was these. He cleared his mind, no reason to point the finger now. He had to wait, to know that his God had not forgotten him. His head slumped low on his shoulders, wondering when the sign would come.

He had seen it in the stars last night. There was no warning of its approach. Before that night there was no sign, nothing to tell him to watch on this night, lest he should miss it. But the sign was there as he stood atop a large run down house in the slums. A comet appeared from the darkness running across the sky. It disappeared as quickly as it had come, but the trail that the tail of the comet left, caused the man's heart to flutter in fear.

The sign of this world, the sign of Thanthos, was wiped completely out of the sky by the tail of the comet. He had looked down to the ground and wiped his eyes in disbelief. When his eyes returned to the sky his fears were confirmed, Thanthos was gone. He had then looked to the other formations, representing the brother demigods, they were all present. The comet had come in to the sky for a purpose, then had disappeared when its purpose was complete. One formation, one demigod, wiped from the night sky. He had fallen to his knees, his mouth wide open in shock. He could not take his eyes from the horror of this coming. For twenty beats of his heart the formation was wiped from his sight. Then it was back, as if it had never disappeared.

What glory! His mind rejoiced, there was a chance. The God would not have sent the threat if there was not an escape from the horror of the sign. He had run back through the streets, keeping quiet to himself, but gazing around at the people, wondering how they could have missed what had just taken place. The streets were a mass of wreckage and trash in the slums. He jumped and dodged all sorts of garbage on his dash home. A cat lay dead in his path, then a dog. So much death. Rats poured from the sewers to pick at the carcasses. His feet beat the pavement, running, not getting home fast enough. His saddles were soaked in large puddles lining the streets. The splashing of his run was the only sound to erupt upon the barren streets in this section of the slums. His eyes just wandered over the horrors, his mind did not see, or recollect that of which he had become accustomed to. At the end of the street on his second turn since leaving his gazing mount, his feet stopped. His hands pushed and pulled at a pile of garbage that lay on the side of the street. He grimaced at the noise, looking cautiously around, hoping not to bring any unwelcome attention down upon himself. As the pile began to dissipate, a large wooden panel was uncovered. He lifted this and crawled beneath it. He pushed the panel back into place and continued down a sewer passage beneath the city. The tunnel was dark, but his instinct led him to his home, his temple. A glow started to emerge in the distance. His body followed the light, but his mind was still up in the heaven's gazing out at the night sky and seeing his world extinguished by the tail of a comet.

The glow grew bright and candles came into view. The eternal flames of his personal temple greeted him with their flickering. Hundreds of these tiny flames outlined the entire room. The only sound was of water dripping from the ceiling onto the mat in the center of the room, his bed. His body burst into the room, his eyes crying, his mind now joined by his voice begging for mercy, begging for the sign, for the knowledge of how to save his world from the doom that his God had showed him. His cries bounced back and forth between the walls of his cavern, but no answer came. His prayers went out into the night never to come back. He had fallen asleep there in his temple, praying for the sign until sleep had come as a false answer to his pleading questions.

That was until today. This morning to be exact. The answer had come to his mind. A prayer answered where none were before. That was the thing with his faith. You could pray, pray forever and never be answered, but the faith kept him true. The faith that his God was out there and that he did listen when his servants called. As his body told him what his eyes could not see, that morning had come and that the sun had risen above his sewer home, the answer to his prayers had come. The message was one of such care, such concern, that its origination could only be that of his God. Right in his mind he had heard his

God's voice, speaking to his humble servant with a respect in the tone of his voice that preacher had never heard from anyone addressing him.

"Be calm my child, do not speak. I have shown you what may come, what may be. But to this world I give a gift. A gift of myself for you to use to escape the horror that you saw in the night sky. This evening you shall witness my sign and know that I have done all that I can do to help you and your people. You have served me faithfully over the years. Tell others what you know and continue your work in my name. There is nothing more that you can do, for the fate of your world does not lie in your hands, but in the hands of others. Be confident that I have chosen the heroes of your race well. Wait tonight, wait for my sign, and know that I have given you a gift, know that I have done all that I can do for your world." His voice echoed off into the distance.

The crowd was thinning out, the hour getting late. Soon the sign would come, he had no doubt in the words of the great one. He rose from his table, leaving a generous tip for the girl that had served him all night. She smiled in his direction, but could not tell his reaction, for the cowl of his robe still hid his face. Something about him caused her to continue to watch the strange man leaving the bar. Others began to watch his exit. His pace grew faltered, then he stopped completely, falling down to his knees. His hands reached towards the sky.

A moment later he cried out, "Thank you Jahvey," tears streaming from his now unmasked face. "Thank you my God. I will do your bidding." With that he rose and fled the bar, a glow of inner peace permeating from his face.

Chapter 2

On the southern edge of the great northern swamplands lay the Shrine of Cathous. A holy place devoted to the training and development of apprentice clerics in the True One's ways. Endless hours of classes took their toll on the hundreds of apprentices roaming the endless, stark corridors of the shrine. Towers thrust up into the sky, twice higher again than the most grand of New Peturan. Only the most noble of clerics were even allowed to set foot in the towers, they were devoted to worship in the most direct contact with the True One. Beneath the towers lay a courtyard of marble. Not a crevice or line could be seen in the floor. The moon reflected down by the towers upon the floor placing the great white orb in the direct center of the courtyard.

Clerics darted back and forth across the courtyard, whispering to each other in hushed tones. The speed by which they walked could be used to tell their rank. The Arch- Clerics had a very slow gate, not rushing to any meeting, happy with themselves and with their God. The apprentices ran to their different classes and back to their rooms to get the right journals for the next lesson.

When the apprentices neared the Acceptance, their classes became more in tuned with their future duties. They were instructed in the different missions, and locations throughout the world, that the cleric could pursue their destiny.

"Thanthos," the cleric instructed, "the name by which we call this world on which we live. Our history goes back one thousand years. But the records after five hundred are a bit sparse. The Shrine of Cathous appears in all of these recordings. We do not know from whence it came or whom built it. It has always been here and always will. The less studious of us believe that it was built by the True One himself, but those of us who think with a more logical mind, know that there must have been someone or something that built this great temple in which you study. The cleric's role throughout history is somewhat undefined. We are here to teach others about the great One. We are stationed throughout the known world and our ministries have put us in contact with a variety of cultures and people.

To the north are the great swamplands. Hidden deep within the marshes and demented foliage is said to be the first known temple to the True One, but none have seen it in decades. Last year one of the Chornjena organized a small group of various adventurers that dared to face the swamp. The swamp won as I am sure that you have heard. There will be other groups if this is to be your calling. There is no doubt that the temple is there, but my personal belief in the matter is that it does not want to be found just yet.

To the west lies the Great Sea and beyond that we do not know. The city of New Peturan lies on the western coast, the greatest city in the realm, where our King resides. The temple in New Peturan is our most glorious and visited holy places. The Temple of Jahvey. The donations given to this temple support the rest of our projects. To preach in New Peturan one must be very attentive to the needs of our worthy benefactors that live throughout the city. You will wear stunning, jeweled robes and be cared for by the hundreds of servants that maintain the temple, quite a contrast to the cleric that finds his destiny searching the northern swamp.

In the south are the plains, seemingly endless dunes of golden sand. The water is scarce, the wind can bury you within an instant, but the need for clerics down there is great. The plains are infested with a nomadic race. They are still very primitive and our present force has had little success in converting them. They would rather worship their hideous idols and false demigods, than come face to face with the True One. The road to winning the trust of the nomads is very long and arduous, one wrong step and this shrine will be out one more cleric. But the rewards of bringing a lost soul back to the true path are great, devotion must be very intense for this calling.

To the east lies the forest. Slowly the knights of the realm cut down the forest lands and our people are with them to guide them through the uncovering of the unknown. There are many types of beasts that emerge from the invaded forest. So it is the belief of this shrine that there is more than just a forest to the east. These beasts must come from somewhere. Many have sailed down the straits of Torgas only to return when their supplies ran out, confirming that the straits go on forever.

There is much to do in our world. Many things not yet known. Much to explore. You, as new clerics will be sent out to seek the unknown, to uncover what is now lost. To spread the good word of Jahvey to the world beyond the great sea, beyond the eastern forests." The cleric hesitated as an interrupting messenger burst in the room and held a hushed conference in the front of the class. The cleric's face looked grave as the news came to his ears. He ushered the messenger off with his reply.

“Class will be let out early today. There were some dramatic ... developments in the sky last night. Is the Gazer Allanah in class today?” A young girl in the back of the class raised her hand slowly. “Do you know what I have just been told?” The girl nodded slowly. “Would you mind sharing what you know with the rest of us?”

The girl stood up awkwardly. “Last night Sir, the cluster of stars in the heaven which represents our world was hidden from sight for a moment. My teacher said that it was nothing, but his eyes told more than his voice.” She sat down, afraid that she had said too much.

“Our world,” the cleric continued, “disappeared from the night sky. No clouds were out last night.” He paused letting the impact of this discovery sink in to the young minds. “The Arch-Clerics say that we have been sent a warning. Our world is in danger. The True One has shown us a sign of what is to come and it is our duty as clerics to see that this does not come to pass. Tonight, there will be more. Our God will give a sign of hope. With all threats there is a chance, a sign of hope that the awesome will of the True One will not strike its hand in our direction. Go now and pray that we may avoid this fate.”

The students rushed out of the classroom, whispering among themselves. The young girl, Allanah, headed towards her room. She remembered the evening before when she had been allowed out upon the great towers to assist her instructor. She had the gift since birth, the ability to read the stars, but none needed the ability to see what had happened last night. The comet had wiped out the entire cluster, leaving every other star untouched. She remembered the terror gripping her heart when her eyes witnessed the dark hole left by the comets tail. Her breath had stopped and the next thing that she had remembered was lying in her bed with her teacher bowed over her.

“What did you see Allanah?” he had asked her.

“Our world ... gone,” she whispered remembering the horror that her eyes had forced her to see. She wished that she was blind. There was no comet ever seen on this night, the next one was not expected for ten years. Her teacher rose from her bedside and walked towards the door of the small room.

“I must tell the Arch-Cleric this, sleep now child.” He had left, leaving her alone in the cold room. She looked up upon the blank walls, her mind wondering as to the true meaning of what she saw. She had been given a gift, that is what the clerics told her, the gift to be able to discern the signs of the stars. But now she thought of it as a curse, she did not want to see the ending of the world. She alone knew the true meaning of the night's events.

“Well missy cleric, it seems as though the higher order is licking your heels once again,” her roommate mocked from across the room.

“I am not in the mood for you tonight, Decka,” Allanah replied turning away from the girl.

“Oh, but I want to find out about the death of us all. Please, enlighten me with your knowledge. Allanah, you are special. Allanah, come up to the high towers. Allanah, you must never forget that you will be a great leader some day. Pah!” Decka spit on the ground. “I am so sick of living with Jahvey's image on Thanthos!”

“Decka!” Allanah eyes widened, “you could be excommunicated for that.”

“So let them kick me out, at least I would be rid of your ugly face.”

“Leave her alone,” Magral called out from her sleep. “She does nothing to you. Why do you insist upon teasing her?”

“She makes me sick. They treat her like an Arch-Cleric, spending her nights in the high towers while the rest of us get the grace to wash the evening dishes. What makes her so different from the rest of us? I have been here longer than she has, and yet my chores are of a dog, while she has forgotten the meaning of work.”

“You forget Decka, I have been in training longer than both of you and still I do the dishes. Yet do I complain? No. I except my tasks, as should you.”

“But don't you ever get sick of seeing ones such as she being treated as if they were already members of the Chornje? Don't you ever wish that it was you on the towers, being able to witness the messages in the sky? I was not even able to watch last night. I was in the kitchen being scolded for a spot on a pot, while the princess was interpreting Jahvey's messages to the Arch-Clerics.”

“That is because you would have no more of an idea about the meaning of the message last night than I would. You must accept the fact that Jahvey has blessed her with the gift. She is a Gazer. There are no others, not even any of the most honorable Chornje have the gift, you should be thankful that there is now one who can interpret the signs.”

"I know why they treat her like a queen. You see there was another, a Gazer, but they ran him out. They're all afraid that princess Allanah is going to leave if she breaks a nail doing the dishes or some other petty chore."

"Just go to sleep Decka. There is no reasoning with you." Magral brought the covers over her head in an attempt to shut the other out.

Allanah just listened, Decka was right, she had been treated better than the rest of the apprentices. But she had to watch the night sky. Who knew when the messages from the True One would come?

The next day appeared as any other to an outsider. The clerics roamed around the compound repeating their daily activities as they would have done on any other day. But there was a sense of urgency in the air. Their faces were aglow with their knowledge. Tonight, their god would speak to them. He would show them that there was a chance to escape from the dark gloom. They were so excited by the occurrence of a message that they completely forgot about the horror which the previous night's message relayed. The horror of the destruction of Thanthos. Only the apprentice Allanah was hushed in her waiting, knowing that tonight was only a promise of chance, nothing more. But the chance depended on people, those of the God's choosing, and people could fail.

She was beggared all day by all levels of the Chornje. She must have repeated the message a thousand times before she was able to escape to the relative silence of the high tower after the lesson was finished, where her teacher awaited her.

She gazed out into the sky, nothing. Thanthos was still there in midst of the other formations. The comet was long gone from sight. She looked down from the edge of the landing. The entire Shrine was out tonight, all looking to the heaven's for the sign. A hushed fog had descended upon the Shrine. The wind whipped her cloak about her, coaxing her over the edge. Her teacher stood in the middle, watching her. A voice inside her said that the sign would not be from the sky tonight, her teacher seemed to have equal apprehension. No show for the thousands to see. This sign would be a glimmer compared to blatant warning of the previous night.

She felt a calm descend about her, shutting out the rest of the world. The sky was clear, the moon reflecting off the far tower down into the courtyard below, making the thousands seem like bits of light in the immense pattern. Her mind lost focus of the world, and her soul was lifted from her body. She felt no fear, just an unending happiness as she felt the confines of her body left behind as her soul lost touch with the false security of solid ground.

Allanah was drawing too close to the edge. Her teacher moved in towards her. Her eyes glazed over, her body slumping forward over the railing. He reached and caught her just in time to prevent imminent death. He laid her down on the ground. Her face shown with light, and a smile tried to erupt from her lips, but without form. Her hair blew in the wind and his attempts to wake her failed. There would be no sign tonight. Her vision had failed her. He lifted her in his strong arms and started the long climb down.

His feet went slowly as to assure a firm grip on the stone steps. He got to the first landing and paused to rest. Allanah stirred. The glassy look slowly dissipating from her eyes. Her breathing became rapid.

"Allanah," he shook her lightly. "Allanah, can you hear me?" Her eyes focused upon her teacher. She sputtered something, but he could not discern the meaning.

"Jahvey, bless us," she said to no one.

"Allanah, are we to be saved?" he asked urgently inches from her face.

"A chance," she laughed. "Oh yes teacher, there is a chance. Not only a chance, but a gift, the greatest gift."

Chapter 3

Forty years after the ominous message from the heavens, all was forgotten. The warning was never advertised to the general public of Thanthos, and those who knew of it, never researched the reason as the why their god would choose to destroy their planet. None seemed to know the cause for such a threat, and those who did, choose not to discover its source.

At the Shrine of Cathous, the sign was treated as a great historic event, taught in the classrooms to the apprentices as something they should have seen. In New Peturan the threat was taken a little more seriously by the King, charging his personal clerics to find a way to appease their God's anger rather than search and destroy the problem at its source. None knew its source and none really cared. Dark rumors spread out of the Temple of Jahvey and the once grandiose temple became a dark dungeon of which none dared enter. The once magnificent city became a military oppressed town, with strange disappearances in the night. The people feared the King and the military, but not as much as the black cloaked clerics who rarely ventured out of the temple during the light of day.

The word of hope never reached New Peturan. The recluse Gazer was not taken seriously and the girl Allanah was shut in the Shrine in study, never to leave. There was a general feeling that Jahvey had forgotten them. The clerics still waited for the promised sign of hope that had come to only the two Gazers. The devoted waited out every night for the past forty years, praying for the sign to come, but not knowing that the small glimmer of hope had already made its presence known.

Life for the commoner continued as usual. The people were never warned that their repetitive lives could come to an end sooner than they would wish. Those that had heard the rumor took more notice to it than they did to the strange preachers in the marketplace. They were lost souls, lost to their God and lost to themselves, but the time had come. The time for the world to fight back against the unknown, the time for the calling.

Roaming the city streets was the first victim of the road to victory. The Jackal was a thief of vast reputation throughout New Peturan. When he had first heard the call of the Orb it had nearly cost him his life. He was in the midst of a theft in the Arro District, acquiring the few extra gold needed for an enchanted dagger he wished to purchase. The theft was a routine in and out, grab the gold, break in, or so he had thought.

The owner of the apartment left every evening at sunset and failed to return until the early light of dawn. He was a frequenter of the exquisite brothels that New Peturan was most famous for. The Jackal had been surveying him for the past month, keeping track of his every move and all visitors coming and going from the house, his target. The Jackal felt good about this job, when his victims set themselves into an unending daily routine, so common among the residents of New Peturan, it made it that much easier for a thief to properly time his break in.

There were no windows on the bottom two floors. He planned his entry towards a barred window on the third floor. The outside walls were made of stacked stone, providing a scaleable surface for an experienced climber. In the city the houses were built very close to each other, leaving just five feet on either side, so the Jackal had to remain extremely quiet throughout his engagement. There were hushed voices coming from the next house on the side which the Jackal choose to climb, but the lights were dimmed.

Dressed entirely in black, he approached the wall. The street was quiet due to the late hour. He slung his pack on his right shoulder and proceeded to slip his fingertips in to the small crevices between the stones. He easily scaled the entire wall quickly. Breaking in the window would not be a difficult problem. The bars were separated just enough for a boy of the Jackal's size to easily slip through. He had just reached the ledge and was about to slip through the bars when the Orb's call came piercing through the night into his mind. The shock of the probe jolted the Jackal causing his muscles to spasm. His arms and legs tensed then released in such a fury that he was thrown across the dark alley into the adjoining tenement.

The boy, hurling through an unbarred window while ripping down most of the curtains, was quite a shock to the present tenements of the room beyond. Jackie landed in the midst of a great bed right between two lovers.

"Ugh!" groaned Jackie recollecting his senses. The bed was very soft and he found himself swimming through the blankets in an effort to regain some balance. He looked at his new companions,

“pardon me my good fellows. I hope I did not interrupt anything.” He made his way to the bottom of the bed, trying to avoid any contact with its present occupants.

The two men were still too befuddled to move. They merely laid still, staring in shock at the intrusion. One looked very menacing towards the Jackal, his eyes gaining that animal gaze that warned the Jackal to move fast. While he was watching the dangerous one, a hand reached out to him from behind, trying to gain some hold on the boy's body, but the Jackal was much too swift for the obese charmer.

“Do not leave son, this must be your inner self coming out, why not you join us for a bit? It could be quite an experience for one so young.” He continued to grab at the boy, crawling after him across the bed, but the Jackal had gained a good head start and the mattress was too soft for quick movement.

“We could teach you some of life's simple pleasures.” added the other, catching on to his friend's intentions.

“No thank you my good man,” he blurted as he avoided the outreached arm, gaining the edge of the bed, and made for the door. “I much prefer my roommates to be of an opposite build than myself. It adds so much to the experience. You should try it sometime.”

As Jackie made his way through the door he heard their last plea. “It could be quite prosperous for you to stay. We are men of great wealth.” The giggle that followed made the boy's skin crawl. He slammed the door behind him and ran down the stairs. He burst from the house and took a deep breath of the fresh night air, the room above had a sickly perfume stench making the fresh air taste all the better.

As he began the long trip back to his own lair, he scolded himself for not taking advantage of the obvious opportunity. The two men would have been easy targets for his dagger and he was sure that their room held much wealth. But his mind still remembered the surge that had thrown him in to that room. Something had invaded his mind. He could not think of any who would wish to kill him, at least none with the power of which he had just been a target.

The Jackal made his way through the streets tonight. He really did not feel like crawling through the sewers, as was the usual method of escape. The streets teemed with people. Older men and women with nothing better to do with their excess of money than to spend it in one of the houses that lined both sides of the street. The working ones were kept behind bars where the patrons could pick their favorite. They would order the girls, or boys, whatever their fancy was, to stand and show them their wares and if their fancy was satisfied they would be invited up into the rooms of the house where every wish would be granted, for the right price. The sounds that emanated from these rooms would make even a hardened man cringe with disgust.

The Jackal detested hated this part of town, it reminded him of his own birthright. His mother was a prostitute, but she would never show her face in this collection of scum. She was the most sought after woman in all of the New Peturan, and most of the surrounding territories. The King had even called on her fine services on more than one occasion. This particular joining caused the unexpected birth of the Jackal. The results that followed allowed the Jackal opportunities not often offered or available to one of his status, which is why he was so well trained in all of the honorable arts, and even some that were not so honorable. The Jackal found that most of his interests lay in those skills that were not openly taught. He enjoyed the lessons that came from the knights of the castle, but he would always find his mind wandering to dreams of the day when he could be called Assassin. After a long hard day of sword training, he would sneak away to the Assassin's chambers to put his new acquired skills to the test. But before the skills of the killer, there was always the grueling sword play with one of the knights or even the Captain of the Guard. On occasion the Captain would teach young Jackie the better arts of sword fighting, and how a noble knight must enter into battle.

“Now Jackie, you must always remember to salute your opponent before engaging him in combat. There are as many different varieties of salutes as there are standards of kingdoms. Here in New Peturan we place the shield to our breast, to display our King's colors in full view to the enemy, and the sword first raised above the head and then the hilt to the forehead and lastly with the tip pointing to the ground with the arm extended. This is done to symbolize the harmony between Jahvey, ourselves, and the earth beneath us,” taught the Captain.

As the Jackal was repeating the movements, that he promised himself he would never use, he asked, “but why not use his salute as a chance to strike first?”

The Captain saluted the boy and then changed to a much practiced fighting stance as he answered, “that would be wrong and dishonorable!” Easily he dodged the Jackal's first attack consisting of a series of careless blows. “If you keep this up boy you can go home with a few more cuts to add to those that I gave

you last week!" The Captain quickly parried swinging low across his body then, coming up with his hilt under Jackie's jaw, he sent the boy stumbling to the ground trying desperately to catch his wind as his sword slipped from his grasp. "If you decide to ever enter this fight using even a slight sample of sword play that I have taught you, maybe I shall let you go home undamaged." The Captain helped the boy to his feet then backed away resuming his fighting stance.

"But if one of you is going to die and you can prevent your death and the death of perhaps a charge, why not strike during your opponent's salute?" taunted Jackie. The boy was tired of getting hit. He concentrated on all of his skills, and his quickness, to work on the larger opponent. "It is better to die honorably than to fall to such foolish whims." The Captain found himself backed against a wall. Grabbing the tip of his sword, the Captain hit the Jackal with the flat of the blade and quickly moved away from the wall. "How can a knight live with himself if he were to take advantage of such a display of respect and true chivalry? Do you really believe, Jackie, that you could get away with such an act of cowardice?" He lowered his sword and assumed the stance of the lecturer. Jackie thought this stance much more dangerous than the previous one. "As soon as word spread of your misdeed, scores of knights would hunt you like the dog chased by the fox. Do you not think that your opponent could do the same to you? When you wear the armor of the knight, if ever, you will understand what it means to have true honor. I only hope that your lesson is not learned too late," with this the Captain saluted, thrust towards Jackie's shoulder making a hit. He then sprung around and blocked Jackie thrust, knocked the sword out of his hand, and threw the boy across the engagement circle where he landed in a heap of semi-consciousness against the wall. The Captain then bowed and took his leave.

Jackie's other teacher was Stealth. No one knew the instructor's real name, except maybe the King. Stealth and the King had been childhood friends. Needless to say, because of his line of work, the friendship was kept from the prying public eyes once the two had grown up. When the King's father had resigned from the throne, beginning the present King's reign, the meetings with his friend were held in upmost secrecy. The public could never accept the King's kinship to one such as Stealth. His reputation was known throughout the city. If Stealth had to meet with the King he would have to sneak into the castle through the immense dungeons and numerous secret passages through the walls of the stone fortress, and because of this his nickname was invented by the few castle workers who knew of the King's secret. Stealth looked admiringly at young Jackie, with a hint of sorrow. He saw so much of himself in the young boy, and therefore was twice as tough on him than any of his other pupils. They would drill for hours in all the basics of dagger and short sword fighting, the weapons of the assassin. This grueling workout took place after the long afternoons with the Captain.

"The Captain disagrees with your art of fighting," Jackie stated as he sharpened the already razor edged short sword.

"And what makes you say that Jackal?"

"He said that you should always salute before you fight."

"And he is correct."

"But you told me the other day that the best way to rid yourself of an enemy is to use quickness and if possible to kill him before he realizes that you are fighting," Jackie argued.

"That is also true. Were I to dispose of an enemy, that is precisely the way I would do it. But that is not fighting, that has nothing to do with meeting a respected foe on the field of battle and engaging with mutual respect. Were I to engage a knight and he saluted me, I would return the gesture. Though, it would be his duty to salute first, being the knight. It is quite obvious by my size and stature that I am no knight and have no reason to offer a salute," Stealth explained.

"But how does one tell when to return a salute and when to attack quickly against an enemy?"

"That is for you to judge Jackal and the answer can only come with experience. You be the judge. But the main thing in life is to stay alive, is it not?"

"Yes of course," Jackie sat perusing this last bit of knowledge. "But... oh never mind. I suppose there is no absolute answer is there?"

"No, just stay alive my young assassin."

Under Stealth's tutoring Jackie learned the art of the assassin. The lessons were long and arduous. On certain occasions they would spend days lying in wait for their victim to arrive. There is no glamour in the life of the assassin, only the vast amount of gold that one can receive for a job well done.

The King relied heavily on his team of assassins, though he would deny any knowledge that they even existed if questioned. Heads of State that disagreed with the King in his frequent meetings and made

themselves a threat to the unity of the land would awake in the morning with their throats slit or maybe find their hands pawing uncontrollably inside their stomachs. This allowed the King to exercise an absolute dictatorship over the Kingdom. The King was not a bad man though, all of the murders were for the good of the land. Though some might disagree with this method of ruling, it worked and the King never abused the power that he had. The King was a fair and just man and anyone who had fallen under the wrath of the assassins was usually better off dead anyway.

Jackie pondered all of these memories as they were thrown at him through the calling. His mind was attacked with visions of his past. He recognized within himself the repetitive lifestyle which he so detested. He saw his future in his mind, growing old and dying, never accomplishing anything of significance. It was as if the Orb recognized his need for a purpose.

As a young teenager he had left the castle and had foraged on his own ever since, which, although this had not been a very long time, had caused the maturing process to speed up a bit compared to the other boys his age. The Jackal is only sixteen.

He had done quite well on his own, buying a house in the rich district and acquiring a small band of thieves to work over the better parts of town. His men lived in hovels that he rented all over the city. This small band added quite a nice amount to his monthly income. But now the time had come for all this to end.

He was not sure how he knew that the end to this stage of his life was over, but it was there as plain as if someone had told him, "It is all over boy, life as you know it has come to an end. I guess that it is about time that you grew up. You are not getting any younger and I do not want any crying and no you cannot take any of your filthy life with you. It's about time that you did something meaningful for a change, help out someone besides yourself."

The messages stopped, the images came to a standstill in his mind. The Jackal knew that he had to get home as fast as possible. His feet brought him along a path that he had taken countless times in the past. He went to one of his houses where he knew he would not be disturbed. It was an underground room in the middle of a old cart and chariot junkyard. Actually the whole thing had been set up as an escape route in a last resort situation. There was no apparent outside entrance. The only way to get in was through a tunnel located in the outhouse.

Upon entering his house, he fell into the plush, feather bed covering most of the floor. He was asleep before his head hit the pillow. The Orb watched and then continued its message in the Jackal's dreams.

The Orb brought Jackie through a glimpse of the loneliness of his life. He saw his mother, whom he never got to know. The sensations hit his weakest thoughts. He had always been a vagabond in a world of royalty. Never really belonging anywhere, he had left and formed his own life. The simple matter was that deep inside the tough exterior of the city renowned Jackal, was a pitifully, depressed, little boy. The Orb made other promises. Ones that told of friends becoming close enough to be family. The Orb needed him. Him, not just anyone. Here was a place to belong. Though he had no idea of the specifics, he felt a great importance behind the Orb's call. Its message told of a mission, one that would take all of his cunning and skill, a mission that if failed, would mean the destruction of the world. He knew that he must somehow find it, this Orb. But soon the messages stopped and only the call persisted.

Jackie woke, and he knew then that the journey ahead would be unforgiving, but to what end was still disguised.

Chapter 4

The Knight was also a recluse, a loner. He lived a proud life, fighting each day with the squadrons sent out to keep the forest at bay. But his mind wandered afar, spending its time in a world that was solely his. This world was much different than the events that took place around him. While his face was as cold as stone, his mind wandered afar. He dreamed of adventures and revenge, things not to be found at the poor excuse for an outpost they called Fortress Shathra. He spent his days traveling back through his youth, when his dreams still had hope and his life still had a chance for fulfillment.

The Commander was a fair man, he would admit that much, but the Commander was not the one he had to report to at the end of each day. It was the squadron leaders with whom he had his trouble. Old, fat knights who had earned their way into a desk job. Every day he would have to go to this slob and put up with the “In my day” and “When I was a squad leader” bullshit. These men disgusted him, he was around “In their day” and had fought beside most of them, but they all seemed to forget this point. The world had been no different then, he had put up with the same crap then as he did now. As a matter of fact those greased pigs behind the desk had bitched about the same things that they were accused of today. They all created their own images of glory, false stories of what they wished they had accomplished in the past, but these stories were gold to the eager young squires and soon turned into legends told around the Inns at night.

His squadron leader, was a perfect example of false heroics. He had made himself a legend through his stories. The Licker, as he was sarcastically called behind his back, due to his false sincerity displays for the Fortress Commander, had the mind of a snake. He was the cruelest man at the Fortress, and had every intention of some day becoming its commander. The sooner the better. There was nothing that would stand in his way. The Licker kept himself in good shape, but what a hypocrite the man was, complaining constantly about the “system” in front of his men, but accepting no such talk from anyone else. There was nothing that destroyed respect more than hypocrisy. Two-faced bastard. He created a false image of the perfect Knight for the younger ones, an image of cruelty and hardness. This was not at all what the Knighthood was about. The Knights were a brotherhood with truths based on honor and loyalty, but it was all destroyed now. All the truths were thrown down and trampled beneath the war for power. The brotherhood had succumbed to the influence of assholes that were destined to destroy anything that based itself on the truths of life or was held sacred. The typical duels for power were turning to political battles rather than the honor that was due. The Knighthood, that he had seen hundreds die for, was crumbling down around him.

The Knight had been offered the first step up the ladder to power, but had turned it down. He would rather fight against the vermin on the field of battle. At least they would not stab you in the back to further their own selfish ambitions. The legions of horrors that crept out of the forest or the river, should be the real enemy, not your own people. So he had remained a squad leader, setting out each day into the unknown to find any trespassers onto the new territory. Of course the new territory was originally the monsters home and the knights were the actual trespassers, but when the King wanted more land, he got it.

His fellow knights, who had risen above squad leader, left him to all of this. Allowing him to continue to fight, which removed him as a threat to their throws for power. This made the Fortress a more dangerous fighting ground than the battlefield.

This morning he got up and dressed as he had for countless others. He moved to put on his armor which was left, as usual, arrayed neatly in the far corner of his one room hut. Each night he spent at least one hour polishing out rust spots and washing off the blood of his victims. It was a tedious task, but one that he had grown accustomed to over the years.

As he was finishing the last buckle of his bottom armor, the call came. He was forced down to his knees as the surge of power coursed through his brain. His hands flew to his ears in a hopeless attempt to shut out the intrusion taking place inside of his head. The call surged through his mind's memories as it had with the Jackal and found what it was looking for, a dream and a loss.

Inside each mind there is at least one dream and one loss. A dream that has existed forever, but has been dismissed by the logical mind as impossible or unattainable, and a loss of great proportions, most often of something loved. In the Knight's case it was his family.

Years ago a child had roamed this empty room which he called home, and a wife had pushed away the darkness and cold with a radiant smile. The smile that he had once loved more than life itself. Tears welled up in his eyes as the painful memory of love reinstated itself deep within his being. The Knight

succumbed to the call and dropped completely on the floor as the call brought back the feelings of family and of being a part of something. That morning, for the first time in his life, the Knight missed morning quarters as he lie half dressed on the floor, lost in the past.

The Licker had been waiting for this opportunity quite sometime. Although the Knight posed no immediate threat to his position, it was best to pluck the seed before it had a chance to grow.

“You there!” he shouted.

“Yes Sir!” the young knight answered warily.

“What is your name?”

“Faerkis Sir.”

“Are you not of Sir Norcroapas's Squad?”

“Yes Sir?” the soldier answered, leaving the end hang for he sensed something in the wrong.

“It seems that your illustrious leader has taken it upon himself to sleep through morning quarters,” the Licker let that sink in before continuing. “Do you know the penalty for missing morning quarters?”

Faerkis hesitated. “Sound off boy I have not the day to waste!”

“Sir, Knight's Article IV, any soldier who finds it necessary to miss any formation for any reason, excluding death or maiming, will be placed upon the stake before sundown of the day of the offense and flogged in front of that knight's squad.” Faerkis repeated the order as he had done countless times in his training as a squire.

“Yes, that is the law,” the Licker festered for a minute, “It seems that your leader has a great love for my whip, given the situation, does it not seem so to you, being his fellow soldier as you are?”

“Yes Sir,” Faerkis answered uncommittedly, “but Sir, Sir Norcroapas has never missed before and I find it hard to believe that there is no just reason behind this one incident that deems consideration.”

“Quiet boy!” the Licker shouted, “You are not here to make excuses for your superiors. Since he has never missed before, it is our duty to teach him this lesson before he makes a habit of it, do you not think so?”

“Yes Sir,” Faerkis answered sorrowfully.

“I can not hear your whispers boy, I said do you not think so!” the Licker had now turned red and whipped this last statement at the top of his lungs.

“Yes Sir!” Faerkis retorted in his loudest voice.

“That is better, now perhaps this sorry member of my squadron would be so kind as to take his fellow squad members and fetch their leader for me, that is all, dismissed!”

Faerkis did an about face and left the Licker to drool over the prospect of flogging his hated adversary, all within the confines of the strict code of discipline.

Faerkis gathered the other squad members from the formation. He explained the situation to them, but could not answer any of their questions. There was only one place to find the answers, so they headed out of the Fortress and soon were within sight of Sir Norcroapas's hut, where not one sign of life was seen.

Chapter 5

A signal penetrated through the vast space that separated the Orb from Jackie and instilled itself in his skull. He knew that he could easily get to the Orb in about two weeks. The temple was not far from New Peturan. There was no way that he could have ignored the call even if he had wanted to. The pulsing radiance was too strong, too overbearing on everything he did. A train of thought could not go five minutes before the signal reinserted itself and reminded the brain that it was still there, not by interrupting thought patterns, but by instilling its mark on everything, making its presence the most dominating need to the mind. An urgency erupted from the center of his head, filling his whole body with energy. He felt powerful, nothing could keep him from his goal. Someone had a job for him, a very important job on which the world's destiny lingered, for the first time in his life he was needed for something important. He was not about to let this first one go.

The Jackal loved the sea. He had grown up with it and had spent many hours on the docks watching the ships and the sailors. There was a very professional atmosphere along most of the docks. It was not a typical "sailor town." He had spent enough time here to know that the fastest ship available was the Cutlass. Her reputation had spread through all the known ports of the Great Sea. Since speed was Jackie's main objective, he brought all of his needed possessions and made his way to her pier.

The dock was kept in exquisite cleanliness. Every night the city workers would go down to the dock and clean till it shined. Crates were everywhere, going to every thinkable destination. One could buy anything imaginable here. Sailors worked like ants and there was no room for laziness. A sailor could find himself in the brig if he was caught loafing on the job. New Peturan was the best port in the known world and she planned to meet and surpass her reputation.

The Cutlass gleamed in the sun. Her frame seemed to be made of some type of metal which was very odd, for most ships were of wood. It amazed Jackie that this heavy bulk could have the reputation of speed that it did. Her mast was also made of the same metal and was thicker than any he had ever seen. The boarding plank was made from a rich redwood. This was amazing in that the only redwood to be found was located in a forest that guarded a wizard's castle.

"Welcome aboard," the sailor's voice snapped as smartly as did his salute.

"Is the Captain aboard?" inquired Jackie. "No, but you are welcome to wait aboard the poop deck until his return, which should be momentarily."

"Thank you." Jackie climbed the plank and took a look about him. Sailors worked vigorously everywhere. There was such a sense of excitement and teamwork present. He could tell that the Captain must be a great leader to command men to this degree of motivation. He tried to stay out of the way, which he soon found impossible.

The Captain demanded respect. He walked with an air only found around natural leaders. He was a true sea warrior. His body was fine tuned to a degree that impressed the Jackal. His blond beard and mustache were neatly trimmed to perfection. He wore an enhanced uniform, not all that different from the sailors. His gait was one of importance, but not impatience. Jackie was quite impressed as he saw him approach the ship and immediately decided that this man must be the Captain of the Cutlass.

As the Captain approached the plank the sailor snapped to a rigid attention and saluted impeccably. The Captain promptly returned the salute and had a few words with him. His eyes peered up and Jackie returned the glance. After receiving some other information, he proceeded up the plank and approached the young thief.

"Good day, I am the Captain of this fine craft, Captain Kraken." the Captain greeted as he extended his hand.

Jackie returned the gesture, "I am called the Jackal and am looking for transportation to the mouth of the Thaxrka."

Kraken's eyes peered through Jackie, scrutinizing everything about him. He looked at his clothes and examined his face for quite some time before answering.

"I must ask the nature of your mission and if it will jeopardize my craft in any way or my crew?"

"I assure you that there is no danger. I simply mean to reach the river as quickly as possible."

"I have heard of the young Jackal in my visits here. You are related to the King?" asked the Captain.

"Yes, it seems my reputation may endanger my passage. But I am not escaping anything nor am I wanted for any crime." Jackie responded protectively.

"I make my own decisions on a man and do not trust the opinions of others. I simply wanted a reference, and relationship to the King is good enough for me. You must tell the King, when you return, that I rate his port the finest in all that I have visited, and I have visited every one charted and some uncharted," bragged the Captain.

"Thank you. I will be glad to convey your message when I return."

"We shall be shoving off at sunrise tomorrow morning. You may spend the night on the ship if you wish. I will have one of the sailors show you to your cabin."

"Shall we discuss price?" asked Jackie.

"I prefer to leave that up in the air. If you successfully reach your destination then we shall say that you owe me a favor some time in the future. I rather like the idea of having favors owed me."

"Then I hope that I can do you that favor some time. I am very good with making good my debts to others." With that final word Jackie followed a sailor down a few decks to a small cabin with one bunk.

Jackie had no intention of staying on board this evening. He had much to buy and much gold to do it with. With the cost of the trip out of the way, he had many unexpected gold pieces burning holes in his pockets. After storing a few items, he left the ship. He walked down the docks until he spotted a small boy.

"Boy! Yes, you," the boy turned back precociously. "I'm not going to hurt you. Come over here I've a job for you. You must give this message to the King. Tell him that the Jackal is going away for some time and not to worry. Go up to the guards at the main gates and tell them that you have a message from the Jackal for the King. I will give you 5 gold pieces now and when you deliver this message I am sure that the King will reward you better, plus ask for a meal."

The boy took the message and the money and ran off in the direction of the castle. He looked back once, but was waved on by Jackie. "Awe, now on to the shops and the ladies," Jackie thought to himself.

The Jackal was a favorite among the woman folk of New Peturan. He was known for his class. He treated the women well, no matter what their status. This was probably a result of his own family tree. His mother was well known. Though her occupation would not grant it, she was well respected and liked by the residents of the city. Jackie never had any problem finding young women more than willing to spend the evening with him. There was more to turning a trick on their minds though. He was young, but that did not exclude even the older working girls. The women of the district knew him and enjoyed his company. Tonight, though, he was looking for more than a night in bed. He wanted more than matters of the flesh, so he turned away from the worse parts of town and sought out one that he knew could fulfil his other desires, the ones of the soul, as well.

Her name was Alexis. The blond locks flowed down past her hips. Jackie loved long hair. He liked to feel it run between his fingers. Alexis was a rare beauty. She was not a prostitute, her mother knew that her gifts could bring a much higher dowry if she was kept pure. Jackie had other thoughts though, and so did Alexis. They had often dated but nothing physical had happened between them as of yet. This night was a special one.

He could see in her eyes the loss she would soon feel, he had told her that he was going away for awhile. If there was anyone he could say that he loved, it would be her. Her innocence was evident. All she had ever learned about love was from him, and now she was going to lose that. Her only friend. They sat at a table in a secluded restaurant. He was known here, so they got their favorite table in the back corner by the fireplace. The aroma of the roast pheasant and fried potatoes filled the air. Her hair reflected the yellow glow of the fire that burned with increasing intensity. A tear flowed down her cheek.

"Do not cry my sweet, I will return for you," Jackie calmed.

"I can not help it, I have this feeling of dread, of emptiness. It is as if I am never going to see you again. I do not know what to do without you. We have spent so much time together, I do not think that I have another friend in this whole damn city, and I can not live without you!" she broke down in tears.

"No, please do not cry Alexis. I give you my word that after this is all over I will return for you." Though deep inside he was not sure whether he would be able to return. "I can do no better than that," he tried to calm her, but had little success.

He had not realized before how deep his feelings went, but now they came to the surface. He felt the loss as she did. Her crying continued and it did not bother him. He wanted her to cry for both of them. For the love, yes it was love in a pure form, that bond them. He had met no other in this city as good as this one. He did love her, but he hid it from himself as well as her. He could admit it to no one. His hardened ways had tuned him to show no weakness and this was their ultimate test. But deep inside, in where the Orb

had touched earlier, was a scared boy who wanted to stay and marry this perfect girl. Her crying continued, but at a slower pace now as she tried to bring herself under control.

Jackie gazed into her eyes. This was his goddess. Sitting across from him in this darkened restaurant was someone who really cared about him and he had not realized it until his time came to leave. He wanted to comfort her, but knew that it would only make things harder. She had to regain control to deal with the situation.

The Orb watched Jackie and felt pity for the boy. Using the powers that were common to the Orb, it influenced the situation. Jackie had never known love for another. This one was special and the Orb needed him to witness true love. He had to break down the walls constructed around his heart so that he could be more exposed to the needs and feelings of others. As a gift to the boy and to the world and to its God above, the Orb inspired the heart of the boy. Not that love was not already there, the Orb just amplified it to a level that only old lovers reach. The girl would be pleased by this, the Orb was curious as to the boy's reaction. The Orb erased the shield that the boy usually put up to ward off any that might get too close to his heart. The gift of love was not one to be dismissed, and the two exercised their gift to the fullest.

They finished their meal, she had hardly touched anything. The Jackal had taken to the wine to soothe the fire in his heart. The walk back to her apartment was without words, none were needed. She felt that this was their last night together, no matter what he said. He had lied before, not that she did not trust him, but she had a feeling and she always acted on her feelings. Her feelings led her to grab his hand when he tried to leave, and her feelings brought him into the apartment beyond, to the secluded back room which was her bedroom.

The room was lit by candles on the outer perimeter. There was a curtain drawn about the bed and the candlelight danced in intricate patterns along its folds and creases. She stood in front of him, a vision to his longing eyes. The last night of love for him. There was such a finality to the act. In these moments here in this bedroom, he would love her. He had no other, and she was worthy. Her hair spilled down in long locks to her waist. Full eyelashes covered rich blue eyes that gazed longingly into his. She was his for tonight. He was hers.

The room moaned in ecstasy of the beauty of the union. There is something special that happens when two of purity join.

She approached him and slowly unbuttoned his shirt. She removed over 5 knives from his body as she continued to disrobe him. Her fingers traveled over his bare skin. He was too young to have any significant body hair. Her nails caused shivers to emanate up through his skin. Her hands traveled over his chest and when he was completely naked, they traveled between his legs. He moaned as her hand moved with his gyrations. He pushed her hand away and undid the strings that allowed her dress to fall in a neat bundle on the floor beneath her.

Jahvey saw what the Orb had done. He watched the two and was pleased by the Orb's choice of the thief. When the god felt good the whole universe was effected by this feeling. The tenderness of the god's heart illuminated the universe and all of his creatures felt the goodness of the act of love. They had a rare feeling towards friend and enemy alike and their actions displayed this awe toward their god and the love that was now increasing in a small room on a distant planet on a street in New Peturan.

Her body was of the same silky skin that he had seen on her face and hands. She was of the purest ivory. Her breasts were full and young. He reached forward to caress them and they rose in anticipation, the nipples becoming erect. They kissed and a thousand lovers on a thousand different worlds joined and kissed at the exact same second. Animals joined and everywhere there was love, and for that one instant where their tongues intertwined in a dance of joy, there was no fighting. Millions of fighters, fighting in countless wars, lost there urge to fight and for a split second they stopped their engagement and wondered what the purpose of their fight was. For that one instant not a single being lost its life anywhere in the universe.

But the battles started up again and the moment was lost when their lips parted. All returned to normal and he carried her through the curtains to the bed beyond. He lay on top of her and gazed down at her face and neck and chest. Then he kissed them all. She moaned in delight and returned the love kiss for kiss. He entered her slowly and they soon moved in a rhythm of love. They joined as one and their cries went into the night. Tears flowed from her eyes; for the pain, for the world that would separate them, for her lover who would be leaving her, and finally for herself. She cried for her own loss and for her own heart which was about to burst wide open with love and pain.

When they tired, they slept together. She put her arms around him and vowed never to let go. She would not let him leave her, but when she awoke he was gone and all she had left to remind her of the night was a single red rose.

Chapter 6

They stood in the doorway, aghast at the sight that lay before them. The Knight lie on his back staring wide eyed at the ceiling. He was half naked and it was obvious by his positioning that he had fallen. At first they thought some horror had befallen their leader, but it was soon obvious by the look of content and happiness written on his face, that the cause for his plight was an even greater mystery.

"You two," Faerkis commanded, "pick him up and lie him on his bed." The two men quickly obeyed, taking special care in the handling of their respected leader.

"What do you think happened?" one of the younger ones asked.

"And why does he look so happy about it?," Faerkis pondered. "I suppose that we shall have to wake him and find out. Now go and fetch some water and I will see what I can do about getting him to quarters." Secretly he thought that the Knight had just a little too much to drink. He had seen it happen often enough. All the signs were right, the smile on his face while lying half naked on the floor, the only thing that was missing was the evidence. There were no bottles anywhere and no stale smell of alcohol intruded upon the room. The Knight had also never been known to drink. Well if he was right in his assumption, at least the water would calm the effects of the hangover which would assuredly follow and wipe the stupid smile off his face.

The water arrived, with a cloth Faerkis wiped the brow of his leader. At first no progress was made, but as he squeezed some drops of water down the Knight's throat he started to come around.

"Help," the Knight whispered.

"What Sir, help with what?"

"No, no, I have to help, to go"

"Go where Sir?"

"I can not remember, a jungle, a temple somewhere!"

"There is nothing like that here Sir, your not making much sense."

"Not here, North!" he shouted coming fully awake and sitting up. "I have to go North, to help, I am not sure with what, but I have to go now!" The Knight started to rise from the bed, but Faerkis gently pushed him back.

"I am very sorry about this Sir, the temple and whatever else you dreamed about, but I have to take you back to see the Licker, he would have me skinned alive if I did not. I hope that you understand. It is for your own good."

"I see," whispered the Knight. "I will go with you, the sooner this is over with the better."

They helped the Knight dress into the rest of his armor, while the effects of the previous night were wearing off. Soon they left the hut and the Knight locked his door for the last time, pausing a moment in respect to all of the memories that would lie forgotten in the empty corners of the structure.

"Your horse is ready Sir," Faerkis informed.

"Then let us go and get this last meeting with the Licker over with." This mention of a last meeting startled the rest of the riders into attentiveness. "It shall be interesting to see how the legendary Licker deals with my sole indiscretion." The Knight looked around at his men. He had trained each one individually and transformed the boys that they were into the best fighting squad in the history of the fortress. They were his only family now, he felt that he owed them an explanation for the events that were about to occur.

"Men," he paused to get their attention, "we have been together for quite some time now and I want you to know that I am proud of each of you."

"Sir, just because you missed morning quarters does not mean that we should be punished by one of your speeches," one of the knights jested. The others laughed at the Knight's reputation for long windiness.

"I understand, but this one last speech is very important." His men, sensing his intensity by the tone of his voice, stopped the laughter as quickly as it had started. "Some strange things may soon come to pass, and although you will probably think me crazy, I will tell as much as I can. I have been called away. I am not sure by whom, but I know that I can not ignore this summons. There is some great evil in our world and I have been chosen to extinguish its fire. I am not sure why I was chosen, but I feel very honored by the summons." The others turned their faces towards the ground and stared at their horses' necks, ashamed of the tears that were forming in the well pools of their eyes. The Knight though, held his head proudly as the

water trickled down onto his face. The tears of sorrow of parting from his men mixed with those of his joy in discovering a new life and together they dripped off of his cheeks onto his armor.

As their horses neared the Fortress, the Knight called a halt. "I shall leave this place today and never come back. You might be called upon to pursue me, you will not catch me, so do not falter in obeying your orders. In the escape, should we come to blows, I shall surrender. I will not risk harming one of you. I ask only this, that should the Licker choose to carry out the punishment that the law entails, which he most assuredly will, than you will have my horse waiting for me nearby."

"Sir, let us leave now and go with you," one interrupted.

"Yes, we can all go and help you on this quest," Faerkis added.

"That would make me very happy, but no, I must do this alone. You all still have families to care for. Would you leave them and ruin any chances for your sons becoming squires by your dishonor to the crown? No, I think not. You will all stay and become the leaders of this desolate Fortress someday. But I beg of you, when you do get the power over other men, do not let it go to your heads as the Licker has. Remember all that I have taught you. Come we must go," the Knight kicked his horse into action and was soon lost in his own thoughts as he galloped towards the impending structure in the distance, the others following closely behind.

Chapter 7

The plank was lifted as soon as the Jackal's boot left the wood. The deck was a flurry of motion, each sailor with his assigned task to complete before the Cutlass could get underway. There were line handlers prepared to release them from the pier at the correct command by the Captain. Other sailors stood in a strict formation, every ship wanted to look good before it got underway. Others were navigators and checked the position of the sun with arcane looking instruments.

"Take in the stern line," bellowed the Captain.

"Stern line in," returned the sailor in charge of the line team.

"How are we looking up there?" the Captain yelled to the smallest sailor of the crew, who had found his place in the crow's nest.

"All clear Captain, but I'd watch out for that crazy chap over on the north pier. He looks like he spent all night in the pubs again."

The Captain laughed, "I'll be watching him."

The Jackal looked over the side and saw the portals in the side of the ship had opened up and now oars were floating gently in the water. The wind had begun to push the stern out away from the pier and it seemed that the Captain thought the progress sufficient enough for the next barrage of commands that were required to release the ship from the prison of the port.

"Stand by your oars," yelled the Captain.

A boatswain's mate echoed the command down into the hull where the oarsmen were. "Stand by your oars mates!"

"Port oars row!"

"Port oars row aye!" returned the mate. The rowing pulled the ship even further away from the pier.

"Take in the bow line!"

"Bow line in Captain!" yelled the bow line handler.

"Very well. You see Jackal, the winds push us off of the pier and now with the help of our port oars, we are in excellent position and can easily slip away from the bonds of port," taught the Captain.

"All oars ahead we are heading out to sea. You may take the helm on your own."

The Cutlass slowly moved on. As they passed the fort that guarded the harbor entrance, the Captain gave some orders to a group of sailors that had been standing by as if waiting for these specific instructions. In a flash they disappeared below the deck into the holds beneath.

The men returned to the deck carrying a large pot among them. It took all five of the sailors to move it and even with all five they were having great amounts of trouble. They brought the pot to a stand that stood about 10 feet behind the mast. Here they hauled it up with lines until it was at the top of the six foot stand. The Captain then gave orders for the sail to be raised. The fabric of the sail was made of a material that the Jackal had never seen before. It looked like some type of animal skin, but of what origin was still a mystery. The fur was still on it, but had been glued down by some means. The sail was very heavy in itself. It took a quarter of the crew to raise it to the top of the mast. Jackie now saw the reason for the hefty mast. No ordinary mast could have held a sail such as this. But only one sail? How could one sail propel such a ship? There was no means to turn it sufficiently enough to catch the wind. It stood in the immediate center of the ship. The Jackal's curiosity was increasing with every second.

The Captain then waited. Land was slowly disappearing from view. As soon as all land was gone from sight, the crow's nest reported, "Captain we are now gone from all eyes."

"Very well," said the Captain, "prepare for the skis." He then approached the large pot and climbed to its side.

The Captain ordered all rowers to halt. The deck cleared of all unnecessary crew. Those that were left were holding on to anything available. The deck was secured of all loose equipment.

Now the deck was silent. The Jackal grabbed onto the side of the deck, wisely following the example of the others. Jackie's curiosity would not let him go below. The Captain placed his hands on the pot. It was an amazing looking thing. Jackie knew that it had to be of magical origin. There were jewels in the sides and it was apparently of great value. An incantation rose from the Captain's lips and a slight wind started up where there was none before. The sail filled and the wind increased. There was no way that the sail could have filled from the slight breeze that Jackie felt. The source of the wind had to be the pot. The ship started moving forward with the power bestowed by the great sail. Then with a tremor the ship rose. A

huge wake erupted from the rear of the Cutlass. The ship continued to rise and Jackie felt the hull released from the water. The Captain stopped his speech and watched as his ship pulled away from the bay at an alarming rate. Jackie held on as tight as he could. He never knew that a ship could travel this fast. He was quite sure that no ordinary one could, but this was no ordinary one that he was now on.

“Hydrofoil Jackal.” the Captain explained. “The pot creates a wind that is strong enough to raise the ship up on the skis built below the hull. I got the pot as payment for a deed I once did for the Wizard in the Redwood forest. The pot is the only one of its kind. I was taught the words to start and stop the wind and now I have the fastest ship on the water. There is nothing that I can not outrun. I love speed on the water. There is nothing like it in the world. It is better than even your prostitutes. I spent half of my life building the Cutlass. She is a fine craft. The finest!! The sail is made from the skin of the Molak. It was a long and costly battle, but in the end I got my sail.”

In less time than the Jackal thought possible the Cutlass sailed across the Straits of Torgas and was at the mouth of the Thaxrha. Here the Captain once again approached the pot and raised his incantations to its creator. The winds stopped and the Cutlass was once again bound by the water beneath it. A small boat brought the Jackal to the shore and left him just below the river's delta.

The Jackal left the boat's safety and stepped upon the shore. He turned and waved good-bye to the Captain. The swamp greeted him with open arms.

Chapter 8

The Licker had been waiting, rubbing his hands in anticipation of the moment. There was a blanket of silence spread throughout the courtyard of the Fortress, as if the Licker's eagerness was opposed on equal ground by the nervous minds of the men.

"Too many years I have waited," thought the Licker, "this one last thread of the old Knighthood shall be shamed in front of so many. The last of the believers in the old ways shall gaze upon the flogging with uncovered eyes and witness the beating of their savior. One might think that he shall become a martyr, but no, oh no. He shall be returned to his squad, demoted and one of his own men shall lead him from here on! All will laugh at him and he shall become not the martyr, but the example of what befalls those who oppose the leadership, which is me of course. I shall rise above as an example, counter to the Knight, of what the Knighthood is about in this day and the future, and all will come to me to hear the lessons of the learned. I shall be promoted and that will put me well on my way to that which I desire most, the overseer of this desolate Fortress!"

The gates squeaked in their hinges interrupting his chain of thought and the Knight rode in.

His head was held high as the horse on which he rode raised each leg well above the ground in a simulation of the formal march. But there was something odd about the stone face which everyone in the yard gazed upon. The head was slightly cocked to the right as if receiving instructions from some unknown deity. After a quick, yet discernible nod, the head righted itself and the cold eyes came to rest on the Licker, never straying.

"Sir," the Knight calmly uttered, "I have come as so you have commanded."

"Good, do you know of the charges that have been brought against you?"

"Yes," the Knight answered in the same calm, unflinching voice.

"And do you know the penalty for these charges?" baited the Licker.

"I do," the Knight replied.

"Then I proclaim that on this day, it shall be recorded, that the Squad Leader, Knight of the Fortress, Hero of the Realm..." the Licker continued, sarcastically stating every title and honor that was ever bestowed upon the Knight, finishing with his name in a voice not unlike one used as a punchline in a good jest, "... Sir Norcroapas, came up absent from morning quarters and therefore I sentence him to the flogging. Which, as prescribed by the Code of the Knighthood, will take place before sunset of the day that the offense was committed. This event shall be witnessed by all members of the fortress as also per the Code. Have you anything to say for yourself Sir Norcroapas?"

"I do not," answered the Knight slowly in a voice that all in the courtyard could clearly hear.

"Then I proclaim that the flogging shall take place presently and that I, as your superior, shall conduct the punishment. I must admit that it shames me to have to correct one of such high standing. Observe that all of the glory that this Knight has brought on our Fortress has not gone into my decision. There can be no wavering from the code. The rules are just and brought upon by those ancestors that founded the Knighthood. Men of Sir Norcroapas's squad?"

"Yes Sir," answered the shocked knights in unison.

"Remove your leader's upper garments and secure him to the flogging post. Let this be an example to you all!" screamed the Licker in a frenzy that had befallen him, "that no knight, no matter what his honor and rank may be, shall be exempt from the Code from which we come, live by, and die for! My whip squire. Let us begin!" The whip flew in his hands.

The hands were not tied, also a measure of the Code, a knight shall be held upon his honor to not remove his hands from the post. The crack of the whip, more than any pain received, brought the Knight's head up to stare into the eyes of the Licker. Sorrow and shame filled his heart as that which he had held most dear, betrayed him. The Code was his life and here in this vast courtyard, the Code was prosecuting him. After all that he had given it, his life, the Code still betrayed him. But that line of thinking was wrong. The Code was still his life, just not its interpreters.

"See the knight's sorrow. Not the reaction I would have expected from one so brave. Fool! I spit on you and your false religion. You are old and done in life!" screeched the Licker bringing down another crack. But there was something wrong in those eyes that held him. A falter in the Licker's swing brought all around. Those eyes were not here in this yard, they were on a plain above. The sorrow continued, enveloping him in a veil of shame, but no reaction to the whip could be detected. The fury of this brought

the whip into an ever increasing rhythm. Skin and blood flew onto the Licker as his conquest baptized him in his heresy. Then without warning, the Knight was off.

The horse had been close by, as instructed. The rest of his armor was lying tied loosely on the saddle. He sprung upon his steed and headed straight into the crowd of stunned onlookers. No one had expected the Knight to try and escape. No preparations had been made. The stunned crowd gave way as the Knight burst through them and then through the open gates and onto the plain.

As he stopped briefly to slip his armor top on, the Knight took one last look back at his life's home. One look was enough and the Knight was off again, a cloud of dust trailing him into the plains.

The Licker was in a state of shock. He had never expected this, not in his wildest fantasies. The honor of the Knight held him there, but then this proved that the man had no honor. His own demented state could never fathom that the escape was not merely for the life of the Knight, but for a higher cause.

"After him!" the Licker yelled coming quickly to his senses. "Archers to the walls, I want every available man to pluck this traitor for desertion. He shall be killed for his insult, so if he must be killed to be recovered than so be it. Go you fools, go!"

Two hundred knights leaped to their stallions and two hundred knights flew out of the Fortress and in pursuit of the ever shrinking object nearing the horizon. He had been given a good lead, but what was one against two hundred?

The Knight's own squad was in the lead, with a few behind to ride with the stampeding herd. They rode throughout the charging knights, spreading rumors of the Licker being insane, sowing the seed of doubt about the Knight's punishment, which was enough to hinder the aim of the archers. Throughout the force they rode stating the Knight's titles and honors, but never staying long enough for any to see the source of this new knowledge. Men questioned their cause in this chase and many of the believers in the old ways surrendered to the onslaught of feelings that were confusing their minds.

The arrows flew, easily reaching the Knight, but none found their mark. The Knight was astounded by his luck. There was no doubt that the Fortress had over 50 archers that could have easily hit him from horseback, but still his luck held. Or was it luck? Was there some hope for the Knighthood that now showed its true colors? These were the young knights chasing after him. Was there some effect changing their souls? They had been exposed, rather harshly, to the old knighthood and the new by two of its top leaders. The old seemed to be holding out as another arrow grazed his helmet. Any man who could hit his helmet surely could have hit his arms or even his horse.

"Thank you Jahvey, I do not know for what reason that you have chosen me, but I will uphold your honor with my life, for you are my Code now." The Knight intoned these final words and pressed his steed, finding new speed in the realization that life may find its way back into the old bones.

The diminished two hundred roared on. Some were less zealous than others, the words of doubt reigned through every man's head. Some even gave up the chase, doubting their very purpose and doubting the Knighthood for the first time, but the squad kept on, because there were some who worshipped the Licker and these kept the chase hoping to gain the Licker's praise with the capture.

All day they rode, never gaining nor decreasing there distance. And just 100 yards ahead, rode the Knight, striking out as if he were some type of god ripping the plains asunder by the fire of his stallion. The sun made its descent laying down the Knight's shadow across the plains for all to see.

"He must rest soon."

"Yes, but so must we. Our horses are no different than his, if there is a difference to be made, I would say that his is better. I have rode Silber myself and I will say that I have rode none finer."

"He shall reach the river soon. If he does he could destroy the bridge."

"Well we will continue our pursuit until we can not go any further. If the bridge is to be our stopping point, than I for one, will turn back and gladly face the Licker's wrath. He can not punish all of us." The conversation between the two knights was soon lost in the fury of pursuit. The chase continued, only one hundred left in the chase, the original squad counted amongst them.

The chasm slowly came into view, the sole bridge spanning its tremendous depth. The hundred yards that separated the Knight from his pursuers had remained constant.

The bridge had levers on each side that triggered the mechanism. For decades the bridge had been used as a last effort to keep the wilds of the southeast from entering the kingdom. There was no other way across the chasm for at least 50 miles in either direction. If the Knight choose to release the levers from the other side of the chasm, his pursuers would follow and be thrown into the gorge, but if he released it from his present side, he may not be able to make it across.

Rather than risk the lives of the young knights, the Knight rode by and bashed the level with the flat of his blade. Pulleys, slowed by lack of use, released the foundations that held the bridge in place. Beneath the hoofs of his stallion, planks fell, lost in the depths below. The Knight rode on, praying that he could reach the other side before the last bits of footing fell from beneath his horse.

Faerkis pulled on his reins, bringing his horse to a halt on the southern side of the gorge. He held his breath as he watched the bridge plummet in to the chasm. The Knight rode on, not looking down, pushing Silber passed the edge of endurance. Silber's hoofs hit ground just as the last of the great bridge started the endless dive in to the river below. A great feeling of relief was felt from the score of knights witnessing the escape, but none yelled the cheers they felt churning in their stomachs. They were afraid, and did not trust the others around them.

"Damnit, I should have loved to present his head to our commander. At least I shall report those who have given up the chase. We might as well turn back, but I will beg the Licker to allow me to continue on in the pursuit of the traitor." The young man turned his horse and headed back towards an encampment of tired knights.

"Jahvey, I know not the reason for my leader's escape. I know that by all I live, the Code, that he has done wrong. But I can not help a feeling in my heart that his quest is one of good and hope. I pray to you, that if he is on your errand, that you protect him, for I love and respect him as I have no other." Faerkis turned back towards the encampment wondering if he would ever see Sir Rexord Norcroapas again.

Chapter 9

The river delta was a maze of weeds growing on tiny islands. One never knew, though, which ones were islands and which were some sort of beast whose only purpose was to feed off of any caught prey. The beasts under the water were not picky though, they would be glad to have anything for dinner even each other. If they were watched closely they could be discerned from the rocks. They moved slowly, at a sinister speed, constantly closing the distance to their target. The weeds that grew on top of these beasts were mixed with eyes that looked very similar to the weeds. Tall marsh grasses with an ominous bulge at the top waved against the breeze to search for their target. Many of the animals that found it necessary to cross this area and those that lived here watched closely for this contrast. They looked for the stalks that swayed against the others, which were actually weeds that had grown on top of the beasts and anywhere else that they could. The beasts had lived in the area for so long that many sorts of vegetation had taken root in the muck that covered their water softened skin. One of these plants was a major part of the food chain in this area. Many of the smaller animals depended on this plant for survival. These waited for the times when the eyes waved with the breeze signaling that the beast was asleep. Of course a mistake, or a very clever beast who had caught on to this trick, would end up in certain death. The tentacles would rise from the water at a very fast pace and grab the intruder while the nails on the tentacles injected a paralyzing poison into the prey. The beast found it much easier to drown its prey while they were paralyzed. Then the animal would be stored among the many that the beast kept stored beneath the water until it found the pain of hunger spread throughout its body. This store of dead was incredible. Sometimes they would collect a horde of food into an underwater den, but only the strongest of the race had the power to enforce any type of territory so this was a rare feat. Most of them just carried the food by cramming it into one of the many expandable pouches that infested the underside of the beasts. Before the coming of the colder months these pouches would grown immense in size and sometimes even surface to the water. The beasts were very slow in the cold, so there was little chance of attack. But a starving beast was never predictable, so one always had to stay on the lookout.

The Jackal watched as one very brave, or very hungry, animal flew slowly in circles above one of the beasts. All the signs were right for an attack. The flying lizard had been watching for some time now and the eyes had been consistently flowing with the other plants. The lizard was ready to make good its attack. First it appeared to be flying away, but only as trick just in case. With a quick turn the lizard was in a dive and the beast was targeted. The Jackal saw the tentacles slowly rise to the surface, but it was obvious that the lizard had missed this because the dive continued. The lizard had the plant in its mouth and was about to make good his attack when the tentacles struck. The strike was too strong though and the lizard was thrown into the water. The chase was on as the former wings now acted as oars and propelled the lizard across the water with amazing speed. But the beast had prepared for this and before the lizard had gone far it was drug under the water to meet its doom. At least it had died without the pangs of hunger gnawing at its gut.

The trek up the river was a thankless one. The millions of species of flying insects dared to close in on the Jackal for a reward of blood. The muck beneath his feet gave way and swallowed his boots up to his knees. The muck was the home of countless reptiles. The snakes that were rare back in New Peturan, teemed in the hundreds as they made their way slithering across the sleek surface. Any one of these venomous creatures would have brought a high price in the markets for their poisons were highly valued among the assassin's guild. But here in the swamp they were creatures of death and not of price.

It is here in the swamp that a man's true worth is tested. To strive to the limits of one's endurance and come out alive. In the swamp the dangers never end. The mist prevents one from being able to gaze far off into his destination. It also provides cover for the many creatures who would be glad to share in the rare delicacy of man. Every log is a hidden alligator, every branch is snake, but if not the real thing, the imagined ones take their own toll on the mind of the adventurer. Even nights are without rest. There is no safe place to camp. No fire may be lit in fear of drawing uninvited guests. The waters of the swamp are infested with carnivorous fish. It is only the daring that would break the surface and trudge through the shallow waters. All these tests work on the travelers mind, driving him towards insanity. The sounds of the swamp never stop. They are echoed from tree to tree, allowing no judgement as to the distance of the originator. When a man is faced with a challenge such as this, there are few who continue. Of those who dare the terrors of the swamp, there are few who survive. Of those who survive only a fraction maintain

their sanity and it is this survivor, and this survivor only, who can claim to be a true adventurer in the Realm of Jahvey.

There was no use in waiting around until the magnitude of the swamp overwhelmed him, so the Jackal got quickly to work on a raft. The quickest and safest way to the temple had to be the river. The water flowed too fast for the alligators and most of the carnivorous fish which required some type of territorial boundaries. There was plenty of resources from which to construct the raft and in no time at all the Jackal was ready to shove off.

Instantly the current took him back down the river towards the mouth. It was only with the help of one extra long branch that search had uncovered, that kept the Jackal from sinking back into the delta. It was hard work going against the current, but by traveling through the pools and towards the sides of the river whenever possible, he made fairly decent time. Although the going was slow, it was much faster than trying to navigate through the muck on the shore.

Times like these would have taken their toll on any man, even the hardest of warriors. But the Jackal did not falter or even pause in his journey up river. He moved with an unearthly power as his biceps expanded and contracted in unison with the rod digging in the river scum below. His breathing was steady and without the rasping of one who is overworking themselves. The whole situation was unbelievable that this sixteen year old boy had the power that other men lacked.

The Orb's call pulsed through the Jackal. The energy of the call could not simply vanish in the air, and the closer that he got, the more powerful the energy. Through his veins the energy traveled, and into his muscles and mind. In his brain the energy supplied the adrenaline required to keep the boy motivated for the journey. His giant-like strength was supplied by the continuous flow, through his sinews the energy added strength and endurance. The adrenaline was enough to allow the Jackal to travel continuously without sleep or food. Sometimes he felt that his body was not his own and that some great being was possessing him. In a way that was true, but the Orb fully intended to return the body to his mind. What use was the body of a thief without the cunning?

The rod continued to hit the water, sink in the muck, draw itself forward, remove itself from the water, and restart the process continually until the destination was reached. The sound waves of this action traveled up and down river. Since the motion was continuous it caused a very discernable pattern, a beat to home in on.

Up the river the largest of the swamp's alligators rested. No other creature lived within a hundred yards of the cave that called home. He usually left the river to search the swamps for food and had just yesterday caught a large enough morsel to tide him over. That was until he heard the splashing. He often searched the waters for such patterns, they usually meant some creature attempting to swim across the river, and that always meant food. The sound was not the same, but the continuous beat drew him up out of his sleep and he could hear the prey coming closer. Slowly he swam from the cave and into the current, surfacing just enough so that only his eyes and nostrils were exposed to the air. The river carried him downstream towards the Jackal.

The closer to the temple the raft carried the Jackal, the more a part of the Orb he became. He was so caught up in the song of the call that he never saw the log floating down the river towards him. It was on a direct course towards the raft and would surely overturn the Jackal when it hit. Even the Orb was lost to the danger, it had more important things to do in other parts of the world. So the log came closer and closer towards the raft.

When the Alligator saw the boy on top of the raft, it knew that its disguise had worked and that it had remained unseen. As it neared the raft it sank below the surface and swam underneath, then with a great swish of the fifteen foot tail, the Alligator rose up from the bottom and struck the edge of the raft with all of its stored power. The boy was immediately thrown into the water.

The trance left as the disgust of the slimy water covered the boy from head to toe. The instincts of the thief, assassin returned and his dagger flew to his hand.

The Alligator did not give him even a moment of rest and quickly clamped its huge jaws on the Jackal's thigh. The hold was tight, but not too tight, many times the Alligator had learned its lesson when it bit off the leg of the prey allowing escape. What creature would not give up a leg for a longer life? So the jaws were careful not to bite down too hard. The teeth had penetrated though, and bits of flesh flowed in the blood and down across the monster's nostrils.

The Jackal felt the bite on his leg, but ignored the pain, there was more at stake here than his leg to worry about. He felt himself being dragged to the bottom where he would soon drowned unless he acted

quickly. The hand followed as the dagger plunged itself in the upper jaw that now held his leg. A cracking sound was heard as the dagger penetrated bone and almost continued into the Jackal's leg. Yet the beast refused to yield and continued the descent to the bottom. The Jackal took one last gulp of air as his head was submerged.

The water turned red from the blood of the jaw. Down the river it flowed. The swamp was a flutter of motion, for every creature recognized the scent of the oldest among them. The Alligator was injured and there was not one creature who would want to miss it. News traveled over land and soon there was a mad rush to the cave that had been avoided for so long.

The beast was only angered more when it felt the dagger penetrate flesh and bone. The taste of its own blood was not unenjoyable, but it was something that the monster would have rather done without. Soon the battle would be over and it could eat, but at what a price? Then the dagger hit again and this time the pain struck home. Slowly the dagger sawed through the remains of the upper jaw. The monster knew he was in trouble and the pain increased by the anger made the creature thrash about as if to kill the boy by bashing him. But the dagger did not stop, the sawing continued as the boy steadied himself by using the other hand. The Alligator spun in circles, but still the sawing continued. With one last mighty clamp, the jaws tried to refit their position on the leg. But when they tried to bite down again, the forward half of the jaw broke off into the water and sank to the bottom.

As soon as the Jackal felt his leg free he kicked to the surface and in one gasping breath he filled his lungs with precious air. Even the mist of the swamp was sweet to one who had almost drowned. Quickly he located the raft and climbed on board before the monster gathered its senses and reattacked.

But there were no senses to be gathered, there was only hatred flowing through the veins as blood. The wound was not a fatal one and would heal with time. But the wound in the monster's pride was worse, never before had one challenged its authority. Prey usually died within seconds of being submerged. Had the alligator planned a strategy to attack the boy it might have overcome the injured one, but the anger was more powerful an elixir than thought. With the front half of the upper jaw missing and the water flowing through the wound, the monster swam forward to reply to the Jackal's statement.

The creatures of the swamp were almost there. They could sense the strength of the great gator seeping from him. The closer that they got the thicker the blood was in the river. The carnivorous fish were the first to arrive. They relied solely on smell for navigation, so the blood in the water did not slow them down as the others who relied on their vision.

First there was a small nip, then another, soon the water was churning as hundreds of the little fish made a meal out of their worst enemy. They fought amongst themselves for the biggest pieces, but there was plenty to go around for all. The jaw was the first target as the sharp teeth ripped chunks of flesh from the gaping wound. Some of the more daring ones traveled down the throat of the beast to chew from the inside out. The jaw was useless against prey such as this and the gator found itself slashing at water as the little fish skirted around the helpless beast.

The Jackal was sure that the gator would attack again at any moment, but this time he was ready. In a few minutes he had sealed off the wound with his shirt. The bites were not too deep, but there was no use in trying to stand. As he was waiting there was a disturbance in the water and he turned to face his enemy. But there was something wrong with the way it was approaching. All around the alligator were small splashes as if a million fish had suddenly attacked, and he was absolutely right. He gazed as the skin was torn off the body. A few of the stronger ones claimed rights to the eyes. Then came the muscle, peeled off very slowly. The gator was still alive, but its thrashes were getting weaker as it sank in the pool of its own blood. The Jackal gazed as the gator was literally stripped down to the bone by the little monsters. As they chewed through the muscles to the stomach and intestines, those that had swam in through the mouth burst out in the hundreds. Pouring from the monsters gut they continued the feed, until, in a matter of minutes, all that was left was bone.

The Jackal knew that he had to escape fast. Already the other creatures of the swamp had come to witness the monster's death. Soon there would be battles to see who the next King of the Swamp would be, but for now they were content in watching the old one perish.

On his knees the boy pushed the rod through the water and slowly picked up speed. Here, near the source of the river, the current was not as strong. The call resumed and the Orb was glad to see that its warrior was not hurt. It knew that the boy would escape alive, which was the reason for its summoning him in particular. The energy once again flowed through the call and the wound was healed. While this close to the Temple, the Orb could drain on the Temple's energy stores and create the miracle of healing.

As the boy stood, the raft ran aground on a bank of the river. He slowly crawled off the raft, and kicked it back into the current where it floated back down towards the delta.

Cautiously the boy stepped into the forest ahead of him. The swamp had ended and a great forest seemed to grow out of nowhere. In only a few paces he could see a clearing up ahead. The crunch of the leaves under his feet was the only sound heard. The trees parted and the Temple's hiding place was revealed.

Built in the majesty of the Ziggurat, the Temple rose well above the tree line into the sky. The middle was still the original goal, while the sides had faded with the approach of the forest on its walls. There seemed to be some type of huge room in the middle of the structure.

Here it was, the source of the call. A quest completed, or was it? A sense of fulfillment washed over the boy and pride followed. He was the first to arrive. The call guided him to the north side of the structure, and there he found one door with his name engraved in gold. Boldly he strove forward and opened the door, only to be engulfed in darkness.

Chapter 10

The Knight made camp. The bridge had been planned all along, he had thought it better not to tell his men of that aspect of the plan. The less they knew the better. He had been surprised by the pursuit. He had actually expected them to take to their stallions much sooner. Their shock amazed him. He only hoped that he was not seen as a deserter by the young impressionable knights. It was very hard to keep the faith when one's hero broke the rules of the Code. The sacrifice was necessary though, and no regrets were felt by the tired knight.

He could see the lights of the encampment across the river, but he had no fear. The river had etched a chasm at least five hundred feet deep many decades before he was born. The bridge had been built to protect the kingdom from the outer lands, never had anyone anticipated the Knight's use. The ride had been an all day one and Silber was exhausted as was the Knight. After finding a secluded area, he removed the saddle and his packs. His men had done very well, there was at least two weeks hard rations in his packs. When had they the time? He thanked Jahvey for his luck and their loyalty. The sun had set, but the night was alive with stars and the comet.

The comet had appeared about ten years ago. No one knew where it had come from or why it chose to stop its route in their sky, but the comet was there none the less. Some of the mages said that the comet was coming closer every year, soon to collide, but the King expressed his doubt, secretly begging the clerics to make whatever necessary amends to the one god. These "amends" were thought secret, but the city had started to take notice of the diminishing numbers of homeless that usually roamed the back alleys in the slums. The Knight chose to not recollect that fact.

There was no fire to warm him, he still had a few misgivings about some young adventurous knight seeking the favor of the Licker and attempting the impossible journey across the gorge. There really was nothing to fear, but every knight knew that it was better to be safe. He did not want to tempt any to their certain death.

He fell into a deep sleep immediately upon his head hitting the pack. The dreams that followed were amazing.

A young boy, no more than 18 entered a dark passage. He knew this boy as a friend, but did not know how. The boy was quite clever, discovering a concealed pit in the middle of the passage. He saw a monster lying in the middle of an underground lake and found himself warning the boy to no avail. The images of the boy's flight haunted his dreams, but at the same time gave the Knight immense hope when he saw that the boy had reached his goal. The goal was shut out as the door to a vast room blocked his vision, leaving him feeling extremely lonely as the light was cut off and the passage returned to darkness.

A new image then formed in his mind. There was a man in his mid twenties. He was a warrior of the old. His body was perfection and his eyes were alert. The Knight felt as if he were part of this man, as if he were a distant relative. On an instinct he thought to the man to look behind him. Instantly the man spun around in a fighting stance. Quite a different reaction than his warning to the boy. Continuing to play the game he told the man that all was well. Slowly a look of calm serenity bestowed itself upon the man's face. Amazed at his powers over this dream, the Knight continued his experiments, but was soon cut off from the man, his dreams now focusing on the man's neck and what was dangling around it. An orb.

The orb pulsed with a life as he had never witnessed before. Its glow was the same as the vast room into which the boy entered. He felt a strange longing for this stone and in his dream he reached out to it. The orb recognized the intruder and repelled the dream hand, but there was no anger in that repulsion. A peacefulness surrounded the Knight. He had to wait. Very soon the orb would be his if he kept to the path laid before him. A temple in the middle of a vast swamp was his goal. But where? The orb interrupted the dream with an image. Soon he was looking down on the temple from the sky. He felt himself flying south. So the orb was to the north. The swamp soon gave way to another temple, this one not as decrepit. He recognized this temple, but from where? The images faded and he felt his soul returning south to his body. Images of light exploded in his eyes and he opened them only to find the sun peeking over the horizon.

Silber was grazing nearby. After a short meal he prepared the horse for the ride. A lone knight left the banks of the river in search of a dream. North he would ride to the Fortress of Artong. There was no way that a message of his desertion could have reached the Fortress yet. The Fortress stood on the edge of the Straits of Torgas. The outpost protecting the Kingdom from the direct east. This Fortress was not like his though. There was a bustling town growing from its walls, its location on the Straits transformed it into

a great port for all merchant ships daring enough to travel to the eastern wildlands. The Fortress was at least another day's journey if he kept up a good pace. Silber seemed to be doing fine, so he anticipated his arrival in one more day.

He made camp shortly after sundown, this time daring to light a fire for the warmth in the cold summer nights. He had found a small encampment of trees in the middle of the plains and a small spring bubbling in its midst. The trees would protect the light against any intruders. This night's sleep was uneventful, but his dreams were still haunted by the image of the man.

Two mornings after deserting the Fortress, the Knight rode into the town surrounding the Fortress of Artong. The town was alive with activity, much larger than when he had last seen it many years before. He had removed his armor and it now lay in a sack tied to the horse's saddle. He had taken special care to pack it with plenty of cloth, so as to not alert anyone to its contents. He had thought that a regular traveler would cause much less commotion than a Knight from the south. The outer houses were very poor looking, and he was amazed at how poverty had stricken this port so quickly. Where there was money there was bound to be poverty. Dreams of the east's riches had drawn many here. There was no glory though, only a simple port making money for those with it to begin with.

As he traveled farther in he reached the bazaar. Many merchants lined the streets selling every known item. He needed nothing, so he continued on. A priest caught his eye. Priests were looked down upon by the clerics of the shrine, because usually they were the ones who had left the shrine before completing their training. There was something odd about this one though, claiming that the end of the world was near. Most of the passersby ignored his taunts and threats, but the Knight dismounted and approached the man.

"Why the end of the world my good man?" the Knight questioned.

"Do you not see the comet? Do you not see how every year it draws closer to our world? Soon it will hit and all will be gone." the priest answered. The Knight was impressed by the sanity of the man's voice. "It is punishment from him most high. He has sent his wrath to destroy the Tormentor and us with him and all of his creations will go down with their demigod!"

"The Tormentor?" the Knight had heard tales of the demigod, but never took any of the myth seriously.

"The Tormentor has awakened from his sleep of youth and he wishes to rule the planet which he was given to watch over. Jahvey does not wish this and has sent the comet to destroy him!"

"How can you be so sure as to the wrath of the one god?"

"I see things my friend. I have been sent visions of the Tormentor, he haunts my every sleeping moment." the priest's voice had quieted somewhat as he took a good look at his new audience. "You are sent by Jahvey. I can sense your glow. The glow of the orb. You are chosen. You have seen it too, do not deny it. The orb, our only hope. I know not how or why, but the orb is the only thing keeping me sane, for when the Tormentor haunts my dreams, I have only to sum up the image of the orb and he is gone." The priest's head bowed at his last remark in homage to some unknown savior.

"I know not of which you speak, but please tell me more of what you know."

"I know no more man." The priest quieted to a whisper. "But take this," he said while handing the Knight a small portrayal of the orb of his dreams. "Let this be your guide, and remember me on the day of judgment if the orb should fail. Do not be led into false beliefs as our King has. His sacrifices shame the one god. There is hope though, as I can tell by your aura, the aura of the orb. Go now, and may Jahvey bless you and protect you."

The Knight tried to say more, but the man had once again started his ravings about the end of the world. Choosing to walk, the Knight led Silber away. The port was a horrible place. Cutthroats roamed the streets in the open, definitely not an example of the fine port in New Peturan. It seemed that the knights of the Fortress had totally ignored any duties to the town. They had focused solely on keeping the east away from the kingdom and without the watchful eyes of the King's guard, there was no one to check on their responsibilities. The Knight did not fear, he had wrapped his scabbard in cloth and had his sword within easy reach of his belt. He hoped that this would be enough to scare off any gangs, he did not want to catch anyone's eye and risk disrupting his quest.

He found a ship, the same proud Cutlass that the Jackal had traveled on. The guard was doubled on the ship due to the less than desirable conditions of the dock. The Knight approached the mate and after a few words was speaking with Captain Kraken. After a deal was made, the Knight left to find lodging for his horse. He hated the thought of parting with Silber, but he knew that the horse would not survive the

swamp. On the outer reaches of town he found a poor shack, pretending to be a farm house. A man and a boy were helping an old horse pull a plow through the mud. The horse was very old and barely had the strength to move the plow. The man proceeded to untie the horse and with the help of his son pulled the plow to finish up the rest of the field.

"I feel that she is on her last legs," the man stated to the boy.

"As do I father. She has been a good horse, a regular member of the family, maybe we can sell her."

"Who would buy her son? There is none that would treat her the way she deserves. Treat her as a worker that has labored their whole lives and now only dreams of rest. No, I will not sell her. She shall stay and continue being the member of the family that she has always been. Besides whose going to keep you in line. Ever since your mother passed away she has been the woman of the house and I see that she has been keeping a watchful eye on my mischievous son."

"Father," the boy whined. "But what are we going to do without a horse? How are we to get the food to the market at Oythala, the other field is almost ready to harvest and we must travel soon?"

"We will rent or borrow, something will come along."

The Knight was very pleased with what he heard, trusting his instincts as always he called to the man.

"Farmer, come to me, I have an offer for you." Cautiously the Farmer and his son walked towards the Knight. "I could not help but over hear your plight and I believe I have a solution to your problem."

"Sir, unless you plan to give us your inheritance or your horse, than I feel that you have no answer."

"But that is exactly what I plan to do."

"What are the conditions?" the man inquired cautiously.

"Father, he is a great horse. Can you not see his muscles? Surely he was not meant for farm work?"

"Son," the Knight answered. "Even the greatest of men may find the need to give up their luxuries and work with their hands for a time. The horse is yours, I assure you that he was not stolen. He is mine and has been since he was a colt. He is strong and a good worker. If I tell him to stay and work than he will. I only ask this. If anyone should come by and ask for him by name, then I ask that you release him from your custody. I give this trade, he will work for you in return trade for you boarding him and treating him well. If I should ever come back and find that you have sold him, my anger will be great. I do not anticipate this though. I may give his aid to a friend in dire need, as I have done with you. Do agree to my terms?"

"Sir, we are extremely grateful. I shall treat him as my own. He shall be cared for as well as I can provide, which shall be greatly increased by the help of your fine beast. If any should come and ask for him by his name than I shall release him and be thankful that I had him in service for even a small amount of time."

"Thank you. His name is Silber. He is my last friend on this world, but I feel confident in leaving him with you. I must go now. Your name Sir?"

"Paul, and this is my son Jorgas. We are pleased to be of service to you, though I must admit that it is you that are doing the service for us."

"So be it, farewell for now." The Knight left the boy and his father watching as he walked his way up the road, still not believing their luck.

The Knight returned to the Cutlass and boarded. The ship was off shortly before dusk.

The trip across the Straits was no a hard one, but the ship had to sail slightly east due to the current. The Captain would not risk exposing his magic in these pirate infested waters unless an emergency arrived. They sailed to their first stop at the Shrine of Cathous. The Knight had asked to be let off at a river slightly due west that opened to the Straits and would give him a better path into the swamps.

The towers of the Shrine rose hundreds of feet into the sky, each one ending in a pinnacle that reflected the diminishing light of the sun into the center of the structure. It was here that rumor said the clerics spoke directly to Jahvey. The Knight wished to see this myth, but the Captain would not stay in the port for long, wishing to drop off the Knight before absolute darkness. The Cutlass had no problem sailing the Straits at night, the magical pot on board provided quite enough light for them to navigate the rock formations that kept many ships of the east from entering the Western Sea.

The Knight looked over the side onto the dock at a commotion that had arisen. On the dock stood three arch clerics. There were two older men and a woman with the Captain and they all seemed to be

arguing with the woman. She was fairly old and by the looks on the other's faces, she was going to win this fight. After some few but weak last arguments some type of payment was handed over to the Captain and the woman joined him as they boarded the ship.

"Sir Knight, please, if you would join us," the Captain called upon boarding the Cutlass. "This cleric wishes to travel with you, I must say that it is your presence alone that persuaded the others to let her board."

"I would have come anyway," the woman stated matter of factly.

"Well whatever the outcome it seems that you have a traveling companion Knight. I will entrust this woman to your care after we leave you at your destination." The Captain left the two and shouted orders to get under way.

"The orb," the woman stated.

"Yes the orb," the Knight replied.

"Do you have dreams? Of a young man, he carries the orb," the cleric was caught up in her own excitement.

"Yes," the Knight replied. "And of a young boy?"

"Yes, yes! He seems to be some sort of thief, I saw him climb down a wall that had barely a handhold."

"Our adventure becomes more mysterious, but tell me about yourself."

"There's not much to tell really. I feel as though I can trust you as I have trusted no other, save Jahvey. I have never left the Shrine. My life has been quite unexciting. I have been housed in its walls since my very birth. I have always, oh I do not know, seemed special to the others. When I was a little girl the arch clerics would tell me that I was bound for some great task and that I must spend every day preparing. But that is what they tell all of the apprentice clerics. I took no heed of their words. Sometime, though, I did believe the story myself. I felt a need, a rush, in my youth and felt that I must prepare, but alas the day never came. Here I am, old by the ways of the Shrine and even of the world. I thought that my time had come, that no great mystery existed. Lately I have been losing a grasp on life. You can not know how it feels to prepare for something your whole life and then reach that age when life seems to stop. I was very depressed and even tried to take my own life." The Knight looked shocked. A cleric committing suicide? "I see that you do not believe me. Well it is true. I was at the height of my depression, no husband, only Jahvey as my guide and I thought then that he offered nothing, ever holding the greater purpose in front of me so that I would strive on. So there I stood at a window in one of the great towers, ready to plunge to the most holy of place in the middle, when it happened. I remember looking up at the moon to get one final glimpse. I have always been attracted to the moon for some odd reason. When it occurred to me that the moon was awfully bright. Then the moon spoke. Imagine my shock, wanting to die in peace and plunge myself in to my depression, when the moon speaks to me. I was too drawn up in the moment to realize that my great escape was over. I continued to gaze at the moon, wondering if it had spoken at all. I now stood on the stairs staring out the window. The reflection of the pinnacle produced an image on the tower before me. This alone would be enough to stun anyone since all know that the pinnacles are supposed to reflect down in to the center no matter what time of day or night. The image of the moon was encrusted on the stone before me when I realized that it was not the moon at all, but a vast glowing sphere of light. Then, as if the dreams had never left, I was once again filled with the spirit of my youth, rejoicing that the great task had finally come. A happiness in this fact alone, filled my very soul and I felt ashamed at what I had planned to do. But with my very shame came a great forgiveness, from the orb! Now who was this orb to forgive me, I am a cleric of the one god and will except forgiveness from none other than the great one himself. But even my teachings and faith could not help but except this forgiveness, then my soul was cleansed. I can not describe this feeling to you. It was if my entire body was stripped away and rebuilt with pure light. I was new and young, although I know that I do not look it, but I assure you that I am young again. Does my story sound strange? I have a feeling that you have one as strange yourself." The Knight nodded in acknowledgment. "The orb continued to speak, not with words, but instead images. It flew threw my head and grazed back to my youth when my faith was strong. I was broken down and I started to cry. What a waste I had become. Never being a mother, never completing my task, but what task to complete? Here it was offering itself to me and I was not about to turn it down, no matter what my age. I then saw the temple. You have seen this?"

"Yes," the Knight answered. "I have seen that of which you speak. In images such as yours. It lies in a great swamp."

“To the north”

“To the north. It is a ruin, but has a vast and evil power all its own. I feel that it is alive with this power. I also feel that there is more to our task than just reaching this temple. I think that is where the real adventure begins.”

“As do I,” the cleric quieted as they both gazed over the side into the water.

The ship started to slow in the water and a boat was lowered to the surface. The Captain approached.

“We are here my friends. I do not ask the purpose of your quest nor of your destination, it is not of my business nor of my concern. I wish you luck in your journeys. I feel very good around you two and I feel that you are very great people. I do not know for what reason I think this, but the thoughts I can not stop. Good luck! The boat will take you to shore. Be careful, the swamp is unforgiving. Sailors have told tales for decades about the treasures that the swamps protect. If you should find these treasures, or whatever lies hidden in the jungle, search me out. I would be glad to trade my services for any tales of your adventures. Good-bye, and may Jahvey protect you in all of his will.” The Captain quickly turned around and walked away across the deck.

The Cleric and the Knight climbed down a rope ladder into the small landing craft. From the boat they could see the Captain standing atop the poop deck gazing out into the swamp lands. He was searching for their destination, but nothing could be seen in the vast mass of trees and water. He looked to the boat and saluted. The Knight returned the salute and they were on their way.

Chapter 11

They walked for two hours without a word. Both caught up in the realization that their quest had finally started. Until this point the whole idea was a dream filled with glory and honors, but the swamp quickly dissuaded any thoughts of glamor. The swamp was a force of its own, sucking out life from all that entered, feeding off the energy of its intruders.

They walked on the edge of the water. Not close enough to fall prey to anything that lurked beneath the surface, but not close enough either to the surrounding trees for any land predator to surprise them.

After realizing this was going to be a long walk, the cleric interrupted the silence, "You have not told me your story Knight, nor your name."

"My name is Sir Rexord Norcroapas, I am a Knight, or rather was a knight, of the Fortress Shathra. I just recently became a criminal by desertion of my post."

"A necessity I am sure. I have felt the call of the orb and I would think it very foolish to ignore it."

"I do not think that I could have, but it still does not forgive the fact that I have lost my honor as far as any knight is concerned. I shall never be able to return to my home nor my squad again. But then again, what is home? I think that my dwelling ceased to be home soon after my family died."

"I am sorry. How did it happen? Does it bring you pain to discuss it?"

"Do not worry, I have been living with it for many years now and I think that it will do me good to finally get it off my chest. Many years ago, I have lost count, I was fighting small bands of the cult that was forming to the south. Small groups of the typical nomads of the plains were forming under some unknown leader. Many said that demons were witnessed in their midst, but I doubted the stories. Then one day a lone knight rode into the Fortress on his horse. The guard ran to greet him, for there was something wrong in his ride, but they turned away at what they saw. What they saw was horrible, I have no wish to describe it to a lady."

"Please, go ahead, I have heard many terrible things in my years and have grown accustomed to the horrors of the world outside of the Shrine."

"Stop me if you must. The knight was tied to his horse. He was very dead I assure you. Under his helmet there was no head. The helmet rested on the stump that remained of his neck. His head peered at us from a gap punched through his chest, with his," Rexord paused looking for the right words in his discomfort to continue, "man part stuffed into the mouth. His eyes were gone and replaced by his genitals, please pardon me if I offend." The cleric shook her head, but could do little to hide the horror in her face. "The man that he was, I did not know. But I saw him as a member of the brotherhood of Knights and therefore my brother. I was outraged and without leave took my squad and rode out, following the trail of blood and entrails south. After an hour's ride, we came to an encampment of nomads, they were dancing around a fire singing demon music. My ears cried forth with horror at the sound, but I pushed my men and myself forward and we surveyed the camp. The rumors were true. I, myself, witnessed at least two dark forms that had to be demons standing in the outskirts of the fire. They were almost like guards as they watched over the proceedings, but did not take part. The nomads were zealous in their worship of some unknown deity. I was shocked to see two jump into the flame and then run around the outskirts until their lack of skin and blood forced them to stop. What sort of men were these that placed no value on life? I was afraid, more afraid than I have ever been before. There is no worse enemy than that which places no value on life, even his own. I could not help but wonder what new horror this deity was to ask, so nonchalantly, for the lives of its worshippers. But I knew that Jahvey would not ask this, so inside I felt pity for these people who had been led astray by these demons.

Organizing my men, we formed two groups, one behind each demon. I was surprised that they did not detect us, but it seemed that all of their attention was on the other men. On a signal we attacked. My men were merciless as they ripped through the demons. But, to my greatest fear, one of them was attacked before the other, giving the one closest to me a warning. That was enough for him to turn around and face me. I froze in my steps. I could not see him entirely with the roaring bonfire behind him, but I shall never forget those eyes. They bore through me into my very soul. I could not move, his gaze lifted and he looked at the patrol behind me. In that instant he made his decision and fled from the camp. There was no way to stop him. Being freed from his magical hold, we flew into the clearing, right into the surprised nomads who were still staring at the other demon being hacked to bits. The knights had taken him completely by surprise and had removed his head before he could react. I was surprised at the ease of his disposal, but upon

returning to the Fortress and gathering information from our library, I found out that lesser demons are not immortal, and although a very formidable foe, they are not half the terror of the full demon. After disposing of the remains of the lesser into the fire, we killed every nomad in the party. None ran. They fought with an abandon that shamed my men. They had no armor and only simple tools for weapons, we would not have killed them had they not destroyed our brothers. We are not accustomed to killing the defenseless.

After all of the bodies were disposed of in the fire we searched the remains of the camp. There we found the rest of the southern squad. Various parts of their bodies were missing and it was quite obvious that they were being stored as food." Rexord quivered at his last statement. He recalled the horror of walking into the hut and seeing the knight's torsos lying in a heap on the floor with various appendages sorted neatly throughout the hut. Was there no end to the horror of the day? "The rest of the night was a blur, somehow the bodies were gathered and brought back to the Fortress for a proper burial. Little did I know that the horror for the night had only just begun.

I returned home to find the hut dark. That in itself was very strange, for my wife always waits up for me when I have night patrols. I immediately sensed something was wrong, the horror of the night had not left me yet. I urged my horse on and dismounted in front of the house. The hut was completely dark inside and I could not find a lantern. I called to my wife but there was no answer. The terror of night was turning my search into a mad frenzy. I surged through the room until I found some wood lying on the floor. I went back out to my horse and with my tinder box lit the torch, I wish now that I had not." Rexord's eyes flowed freely and the tears ran together forming two streams down his cheeks. He continued very slowly each word worked on separately and struggled to be released from his swollen throat. "My wife... she was, hanging in the far corner. There was a spike there. She was hanging from it. My beautiful Laurina, my love how I miss you." He wept.

"Please, if it hurts you, do not go on. I understand your situation very well now there is no need to continue."

"No, there is one more thing that fully describes the horror of her murderer, because my son was there also. He had been returned to his mother's womb." The cleric gasped at the last statement, the night had now come to grips with his sorrow and used his anger to push it out of his heart. "On the wall, written in the blood of my family was this message, ONE OF MINE FOR TWO OF YOURS KNIGHT. I knew then that it was the demon from the camp that had been their murderer. I quickly ran outside to look for signs, using the hope of revenge to quell the madness growing inside me. But there was nothing, no path, trail, not the faintest sign that anyone had ever been there. The next morning I reported to the Fortress and begged them to let me search for this demon, but they did not. They saw, as I truly knew, that any search was hopeless. My squad came back with me and helped me bury my families remains. Every since then I have been haunted by the vision of their deaths, absorbing myself in fighting in the east and south, hoping that by some chance I would meet up with the demon again, but I never have.

That is how I have been living since my family's death. Each day I hoped that my encounter would come, but each night I went to bed unavenged. That is until I heard the call. But that story you are familiar with, I too was as shocked as you. I dreamed of my family and my loss of life. I saw myself as a waste, but was offered a chance at something that had true meaning. I was purged of all hatred and completely filled with hope and love. I have felt the orb and I like its touch."

"Your story is a sad one, but I am glad that I am traveling with one such as yourself. Behold, the temple." Without either of them realizing, they had diminished the distance to the temple with Rexord's story. The temple loomed above them as they approached, its walls looking like ruins, but still containing the strength of evil and the power of the Tormentor.

"There is a door in the center for us to travel in." Rexord stated.

"That is strange, for I see no door there, there is a door on the south side that I see." the cleric replied.

"Our quest gets stranger by the minute. I would guess that each of us is to enter the temple separately and reach our goal on our own. I wish you luck..." Rexord waited awkwardly for a response.

"Oh, I am Allanah, Rexord and I too wish you luck. May we meet again soon." Allanah plunged into the darkness that opened up before her.

"Good luck Allanah," Rexord intoned as he plunged into his own darkness.

Chapter 12

Cakes of mud dried off and fell to the stone floor as the Jackal cautiously strove forward. His footfalls echoed off the steep walls continuously answering each other as he continued. Walls of carved stone rose up above and to an unknown beyond lost somewhere in the darkness. A single torch lay on the wall suspended by a cold black chain that shook with an unseen force. The torch beckoned to his hand and it was obvious to the Jackal that he was meant to take it. No smoke rose from the unearthly wood as the fire licked the sides. The warmth of the flame washed over the Jackal in a welcoming hold. Stones, carved of the ground beneath, were fitted together in no known pattern. Their shapes cast reflections of the boy along the passage. Had the boy taken notice he would have seen his shadow meeting numerous deaths as the stones teased the light.

Dragons were formed on the walls, creatures of the night fought in armies against an unseen foe. The shade of the Jackal was torn to shreds and only to reformed on another surface in order to do battle once again. The torch lit the way and the Jackal followed its light down into the heart of the temple.

Never before had the gate to the temple been breached. Never before had anyone dared. Finally the temple had a chance to prove its worth to its creator. All of the defenses that were a product of the deep magic within came to life. A rumble was created as if a long forgotten horror had awoke, and it had for as the Jackal proceeded down the hall, the air that fed him life also took his life's memories. The air entered through his mouth and then traveled through the inner workings of the boy to his brain. Here the unholy air worked. Information was received and the air traveled out of the mouth to report its findings to the defenses that lie in waiting.

Slowly the Jackal plodded forward. He took each step as if his life depended on it, which it did. The passageway groaned in anticipation of new blood. Too many years had passed since the last drops of blood were shed into the stone floor. The yearning grew and out of the power that had fermented in the temple, a form was taking shape. Life was given and a trap was created. Not a difficult one, more of a challenge in order to test the boy. The temple wanted to savor and slowly suck the life out of the boy. The torture would appease the hunger more than a quick death.

The torch did not shed enough light to fully illuminate the way, but the boy kept it forward and low so that his own instincts would not be hampered if the torch was lost. There was no sound that came from the floor, and although he felt that it was an unneeded precaution, his footsteps made no sound upon the smooth floor. There was something ahead and all of his senses warned him. He could not see anything, but he had long ago learned to trust his fine tuned instincts to warn him of the unseen. He halted his progress and examined the floor before him. There was nothing to be seen by the casual eye so he placed the torch on the floor and lay his eye behind it. There was a slight depression in the next rock. It could have been nothing, but was something ever nothing? Cautiously he reached back and slid his blade from the scabbard. He pointed the tip towards the depression and placed a slight pressure upon the hilt. A loud boom echoed down the passage as the floor all around the rock with the depression gave way. Quickly he grabbed the rock and held on with his fingertips. Far below the floor had made a large splash in the water that must be below him, although his eyes could see no further than a few yards down. The torch and his blade had been saved by being near enough the depression. All that was left was a foot wide slab of stone stretching the width of the passage. He easily hoisted himself up onto the stone and examined his situation.

There was no going back, the temple had taken care of that. He could no longer see the entrance and it looked as if all of the floor to the door had fallen. Ahead he could see the floor starting again beyond the newly formed pit. Assessing the situation, he leaned upon the wall and took his breath slowly to calm his mind and soul. He would have to find a way forward. The trap was a simple one now that he took the time to look. It amazed him that there was no hollow sound beneath the floor earlier that would have warned him of the pit. It was almost as if the pit was newly formed upon his arrival at the depressed rock. Gathering his sword back into the scabbard and the torch into a belt loop, he examined the wall.

The climb was possible. There were numerous places on which to rest his feet and enough handholds that the climb would not be the most difficult that he had faced. Flexing his fingers, he reached for the most obvious first handhold and, without taking his feet from his rock oasis, pulled down with all of his might. The wall crumbled into the abyss below. This was going to be tougher than he thought. A huge cavern was created as both the walls on either side of him slid slowly down to the unknown depths. There was no going forward. The only choice led him down to the blackness below. On the sole rock he stood staring out into the immeasurable dark that became his outpost in this foreboding world of black.

The Jackal slowly lowered his body over the side and down into the abyss. Not initially trusting his weight to any one of the outcroppings of rock, he carefully tested each one, many failed and plunged disappearing into the darkness that cried for his death. The abyss below was like a mouth, opening up with many rocks for teeth and its long tongue the rock that had become the Jackal's miniature sanctuary. The way down was long and arduous. Only a few feet was gained in what seemed like hours. He could hear the fallen rocks splashing in an unknown lake far below, lost somewhere at the bottom of the pillar that he mercifully clung to.

There was no way of telling what lay at the bottom of the pillar. There was the water, of that there could be no doubt. But what else? Was the water an endless lake, with water that stretched out below all of the known land? Or would there be some escape from this exhausting torment of clinging to the practically bare surface in which his life so depended? And how far would he have to swim to escape the watery grave? If there was an escape. But somewhere in his mind he knew that there would be, for some reason he knew that his quest did not end here. No, not here on the face of the mountain that seemed to have lost its sides. He was also aware of ancient stories speaking of the creatures that lived in these subterranean lakes, catching anything that breaks the surface and enters into their world. There had to be a pathway to the next step. The temple was a gateway to his final goal, there had to be some way to pass unscathed. He could not comprehend why he was being hindered. The call was still strong in his mind, although it had quieted down some in order to allow his mind to concentrate on the climb below. There was a sense of wrong in the way that the trap had come up unnoticed, almost as if the temple was trying to stop him from finding the source of the call. There was the trap to think of and somehow he knew that it would not be the last barrier to attempt to halt his progress. This conflict, the call drawing him forward and the traps trying to take his life at every turn, gave him a better image of what was actually happening in the ancient walls. The call was not from the temple, but something that the temple was guarding, something that he was not supposed to reach. The temple was not actually an ancient holy place, but a fortress against any unwanted visitors. But that left the question as to who was controlling the temple. If the call was from somewhere deep within the temple bowels, then from where was the temple being mastered? Who was or what was it that was guarding the object of the call? There was a great secret here that would be found in time. For now he knew that he would just have to overcome any obstacles that were laid before him and do his best to succeed. He would succeed, there was no doubt in that. But what would take place between now and the goal, this alluded him.

At the base of the pillar there was a large pool of black water. The ebony surface glistened with death from the light emitted by the torch. There was something to the blackness here that was not natural. His torch should have illuminated more than the few feet that was now visible. There was no disturbance at all on the surface. Only the flickering of the flame creating waves that were not there.

Deep below the surface on the bottom lay the Kraken. For years it had been in hibernation, its only escape from the hunger that had been brought on by the years without food. In its cave it slept silently. The only living thing that occupied the immense underground lake. Its tentacles clawed in the water as it dreamt of the killing that had ruled its life many eons before. The Kraken had turned to hibernation after it had consumed all of the fish in the lake, leaving no food for survival. Now its dreams were interrupted. Whether it was the presence of the other that had awakened him or the temple itself did not matter. It knew that it was time for feeding. Slowly the huge eyes opened and gazed in the blackness. Consciousness came quickly for the hunger in the belly of the beast would not be put to rest again. With stealth it crawled out of the cave and rose to the surface without making the slightest ripple. It was drawn to the light that was glittering and disturbing the darkness above the lake.

The Jackal threw a rock in the distance hoping to gauge the distance that he would have to swim and get some sort of direction in which to travel. He heard a faint clicking as the rock hit something solid across the lake. At least now he knew in which direction to swim. Placing his foot in the water, he found that there was no way to walk the distance, this was truly a lake of depth. He took the torch and dipped it in the water below and was cloaked in darkness. The torch was tucked in the small of his back as he silently pierced the surface. He gasped as the gripping cold crept up his legs and made contact with that place that was usually kept warm and protected from the cold. Hoping that he would not get lost in the utter blackness, the Jackal began to swim towards the unknown.

The Kraken saw, or rather felt, the boy enter the water and swim away. A burst of excitement took the form of bubbles of gas that had been trapped in its mouth and rose to the surface. The tentacles whipped the surface around the boy, playing with dinner.

Bubbles were the first warning that the boy had of the monster. They surfaced around him bursting open with a sick gaseous odor. Then the water became choppy. The small waves were just enough to clog his mouth and nose, causing him to choke and falter in his race against death.

The Jackal saw the tentacles and increased his stroke. His arms and legs were already becoming numb from the ice cold water that had been locked far from the warmth of the sun for so long. The exhaustion of the climb was taking its toll as each stroke took longer. His arms were weights as he tried to lift them out of the water. He felt one of the tentacles brush up against his leg then it continued to search frantically for him. The darkness seemed to close around him. He hoped that the frantic swim would not send him in circles around the lake never finding his way back to ground. A fear of drowning and of the beast beneath the depths caused a bursting of adrenaline to issue forth and flow through his blood stream like molten lava. The extra energy came forth and once again his stroke increased. On and on he swam not knowing when his fate would be sealed and the tentacles would reach him only to drag him down beneath the cool, black surface, where no air would come.

Another tentacle came closer and he felt it climb over him as if to encircle his waist. He rolled left leaving the tentacle clinging to his back unable to encircle the whole body. The suckers beneath the slab of tentacle gripped the leather jerkin and pulled with a mighty force. Dragged beneath the surface, he ripped at the buttons of the shirt and pulled it from his body which was being dragged far from the surface above. The Kraken plummeted to the bottom where it planned to drown its victim before slowly savoring the feast. But the Jackal had escaped and swam to the surface lacking only the jerkin and his torch which had been tucked in the back. He gasped for air and filled his lungs as he broke the surface. But there was no time to gloat over his small victory. The Kraken would soon learn its mistake and when it did the game would be over.

The Kraken felt the load lighten and changed direction back to the surface. It burst up from the depths, piercing the surface of the water for the first time. A great bellow was issued forth from the unseen mouth causing the cavern roof, somewhere far above, to release a rain of small rocks and debris into the lake. The Jackal thanked Jahvey that he could not see. The terror that seized him now almost made him freeze as panic gripped him. He did not want to think of what he would have seen had he been able to gaze at the spawn behind him. Praying that he had not lost his direction while he was below the surface, he swam forward with an energy known only to those whom he had stared death straight in the face and escaped only to find it still pursuing.

The Kraken's burst through the surface had been its folly. The waves created by the ascent through the surface gave the Jackal the extra speed that he needed to escape. Surging forward the beast sought with his tentacles for the prey that was escaping. The burst forward brought more waves flying at the boy, it was all that he could do to keep his head above the surface. He reached forward with his hands to steady his body and it was then that he hit rock. The waves had washed him into a sort of platform of rock that lay an arm's length above the water. The next wave washed his body up and over the shelf, throwing him on his back onto the dense, stone floor. The Jackal's head banged against the floor, rendering him unconscious.

A roar from the bowels of the Earth issued forth. The Jackal was lucky that his mind was elsewhere so that he could not bear witness to the horror that was the angered Kraken. The stomach would not be calmed and the prey was gone. There was only one choice for the beast as it bashed itself against the side of the platform, searching over the side hoping that the boy lay close to the edge. That was not the case, the choice had been made as it once again plummeted below to its cavern at the bottom of the lake. The tentacle was not the worst meal that it had ever had. There were only five left. The Kraken wondered to itself what it would be like when these five were gone. The next time it would not hesitate. Dreaming of seas swollen with fish the beast once again entered hibernation.

When the Jackal finally regained consciousness, it took him sometime to recount the events that had brought him to wherever he was. He had no idea how much time had gone by since he had passed out. Laying on the floor, he flexed his sore muscles. That had been some workout, Stealth would have been proud of him. He missed him and the Captain of the Guard. Thoughts of home filled his mind as he recounted the memories of the years gone by. He wondered if his life would ever be the same again. Suddenly he felt very lonely in this black pit. As if he were the only person alive, and he was the sole human in this world made of black and death.

Then the call returned, it had eased off in his sleep, but now it came with the full force of urgency and expectation. He had to continue, no matter how tired he was. He got on all fours and then carefully regained his feet, not knowing how well they had endured the torture of the swim. His legs felt very tired,

but not too bad. It would take some walking to loosen them up, but he could go on. It was very cold and the lack of his jerkin did not help matters at all. The water dripping off of his pants was the loudest sound in the omnipresent silence. He heard a faint echo off what he hoped to be walls. There had to be some form to this new territory that would lead him back to his original path and then to the source. Moving cautiously with his hands outstretched before him, he proceeded to what seemed to be the source of the echo. His hands found a wall, made up of the same smooth rock as the floor. Keeping one hand on the wall and one on his scabbard he went forward into the ceaseless black.

There was something to walking into unknown doom. He would not be able to see another trap like the last one if there was one. He had only his instincts to trust. A terror of claustrophobia settled in his skull. He hoped that he would find another torch soon. He traveled this way for hours. One hand always on the wall, afraid to lose his only guide. He had drawn his sword some time back. It felt good in his hand, giving him a false pretense of protection and might against whatever horrors lie ahead.

His feet hit something as he was walking and probing down with his sword he found what seemed to be a set of stairs. He had no idea how long he had been traveling, but this seemed to be a good place to rest. Lying on the floor, the sleep of an exhaustion bred from fear overtook him quickly.

He dreamt of a door. Behind this door was the source of the call. Light flowed through the cracks in a brightness that blinded him in the darkness that had been his temporary home. But the door seemed miles down the corridor. Picking up his pace he approached, but the door never got any closer. It was as if he was walking away from it instead of getting closer. He started to run, but the door kept getting further. Further and further the door appeared until the light disappeared all together leaving him once again in total darkness.

A cool sweat covered his body when he awoke from the dream. Putting his hand back to the wall he proceeded up the staircase and left himself to whatever fate would come to greet him. And he had no doubt that it would greet him with open arms.

The Jackal's footfalls created echoes that bounded up the great staircase, seeming to go on forever. The arm that was tracing the wall soon found a torch that was sitting in a holder on the wall. A great sigh of relief escaped his mouth, but there was still doubts as to what he would see when he lit it. There was a certain protection in the dark, not being able to see any images of horror that he might have passed by. Taking out the flint, he soon had the torch blazing through the darkness, a natural darkness. The flame penetrated much more gloom here on the staircase than it had on the lake. The stairs rose up steeply out of sight. On the walls were painted murals of death and torture. All of the pictures seemed to center around one great demon. The Jackal could not make out the name of the beast which was written in some cryptic language of evil. Had he been able to read, he might not have proceeded. For the name on the wall was that of the Tormentor and that name spoke evil unimaginable to those of the upper surface world.

The walls held terror and death. Painted in the blood of humans, they were made by the ancient priests of the temple at the time of its construction. There was a portrait of the world showing six passages down into its depths. Far below the mines of the dwarfs, these passages went straight to the center of the planet. At the entrance to each passage there was painted a Dragon of immense size, almost as large as the volcanoes that marked the entrance. Dragons were a thing of legends to the people of the upper crust. They had disappeared out of existence during the early stages of time. In the center of the earth was depicted the Tormentor. For the Jackal it looked like a large splotch of black jewels glistening in the torch light. But beneath that splotch of black, for any that had the power to see, was the Tormentor. The most powerful being on this planet. Second only to Jahvey himself. Around the pit of darkness there was terror. Creatures of all races clung to the little life that they had as the demigod brought them closer to death, but never allowing them to escape into peace. Humans and dwarfs lie in pools of blood with all of their appendages removed. Like a cork in the ocean they floated in the pool as they watched others being reduced to the same state that they were in. Demons fed on the remains, cooking the arms and legs slowly over fire while they were still attached to the bodies. Only when the fire threatened to spread to the main body, was the appendage removed and the living being thrown in the pool of blood. Not deep enough for them to drown, but quite deep enough to allow the bile and blood to flow easily into their mouths.

The Jackal turned away and a retching sound soon echoed off the walls up the staircase. He wondered whether it might have been better without the torch. Looking at the ground a few steps in front of him, he proceeded. The murals stopped after the first one hundred steps and the Jackal was able to look farther ahead. A green scum covered the stairs immediately in front of him. Taking the sword, he pressed it to the surface. The blade sank and continued to sink into the scum. The slime was some form of an acid

that ate the sword and soon he only held the hilt. Throwing this away, he looked for a way around the new obstacle. There was enough space near the walls to easily slip past the slime which only went on for a couple of steps.

There was a dripping sound and more of the slime seemed to fall from somewhere above. The Jackal looked up just in time to back away from the large mass of green slime that had set this trap. Like the Kraken, the slime had not eaten for centuries. The Jackal turned and ran back down the stairs, taking two at a time. Soon he reentered the area of the murals. Turning back to get a picture of his pursuer, he saw that the slime was reluctant to go beyond the area of the murals. There was some force here stopping it from proceeding. It rolled on the stairs, bubbling and hissing.

Looking at the walls, the Jackal saw the reason for the slime's sudden halt. Above his reach was a painting that filled him with peace. Before he had missed it since he had kept his head down to avoid the terror that most of the paintings emanated. A white, spherical light was painted on the wall. It was sitting in the midst of a great temple. The call! He was certain that this is where it came from. The temple must be this one, and his goal was to reach this Orb and somehow rescue it from the fortress. He reached up with his hand and jumped to touch the painting. A fine white powder came off and stuck to his fingertips. He put his hand forward, reluctant to end his gaze at the Orb, and brought it near the slime. It backed away. He reached up with his other hand and took more of the powder. Now with both hands extended he strove forward with the slime ever retreating back. Laughing out loud with delight, the boy cursed the slime and the temple. "The Orb is what you fear, that which called me here is more powerful than your dark presence. I have a protector and to him I will go. Curse you temple and all your minions for they are not enough to stop the Jackal." His cry resounded up and down the passageway increasing its volume with each wall that it hit. Hearing no response and realizing that there was no one who could respond, the Jackal thought that maybe he might be a bit crazy. But he had to be crazy to be here in the first place, so he moved ahead. The slime had reached its perch and climbed back up to the ceiling where it let the Jackal past.

There was suddenly a great groan throughout the temple that shook the walls with hatred. The boy knew that he had won this time. The temple had realized its folly and cursed the Orb for its interference. Now another would make it to the amphitheater. Its master would not be pleased.

As if from the dream, the stairway turned to a hall and at the end of the hall there was a door. A massive structure that rose up high into the ceiling somewhere lost above. The light from the dream was also as blinding. Pouring through the cracks it greeted his face with warmth. Somehow he knew that the powder on his hands had prevented the rest of the dream, or prophecy, from coming true, for he reached the door easily. It was unlocked. He pulled the latch and the door opened a crack. More of the white light enveloped him and took away all of the pain that had been caused by the temple. His wounds were healed and his jerkin was restored. The light was too bright though, to make out any details of the chamber. So gathering confidence about him, as if he were about to address the King's Court, he entered.

Three steps into the temple his body went ridged and he was frozen in front of the door. He heard the door slam behind him. Then his mind went blank as he was thrust through the gateway into unconsciousness.

Chapter 13

The temple laughed, if one such as it could. Two more to test itself on. The demon had failed, but the boy had succeeded. Strange that the most powerful of demons should fall pray to his traps, but a small boy should prove the victor. The Tormentor would not be happy about the boy, not at all. But here were two more to offer up to the demigod. The temple loved the taste of Jahvey's children, much better than the demon. The knight and cleric should provide some amusement too. Funny that when for centuries none had come to test the temple, and now four within a week. Maybe there would be more. The temple hoped so, for too long had it lain dormant, its powers growing sluggish from lack of use. But now it was in the height of power. It had one, and now a chance for three, it would not lose that chance. Gathering deep within itself, the temple waited and plotted the deaths of its two new intruders.

"So my friend we meet again," the Licker said walking towards the Knight. "You did not think to escape me. We captured you some days back at your camp, you have been out for some time, but you can not hope to escape the Code. We are your family and I your father. You have been very bad my son and you must be punished."

The Knight looked around him, he was back in the courtyard, the grounds were lined with knights, young and old. But how could this be, he was in the swamp temple. But what had the Licker said, he had been passed out for many days? Could this be? No, the Knight thought, this was the temple and its evil. He turned around looking for the door, but found only the leering faces of other knights, but somehow they were not knights. On closer inspection, they did not look even human. Their faces were that of men, but their eyes and stances, even the way they cursed him, this was not the Knighthood and then this was not the Licker. Actually it was too bad, he would have liked this to be the real Licker meeting him in combat. He reached for his sword, which he found, thankfully, still attached to his belt. He drew the blade and waved it into an arc above his head. He was ready, as ready as one can be when facing the minions brought up from an inanimate evil building. The room around him pulsed with life. In his recognition of the temple, the courtyard disappeared along with the scores of knights, leaving himself and the Licker alone in a large room. Torches lit the walls and their shadows danced in the flickering flames. The room was absolutely quiet, only his own breathing. No breathing sound from the Licker, this only added to his conviction. His enemy approached, wearing much the same armor as Rexord had replaced on the Cutlass. There was a skill in that movement that was not of the Licker, he must not treat this opponent as he would his enemy at the Fortress. This was a completely new threat and warranted the Knight to be open to learn the skills and weaknesses of this new opponent. He watched the waist of the man, no fake moves were thrown from here, the waist always showed the true movements. The Licker stopped and stood erect, losing his fighting stance. He removed his eyes from their position and stared the Licker in the face, the Knight's anger grew inside him with a glimpse at that face and attacked.

The Licker easily dodged aside. "I see that you recognize me. I am the one, you know that. I killed your wife and your little boy. I fucked her first though. Did you not wonder why her womb was burst open, it was my demon cock inside her. I thrust it in her and up through her stomach." The Knight swung around, his anger reaching the level of madness. But, with his mind occupied on revenge, he lost the level of concentration needed for sword play. "You falter Knight. Can you not hit me who deserves it so? But you do not want to kill me, I have done you a favor. Your wife enjoyed me, much more than you. She said I was more of a man. I laugh, me, the Licker, more of a man than the legendary Sir Rexord." The demon continued his taunting, wavering between the image of the demon and the Licker. Easily he dodged the feeble attempts of attack thrown by the Knight. He was no longer sane, the anger inside him had turned his mind away from any type of organized thought. His blade slashed through the air, never even coming close to hitting the demon. From the Knight's mouth came the ramblings of a mad man. He was lost.

"Are you not going to thank me? I am your friend! Your son did not deserve to live. I caught your wife and him in your bed when I arrived. I only placed him where he wanted to be when I was through with her, right in her womb. Of course I pushed him in a little further than he had previously been!" The demon laughed, dancing about the room, the temple was caught up in the ecstasy of the mental torture of the Knight. But the pride of the temple did not foresee the small stone dropping from the Knight's pocket. Nor did it foresee that the reminding of the quest would jerk the madness from the Knight's head and return him to the world of the sane once again.

"Lies," the Knight yelled at the demon, "you try to tempt me with your words, but you lie as all of your kind do. I will not even challenge what you say, I am that sure of your treachery. Now feel my steel

demon, and taste the fury of a full Knight of the Kingdom!" the Knight charged the astonished demon. Caught completely off guard, the demon received a serious blow right through his black skin.

Since the demon was simply a creation of the temple, it was all one beast. The skin was simply an image created, and did nothing to stop the Knight's next cut through the stomach. The demon pulled itself up on the sword towards the Knight, rendering it useless. The Licker's face had changed and now an inhuman face took its place, not that of the demon, but of something more horrible. The Knight was shocked at first, his emotions lost in the fury of the moment. He tried to wrench his sword free, but to no avail. It was securely lodged in the demon's gut and seemed to be causing the thing no pain. The demon simply held the sword in him with one hand, blood pouring down the blade as the steel bit into its palm. As he drew closer on the blade, pushing the sword to the hilt in its stomach, the demon took his other hand and placed it over that of the Knight in a crushing grip. In one great effort he pulled his body up to the hilt on the sword and there was no way for the Knight to break the grip on his hand. He could feel the hilt biting into his fingers as they were forced together with inhuman strength. As the face of the horror drew near, the face was that of the Tormentor though the Knight had no way of knowing, the Knight took the opportunity to rotate his blade in the gut of the creature and send it flying up through its body. The upper part of the demon split in half as blood and bone spewed across the floor.

The mighty temple groaned at its failure. Rock crushed down from the ceiling as the Knight ran further in to the vast room. The temple cursed the Knight and threw itself upon him, but that cursed orb was protecting him. He would escape, if only the two had not entered at the same time, he would have been able to concentrate on them individually. But now he had to split up his power. The cleric was already deep inside, he would concentrate on her, with the orb protecting the Knight there was no way to stop him.

The Knight had reached the other side of the room and stood at the foot of a great door when the quake stopped. All was silent in the room as the dust cleared. There was no going back, but there was no urge either. He knew now that he had won his prize. He stood there and savored the moment, wiping his blade off on a tapestry that had been knocked from the wall. He ripped a piece off and wiped his face, hands, and tried to bring some sort of shine to his armor. He felt as if this was the most important summons he had ever received and he wanted to look his best. His former life was over now, from here on everything was new, he was new. He searched within himself to see if he was prepared, he found himself ready and knew that the time had come, time to fulfill the call that he had received in the hut in a far away land.

The door loomed above him into the darkness beyond. He had no trouble opening it and pulled it outward. He gazed inside at an enormous amphitheater and in the middle was the object of his dreams, the orb. Pulsing with life it called him into the room. He heard the door shut behind him and remembered nothing else. Like the boy, the Knight stood frozen on the edge of the amphitheater, waiting the arrival of the others.

Chapter 14

Allanah had entered a damp passage upon breaching her door. There was no light in the passage, but a faint breeze guided her ahead. She strove towards the breeze until she felt the close walls of the passage widen out into a room. The echoes of her steps were much louder now and the breeze started turning into a soft wind. The smell of decay and dying came with that breeze and the cleric followed. She had expected more than an encounter with a breeze in the temple. There was an evil foreboding that insulted the cleric. She felt almost raped by the evil as it traveled around her and took itself inside her through her breath.

A light ahead turned her course. Softly, as if coming through a long tunnel, light penetrated the dark gloom. Allanah soon reached a wall, she had been walking with her hands outstretched. The light was coming from a hole in the wall. She peered into the hole, but could only see the bright light spilling forth.

An image of her teacher came to her, "Go my child, through this passage there are many in need of your services. You know that there is no other healer that can completely destroy the plague besides you. Whole villages to the southeast are being wiped out by this terror. If you enter the tunnel and crawl towards the light, you will be with those that you can help."

"But what about the orb and the temple?" her voice faltered not completely convinced of this image of her long dead teacher.

"You must set your priorities Allanah. Many little children are dying, they have raised boils in their armpits which are exploding. They have disfigured faces and can only look forward to at most a year in our world if you do not help them."

"I can not, no I can not I have already promised."

In the image's hands appeared the form of a small child, his skin completely covered by blemishes and boils.

"Can you see the pain on his face Allanah?" the voice was soft and soothing in a hypnotizing fashion. The image lured her forward on a string tempting her towards the tunnel. "Can you not see the good that you could do? For so long you have remained locked in your own prison waiting for that special task. Now here I am to grant you that task. I have been sent by Cathous himself to return from the grave and send you on your quest. This boy can still be saved. You are the only one who can save him. Will you let these children die Allanah? You are being very selfish my child. You, who was given so much, must now return and do some good for the world. When you were a little girl you used to tell me of some great quest that you were preparing for. I told you that everyone had a quest, but you remained firm, saying that your quest was extra special. Well I stand corrected now, I have seen the truth and here I am to send you on your way." The image flickered in and out of existence. "My time is short my child and I have to leave you. Just look at this boy Allanah, he can still be saved." The image flickered out and completely disappeared but the last words echoed faintly off of the walls. "He can still be saved."

Allanah was speechless. She could not decide, but the boy was so real, that must be her quest. But then again the Knight and her dreamed the same things. There was nothing about a village in her dreams, only of the man. But her teacher, her childhood teacher, was here. The voice was the same one that used to calm her when she was just a girl. He knew of her quest and here he had come to grant it too her. Who was she to believe? Her old teacher or her dreams? Allanah did not know which way to go, but then again there was only one way out of the room that she could see and that was through the tunnel in the wall. She bent over and peered directly down in to the tunnel. She was accosted by wails and crying, the obvious sounds of people in great pain. They cried out to her calling her name, begging her to come and save them. She could see through the light, images of death and dying flew at her and then another image pierced all of the others. It was an image of herself, saving all of those people, taking them away from their misery and giving them hope once again. Her mind made up, she brought her head out of the tunnel in order to back down into it feet first, but something stopped her progress.

On the west wall a door had opened. Through the door came the light, the same light from the moon on the night of her calling. The orb, in the center of a shallow, yet huge, pit stood calling out to her, but the call was not overbearing as before, it was weakened, or rather she was more resistant to it now that her teacher had visited her. Her heart was pulled towards the tunnel, but her mind told her to investigate before she made her choice. She felt herself teetering on the edge of a cliff with only one wrong move and she would plummet thousands of feet.

Through the door she saw the Knight, way across the vast room. He was stiff, as if frozen, but his eyes stared at the orb in a look of complete content. She remembered speaking with him on the trip and how they had the same dream that drew them here. But his quest must have been different, not meant for her. The dreams must have been wrong, but one glimpse around the room told her heart that she was wrong. There on the west wall was the boy, just as she had dreamed him, a young boy, but with a cunning look of wisdom about him. He too shared the look of content written on the Knight's face.

No, her mind was made up, how could she answer a summons to a ball of glass instead of helping people in need? She walked back towards the tunnel, but there was something wrong. There was a growing sense of anticipation in the room, as if something desperately wanted her to enter the tunnel, something very evil.

The temple stood on the threshold of madness. All of its power had been spent creating the image of her teacher summoned from her mind. Why did she not go? The only way to break the call was with something good, it had given her that. It saw her turn towards the tunnel again and almost screamed in happiness, but that its mistake. She sensed the waiting anticipation in the air, it knew not, but she had felt it and her decision was once again faltered.

Allanah stood in the middle of the room. She did not know which way to go. What was that feeling in the room? A sense of foreboding evil that was so strong that she almost heard it in the wind. But the Knight was in the other room and so was the boy. That had to be her quest, the dream had to be meant for her, the call was too strong. She felt almost happy with her decision as she neared the door, turning her back upon the tunnel.

The image of her teacher appeared before her once again, this time the boy was dead, draped feebly across the arms of the image. The boy's eyes stared up at Allanah in a look of treachery. Tears burst from her eyes, but her mind was made up and with that decision the call returned into her soul. She shut her eyes as she passed the image, the look of betrayal had also reached her teacher's face. A fury arose behind her as she entered the amphitheater.

"Curse you!" boomed the image behind her. She turned around but the door was gone, she was standing before the orb with the Knight and the boy. The temple screamed and shook in fury as she faded off in to the magical sleep of her companions.

Chapter 15

Maczcksuxe lay in a pool of bile and blood. His brain, acting on its own immortal instinct, had been attracted together like a magnet until it had formed a pile of matter large enough to form conscious thought. Maczcksuxe lived once again!

The agony was unbearable, but he did not have the gift of mortality that would have let a human die thus ending the pain. Faintly his subconscious reminded him of the presence of the lesser demon nearby. He knew that he would have to act fast before it realized that its master once again lived. Feeding off a power inbred into all immortals, Maczcksuxe formed a link with the lesser and commanded its mind. Slowly and meticulously he commanded as body parts were found and reconnected to the omnipresent brain. The eye came first, and as soon as the nerve was reconnected, all damage was slowly removed. Once any part was reconnected to the source, the immortality played its role and repaired all damage. There were some parts that had to be replaced. A lesser demon could consume much in the given time frame.

Maczcksuxe gazed down on his body. His skull was trapped underneath the stone slab. He ordered the demon to reconnect the arm. As soon as the first nerve was connected, the process started. Nails peaked out of the finger tips, fragment reformed into a solid mass. The course hair sprouted from the ever developing muscle. Although connected directly to the brain only by a few nerves, the arm was once again a very deadly weapon. It began to work at the slab. With the awkwardness of a new tool, the arm worked on its own to break apart the slab that had crushed its owner. Stone crumbled beneath the fingers and the skull was recovered.

The lesser brought the skull around the room, picking up any brain matter that had escaped the exodus to the root nerve. The brain sloshed in the halves of the skull, along with any other matter that escaped the lesser's eye. Then, carefully, the main mass was put in the cavity and the two halves sealed.

There was some resemblance to a face now. The demon cursed his misfortune. All thoughts and memories now returned. His anger met the walls and more stone came down. To avoid another crushing, he eased off his temper. Normally he would return to his embryonic form, but the anti-magic field was still in effect. Had his immortality been of a magic nature, and not a fact of his life, he would have been left to torment in the passage forever. The lesser now took the head to the farthest recess of the passage away from the door. "Yes," thought the demon to himself, proud of his ingenuity, "this is quite far enough slave."

The slab had left a small cave in the back of the passage which was just out of range of the anti-magic field. Calling on the vast recesses of power that came from the world all around him, he changed. Animals within his range on the surface dropped dead as he stole their life force. He had no idea of the effects of this mass gathering of power, but it would not have mattered if he had. Using all the power gained, he invoked the awesome will of the master of all demons, which he was, and returned to the embryonic form of his existence. The form soothed away all pain, he roared in triumph and cursed the trap as the victor over the defeated. He had survived as always, and although it was a great inconvenience, he enjoyed this opportunity to prove his superiority over all that dare challenge him. The lesser continued to gather all body parts and throw them into the glowing mass. The embryo gained strength and soon was back to its peak.

The demon changed again. He returned to his monster form and gave the lesser back his own mind. The lesser cowered in fear as he realized that his former meal was now his master, restored in power and might. The demon grabbed the lesser by the throat, or what most resembled one on such a ghastly creature, and balled him up between his fists. Careful to not leave the safety of the cave, he formed a shell of rock around the mass of crushed bone and cellulite. Now, much more cautiously than before, he walked towards the door. He fed off of his own remains as he approached the stairwell. His instincts told him that the way was now clear, he had beaten the trap and could now continue. With the power created from a massive arm and muscles forged in the pits of the world, he hurled the ball of rock and debris at the door. The door burst in an explosion as the wood imploded into the amphitheater.

Maczcksuxe surged forward.

Chapter 16

The four stood frozen on opposite sides of the amphitheater. Deep in the floor the Orb pulsed with life, beaming in pleasure at the success of the chosen ones. They were the ones, chosen for their skills and courage. Now the men of the surface world had a chance, the Tormentor had a new enemy.

The demon had entered with a more tremendous burst than the others, but that was to be expected from one of such power. The Orb hoped that it would not regret the decision of recruiting this demon of such awesome power. The knight was the most impressive of the group. He stood with the air of majesty of one of true honor. Such a knight was hard to find in these times. All had passed the tests of the Temple.

The Tormentor had set up the Temple during the birth of the planet, so that none could reach the Orb, but little did he expect the Orb to help those who attempted.

None of them saw the others, the call too great. All that they could focus on was the Orb. A strange radiance emanated from it that filled the amphitheater with a dull aura of white light. The amphitheater itself was a pit surrounded by a circle of stairs leading up to the four doors in which the warriors had entered.

The Orb was a perfect sphere with a diameter of three feet, perfectly white, but not a blinding white. There was a sense of life about it, that something actually lived inside the great globe. There was a pulsating to globe, but strangely enough, this pulsating was not reflected in the glow. The aura glittered like a flame, a flame of an inner force.

Shadows were cast up from the Orb, which was the only light source present. All four, though they varied vastly in size and build, appeared as equals to the shadows. Their shadows were cast up behind them onto the tremendous walls of the amphitheater. Huge portrayals of the four came alive in the flickering glow. There was no discrimination in the emanating light, here the thief and demon were equals in size. Skills and abilities, not size, evened the battles among thieves and demons. The demon was definitely the more terrifying foe of the two, but then why had the Orb not chosen two demons, or even four? There had to be some quality to the young thief that was needed, to the Orb both were equal in necessity. The loss of either would be just as great.

There were no doors left in the theater, they were charmed to release no one that had entered. There was no way back, not even the might of the demon could summon the power required to escape this room. The only escape was through the Orb, so for now the four warriors had fought their way into the final trap. For now they were subject to the whim of the great globe.

The tests had been harsher than expected. The temple was beaten though, its traps avoided. The Orb had won, at least for now.

The cleric found it especially difficult. She had become harder mentally in her old age, but was still a very delicate creature. Her beauty, which had matured with her age, was such a contrast to the dark aura of the demon. But, despite the difficulty, she had survived. The other tests were easy compared to hers. It was always easier to test one's skills rather than one's soul. She had chosen the path that would save the multitudes, rather than the one to save the few. There was no way that she could know the implications of her decision. She saw greater meaning in the call that she had followed to the temple. The call was irresistible under normal circumstances, but when it came to choices that concerned the soul, the very being of a person, the call could be avoided. The soul controlled one's actions and the call could not penetrate the soul, only the mind and heart. The cleric had healing powers never foreseen. She was as good as the demon was evil, never able to harm another living thing. When she was just a baby her mother had given her to the clerics to develop her obvious power. She was now more powerful than the most ancient of the clerics, but the power never corrupted her. She was still the same sweet child that was taken from her home to be educated, though she did her best to hide it.

There was a heavy rasping breath that filled the room with a foul odor. The Orb turned its gaze towards the demon. He was not happy at this delay. He especially did not like being held at bay from his final goal which he had suffered so much for. If it was possible to feel pity for one of such evil, the Orb did. He had done much wrong in his life, this was his repentance. The most awesome, terrifying being on the planet forges ahead on a quest to pay his own repentance. The breathing was the only sound that could be heard, but that was settling down.

The Orb would wait until all was quiet before it communicated to the four. The demon was still too hostile from his destruction to be presently dealt with. Here in this room, the Orb had absolute control over him. The demon could do naught without the Orb's concession. In the close radius of the Orb, all was

under its control. It would take every ounce of power, though, to control these four. After it had complete control, it would have to rely on their power to accomplish its task. And what power that was.

The demon himself had the abilities to control nations, he only lacked the planning and direction. He rose 8 feet above the ground. His build was piled with rippling muscles that showed that the demon had the strength of many and had used that strength often. His eyes were red globes that seemed to be a reflection of an interior fire. The face demanded respect and summoned fear. The features of true power. The Orb hoped that it would not take the other three long to be able to gaze on the demon without invoking the irrepressible fear that was a common side effect. But this was much better than the embryonic form, the Orb had a half glimpse of that once and never wanted to see it again. The other three could never be allowed to see him in that form and as long as he was under the Orb's power, they would never have to.

With all the power that the demon possessed, he had never used it fully. Possibly he did not even realize the amount available to him. The knight had always used his power for good, in fact the knight and the demon had been on the opposite sides of the battle field. This may be more difficult than foreseen, thought the Orb. The two were sworn enemies for life. The demon had destroyed the Knight's family in revenge for the destruction of one of his lesser demons. The Orb had not known of the enmity between them when it had first released the call. Only the recent events in the Knight's test warned the orb of the battle being waged within his soul. The Knight had sworn to follow the demon, but the Commander of the Fortress would not allow it. Now he would have to cooperate with his family's murderer for the quest to be successful. This was not going to be easy.

The knight would be extremely difficult to deal with, maybe even more so than the demon. He was the true example of all that was holy to a knight. A knight that lived by the chivalric code every day of his life. He was a very religious man, praying every night and before going into battle. It was because of these prayers that he was able to defeat the traps laid for him by the temple. He was favored in God's eye, and for this he was a truly legendary fighter. There was nothing that could defeat him by the sword. If only his principles in the Code had not forbade him from practicing magic. For if he had also been a sorcerer, he could have become one of the greatest leaders of the time. But now he was here with his sword and that is exactly how the Orb needed him.

So much yet to do. The Orb knew that this summoning was only a fraction of the mission. But everything would come in time. It was patient.

Finally the Orb rested its gaze on the boy thief. It had hit a soft spot to summon him here, but there was no evidence of that now. The boy was hard all the way through. He was merciless in his assassinations and burglaries. As with the others, he was the best. The Orb had almost killed him with the first call, but there was no way to foresee that. All that mattered was that he was here and in good condition. All of his skills would be tested. There are many times when it is better to avoid a battle in the shadows than to challenge a foe. It would not be easy to convince the knight of that, but here the Orb was in control and made the final decisions.

The Orb gazed all around at its makeshift family. What other family did any of them have? There was no loss to others, or not major ones. They were all basically alone in the world as it is with most of the true leaders. They were the finest in their arts. Now, converged under one mind set, they would be unstoppable.

"Enough wasting time," the Orb thought to itself, "there is a mission to be accomplished."

"All of you were gathered here for a purpose, do not try to fight, there is no escape from the embrace which holds you except by my will alone. You have no choice but to listen to my offer and accept it.," the Orb addressed the entranced four. "I have, with great strain to myself, drawn you here today for a purpose. There is a reason and mission for each one of you being here."

The Orb had thought about how much it should tell them for many weeks after the call had come to the amphitheater. They must understand what was about to happen to their bodies and minds, and they must know the full seriousness of the mission and the possible outcome if they should fail.

Chapter 17

“In the beginning there was one god, he was to become known by many names to different races, but there was and still is only one god. I shall refer to him as Jahvey so as to appease all of you. This one god is your Shathra, Knight. If I remember correctly demon, you consider him your enemy, but he is not, you refer to him as the neutral god, Czcsux. The cleric knows him as the pure and gentle god, Cathous, from which he is also known to the thief.

I hope that I don not upset any of you by my vast knowledge of your lives. I did not chose you without careful research. So do not be surprised by the things that I know.

Jahvey created the planets, throughout the vast emptiness of space there are many planets such as ours. Some have inhabitants like ourselves and some have many different ones. Each planet was given as a gift to a demigod. Who was to rule on Jahvey's behalf. He was not to interfere in the inhabitant's life, but was to oversee life and purge any destructive problems. Our planet has been ruled by one such demigod. Jahvey also granted each the gift of free will, they could do with their planet as they wished. There are some planets that have no thinking inhabitants, they are simply composed of beautiful gardens and vast forests. They are small paradises for the demigods that hold them. But there are others, such as ours, that have become filled with many inhabitants. These are the ones that Jahvey watches most cautiously.

Jahvey is a fair and just god. I would even be bold enough to say that he sways towards the side of righteousness. He looks on us as his children, even though our lives are a direct result of the demigod's will. Our demigod has come to be known as the Tormentor.

He wanted his planet to be populated with beings of all types. From the center of the planet he sits and watches all of the happenings of his creations through visions and dreams. There is very little that takes on this planet that he is not aware of. Jahvey was once very pleased with the production of our planet and the Tormentor was favored among his brothers. Neither of them have interfered in any of the happenings on the surface, that is until recently.

The Tormentor wants to be a god, not only of this planet, but equal on the level of Jahvey. He is tired of his life here and looks elsewhere for conquest. He considers his planet a prison instead of the gift that it is. Jahvey created him and only he alone has the power to destroy him. This planet was the ultimate gift, for in the process of giving it, Jahvey has made the Tormentor a god in himself. He is the god of our planet, though on a much smaller scale than the great one. But he ignores all of this and still considers this a confinement. So despite this great gift, the Tormentor has rebelled.

In a very secluded area of the planet, he has started a cult. They are like the clans of the plains, but on a much larger scale. They sacrifice humans in rituals to the Tormentor. He is their god. Soon this cult will try to overrun the entire planet. I know that you doubt this possible, but you are so secluded in your own little sections of the planet, that you can not understand the workings that go on beyond your sea and mountains. There is so much for you to see, and you will. The cult has not reached its full potential yet and it must be stopped, but that is not we I have summoned you.

You must realize the threat that this will cause to all of your people. Yes, even you demon, for if this evil is not extinguished Jahvey will punish the demigod. When he punishes all is final. The absolute destruction of the planet. Life here will come to a stop and our planet will become an example to all others. Every bit of life on the surface will be destroyed as the demigod watches from the side of the great one. Then, in the final moments of destruction, the Tormentor will join us to die beside us along with the planet. There is no escape from Jahvey's will. He is absolutely all powerful and his will is law, so erase any such ideas from your heads. Our mission is with the source of the problem, the Tormentor.

I, as I said before, am also the Tormentor's creation, but Jahvey has appeared to me. You cannot realize the beauty of the great one. He came to me in a blinding light less than one month ago. He gave me a soul. For ages I have watched the living and submitted to the will of the evil one. My solitary purpose is to see that our planet survives.

I was able for a moment to peer into the feelings of the great one. He is very sad. He weeps for his lost son and has no wish to destroy him, but sees no other option.

Our purpose is to confront the Tormentor. We must travel to one of the six volcanos that act as gates to middle earth. We must pass the dragon that guards the gate through our own skill and make our way through the dangers beyond to the very center of the planet. Here we will meet the Tormentor and then our mission will be fulfilled.”

The Orb stopped. The four were silent, the full impact of their mission finally revealed. Their goal was to save the world, but if they failed, none wanted to consider the alternatives. The Orb continued.

“There is extreme danger is what I am about to do, in what you are about to do. I have summoned you for this purpose and you will come with me. No, you have no choice in this matter. Why would you not want to come? Our failure is the failure of all life. There is no choice, we must accomplish our mission or our planet will be no more.

There will be many in our way once the Tormentor has discovered that I am gone. My loss will weaken him somewhat, but it will not last for long. It is up to us to overcome all that he puts in our path. We must move quickly and quietly to avoid any traps. Together we are very powerful, but what is a few against many. The cult has grown in power and at this moment is moving to the volcanos to receive aid from the dragons. They have already destroyed civilizations on other sides of the world. Ours, will come last. I assure you, we are no match for the demigod backed power of the cult.”

The Orb fell silent. The four contemplated what they were chosen for. They were honored. The demon was angered by the fact that he had no choice in the matter, but even the great evil that dwelled within him could feel the necessity of this quest. The room fell dark as the Orb's light faded. It gathered its power together for the final call. It summoned Jahvey and a single beam of light energy burst from the Orb and shot through the roof of the Temple. The beam traveled through the clouds and up out of the atmosphere. The beam traveled through the reaches of space and time and Jahvey heard the call.

“I now call upon the power of Jahvey. I pray to you to give me the power required for your mission. I summon the one being that will be made from the five that sit mercifully before you. We beg of you, oh great one, make us one in life and mind, make us Norbavon!”

Chapter 18

With the final call Jahvey heard the Orb as it prayed across the eons that separated them. He sent a beam of energy towards the distant planet. Across the universe the beam traveled, destroying anything in its path, such was the power of the one god.

The temple roof shattered, showering the four with its debris as the pieces hit the floor. Any hold that the demigod formally had was gone, the temple was no longer a building of power, for years clerics would make quests to its ruins to see where the miracle started. The roof was now one of pure energy. The foundation shook, but the four stood their ground.

The fingers of the beam reached down to each individual. They felt their very soul leave their body and travel back to the god. He spoke to each in images, showing them once again the young man that they had come to know through their dreams. This image though held more than the young man, surrounding his body were the visions of the four. They hovered at the man's head and moved as he moved. It was obvious that the man could not see the four, although they could see him. Then this image was interrupted with one of great horror, the Tormentor. His evil ways had twisted him from the glorious form that Jahvey had originally granted him. His face was a hideous mask that spoke only of hurt and suffering. The size of the Tormentor diminished all around him. He spanned 50 feet above the cavern floor. Each sweep of his vast tail sent hundreds fleeing from its passage. Surrounding him were demons and their lessers, called forth from the surface world to serve their master. The Tormentor looked up towards them through the image.

"So it has begun," the Tormentor stated.

"You have caused it to be so," Jahvey replied sorrowfully, "look upon your enemies, these four return to your world with my blessings. Their mission is not unknown to you. I have given those of your planet a chance for life and with that these four. They are your enemy. From here on I cleanse my hands of your fate. Go now demon, for that is what you have become." With this final curse the Tormentor shrunk in size, his vast bulk diminishing, but his hideous form retaining its shape.

"The comet will fail!" the Tormentor screamed, "I have made preparations for its arrival, and these four, you insult me my lord," he spit at these last words in disgust. "I can not be defeated by mere mortals. I know of the orb also, my temple's last task was to warn me of its departure. How can they expect to win? My demons and my worshippers already see their faces in dreams. We are everywhere. No, there will be no victory for you. I am the new god, I am the Tormentor!" His rantings faded out as the image disappeared from the four souls drifting in space. They felt their souls return to their own world, but when they reached the temple their bodies were gone. The amphitheater now stood open to the air and in the middle lay the man from their dreams. Around his neck the orb hung, its light gone. There souls surrounded the man, as in their vision. The man slept.

After a moment to recollect their situation the Knight spoke, unable to contain his anger any longer. "Do not think that I do not recognize you demon. I know you, as I have since I first met your eyes so many years ago. You will die by my sword when this task is over. You will die in the same fashion as my family which you so brutally murdered."

"No Knight, it is you who will die. For years I had been training that lesser. Do you have any idea how long it takes for a lesser to be tamed? He was my pride, my first that I had allowed to continue on. From my own blood he was born and his potential was great. You and the squad that you commanded cut him down, destroying work that had taken three spans of your menial lifetime. It is you that will feel my wrath when we are finished!"

"Calm yourselves," the Orb's voice filled each of them with the same warmth provided by its light. "What you do after our task is completed is no concern of mine, but for now you have a much greater task. A task to the world, to your very planet."

"But," the Jackal questioned. "The Tormentor said that he could deal with the comet. That he could stop its path and prevent it from destroying our world."

"Do not be misled by his lies Jackie, the Tormentor is a weaver of all that is false. He has not the power to stop or even hinder the will of Jahvey. He knows this, but in his own pride he feels that he will be able to escape the comet by hiding himself deep within his kingdom of the underground. What he does not know, or chooses to not see, is that the comet will completely destroy our world, leaving nothing but pieces to float through space. Jahvey intends to use our world as an example to all that take advantage of the great gifts that he has bestowed upon them."

"How are we supposed to deal with him?" The cleric had remained silent for too long and felt a need for questions to be answered. "Did you see him? Even if we could find him, he is surrounded by thousands of demons and we only have one."

"That one is the most powerful, you are better having me at your side than all of the thousands," the demon scoffed.

"Such pride demon, do not let it be your downfall or the downfall of us all. There will be a way Allanah. Jahvey would not have sent us on this task if he did not believe that we could succeed. Destroy your animosity now, for we must work as one. Rexord and Maczcksuxe, I wish you to settle your dispute. Each of you has taken something valued by the other. The game is over and nothing can be done to make amends."

"Yes, revenge can be made justly," the Knight intoned.

"Has your Code taught you so little Knight. Forget that it is a demon before you. You have had your men destroy one of his. Would you not have avenged your family's death if it was his hand that had struck first?"

"I did the world a favor in removing that scum from our world. He had killed and mutilated a whole squad of men before I reached him. How many more would be dead if I had let him live?" the Knight challenged.

"And have you not destroyed my minions before. I have had thousands of children destroyed by your Knighthood over the years. You and your knights have destroyed ten of mine for every one that I have killed. I think that it is you who deserves to be revenged upon Knight!" the fury of ages was burrowing forth from the dark heart of the demon.

"Silence!" The Orb's voice quieted the argument instantly. "There will be no fighting amongst ourselves. We are one now as you can see. Each of you will feel every pain that the man on the floor feels. He is our cover, none of the Tormentor's minions know his face. He has just come into being by the hand of the most high. He has no life of his own, only the life that you four combined give him. You are this man. Each of you controls him. You are one body now, one body in the man called Norbavon. He will need each and every one of you to survive. You may influence his decisions and be four eyes for him to see through, but you may not address him directly. He has his own will and his own mind. We must work together. I alone hold you together to form this man. By the power granted to me by Jahvey I hold this man's life. If he dies, we all die. He is our last hope. Destroy your hate for each other and work for this common goal, for if the world perishes we all perish. What will your petty gripes get you if you are only particles of dust drifting through space?" The four remained silent at this new knowledge.

"I am willing to forget for a time," the demon announced.

"I too am willing, but I still say that our fight has not yet begun demon."

"So be it, but until that time comes, if it ever does, we will work together to save our world. Do not think this easy for me. All three of you are good breed. It shall be hard to control one being that is three parts pure and one part evil. I will take my fair share though, do not think to overcome me in this."

"Do not lie to yourself demon," the Jackal spoke up. "I have killed many in my short life. Were I to try and balance the scales, I feel that I would fail and find myself plunging to your side."

"Then it seems that I have a companion on my side."

"Not a companion demon, but one who looks on the world through a different eye than the Knight and the Cleric," the Jackal told.

"Look he wakes," the Cleric announced.

Book II
The Souless One

Chapter One

For as long as she could remember, Rhiannon had been with the Dwarf. There were times when she faintly remembered another family, but they were just passing dreams. There was a mother that had been brutally raped and murdered, just after they had overpowered the father. She was just a baby then and had been hidden in a pantry closet. Soon after, she was found by the dwarf and raised as his own. The dwarf and her had become, over the years, a family. He had been kind and raised her the only way he knew how, as a fighter. She was good, she could give herself credit for that. The dwarf had trained her well, she needed to be good if she was going to rescue him.

Three days ago they had come to their hovel in the slums of New Peturan. There had been little work for the fighters recently. If only they had taken that merchant job, but to ride through the nomad lands was just too risky these days. She hoped the rumors were not true. Human sacrifice to Jahvey, how ironic. Why would the one god want human sacrifice? She had always pictured him as a fair and just god, but to appease him with the death of humans? She felt betrayed. If these tales were only myths how could one explain the disappearance of so many? No explanations and none ever returned. There was a mystery in the city and it was about time she found out about it. She had heard about a former guard that frequented a local tavern, rumor had it that he could not stand the new duties appointed to him by the King. That was all she had, it was not much, but anything for the Dwarf, her father. If any could claim the title, it was he. That night she made her way to the tavern.

A sign swayed loosely in the breeze, The Comet Strikes Here, a sort of joke to calm down the fears about the new member in the sky. The tavern was also in the slums and she had visited here often with the Dwarf. She had spoken to the man before, but he was very reluctant to speak of his past. He would only say that his life depended on his silence. But he was a friend of Cultin, the dwarf, and the man had loyalty to his friends, if nothing else.

She entered the dark tavern. The place was packed full of people from the surrounding areas. Everyone was afraid to stay home at night, for that is when people disappeared. They would stay here until the bouncers kicked them out. The two burly men stood just inside the door and stared her down. No chances were taken these days. They must have decided that she was all right because they moved aside and let her through. Bouncers were something new to the city. With all of the disappearances, people were more apt to come to a guarded tavern. With the prospect of more customers, taverns were willing to spend some extra money hiring some monster youths from the neighboring farms.

The people were of all sorts, but they had one common aspect, they were all poor. This made them care free and a better crowd than the rich, thought Rhiannon. She waved to a couple of friends and they came over to express their sympathies about Cultin. By now the whole area had heard of his disappearance. Cultin had many friends, so now Rhiannon was looking towards the ground so as to avoid any more sympathy. At this rate she was never going to accomplish her task.

She saw the guard in the corner at his regular table. He sat alone, not many wished to associate with a former King's man, but he was not heckled either, the slums accepted anyone. Their eyes met, he had been expecting her. He motioned to another seat at his table. She was surprised at this because usually he would allow no other to sit with him, it seemed as if his mind was already made up about helping her. Rhiannon approached the table and sat.

"Rhiannon," the guard started. "I have heard about Cultin and it grieves me more than you can know. Although I only knew him for a short while, I could see that he was a good man and he always accepted me for who I am and not who I was. Not like this other scum who look away when they meet my eyes. When I left the guard, I was sworn to silence about what I had witnessed. They said that they would be watching me and if I spoke one word, my life would be forfeit. Now I feel that the situation requires me to remember the past." The guard looked at his cup gathering his thoughts. He had ordered an ale for Rhiannon and she now drank it slowly.

The guard then looked towards the door where she saw the bouncers motion to their left. In the corner she saw a dark form. "That is my guard, the bouncers here know everyone, and he is the only oddity in this crowd. He is deaf and can read my lips across the room. But by positioning your chair as I have, he is helpless to make my words. Besides the guards will take care of him before he leaves tonight."

"Where is Cultin?" Rhiannon was getting impatient with the man and wished only to plan his rescue.

“Patience girl. First I will say that the rumors of human sacrifice to Jahvey are not false. They take place once a week in his temple. New clerics have come in, donning the robes of red to signify a time of trouble. The old clerics were the first ones offered up to their god. When all that opposed the sacrifices were gone, the clerics ordered the guards to go and collect victims from the slums.”

“Does the King not know of this?”

“Some say that he does not, and he would probably deny the fact, but he knows. A group of us went to him to explain the situation, but he ignored us, pretending not to hear the horrors around him. He gave the clergy free rein in this matter.

Your friend is being held beneath the temple. There is a vast system of passages that run beneath the city, and in one of these there is a dungeon where the victims are kept before the sacrifice. Cultin has one week from the time of his taking until the sacrifice. They feel that if they prepare the victim properly he will willingly go to the sacrifice. I have seen some broken down, but only the weak. The strong fight until the instant of their death.”

“How do I get down into this dungeon?”

“I know of no other way except through the temple itself. You must find another way, there must be someone who knows of the passages beneath the city. You would not even make it to the entrance to the underground if you so much as stepped foot in the temple. It is very heavily guarded to protect the secrets that lie within. That is all that I can tell you. I wish you luck, now you must go. I have other things to take care of, for instance, my life, now that I have forfeited it.”

Rhiannon took her leave. She walked straight to the door, never looking towards the dark corner. The form struck out at her, running through a small crowd waving a small dagger. He was not sure of the conversation at the table, but took no chances. His progress was halted and his body crumpled by the bouncers. Rhiannon was not sure what was happening and looked up to see the one bouncer wiping his sword clean. She had not even noticed the swords before. On the floor at his feet lie the broken shape of a woman. Her stomach run through. Rhiannon bent over her and saw nothing unusual, just a hired killer. The same role that she had often played herself. Seeing no point in staying, Rhiannon left and entered the city.

She wandered the streets. Where was she going to find someone who knew the underground system of the city? She was sure that the thieves knew, but there was no way to afford their fees. She figured that she had four days until Cultin would be killed. That gave her plenty of time to find someone, but where? She would have to go to a thief, there was no other choice. Besides some would take other things as payment, things that she as a young woman could give and she would do anything for Cultin.

She had only to find someone particular first. She searched the northern slums, but could not locate the beggar. Asking around, she formed a general idea of where he was working tonight. He was a blind man that sat on the corners taking money from all that would give. Though his eyes were dark to the world, his mind was sharp and his ears even sharper. Rhiannon had often sat and talked with him for hours. He was sort of the wise man to the miscreants. All went to him for advice and information. He did not charge much, he was happy in the fact of helping those in need. There were not too many like him left these days. She found him sitting on a corner in his usual guise.

“Almar, greetings.” The beggar turned to the sound of her voice.

“My sweet Rhiannon. Cultin, death, so sorry. Friend he was.” Rhiannon had no idea where Almar got his very weird accent. It confused her the first time she heard it, but she had gotten used to its form and dialect from their many long talks.

“He is not dead Almar. He is being held beneath the temple. I still have a chance, a friend has told me that I have four days to rescue him before they make the sacrifice.”

“Heard I have rumors true. Temple he is. Dungeon heard of. Dangerous they are. Help you can I?”

“Yes, friend, I need a guide into the dungeons. My friend told me that it was useless to try and enter from the temple, that there were many passages under the city that would lead me into the dungeons without ever having to breach the gates.” She waited while the beggar contemplated her problem.

“One there is. Jackal named he. Help you he can. Price you know. My name tell him. Help he will. Junkyard find him.”

“Thank you my friend.”

“Luck I wish you and Cultin.”

The junkyard, there were many, but Almar and her had visited one frequently when she was a little girl. It was abandoned years ago and he would always find the nicest trinkets for her in the heaps of scraps. This was her present destination.

The yard was empty. The stars lit up random pieces of trash scattered throughout the piles. She walked in cautiously, keeping close to the walls. There was no sound in the yard, not even rats, which surprised her very much. The Jackal had always been sort of a legend, few had ever seen who he was, only if some of his services were required. He was most reliable for the right price. Rhiannon completed the perimeter and found nothing. There was no place for anyone to hide. He was not here. On a whim she called out in a loud whisper.

"Jackal!" she hissed. No answer. "Jackal! I was sent by Almar." Suddenly, in the middle of the yard a form moved, one that her eyes had passed over as another pile of junk. She could now see that it had been a man crouching down. He came towards her and her sword flew in to her hand. He raised his hands to show that he meant her no harm.

"Please, put down your sword. I am not your enemy. I know of whom you speak, I do not know where I know him from, but I do. Tell me why you seek the Jackal."

"I need him as a guide. I need to hire him to guide me somewhere only he knows. I am willing to pay. If you see him tell him Almar sent me. I am Rhiannon and I need to speak to him very soon. A life depends on it," her eyes reflected the desperation of her situation as she told the man about the goings on in the temple, not caring anymore who heard her.

"The Jackal will not be coming back. Again I can not tell you how I know this," she looked to the ground in failure. The Jackal had been her last hope. "I myself know the way of the temple. I can help you if you would have me."

"You would, but for what price. I am willing to... If that is what you require."

"I have no price. I only know that I must help you. I have heard your stories of what goes on in the temple. I wish to see these things for myself."

"We are not going to enter the temple, only the dungeons."

"That is unlikely, there is a cell by the main hall where the ceremonies are held. If they are only taking people one at a time as they need them, then this is where they would have taken your friend."

"How do you know so much about the temple? Almar said that none knew but the Jackal. Are you a close friend of his?"

"I can not tell you how I have the information that I do. It is not that I will not tell you, but only that I can not, because I do not know myself."

"Who are you?" Rhiannon asked peering into his eyes.

"I am called Norbavon, but I really have no idea who I am." he shook his head in confused grief.

Chapter Two

“I am called Norbavon, though I do not know why. I do not remember a family and for some reason I doubt that I ever had one. I can not say what I am, for I am not sure of that myself. There are very few definites in my life. I remember waking up in a temple that stood in the far reaches of a jungle. I have no idea how I came to be there. When I tell people from where I came they seem to doubt me and think me a liar. I hardly remember the trip back to this city. A ship was waiting there for me at the edge of a great swamp that ran beyond the jungle making traveling difficult. The Captain seemed to have been expecting me. He offered no explanation, but he also gave the impression that he was expecting more than just one person.

I can not describe who I am. I feel like I have different personalities. At times I feel the hatred of the world on my shoulders. I hate all life and have this desire to destroy all that I see and for some reason I feel that I also contain the power necessary. I emanate power. The aura that surrounds me seems to be invisible to normal eyes, but I see it very well. At times I feel sad. I feel a love for life and a need to preserve it. This contrast of love and hate, in some ways, seems to form a balance within me. I kept the sword that I woke with. I suppose that is what I shall call it, my waking. I know that I can wield this sword better than any man, yet I have no knowledge as to where I learned such a feat.

My body is powerful. I have the arms of a seasoned warrior and the mind to use this weapon of power. I have the strength of four men and find that I must be very cautious in simple things. My power is not easy to control, but I have no problems with it. I am very confused and lonely in this world that I have been brought in. I know no other like me, yet I searched the city high and low for some clue. I also know the city very well as if I have been here before, but I know that I have not, at least not since my waking.

I am confused and lost in this world of men. I feel apart from all things and know within my heart that I am like no other. I know that there is a purpose for my life and I feel that once I fulfil that purpose, my life will be over. Yet, I am powerless to calm the yearning to strive forward and complete my task. I suppose that I have not the time to ponder these things, but I do have a heart and my heart is mine. I feel that it is the only thing about me that is truly my own to control. Already my destiny is laid before me, yet I fear to strive on. I know that before my life is over I will face grave dangers, but I feel no fear, only courage and a longing to strive forward and undo some wrong that has been lain upon this world. I do not know what that wrong is, but I have no doubts that I will find out all when the time is right for the revelation.

My heart yearns for a purpose and to be accepted by the race called man. I know that somehow I am connected to these strange beings that I resemble in every detail, but still the knowledge remains that I am more than they could ever be. I turn now to my name, Norbavon. This name emanates a power within me and I know that there is much more to this simple knowledge than is obvious now.

I suppose that I should just follow the path that has been set before me. My only hope is that the purpose of my life is one that will benefit the race that I have been chosen to resemble. Yet the hatred remains and I feel that I shall kill many before my time is through.

What is to become of me? I do not know. I only hope that my love and that my heart will be preserved and remembered before my fate ensues.” Norbavon finished his tale, coming of the strange, entranced state. Rhiannon could see the sadness in this man's heart. He had opened up completely to her and who was she but a total stranger. Yet he had offered to help her. She hoped that she was not getting into more trouble than she could see.

He looked so sad and lonely. His eyes, though very intense, were innocent, as a baby's are. The eyes of one new to the world filled with an overwhelming curiosity about life. A life that was new, never before experienced.

But she could not let herself be fooled by his innocent outward appearances. He stood as one who knew how to fight and use the sword that sat in his scabbard. His body, she admired his body very much, he was well built, almost perfect, too perfect. There was not one blemish or imperfection on his skin. His new skin, very new looking skin. Not a mark marred its surface, maybe she could convince him into letting her pay him. She felt a strange closeness to this man as if she could completely trust him, and she did. She always followed her heart and her heart told her to hang on and not to let this one get away. Besides, with one such as he by her side, maybe they could survive a trip to the temple.

“I accept your offer of help.” She reached out her hand and took his, but he surprised her and knelt down and kissed it. His eyes then glued themselves to her breasts. She started to feel very uncomfortable in his gaze. He looked as if he was going to reach out and grab her, but his hand jerked away as if it had a

mind of its own. Then the hand went down and scratched himself in a place that made her extremely uncomfortable.

“Forgive me please, I do not know what I do,” Norbavon continued scratching himself, obviously unaware of it. “I am so confused right now. Let us leave this place and rescue your friend. If we only have four days, then we had best be off. I think though that we have plenty of time.” Norbavon finally noticed his errant hand and halted the motion. He looked up at her and found that she had also noticed his action. His eyes looked pleadingly up at hers as if he could not help what his body did, as if he were not totally in control.

He could not be completely perfect, thought Rhiannon. But she liked him, liked him very much. They left the junkyard together.

Chapter Three

“Stop that at once!” the cleric yelled. The demon and the Jackal could not control their laughing. The Knight was ashamed and refused to look on. “Do you not see that you’re confusing him? How is he supposed to accomplish his tasks if he can not even accomplish the control of his hand?” The two continued to laugh.

“But Allanah, I have heard that every man’s balls itch, so I have heard, and they must be scratched.” the demon broke up, there was no stopping the laughter. The Jackal’s face was turning red and tears were streaming down his face, he could hardly breathe he was laughing so hard.

Rexord turned around, trying to hide his own amusement. “I simply wished to kiss her hand, that is all. I must agree with Allanah, that we can not confuse him, it was hard enough to get him here in the first place. We have a mission and your antics are not helping us any.”

“But she was very attractive.” the demon responded, still laughing.

“Yeah, did you see those...,” but the cleric cut Jackie off before he could finish.

“Yes, we all saw her chest, we could not help it since your own interest forced Norbavon to stare at it. I think that we must make some sort of agreement right now. We must all agree on what any of us does. You heard how confused he was, do you think that you helped him any? He is like a child, just born a week ago. We must be careful with him, do not overbear him with your powers or influence. We have already instilled in him that he has a mission that he can not help but follow. Let’s give him control for a little while. Besides I want to see this temple and stop the horror inside. Jahvey does not need any more reasons to destroy our world, I think the Tormentor is enough without adding human sacrifices to the list. Are we all agreed to decide before we act, unless in an emergency?” The cleric looked at the others, but there was no response.

“I find value in Allanah’s words,” the Orb cut in.

“Where have you been for the past week,” the Knight asked. “I was beginning to think that you left us.”

“It is no small task to hold you four together, it requires all of my concentration. I will not be able to offer much help in upcoming dangers, but I must agree with the cleric on this matter. Norbavon is very confused right now. I think that you need to let him on his own for a while, at least until he needs your help or guidance.”

“I see who you are all staring at. I will abide by your terms, but you must understand, being a demon I have never had the opportunity to be a human obviously. There are certain pleasures that I wish to experience. But I will abide and leave our man alone for a time until he requires my help. I will not let him die though and if the situation demands, I will act on my own because your bickering wastes time that could get us all killed.”

“Then we are agreed?” the cleric looked around and all shook their heads to give their ascent.

“Now soon we will be entering the temple. Do you know the way Jackie?”

“Yes.”

“Then I believe that Norbavon will require much of your skill to breach the temple. We shall stand back and let you do what you must.”

“Do not interfere, any of you. This is not easy and his body is considerably larger than mine. I will have to get used to this. I also have never brought anyone with me and I am not sure how the girl will react. She seems strong, but if her strength matches her beauty then we shall have no problem. Already he enters my old domain to recover some tools that any good thief requires. I shall lead him from here on.”

Norbavon entered the outhouse with Rhiannon looking on curiously, he seemed to know too much even though he maintained that he had just entered the city for the first time. They both went down the tunnel in the outhouse, at first it was a little disgusting, hidden very well, but as they made their way through the first opening at the end, they came to a large room hidden deep beneath the junkyard. Here Norbavon went immediately over to a chest and extracted some small items, the tools of the trade. The room was a tribute to the young boy, he kept his most prized possessions here. There was a fortune in fine tapestries and clothes, paintings lined the floor leaning against the wall. The Jackal did quite well, thought Rhiannon. She hoped that he did not walk in while they were burglarizing his home.

Soon Norbavon seemed to have all that he required and they left. Creeping through back alleys towards the temple. Houses were entered and passages opened. Rhiannon was astounded by the maze of

passages her companion knew. Only few even knew of the secret highway throughout the city and now she was being led through it by a man who claimed to be a stranger to New Peturan.

“I hope you know where your going,” the cleric said.

“Just be quiet, you who have never been outside of your little shrine should keep your mouth shut. I know what I am doing and where I go, and if you would let me concentrate I will be able to get us all to our destination alive and undetected.”

Norbavon came to a grate in the middle of a darkened alley. The sun was rising over the edge of the city and with its light the city came alive. He returned the grate after they had both entered.

“We shall rest here,” Norbavon said to the woman.

“No, we must go ahead.”

“If what your friend says is true than we have plenty of time. We shall enter the temple tonight, it is not far, but I feel that we should both be well rested before dealing with this new brand of clerics.”

Rhiannon agreed and they both laid down well away from the light starting to seep through the grate above.

Chapter Four

He awoke in the early evening. Their sleep had been very refreshing given their present quarters. The sewer in which they were in was clean, it had obviously not been used for several years. Before Rhiannon awoke, Norbavon gazed at her. She was extraordinarily beautiful. He felt strange urges arising in him and was not sure what to make of them. He quickly put these urges in the back of his mind to be dealt with later. Gently he woke her, the sleepiness falling slowly from her eyes. She looked up at him and in the moment, fell in love. No one could have foreseen, these two falling in love. She was the first woman with whom Norbavon had contact. But circumstances do not matter concerning issues of love, they just happen and there is nothing that anyone can do about it but act on the undeniable emotions.

"Are you ready?" he asked, the care still beaming from his eyes. Norbavon was not yet learned in the idea of hiding emotions from his face.

"Yes, let's go," she said, but not before she took notice of the care beaming from his eyes.

The sewer twisted around endlessly, she lost all sense of direction, but Norbavon seemed very sure of himself. There was no light in the passage and she found it very hard to believe that he knew where he was going, but she kept her doubts to herself. He led on without the slightest falter in decision when two paths were seen, or rather felt along the walls. There was a slight decline to the sewer passages and Rhiannon guessed that they were heading beneath the dungeons of the temple. Suddenly Norbavon stopped and put his finger to his lips to quiet her. Then he looked at his finger through the darkness, very strangely as to discern what gave him this knowledge that this simple signal should quiet her. There was so much to learn.

In the wall next to them were footholds, spaced in such a way as to make their purpose clear, but where they led was lost in the gloom above.

Norbavon started up the makeshift ladder and signaled her to follow. She nodded, daring not the slightest noise. Noise traveled very strangely among stone walls. They came to another grate through which a soft light could be seen. Peering up through the grate and seeing that the way was clear, Norbavon lifted the immense metal structure easily with one hand. She was amazed at his strength, it should have easily take at least both of them to move the fixture. She looked at him curiously, but saw no surprise on his face. He had no idea of his super strength since he had nothing to base it on.

The passage above was lit with torches every 30 feet. This revealed the fact that the dungeon had been used recently and on a regular basis for the keepers to keep it lit and clean. They made their way West keeping close to the wall and moving with absolute silence. Norbavon moved as one used to silence. His body was of a cat, never making the slightest noise as his feet touched the ground.

"This passage was never lit before," said the Jackal nervously. "They have been using it recently. The last time that I was here it was full of garbage of every type. I had guessed that they had not used it in my lifetime. Up ahead there is a conduit that leads to the ventilation system for the temple, we should be able to reach the cell through there and make a clean getaway," he finished informing the others of his plans.

Norbavon soon came to the conduit and they both rose up into its confines just in time. Noises were heard coming down the passage and the two stayed perfectly still, peering down to see who was to come.

"This is bullshit Drak. All of these sacrifices, when is it our turn? I hate taking the helpless, maybe they should let us take some thieves or prisoners once in a while, at least they deserve to die."

"Remember the guard that left, well he was caught telling some woman of our doings here. I would not be surprised to see her on the altar soon. The guard was destroyed immediately and now none of us are allowed to leave except to go straight to Jahvey."

"That's shit. I have not been the most religious person in my life, but even what I learned as a kid tells me that Jahvey is not accepting any of these deaths. You see that comet in the night sky, well that's Jahvey's answer to human sacrifices." Their voices faded down the passage.

After he could hear no more of the guards, Norbavon continued up. They soon came to the ventilation system and took a tunnel slanting upward to the north. There was a cool breeze coming through the tunnel. It opened on the sea and captured the sea breeze, keeping it clean and dry.

Their destination was soon reached and Norbavon halted to listen. Right in front of the grate opening they saw a cell. The dwarf was crouched in the back, talking to himself.

“All my life I serve you Jahvey. And now this. I do not blame you for what men do and I know that you do not accept these sacrifices as yours. I do not even think that these new clerics worship you. But at least let me die fighting. I have always thought that I would die for a cause, a purpose that something good could come of my death. And how can I forget my adopted daughter, Rhiannon. I love her, please take care of her when I am gone. Find her a man worthy of her spirit. It seems like yesterday when I heard her crying and found her in that pantry. I opened the door and she fell into my arms.” Sniffling was heard from the old dwarf. “Take care of her, she has made my life happy, even if it is to be cut short by these devils that call themselves your clerics.”

“Shut up old dwarf and be quiet or we’ll never be able to rescue you.” Rhiannon could not hold back any longer. Tears of joy ran down her face, she loved him and her happiness at finding him alive was the greatest joy ever.

“Is that you Rhiannon? What the hell are you doing listening to my prayers? Does a dwarf not get any peace from his brat girl? I tried to escape you by hiding in this temple and now you find me.” His false anger could not erase the smile on his face provided by the reunion.

“Please, be quiet both of you,” Norbavon intervened as he lifted the grate. “Too many grates in these sewers,” he observed.

“How, may I ask, does one so small get through this maze?” the Knight looked towards the Jackal.

“There are other ways Knight, just a little to narrow for our large friend and his companion.”

Taking a small tool from his pouch, Norbavon proceeded to try and pick the lock on the cell.

“Do not try, it is useless,” the dwarf said. “I am quite a picklock myself and I have not been able to make it budge.” he ate his words as the familiar sound of a click signified that the lock was indeed open. Both Cultin and Rhiannon stared at him mystified, but he looked away. How was he to explain his knowledge or his skills? Best to just accept them and continue.

“I see my man did not lie.” The three spun around to find themselves faced with a contingent of guards, led by a dark cleric wearing the full red robes. “Greetings, I am Alacan the head of this temple. I am pleased that you have brought company dwarf, my men will now be spared from the hunt for three more weeks.”

“Who are you?” Rhiannon asked approaching the cleric menacingly. Spears stopped her progress.

“I am a true cleric of the new god Tormentor. He is the god of this world and I do his bidding here on the surface. I see no harm in telling you this, even if you were to escape none would believe your story.”

Allanah gasped. “He used to be in the shrine but left. We had thought that he became a priest. How could anyone trained at the Shrine be led upon this dark path?”

“It is much worse than I thought,” added the Knight. “I have only witnessed small bands of nomads claiming title to the cult, but it seems as though they are much more organized than I had anticipated.”

“Good,” the demon pondered the situation. “We shall have some deaths on our hands soon. I am anxious to try my power through this mortal, let us see if he can handle the magic of a demon.” Before anyone could speak a shadow formed in front of Norbavon. Power surged out of him, giving the shadow life. He stepped back, not knowing what to do, he had felt the power come out of him, but was lost as to its purpose.

“Who are you?” Alacan asked gazing suspiciously at Norbavon. “What gives you the power to summon such here?” He was terrified and amazed at what stood before him. The shadow just stood, growing darker until it became a form made entirely of blackness.

“Go!” Norbavon commanded pointing at the cleric. The shadow, quick as light, was on the cleric, consuming him. The screams issued made Cultin and Rhiannon cringe in their frozen state caused by their shock at the power of Norbavon.

Then the guards were upon them. Norbavon disposed of the first and tossed the short sword of his adversary to the dwarf. Rhiannon already had her sword out and was sparring with two of the guards, just barely holding them at bay. Then Norbavon and the dwarf struck together. Rexord sent his skill and cunning to the man and Norbavon drank up, using all that was at his disposal. A fighter with the skills of the knight and the agility of the thief demolished the guards like a madman possessed.

“You have much explaining to do,” the dwarf stated, finishing his own work, then strode off.

“Cultin, our escape is this way, down the grate,” Rhiannon called after him.

“We can not leave this place operational. It must be destroyed. Too many times already has our god been insulted by this disgrace.”

"I hope they sing great songs about you old fool. I do not plan to make a martyr of myself," she started off towards the hole.

"Norbavon, can you use your power again to shut this place down?"

"I am not sure, but yes, I feel that this power is with me and it is not going anywhere."

"Then Rhiannon, we shall not be martyrs, we have with us the greatest warrior known to this world! Come child, do not let your heart be laden with the deaths caused by this place when you had the opportunity to destroy it."

She turned around and gazed at him through angered eyes, but followed. The dwarf entered the passage that Alacan had come from. There was a booming that shook the walls and they followed it. The passage opened up into the center room of the temple. In the midst was a great altar, formerly beautiful marble carved from the sea, but now that marble was stained with the blood of innocents.

"I will not help with this," the demon stated. "I have no desire to help you humans. I am in this for the preservation of our world, if our man wants to become a hero, than he will without my aid."

"And what if he dies? What will happen to you then?" the cleric was angered already by the scene of the altar and the demon's ignorance only increased it.

"I will protect him against any attack, but I will not aid in the destruction of my brethren.

Although I do not follow the Tormentor, he has been my leader for many centuries now and many of my race still follow him. I will only do what is necessary to complete this task, but I will not aid in the destruction of my race or my beliefs!" There was no swaying the demon's opinion.

"Then protect us fool. We do not need your power nor does Norbavon." The Knight turned away, focusing his thoughts on the scene in front of them.

The chamber was empty, only the altar provided any sort of reference in the room. Norbavon moved towards it, leaving the others behind. At the cleric's urging, he placed his hands upon it and look up to the heavens.

Strange words were intoned from his mouth, but the hold was too strong and his concentration caused by the cleric too intense for him to ponder on his new revelations.

The cleric had crossed her arms in prayer and Jahvey answered her. The chamber ceiling cracked leaving it open to the sky. Norbavon stepped back, jolted from the side of the altar. From his neck a piercing white light came forth and struck the marble structure. When it cracked in two, all of New Peturan heard its cry.

"We must leave!" The dwarf had grabbed Norbavon, still overwhelmed by the situation, and led him to a door in the western wall. The temple was coming down around them and more than once they narrowly escaped the rock from the ceiling. Norbavon had now come to his senses and led the group out of the temple. His haunting instincts taking them out through the back of the temple and to the edge of the sea.

"Go to the port Norbavon," the Jackal suggested. "We must get out of the city with a commotion like that. I wonder how the King will explain it to his men. We did not even need your power demon!"

"You think I did nothing? I not only protected our own warrior, but the other two as well. If it were not for me, we would all be dead and done with this and your beautiful woman would be a mash of flesh beneath the temple walls. Never doubt me boy!"

"We must go to the port," Norbavon told his companions. "If you will come with me."

"To where?" the dwarf asked.

"I will know soon. Come with me, we make a good team and it would hurt me greatly to lose the only two friends that I have, in fact the only two people that I know." He directed that last comment towards Rhiannon. The pleading in his eyes could not be denied.

"I will go, there is nothing for either of us here. They will find and kill us if we stay, temple or no temple. The King will try to cover this whole thing up and in doing so will kill all with knowledge. Will you come Cultin?"

"Got nothing better to do, besides I want to talk to you Norbavon. Got some questions for you about yourself and that stone around your neck."

"I doubt my answers will appease, but I will try." The trio made their way towards the docks where they boarded the Cutlass, which had an amazing tendency to always be at the right place at the right time.

Chapter Five

The waves crashed upon the sides of the ship, wetting the motley crew. They no sooner boarded than the mysterious Captain Kraken put the Cutlass out to sea.

"This ship is amazing Captain. I have never seen one such as this. Who thought up the idea of the skis?" Norbavon asked.

"The idea was an old friends. He was a great Captain in his time and I his first mate. He would spend his spare hours drawing pictures in his cabin. It was his last wish that I should build the ship of his dreams. He was such a brilliant man. The ship is named after him, by far my better."

"Just like you to get involved with one of those heroes, Rhiannon. Seems that everything just works out for him. There we were running for our lives from the whole King's guard, and this ship appears. Obviously a ship that he has been on before. The Captain asks no questions, just takes us aboard and shoves off. Really weird Rhiannon, very weird," the dwarf addressed her to the side quietly.

"Stop worrying Cultin. What is wrong if everything works out for him? Were with him, so that means everything is going to work out for us too, right? Anyway, I like him. I am not sure how much yet, but he intrigues me. His mind is that of a child, but at times it is as if he has been here forever. Imagine a man that can pick locks and has the stealth of the finest thief, fight with a sword with the skill of a hardened knight, cast spells that are only known to the demons, cleanse unholy temples with the skill of an arch cleric, and possesses a powerful magical sphere. I am dumbfounded. And yet when he says that he has no idea how he obtained these powers, I believe him, I really do. Those eyes can not lie. His whole being emanates trust and honesty. He is a child mentally, but he acts as if he has a great weight thrust upon his shoulders. I am so confused about him and so attracted to him to. He is absolutely gorgeous Cultin."

"Now you speak as though you were a child with a crush. I do not want to hear it." The dwarf looked over at Norbavon who stood at the bow staring out into the sea and added, "but I must admit that I like him also and if you must have a crush than having it on him is alright by me. Just keep your pants on girl."

"Cultin!" she burst in mock surprise. "What type of woman do you think I am? Anyone who is daring enough to go near these pants will find certain parts lying on the floor. But I am tempted though," she chided. The dwarf pretended to frown, but a smile soon broke through.

The Captain came over to the pair and invited them into his cabin, after they had started down he went to Norbavon and extended the same invitation.

The Captain's cabin was sparsely furnished, but its appearance was exactly what one would think of the ship shape man. Simple furniture was bolted to the floor, there were four chairs and a large chest. A hammock swayed quietly from the wall. The Captain entered and seated himself after all had taken seats of their own.

"Do you remember me Norbavon?" the Captain asked.

"No I am sorry, but I have never seen you before."

"We met on the northern shore of the Straits. You were wandering the banks muttering to yourself when my lookout spotted you. We were headed back from the Shrine. I had just dropped off two people there the night before, but I could not make it out of the Straits so I returned up the Straits to the Shrine. I then left the next morning which is when my lookout spotted you. We had to take your sword away, but you gave it up almost gratefully. You continued your muttering all the way to the city. When we finally reached New Peturan, you grabbed your sword and jumped off onto the dock. We tried to locate you, but you alluded my men. I am curious as to why you were at the edge of the swamp?"

"I can not give you an answer, because I do not know. As far as I know, my life just started then. I remember walking through the swamp to that spot and boarding a ship. As soon as I entered the city I went to somewhere familiar, the junkyard. Though I know that I have never been there before. I am so lost Captain. I have a mission and at my request, which I am eternally grateful for, you are heading towards the Dead Isles."

"The Dead Isles," the dwarf coughed, "are you crazy man. Those islands are inhabited by zombies. Your after that sword are you not? Well you might as well forget it, because it is just a myth, a myth. Do you hear me, it is not there. Do you have any idea how many treasure seeking fools are zombies now?"

"The sword is not a myth Cultin," Norbavon responded. "It is there, I know it is. Again, I can not tell you how I know so do not ask me."

"I know," the Captain said surprising everyone. "Two decades ago I brought a man across the Sea to the islands. I dropped him off and never saw him again. He was a magi and I never saw his face because he kept his cowl covering it the entire trip, but he had a sword with him. It was not until later that I heard that the sword had been stolen from the sacred tomb. But, even though I never actually saw it, I know that the sword was the one of which you are speaking. I remember what island he brought it to and will bring you there. I waited for the man for two nights, but he never showed up. I left then and have never heard of him since. The sword is there dwarf, of that fact I can assure you. I have never told anyone which island I dropped the magi off at, I have never even mentioned before that I carried the sword. Norbavon, your honesty causes the same in all of us. I had sworn to myself to never tell the tale, but it seems as if many things are changing and the situation demands it, for if the sword was meant for anyone it is truly for you."

"Why did you never tell anyone?" asked Rhiannon.

"Do you remember the power of the sword? No man holding it can be attacked with magic, nor with normal weapons. The sword itself is the only weapon that have ever had any effect on the dragons."

"Now you make me laugh Captain. There are no dragons, they are as much a myth as your sword."

"You, who have spent your entire life living in a city are going to tell me what myths exist in our world." The dwarf quieted with a frown. "There are dragons and I have seen one to the south. They say that they stand guard over the entrances to the passages that lead to the temple of the Tormentor. I remember it well, I was bringing a load of cargo to the south. I always get good barter from the nomads down there, well until the cults formed that is. A great fear hit me and my men. We were in the middle of the sea when this hit, no land in sight. We became helpless, my men went below deck hoping to escape from this unknown fear, but I stayed. I was just as afraid as my men, but I gathered what little will power I had remaining and I stayed, hidden beneath some netting on the starboard side.

Then it came. From out of the sky it swooped down into the sea right next to our ship. I thought us goners, but we were not its target. Next to our ship I saw it reach in the water with those great claws and bring forth from the sea a great monster. Such a sea monster I have never seen in all of my days of sailing, but still it was no challenge for this beast. It simply lifted it out of the water and flew away with it as simply as the seagull captures fish.

You can not imagine the size of the Dragon, even the myths do little justice to the beast I saw. His skin was made of black scales that reflected the sunlight in a rainbow of colors. Its talons were as long as two men as were its teeth. I cringed at fear by its sight alone. I can not imagine meeting one in battle. I feel that if it had seen me I would not be alive today. There is no more fearsome beast than the Dragon. If that your purpose in obtaining the sword, than I wish you all the luck in the world, but I fear for your lives." The Captain finished, giving them all much to think about.

Norbavon interrupted, "I know not the purpose of my obtaining the sword, but I feel as if the Dragon may be my goal." He turned to his friends. "I will not ask you to continue with me. You have done more than enough already. Where I go there is bound to be dangers, ones that no man has faced before. I may die or live, I do not know. I do not want you to think that you owe me any debts, all are paid. You owe me nothing. You have guided me in my time of need and without the help of you Rhiannon, I may still be wandering through a junkyard in that city."

Cultin contemplated all that Norbavon had said, then with his mind made up he spoke, "but without you Norbavon, I would be soon splayed across that altar offering my life up for the Tormentor. No, we go where you go. You have given me my life and I feel Jahvey's presence around you. I have never met a truly pure soul before, yours is the first. I think that I speak for Rhiannon also." She nodded in agreement. "We will face whatever dangers you meet and help you in any way that we can, but after watching you fight, I do not think that you need any help."

"I am glad to accept your assistance." The smile on Norbavon's face warmed everyone. Such childhood innocence reflected from his eyes. "Now Captain, you spoke earlier of dropping off two others where you had picked me up. Tell me of them."

"I will begin a little earlier. Just before I sailed for the port of Artong, I brought a young boy to the mouth of the Thaxrha. He was called the Jackal and his reputation is known throughout New Peturan." Norbavon and Rhiannon exchanged surprised glances at this information. "I see that you know of whom I speak."

"No, I have never met him, but was searching for him when I met Norbavon," she looked towards him for acknowledgment.

“Well that is the last I saw of the Jackal. Then in the Port of Artong I was approached by a knight. He was obviously running from something and wanted to keep his identity secret. I was sailing to the other side of the Straits, so I welcomed him aboard. His name was Rexord. From what I have learned since then it seems that he deserted his Fortress, the Fortress Shathra, not three days before he boarded my ship. We then sailed to the Shrine of Cathous where I met the cleric. She was an arch cleric and had never left the Shrine before. The two talked extensively during the trip. I dropped them off at place where I picked you up Norbavon.”

The dwarf thought back to what he had said before, the stealth of the thief, skills of the fighter, magic of a demon, and powers of a cleric, but dismissed the thought as nonsense. Still he could not get the idea out of his head. Rhiannon looked towards him as if she was thinking the same thing.

“How does it all link together?” pondered Norbavon. “Three entering the swamp and I coming from it. Yet I never met any of them. I think it best if I stop trying to explain my past and just continue with my tasks. After they are over I will have time to discover my past life.”

“There is more that you do not know,” stated the Captain. “I have never before brought any to this swamp. Even the bravest adventurers have not attempted to breach its hold. There is an evil in that swamp. Rumors say that it protects great treasures, but I have never confirmed that with a reliable source. You are the first I have ever heard of coming from the swamp. I hoped to gain some knowledge from you, but your previous condition could not be breached with questions.”

“There is a temple in the middle. I remember awaking there. I faintly remember walking through the swamp, but that is all. I am sorry that I can not be of more help.” Norbavon's answer only summoning more questions on its own.

“What do you remember about the temple?” the Captain persisted.

“Hardly anything,” Norbavon stated hopelessly. “Only that it was in ruins. I was in a large room that had been destroyed. That is the first thing I remember in my entire life, waking in this large room now open to the air. I did not search around, or not that I can remember. I only walked out into the swamp.”

“Well at least the rumors were not totally false. There is something that the swamp was hiding. I may be able to use this information to make a little money. Information is the most valuable thing that I sell,” the Captain stated thinking of his purse.

“You have done so much for me, for us. Use this information in any way that you see fit. It is the least that I can offer as repayment for your services.”

“I must now return to my ship. Please let my ship be your home. I will wait for you when you disembark. I feel that if you encounter the zombies you will need a quick get away. I will be willing to accept any treasure that you find as payment for your trip. Let us say that I am funding your adventure. If no treasure is found than it is my loss.”

“What do you know of the island Captain?” the dwarf asked. “We will need to know as much as possible to find the sword.”

“Only what I have heard,” the Captain answered. “There is a ruined house somewhere in the center of the island. Under this house lies the zombie king, if he can be called thus. If your sword is anywhere, it is with him. I must go now.” The Captain took his leave and went up to the deck.

“We shall find the sword Cultin. I feel its pull. Somehow it knows that I am coming and it is preparing itself. I think that the Captain was right, it is with this zombie king. I am embarrassed to ask, but what is a zombie?”

Cultin and Rhiannon laughed, it was easy to forget that Norbavon had the mind of a child sometimes. Rhiannon answered him, “a zombie is someone who has been killed and then raised from the dead by some magical power, or at least that is what I have heard. When they encounter living humans, they try to take the life out of them, which ends with killing them and turning the living to the living dead. When we arrive on the island you will see well enough for yourself.”

They left the room and went out on deck. Norbavon once again proceeded to the bow by himself. He thought about what the Captain had said about the others left at the edges of the great swamp. Somehow he possessed the powers of those. He felt that he knew each person the Captain had met, but kept this information to himself. His thoughts were soon interrupted by the lookout.

“Captain. Land Ho, the Isles of the Zombies off the port bow.” They all took their first glimpse of the dark island and fear gripped their hearts with talons of ice.

Chapter Six

"I think that he is learning more than we had anticipated," stated that Demon. "He is piecing together a very complex puzzle, one that I still do not believe."

"But he goes on and does what we will him to do. I like him. He is good. I wish that I was in that young woman's shoes sometimes, he is also very attractive. Many women will be swooning over him before this adventure is over." The cleric looked around for arguments, but found none. The three others just glared at the woman. "I was a young girl too at one time. I remember falling in love, but I married my studies instead. Little good it did me, but then again who questions Jahvey's purpose."

"I hope he hooks up soon," the Jackal said eagerly, "she is really beautiful."

"I think the Jackal has fallen in love," the Knight interjected. All now turned to look at the reddening Jackal. "I remember when I saw my wife for the first time, funny how I can now talk, when before I would not even think about saying anything. Anyway, I was a young knight, just inducted into the Brotherhood of Knights. I was a fairly cocky young man and there was one woman who used to visit the Fortress every day. I was on gate duty then, a task still assigned to the newest knights, and I saw her walk in. It was my duty to guard the Fortress, so I had to interrogate her. I still remember the look on her face when I took her aside and started questioning her. I was trying to look serious, but a smile kept disrupting my act. She caught on that I was not serious, but decided to play along. I asked her where she lived and what her purpose she had inside the walls. A very cunning way, I thought at the time, to find out information from her. I think I was the first one to use this method to meet young women, but it is still being used today." Rexord looked very proud that his technique still carried on. "One day she came late when I was coming off duty. I was just getting on my horse when she walked up to me and asked me for a ride home. She said that she needed a strong knight to see her safely home since the day was almost over and it was already getting dark. I later found out that she had planned the whole thing." Tears swelled the man's eyes as the memories flooded his soul and the others looked away. A smile donned itself on the face of the cleric, remembering her own love, and even the Jackal was getting lonely thinking about the one that he had left behind.

"Will you stop this drivel?" The demon was getting extremely uncomfortable. "I can not believe that I am forced to hear this crap, but if I must than you must all sit through one of my stories sometime. I am striking a bargain if you have not noticed. Agreed?"

"Yes, anything, just let Rexord go on and be quiet," the cleric rushed.

"You will be sorry," chided the demon.

"Shut up, go on Rexord, please."

"Well I brought her home on my horse. I never really thought about the reason that she had worn pants under her skirt on this day, I was such a fool. I remember holding my hand out to her and her taking it. Her skin was so soft. I felt her other hand on my shoulder, using me to pull herself up. Then when she had mounted, she put her hands around my waist. I felt so powerful. All of the other knights looked at me jealously. I rode around the yard first so that everyone could see. I was so high. She squeezed me tighter and then I knew that I was in love. We rode off, the stallion a fury beneath us. I looked behind me and saw this beaming smile alighted with two wonderful eyes. Her hair flowed in the breeze, such beauty I have not seen since. I was King of the World all of the way home. I showed off a little, bringing my horse through some difficult moves, but not once did I falter. I had been riding since I was a boy and there was no chance of danger. I then brought her home and left. I was so stupid. I had no idea what to say to her so I just said good-bye and left. As soon as I turned around I almost killed myself. I still was not sure whether she like me or not. Then I did one of the most daring things ever in my life, I asked her to one of the monthly dances in the courtyard. All that bravado was just a front. I was very shy with women and did not take even the most obvious of hints seriously. I was so scared riding up to her house that day. I knocked, asked her to the dance, she said yes and I left. I had to tell all of my friends. I rode straight to the castle and told everyone. I ran around the courtyard bragging about the fact that the most beautiful woman seen in these walls was coming to the dance with me."

"What happened next?" the cleric was excited by the story and had gotten caught up in the young love.

"Well there is not much more really. We went to the dance and all were amazed at the love that flowed from our hearts. We had just met and yet we both knew that this was right. We got married the next year. Soon after I became a squad leader and we started a family. She used to chide me about that now that

I was a famous knight with all of these honors and titles I would leave her for some young maiden. I never did, we raised our son together.” All of the love disappeared from his face as his eyes turned toward the demon, blame emanated from them. The demon only matched the look of hatred with one of his own.

“Thank you Rexord. You have now made me feel absolutely horrible in that I have never experienced love. Being confined to the temple your whole life has many drawbacks, but I do not think that I could have cracked that altar with even a day's less training.”

“That was quite impressive, and so was the fighting Rexord. I was even impressed by that thing the demon created. Of course none of you could have done anything unless I got us into the temple, but I must admit that we work very well together. It is nice not being the small boy anymore and instead being a member of the most powerful man in the world. What was that thing you sent on the cleric Maczcksuxe?”

“That was the spirit of the demon he had destroyed. No mortal knows this, but when a demon is destroyed, his spirit lives on and any that witness his death can control that spirit. I have seen three deaths in my entire life and can control all three. Since we are immortal, much better than your puny life-span, we never really die. There are ways though, to destroy our bodies, of which I am sworn to secrecy, but would not tell you anyway. When one of our bodies is destroyed, we live on, before the Tormentor we used to go to some place of Jahvey's, waiting to be called back to help our brothers. Now that the Tormentor claims himself a god, he has taken these spirits to his side and they fight for him. I discovered this in my summoning. I do not think that I would have been able to accomplish the task without the Orb's direct link to the Tormentor. The cleric that I killed was the one that ended my brother's worldly existence. Some years back he tricked us, those times were hard, the Tormentor was trying to get a firm hold on us and at the same time dark clerics were studying up on how to control us. It is the spirit of the demon to be free, we can never be controlled. That is until the Tormentor tried. The cleric had tried also, he had concocted some great spell and used it against the demon while others held him still with magic. There must have been thirty clerics in the room, four holding down the experiment and the rest trying to control me. They had captured both of us, but I will not go into that.” The demon obviously did not want to talk about anyone defeating him.

“When he cast the spell my brother withered to a crisp. It was all very quick. He was just no longer there. Seeing their failure, they released me. They treated us like animals, and I was helpless against so many, so I left. This is the first time that I have seen him since that night and I thought it best for him to be killed by the demon that he destroyed. But I forget myself, was not I promised the chance to tell a story in equal, but opposite, to the Knight's love puke?”

“Please, not now. I am still enjoying Rexord's story in my mind. Some time later alright?” Allanah asked pleadingly.

“I will wait, but do not try and forget me. I think that all of you need to learn a little about the darker side. There is a certain enjoyment in the taking of another's life. You lose their soul to the God, but you gain their lifeforce. I become more powerful with each that I kill. It is an addiction that I am powerless to stop. Some of my brethren set up temples in the far reaches of the east. There they accept human sacrifices, but that would bore me. I enjoy the hunt almost as much as the kill.”

“Why have you never just taken over the world? You are the most powerful thing that I have ever seen or heard of, besides that Dragon?” asked the Jackal.

“We have no ambition to, we are happy and content in just killing. Besides, as I have said, we can be overcome with the right amount of resistance.”

“Where are you taking us Orb?” the Jackal asked. There was no response. He repeated his question louder. “Why does it not answer?”

“The Orb said before that it took much power to maintain this spell,” Rexord informed. “But I think that I can answer your other question. Years ago there was a powerful warrior, I forget his name, I was not a very good history student. He was given, by Jahvey, a great sword. The sword possessed the quality that its bearer could not be harmed by magic or physical means. The only way to make magic affect them, or to attack them at all, was by direct contact to the skin with an enchanted weapon. At the time, the myth states, the Dragons flew freely about the world, killing and plundering. With the sword, this warrior destroyed all but six, those that guard the gates to the Tormentor's lair. After the warrior died, he was sealed in a tomb with the sword. The tomb is in the mountains to the south. But the day came that the tomb was breached by what appeared to be a magi. He removed the sword and brought it here to the Dead Isles. I had not believed the full myth until now.”

The Demon picked up the story, "you are right Knight, you were not a very good history student. I remember it well, for I lived through that age. The Dragons had to be stopped. They were on a path of destruction and would not halt their terror until every living creature was gone. They would fight amongst themselves in the skies, it was quite a spectacle to see. Beord was the warrior's name. With his sword he set off to every lair and destroyed all of the dragon eggs while maiming the existing dragons. Dragons are very hard to kill, and although the sword does very well to protect the bearer, it does little more than an enchanted sword on the attack. So he left them rotting in their lairs. The legend is false if you believe that he killed them, for he could only kill the younger ones, it takes all forms of attack to destroy one of the ancients. I am not sure whether our combined powers could do it, but I feel that we have a better chance than any before us. The six that remain are all sires. They have lived the longest and were not found at their lairs when Beord struck. Now they sleep in the volcanoes."

"What volcanoes?" continued the Jackal.

"You are a very uneducated boy. There are six volcanoes, one on each side of the world. These are the only entrances to the Tormentors underworld. There is one in the mountains of Zan Timo to the south. All of my brothers went there not one month ago. If it were not for the call, I would have joined them in their slavery to the Tormentor. He does not trust us, for demons can not be tamed. We will be slaves to no man." Maczcksuxe struck out at the air, his fury increasing as he recollected the moments when the demons flocked to the volcano. "We are simply survivalists, dealing with what we desire and nothing else. I help this quest willingly because I see the destruction of this world and myself along with it. I could give a damn about the human, it is I whom I fight for. I protect your human race as a farmer protects his cattle. You are all so blind to the world, you have lived in your small part for so long. I have been all over this planet and saw horrors that would destroy you. For centuries I have watched your race, wondering if you would ever venture into the rest of the world, but no. You have just recently started moving towards the east and I have yet to see the Captain daring enough to cross the Western Sea. I waste my time with you. Maybe when this is over I will take you with me to the other side of the world. I would enjoy that just to see the reaction on your faces. I have even been to this zombie island before." The others looked surprised that he had not mentioned it before now.

"These dead are horrendous, even I have avoided it since my first visit. There is no way to kill them. Each bit of their flesh is alive. You must totally destroy their body to stop their attack. Fire is the best method, but they come down on you like a swarm of insects. They are not just men either, every type of animal that has ever been on that island now haunts it. Slowly their bodies rot, but they continue on. What I have heard, and I can not be sure about how much truth there is to this, is that it was no magi that stole the sword, but a dark cleric hired by the remaining dragons. They could not go near it, but they could unseal the tomb for him so that the cleric could remove it. He brought it here and created the zombie islands. He was the first to discover them, so none know whether there were zombies before his arrival or not. I can not see how we plan to get to that house and if we do I can not see us getting back."

"You are so evil that you do not see the obvious, Demon. All that is dead is in the realm of Jahvey, I am a cleric of Jahvey and I can control these creatures with his help. I have never attempted this before, but I have read much on the subject, and the idea is not a new one."

"Are you sure you can do this?" the Jackal asked skeptically.

"Not really, I have never tried before, there is not too many zombies at the Shrine."

"That is just great, so if Norbavon gets transformed into one of these creatures than maybe we can float around and watch him eat people for the rest of our lives."

"Sounds like fun to me," Maczcksuxe answered seriously.

"That is so morbid, do not even think of the thought." Allanah was thoroughly disgusted by the images being conjured in her mind.

"How does one prepare a human?" The Knight was actually enjoying the cleric's discomfort.

"Humans are usually best raw. The screaming adds flavor," the demon answered.

The Jackal was completely disgusted but could not help laughing at the look on Allanah's face. "I think she is going to barf," he said laughing. Even Rexord started laughing at the blueish tint coming onto Allanah's face.

"Why is everyone laughing? I am serious," Maczcksuxe could not help a smile coming to his own face at the discomfort he had caused the cleric.

Allanah stood gasping, but being in the spirit form, could find nothing to puke out. The joke was very demented, but the day was lightened a little and the four became a little closer.

On the horizon the Dead Isles drifted ever closer. Norbavon and his companions stood gazing at the dark clouds that covered the islands. A strong wind, reeking of decay, blew towards them coming from the direction of one of the larger islands. Captain Kraken pointed the bow of the ship towards that very same island and took the pot and sails down. Quietly, like a Jackal in the night, the Cutlass approached the Dead Isles.

Chapter Seven

Captain Kraken anchored far off the shore. No one questioned him keeping his ship as far from the island as possible. There was no beach to the island, just a rocky coast line and a dense forest starting quickly after the rocks ended. The waves were silent, in fact all was silent around the island. Not one animal called to another, no breeze flowed through the trees. The forest was dead, yet alive at the same time as if the trees themselves had been affected by the zombie curse. A gong banged three times, originating somewhere in the middle of the forest. No response was heard, just the echoes bouncing off the rocks and the other islands. There was no warning, except the feeling of death, to what horrors inhabited the islands. Many had come, before the legend spread, and found themselves adding to the unholy army.

The skiff was lowered to the side. "None of my men will row you to shore, and I can not say that I blame them. Take the boat and leave it anchored in the water close to shore, but not too close to the rocks. The water is calm now so you should not have too much trouble, but when you get back no telling what the weather will be like. Good luck."

The three companions climbed down the ladder and into the small boat. Cultin took the oars while Norbavon untied the ropes. The oars hit the water with almost no sound. The fear seemed to be eating up any sound emitted by anyone. The three talked to each other in hushed whispers, even though there was nothing apparent listening. The dwarf took his time, he was in no rush to face the undead. As they neared the shore a welcoming committee had arrived to greet them. Various animals, drawn here by the presence of the ship, lined the rocks of the coastline. They came out of the woods one by one, almost reluctant to leave their safety. Wolves, bears, deer, moose, and smaller animals stood staring at the intruders. They made no move other than to place themselves along the bank. Animals that would have attacked in the living world, stood next to each other gazing at the fresh life sources. One mind seemed to control them all. Their eyes all moved in unison and their mouths seemed to be trying to recollect the sounds they used to make when blood flowed freely through their veins.

"We might as well turn back," Cultin said not at all unhappy about the decision. He started turning the boat around.

"No," Norbavon answered.

"Are you blind? We are only three and look more of those cursed beasts are arriving every minute."

"We must go on. I will keep you safe, do not worry."

"Oh I forgot, you know you can keep us safe, but you do not know why again, right?" Norbavon nodded. "Well one of these times your going to think that you know everything and get us killed in the process."

"Are you sure Norbavon?" Rhiannon gazed up at him with trusting eyes.

"Yes, I can keep the dead off of us."

"Turn the boat back Cultin, I believe him. He has given us no reason to doubt his powers yet." The dwarf muttered something incomprehensible but turned the craft around none the less.

When they were ten feet off of the rocks, Cultin stopped there progress and dropped a small anchor down taking the Captain's advice. Norbavon jumped out testing the water. The animals on the shore moved towards their landing sight, none of them rushing. They waited in a line that resembled a food line at a poor house. The water was only chest deep and the other two entered. Norbavon held onto the dwarf until they had walked close enough for him to stand.

"Stay close to me," he said. The other two needed no prodding and walked easily in Norbavon's grasp. The animals moved back as they approached, creating a small circle for them to enter. Norbavon climbed up the few rocks to the shore, but the other's remained back not sure of his intentions. One of the wolves attacked.

Norbavon did not look, he gazed up at the sky.

"Norbavon, look out!" Rhiannon screamed. He did not turn, only kept staring into the sky. As the others rushed to his aid they stopped. The wolf had halted his attack three feet from the man, and fled in the opposite direction. None of the other animals moved, they kept their distance, but did not leave the group. Cultin and Rhiannon joined Norbavon on the rocks. As they walked forward the animals followed, but always keeping their distance.

"I will not ask how, but thank Jahvey those animals fear you." the dwarf stated.

"Look at their eyes," Norbavon said looking at the animals. "They are so sad. Their bodies are under the curse, but in part of their minds they remember life. That is why they attack, they hope to take our life and restore theirs. I pity these." Suddenly he stopped and reached out his hand. A deer, braver than the rest, approached, her head down. There was pain registering on her face, but she continued. Rhiannon tried to pull Norbavon away, but he turned and his look kept her back.

The deer reached its snout out to his outstretched hand and nuzzled it. If animals could cry, tears would have been streaming from its eyes. "My god," Rhiannon whispered, the pain in her voice showed her horror at what had become of these animals.

"Rest now," Norbavon commanded as he placed his hand on top of the deer's head. The deer looked up at him and whined. Color coming back to its skin. It fell upon the ground, a look of final peace spreading across its face as its body disintegrated into dust.

The four souls that made up Norbavon also witnessed this. Looks of awe reflecting from each of their faces, even the Demon's.

"Jahvey calls back his children," the cleric whispered, surprised and mystified at the turn of events.

One by one the rest of the animals approached Norbavon, each returning its soul to Jahvey by the man's touch. There was sadness in watching the animals finally die, but it could not outweigh the happiness felt at the release of the imprisoned souls.

"We should have no problem here," Cultin observed. "If you can do that to every zombie we should soon be off this island."

"No, Cultin, those animals were innocents. They only wanted to die, the humans here may be different. I would not count on every encounter we meet ending like this."

He stood up and walked into the forest, the two others following close behind. A path had opened before them and they followed it, not daring to stray from the small safety given to them by the openness of the trail. Soon they came to a small brook, its water black with decay. Even the fish of the stream had the same lifeless eyes and skin color of the dead. They crossed, not daring to look or even think about what had caused the fish's demise.

One by one humans joined their ranks. The eyes of these were evil. They joined up and followed closely as if they were an honor guard, guiding the trio to some unknown destination.

"These souls are not their own," Norbavon observed. "They are under the control of someone else. Look at the difference in their eyes from those of the animals. There is evil there. Their souls are being commanded and I feel that they will take us where we want to go."

The leader of the group turned around, his face was gone exposing his rotting brain to the air. Cultin turned away in disgust at the sight, but his eyes found no sanctuary. Limbs were missing from most, having rotted off years before. Few had both eyes, and most had gray veins dangling from the sockets. One zombie, next to Rhiannon, had his eye fall out while they walked. He seemed not to notice it, but another did. He reached up and plucked it from his face. There was a small scuffle over the eye, but the owner soon snatched it away and plucked it into his mouth, not even realizing that he consumed his own flesh. He was immediately attacked by the others, they tried to get at the eye through his throat, using their teeth to break the skin. The sound of his ripping body was the only one in the forest. All would have fought on had not the brainy one, somehow sensing that his company was diminishing, stopped everything and with a glance from the brain, all stood back up and continued the trek.

Soon he turned from the path and headed into the woods. Norbavon did not want to leave the path, but the other zombies approached menacingly, ignoring the pain that their close proximity to him caused.

"I think we had better follow him," Cultin said.

"I do not think we have any choice." Norbavon turned and followed into the dense forest.

After a short time, or maybe a long one, there was no way of telling time in the dark sky, they came to the house that they had heard of. There was no roof on the structure and in places most of the walls were missing. The leader walked around and approached what would have been the front door, but now was only an opening. He mocked opening the door that had long since rotted away. "He must have been the owner of this house before his death," Cultin whispered.

The group was led in the house and down through a trap door the leader had opened. He backed away and motioned for them to enter. After they had descended into the faintly lit passageway, the trapdoor was silently closed and bolted behind them.

"There goes that escape route," Cultin muttered. "Any bright ideas warrior?"

“We really do not have much choice,” Rhiannon answered for him. “We had better follow the path. Whoever has control over these things can make them ignore the pain of Norbavon's power, so we had better just play along for awhile.”

“The sword is down here,” Norbavon said finally. “It calls to me, it wants to escape. I hear it in my head, calling to its master, which it claims is myself. We have no choice but to follow. I never have any choice,” he finished sadly.

The passage lay out before them, faintly lit by sputtering torches, but never placed close enough to dispel all of the darkness. A door lay at the end of the passage, it opened as they neared and a voice whispered to them out of the gloom, “Welcome Norbavon,” it hissed.

Chapter Eight

Only one object was in the room, a throne. Its gleam long since lost to rust and decay. Gold lay in heaps on the floor, carelessly discarded and left to the dirt. Sitting on the throne was what had greeted them.

"You have finally come," it whispered. "For years I have awaited your arrival, surrounded by my hoard to protect what is rightfully yours. I give it to you now, you must retrieve it yourself for I can no longer touch it. I ask one thing for my years of service, release my soul from this prison."

The figure on the throne was a heap of melted flesh. There was no way to discern what sort of creature it was. The head was sitting on top of two hands, parted to give it a place to rest. The skin of the head had long since joined with the hands, making the whole thing seem like an abnormally long neck. That was all that there was. No body, no life.

"Who are you to ask this of me?"

"I am Drazcar, your servant. Years ago I was summoned by Jahvey to bring the sword here for your entrance onto this world."

From inside Norbavon a demon raged furiously, "Liar! The dragons made him do it."

"It is a small price to pay for this weapon. Will you grant me this favor? It is of no cost to you, I saw through my animals eyes what you did for them. Release me from this worldly prison. Let me rest. I have grown tired of controlling these mindless fools and have lost most of my body in the fight for power." Norbavon was skeptical. If this man was a servant of Jahvey, than why did the other zombies look so evil. A voice inside his head told him that this man was lying, but how could he deny him.

"What about all of these others?" he asked approaching the fiend.

"When I have been released they too will be able to leave this world."

Before anyone could intervene, Norbavon reached out his hand and placed it upon the mass of dead flesh. A voice inside his head screamed in denial as he attempted to release the soul. His power was being drained, but still he continued, fighting with the evil of the soul and trying to send it away to the next world. With a gasp he fell to the floor, his task completed.

"Why are the others not following?" Rhiannon looked around worried.

"Soon," Cultin hoped, but nothing indicated the mass exodus from this world. The zombies only approached the living menacingly as the bonds of their former master were lifted from their souls.

"Norbavon!" Rhiannon screamed, awakening him from exhaustion. The zombies were closing in.

"He lied," Norbavon realized in surprise.

"Welcome to the real world son. Dark clerics do lie." The dwarf attempted to keep the zombies at bay as they formed a protective circle around the throne. "Now why do you not see what you can do about getting us out of this mess." Cultin's blade was swinging through arms and bodies, but they kept coming. Norbavon reached out to one, but it only grabbed at his hand, trying to bring it to its mouth.

"Behind you!" Rhiannon screamed as the brainy one dropped through the ceiling onto the throne. She rushed to attack, dismembering its body so badly that all it could do was lie in a puddle of entrails and quiver. Something behind the throne caught her eye. The sword! Drazcar had said something about not being able to touch it. She jumped behind the throne just in time as another dropped through the ceiling. Lying amidst debris lay the sword, no rust tarnished its blade. Gathering her courage she touched it with her hand. No effect. Only the dead were subject to its curse. "Norbavon," she called out, throwing the sword to him, barely avoiding the zombie that stood in her way.

He caught it in the air and removed the cloth covering. The Sword of Jahvey glowed in the presence of the Orb, rejoicing at having found its rightful heir. A song burst forth in Norbavon's head as he dropped his other blade and swung the new. The zombies halted their attack. Their fear of the blade overcoming their hunger. They ran from its steel, they knew its power. Norbavon felt a hand on his shoulder as the overzealous one on the throne attacked. He swung around with the blade, cleaving the monster in two.

They all covered their eyes as the being burst into a million tiny pieces which crawled with life over their skin.

Cultin screamed while trying to wipe the flesh beasts off of his arm. They all helped each other and soon the flesh turned away from the blade and slithered across the floor.

"Let us get out of this hole," Cultin said turning back towards the way they had come in.

"Wait, do not forget about Kraken's payment. He should be pleased with our plunder." Norbavon grabbed a sack and started stuffing it with gold coins, the other two followed suit. "Now let us begone."

The trapdoor burst with one taste of Norbavon's extraordinary strength. No zombies were to be found. They left the house and entered the forest.

"Which way?" Cultin asked.

"I have no idea," Norbavon answered.

"We could be walking in this forest for days, no telling when they regain their courage and decide on another attack."

"Over there," Rhiannon informed them. "Someone is motioning us to follow them."

"Should we trust them?" Cultin said to himself as much as to the others.

"Why not? I do not have any other ideas." Norbavon headed towards the figure. Cultin and Rhiannon followed, as much as to be with Norbavon as the protection granted by his sword.

The small figure stayed far ahead, turning once in a while to make sure that they were following, but never close enough for them to discern who or what it was.

"We should have reached the path by now," Cultin observed. But they kept on, to stop now would be to be lost in the forest forever. Lights soon lit the edge of the forest and upon closer inspection they could see that they were the lights of small boats searching off the coastline. "We made it, but where has our guide gone. We could at least thank him, or it."

They looked around but could see nothing. Norbavon called to the forest, but no movement was seen. "We better go," he said. Just before they got to the rocky coast, Rhiannon saw a figure emerge and pointed it out to the others. She gasped in shock, it was a little girl zombie.

"Come child," she called. The girl was hesitant, but slowly came closer. She had no arms and walked very awkwardly without the added balance. "Norbavon could you..." Rhiannon begged, never taking her eyes off the girl.

Norbavon approached, the girl started to turn and run. "Your sword Norbavon," Rhiannon reminded him. He placed the sword on the ground and continued his approach, the girl stayed still, fright apparent in her eyes. He reached out a hand, but she shied away. A few soft words brought her back, and she allowed him to touch her. Without a sound she fell, the last look in her eyes was one of thanks. Many zombies started lining the edge of the forest, but it was obvious by their stances that they meant the group harm. Norbavon turned and ran, picking up his sword as he left. They climbed down the rocks and got in the boat. The other boats had seen them and joined them on their trip back to the Cutlass.

No one spoke a word as they looked back on the silent island. Zombies lined the banks jeering at their escape. All they could think of was the horror of the little girl and how she had helped them escape. The zombies had been gathering an army together and they just avoided them. The Cutlass sat in the dark water like a beacon of hope. They reached her and climbed up the ladder. The Captain greeted them with looks of worry and thankfulness that they were alive.

"How long have we been gone?" Cultin asked weakly.

"Four days," he answered and before any more questions could be asked, the trio slumped down on the deck and passed out from the exhaustion caused by four terrifying, sleepless days.

Chapter Nine

The Cutlass sailed away from the Dead Isles. Small waves broke across the bow of the ship. No magic was used on the return journey. The Captain thought his guests needed rest and did not want to make the mainland too soon. They sailed south towards the mountains, where Norbavon told him their final destination was. They had brought back gold, enough for Kraken to retire on. He told them to keep some, but they only took what they would need. Norbavon had said that money would buy nothing where they were going.

The sky was starting to light, the sun coming up over the horizon so slowly. These were the favorite times of the Captain's. Time for thought and decision making. He would let them off to the south, but then what. Norbavon had said they would not be back. He really liked the man. If only there was something else he could do to help. He feared that he would never see Norbavon again. Although their time together had been minimal, he counted him among his friends, of which he had very few. He liked the dwarf and girl also, but nothing special there. The girl was especially beautiful, but any man could see that her eyes rested on the warrior. And where the eyes went, the heart soon followed. The mainland was in sight and the Captain ordered the ship to head south.

The mountains, so far away, yet he could see them clearly. So this was where his guests were going. The mountains of Zan Timo. All of the peaks were lost in the clouds but one, the volcano. When the comet appeared in the sky, the volcano started erupting again after laying dormant for so long. Somewhere there was a dragon living in the volcano, a dragon who was about to meet Norbavon. Secretly the Captain chuckled as he wished the Dragon luck. The dwarf had risen in the middle of his sleep and come on deck during the night. He had told him of their adventures on the island. Kraken still could not believe it, killing zombies, actually killing them with a touch none the less. He had never heard of it before, but he had never met Norbavon before. His tales would spread, if not by him, then by his men. Norbavon would be famous if, when, he returned from Zan Timo. They would not go into details about their purpose, but there was only one reason to challenge the dragon and that was to get past him, to the lair of the Tormentor. The Captain shuttered at the thought, but their business was theirs. He had his gold, more than enough. His men deserved some shore leave in New Peturan and they would have it. There was no use waiting for Norbavon, he was right, they would not return soon.

In the distance a faint screech interrupted his thoughts, far away, circling the volcano, the dragon was waiting. Norbavon had better be ready, at least he would be rested, the Captain would see to that.

If the Captain had gone into the cabin right then, and intensely gazed at Norbavon, he might of seen a glimmer, faint, but a small glimmer of four spirits surrounding the warrior. Maybe the Captain could have seen the Orb's light pulsating faintly in the dark, but never could he have heard the argument that ensued from the spirits.

"Why is he so disgustingly pure and good? It makes me sick to be part of this man."

"He chooses his own path Demon," the Orb stated.

"Where have you been?" asked the Jackal.

"I have been very tired. Keeping you together is no small accomplishment, especially when Norbavon decides to draw on my power. When I was with the Tormentor I acted as a sort of amplifier for him. The surface world was too far away for his powers so he made me. I acted as his liaison and his amplifier on the surface. I do something of the sort for Norbavon also. He does not know when he has reached his limit, so I must aid him so that he does not destroy us all. Many souls have traveled through my light in the past days. I afraid that he would try and rescue the entire Dead Isles from their plight, I was not sure that I could handle it."

"What do you mean that he chooses his own path," Maczcksuxe continued his former conversation.

"You influence him when you need too, but when you are not, he has his own will. Even your suggestions can not over power his own will, he is not a zombie. When you suggest something to him, he feels the idea grown in his head and has a strong urge to do it, but we can not make him do something that he does not want to. He grows stronger, or rather more mature, and therefore his will grows stronger. I had not foreseen this, but it has not been a problem, let us hope that it does not. Just work with him, he seems to have accepted his tasks, do not force him into things. I would also try to give him some type of warning before you send your power flowing through him. Look on him as a son, he must be taught as slowly as possible given the circumstances. I feel that everything has gone very well so far. We have the sword now

we only have to find the Tormentor and defeat him.” The Orb seemed very optimistic about the whole thing.

“Much easier said than done Orb. I wish to have a few words with Sir Norbavon. He has left the sword of my fathers to rot in a stinking pit of zombies. I have no idea how I will ever retrieve it. I tried to get him to bring it with him, but it seems that in periods of stress he is more susceptible to his own will than ours.”

“I too had the same problem when he released Drazcar's soul. That thing was more demon than I. He lied to Norbavon and I tried to tell him, but he continued. He is much too trusting. I hope that this encounter has taught him a few things about humans.”

“Do not dare call that thing human. Did you not see it? He only had two hands and a head. How could it survive? I tried to stop Norbavon from using my power to free him, but I was as much a slave to him as he is to us. I feel like an energy source that he just taps at will. I feel that without the Orb's help I would be dead now from exhaustion. You are lucky Rexord and Jackal that you do not have any extra powers for him tap.”

“You are wrong,” the Knight argued. “My arm feels every thrust he makes. I am forced into concentration when needs his sword. I feel my arm in his guiding his every stroke.”

“And I also. The quick reflexes are mine, so is his cunning, if he decides to use it. I too am being used in his every waking moment. You may be drawn upon in large doses, but I am constantly giving him my skill with every step that he makes.”

“We all contribute in some way,” Allanah cut in. “Obviously he has my good looks.” The others looked at her skeptically.

“No, I think that it is I that he resembles most,” Allanah looked surprised at the Demon's jest. There was something special about him. Here he was, a demon, spawn of the Tormentor and yet he was helping them save the world. All of the other demons had rushed to the Tormentor's side, but no Maczcksuxe. He saw the folly in the demigod's plan and choose the side of good, for lack of a better description. He was not a bad companion either. His descriptions were a little gross and his humor crude, but then so was the Jackal's. She had even noticed a look of regret at the pain he had caused Rexord by killing his family. She sensed that there was more to the lesser demon that Rexord killed than Maczcksuxe was telling them. Or just some special attachment to him. Whatever the link, the demon had a heart, black though it may be it was a heart and a heart had feelings. There was a small glimmer of light in that dark heart. When she had first realized that she was traveling with a demon she thought it a folly. Being a cleric makes one very prejudice against the evil races. But now, she saw the differences and found that he was no worse than any predator. He had great power, but no ambitions for control. He hunted humans, but then again so did other animals. She could not overlook the fact that he thrived on the fear of his victims, but were not those that ran from wolves or bears just as terrified? He did not worship Jahvey, but did acknowledge him being the most high. There was so much to this dark one who had lived for who knows how many centuries.

He was not the most pleasant thing to look at, but then again who was. Her religion had always told her to love all of Jahvey's creatures, but the clerics of the Shrine tended to ignore the fact that evil was also a child of Jahvey, even the Tormentor. Maczcksuxe emanated power, such power, but Jahvey had chosen well in his distribution of such power. In the hands of the mad human, the power would overcome and destroy. In the hands of this dark spawn, the power killed few. Allanah had paid close attention to his stories lately, it seemed that most of his victims did not suffer. His mutilations were done after death to scare the living. In fact the only ones that seemed to suffer at his hand were evil themselves, like that dark cleric in New Peturan. It seemed like ages ago when they had stopped the sacrificial killings, but it was less than a month. She wondered where they would all be a month from now. Norbavon probably will not exist then. She gazed down at him, such a beautiful creature. In their sleep, Norbavon and Rhiannon had reached out and joined hands. Young love, how romantic. Yet she felt such pity for them, the Orb could not hold the spell on forever, and sooner or later they would have to return to their living state. What would young Rhiannon do? Here she was giving her heart to a man who will exist for at most a month more. Well maybe she would be able to console her, but how does one console a broken heart?

The three others that made up Norbavon floated and rested while he slept. They did not actually sleep themselves, in the spirit form they needed none of the human requirements. The never got dirty, never relieved their bowels, and never ate. Though none of these things were required, they often found

themselves missing out on the simple pleasures. Soon this would all be over though, and soon there would no longer be a Norbavon.

The Orb pulsed faintly around his neck, more often now it would ignite. Both Cultin and Rhiannon had seen it, but decided to keep their questions to themselves since Norbavon never had any answers. The Orb communicated with Jahvey, receiving directions to the lair of the Tormentor. Drazcar had alerted him of this new danger, the zombies were expected to destroy the trio. The Tormentor now knew that something new was in the world, something very powerful that wore a smaller version of his Orb around its neck. The Tormentor would be waiting for them on the main land. Before they reached Zan Timo, they would have to travel through the lands that the cult was taking over. Last they had heard, the nomads were being formed into armies, no telling what their size was now. Rexord had described fighting them, he said that they had no concern for their own lives, perfectly willing to give their life up for the Tormentor, in fact happy to do so. What would they do against an army? Even the demons vast powers could not attack more than a few at a time. The Orb just hoped that they never had to worry about it. They were only three and three could travel fast, but it was sure that their description would be everywhere on the plains. The forces should be divided though, since they were still looking for the four that Jahvey had shown the Tormentor on the day of Transformation.

After the plains was the Dragon, Skelter, who guarded the nearest gate. They had little hope of killing him, she hoped that maybe Jackie could sneak by him. The sword should protect Norbavon, but what about the others. Beord tried to kill dragons, but failed. He was only one though, where Norbavon was four. So many ifs is such a dangerous game. But they must succeed, the world depended on it. But who were they really protecting themselves from? It was Jahvey who was going to destroy the world, not the Tormentor. Why could he not just kill the Tormentor, without taking the whole planet with him? Who was worse, a crazed demigod that wants to rule the world, or an angry real god who wants to destroy it to bits?

The Orb stopped itself. There was no use in doubting. That was the only problem with this new life, her free will, before everything was so cut and dry. When an order was given it was carried out, end of story. Now there were morals and feelings, a judgement of what is right and wrong by your own standards. The Orb had no right to judge what Jahvey's wishes were. He was giving them a chance, that was more than the Tormentor would give them when they met. He could have just punished him outright, but he was compassionate enough to let the best the world had created fight for it. Well they were going to fight and the Tormentor was going to feel the might of Norbavon, and he would cringe in terror.

Chapter Ten

Norbavon tossed and turned, he was in front of the Tormentor, but he could not see a face. The demigod was enormous and towered over the puny fighter. He had Rhiannon and Cultin in one hand. Slowly he picked them limb by limb, as one pulls wings off a fly, stuffing the parts in the gaping mouth, that was a black pit in Norbavon's dream. The Tormentor reached for Norbavon, but a shaking on his shoulder brought him back from the land of the dead.

Rhiannon stood over him, her eyes filled with concern. A smile spread across Norbavon's face caused by the close proximity of his love. He sensed that some move should be made, but was not sure what. Deep inside him he felt an urge to place his lips on hers. He was disgusted and yet intrigued by the thought. He moved a little closer, a look of hopeful daring in his eyes. Rhiannon came closer too, but turned away at the last minute, a trick she had used often with bold men.

"Why do you move away?"

"What?" she replied trying to ignore the question.

"Why do you move away from me? I was going to place my lips on yours. I know that it may sound repulsive, but I feel that this was the right thing to do. Am I wrong?"

Rhiannon laughed, it was so easy to forget his immature mind. His boldness amazed her, just like a child when he reaches that curiosity stage. Slowly she turned towards him and put on her most seductive smile. She came closer, he was frozen in place, his eyes wide with fear of the unknown. Delicately she placed her lips upon his, he made no move. Her tongue came out and licked his lips, he went to grab her, but she quickly pulled away and alluded his grasp.

"Now tell me," she breathed. "Was that wrong?"

"Never, that was great. Let us do it again."

"Not now, I think Cultin is waking, but soon Norbavon. I will teach you all there is to know about women. If you promise me one thing."

"Anything, what do you want of me."

"Never leave me."

"I promise," he whispered taking her into his arms, they held each other taking comfort in the other's warmth. Norbavon looked into her eyes and took the kiss himself, opening his mouth and exploring hers. Instincts led on, but the waking of Cultin stopped the passion as quickly as the kiss had started it.

Cultin had heard it all, his little girl was falling in love. Well if she had to, than he could not argue with her choice. He rose from his bed, feigning just waking up. He looked at the puppy eyes that both of them were giving each other. He gave an interested look to Rhiannon, who shot back with the evil eyes she knew so well. Cultin laughed and left, taking Norbavon by the arm with him. Norbavon did not want to leave, but had no idea how to avoid it so he followed. Rhiannon came out after, smiling at Norbavon when Cultin was not looking.

The Captain greeted them on the deck. The breeze was warm and the air fresh. Cultin took a deep breath of sea breeze, filling his lungs to capacity. Norbavon followed suit, clearly imitating the dwarf who gave him a dirty look. Norbavon shrugged hopelessly, quickly releasing the air from his lungs in a cough.

"There," the Captain pointed to a small town on the shore. Their eyes followed his hand. "You can outfit yourselves up fairly well in that town. I have been there a few times, its mostly a sailor town, but that means ships and merchants, and that means you will be able to get anything you have the money for. I do not think we will run out of cash too soon. You will need three horses and supplies for the trip to the mountain."

"Thanks Captain," Norbavon placed his hand on Captain Kraken's shoulder. "You have been a true friend in the past weeks. I shall not forget your kindness." Those innocent eyes spread a flood of warmth over Kraken, melting the icy heart of the sailor.

"I hope we meet again someday Norbavon. I have some things to say before you leave, about your mystery. I will say these things only to you and your companions then I will forget them, they are too crazy." The Captain now had everyone's full attention, the Captain hurried as his ship drew near the small port. "I have been listening to the stories of your strange abilities, shall we say. You pick locks like a thief, I brought a thief to the swamp. You fight like a hardened knight, I brought a knight to the swamp also. You release souls from zombies, I brought an arch cleric to the swamp. Three I brought, none returned, as yet. Do you think it possible that they could have given you their powers somehow?"

“The thought has entered my mind too Captain, that somehow I was trained by these three before I left the temple, but I remember no one there. Not even the remains of people. I think that we are on the right track Captain, but we are still far from solving my mystery. I do what I must, I thank you for your concern on the matter. If I discover my secret I will be sure to tell you so that I do not leave you stewing over the answer till the end of your days.” The ship was being secured to the dock as Norbavon finished.

The companions left, waving good-bye to their new friend. They are felt a little sad at the parting, the Captain had done much for them, but he could not be expected to continue the journey. The port was fairly quiet, there were only a few docks along the coast, reducing the number of ships in port at any one time. They took the Captain's advice and headed towards a small inn on the outskirts of the town. Cultin took Norbavon for supplies while Rhiannon got them a room.

The market was teeming with farmers, having come from all over to sell their wares to the nomads. They would get the best prices in dealing with these folk, since they never stayed anywhere for too long, they had no way of growing their own food. Harvest time was the only time of the year that the town looked alive. There were no celebrations, just the sounds of trading. The nomads would not barter, they either liked the first price offered or walked away. Usually they would try many different farmers until they came to the lowest price. The farmers caught on to the game years ago and in a meeting before the nomads arrived, they would set the prices. Any man straying from the decided prices, may find his throat cut in the middle of the night.

Cultin and Norbavon walked in, the nomads brought a few items of their own to sell. They were a war like race and their wares displayed this. Their tents were scarce of people since the farmers found no use for their sale items. Cultin led over to a horse trader. The nomads were also known for their fine steeds. One particular horse caught Norbavon's interest, he stayed still though at Cultin's warning.

“Display no interest when we approach, look as if you really do not need a horse, but might be willing to buy one for the right price. Let me do the talking. Tell no one your name, destination, or where you come from. I am not sure if these nomads are all in the cult, but it is best to remain quiet,” Cultin had instructed earlier.

“Hail friend,” he greeted the trader.

“In what may I interest you, Sir. I do not see your type this far north often.” Norbavon looked at the dwarf in surprise. He had never thought twice about Cultin's race, but he made a point to ask later.

“And I see your race even less frequently nomad. I may be interested in some of your steeds. The look OK, what price do you ask for them?”

The nomad looked intently at the dwarf, trying to guess his game. There would be no haggling, both knew the rules that the nomads lived by. Once he set a price he could not turn back. “By what manner do you wish to pay dwarf?”

Cultin was impressed by the question. If the nomad knew his payment method than he could get a fair assumption as to how much money the dwarf carried.

“I have some sparkling stones that might interest you,” Cultin threw the challenge back, for jewels may be of any price.

“And what color are your stones?”

“All sorts,” the dwarf said with a menacing look in his eye.

“I have set a price,” the trader said taken aback by the dwarfs stance. “How many steeds do you wish?”

“Three,” said Cultin.

“Show me your stones, if they are of the quality that I am used to from the dwarfs, than one for each horse shall be my price.” Cultin removed three jewels, taken from the island's treasure, and showed them to the trader. His eyes widened and a look of malice passed across his face, but disappeared too quickly for Cultin to be sure of its meaning. The trader took his hand and shook removing the stones in the process.

“For these, you may have your choice.” Norbavon immediately went to the one that had caught his eye earlier. The horse seemed to recognize him too and pawed at the ground with his approach. Cultin picked out two others and they made their way back to the inn.

“This horse is not supposed to be here,” Norbavon whispered as they walked the streets.

“What do you mean?”

“His name is Silber and somehow I know that his home is far away. That man must have taken him.”

“There was something strange about him, in fact this whole town seems to be weighed down with some sort of impending menace. I feel that we should leave very early in the morning.”

As Norbavon and Cultin walked away the trader motioned for one whom had been standing near, near enough to hear the whole conversation.

“They are the ones,” the trader told him.

“I think so to, but how can you be sure?”

“Look at the gems they gave me.” He held out his hand.

“Drazcar’s,” the other said with wide eyes.

“You can feel his presence in the rock. You must go to the Kallah and warn him immediately. I will watch which way they head.”

The other mounted a horse and rode off into the plains, pushing the horse with urgency he left the town.

They entered the inn after purchasing the rest of the needed supplies, all of the tables were full of patrons, but there was a silence among the customers. They whispered to each other and looked around to make sure that no one was listening. A woman signaled to them from a far table. Cultin and Norbavon made their way through the crowd towards Rhiannon, she was sitting with a farmer, already drunk from the ale.

“How did it go,” she asked

“We have everything that we need.”

“This man has some information that you will find interesting, if the drink has not taken him yet. Gorm,” she said shaking the man. He looked up at her with drowsy eyes. “These are my friends, tell them what you told me.”

“They buy all of the food. Everything. Everyone is making great sales, but we are suspicious. Never before has everything been purchased.”

“They are feeding an army,” Cultin observed.

“Some where attacked on the way down. Friends, that I know left before me have not yet arrived. The nomads are usually a quiet race, but there is something about them that is making the farmers very uncomfortable. We fear for our lives. This year we are all heading out together for the trek back north. We could use a few guards, I do not suppose you would like to come?” Cultin shook his head. “I thought not, but be wary of the nomads. There is talk of a great army forming to the east. I feel that some of us may not make it back to our homes. I have said to much, I must go.” The farmer stood up and left the three alone.

“They are all scared,” Rhiannon said. “Just look around you at them. This is usually a happy time and they should be extra happy that everything sold everything that they brought. But look at them. They are too frightened to speak. I have been buying this man’s ale since you left just so he would tell us the little that he has.”

“Let eat quickly and then go to our room and rest. We leave first thing in the morning.”

A waitress brought trays of potatoes and meats. Norbavon stuffed himself. His four unseen companions relishing in the taste of the food. Rhiannon and Cultin looked strangely at the man as he ate for five.

After dinner they went up to their rooms. Cultin stood first watch while the others slept. No chances were to be taken in this town.

A shrouded man stood outside their window and watched the lights go down. They would not leave tonight. He was sure that tomorrow they would head out and had already sent word to the Kallah. Tomorrow they would meet the tribe, tomorrow they would die.

Chapter Eleven

Norbavon was left to rest while Rhiannon stood the second watch. There were no interruptions in the night. The inn had quieted down by her turn. The light soon poured in the window and she woke the others. Without a sound they gathered their belongings and left the safety of the inn.

Silber was glad to see Norbavon. The horse could sense his master's presence in the man. The stable boy had taken good care of the animals, they were saddled and off in no time.

The town ended abruptly. The plains started and rolled off into the distance, right up to the front door of the mountains and the volcano. Riding was easy in the plains, and the group had plenty of water for themselves and their mounts to make the trip in a few days. There was no talk during the ride. The mountains ate up everything in their presence. From the plains, their peaks were not discernible, being lost in the clouds far above the planet. In the midst stood the volcano, Zan Timo, called so after the nomad's name for Beord. For years, before Drazcar's actions, the Sword of Jahvey had laid protected in the tomb at the foot of Zan Timo. Now it lay on the back of Norbavon, sensing the approach to its home. No others could be seen on the plains, but Cultin knew what little that meant. The nomads could attack within a second's warning seemingly from nowhere if they wished. He paid careful attention to the horses, trying to see if they caught any strange scents in the air. It was a long shot, because the nomads would attack from down wind, but he watched none the less, feeling false security at the small hope.

After a days hard riding they made camp. There was no cover on these plains, so no fire was lit and dinner was served cold. Rhiannon stood the first watch tonight. She gazed at Norbavon as he fell asleep. He had given her a loving look as he bedded down. So trusting he was, never doubting his companions or their abilities and never bragging about his own. He had argued about standing watch himself, but it was weak. They all knew that it was him who was the fighter, the magi, and if they were to come to trouble, it would be him who would protect him. He needed his rest.

A glimmer of movement escaped her eye. She drew her sword and walked around the camp, gazing out into the darkness. Seeing nothing she returned. Late in the night she woke Cultin who stood the rest of the watch.

As the sun started to rise above the mountains, Cultin saw something in the distance. A line of dark forms stretched far out along the rise. He peered closer and could make out horses. As the sun rose and aided in his light he gasped. Lined up as far as the eye could see were thousands of nomads. A small group approached their camp. Cultin called to the others. Rhiannon was instantly awake, but had to shake Norbavon from his slumber. He woke and followed the other's gaze.

Norbavon looked around the camp. "Where are the horses?" he asked.

Cultin looked surprised and also noticed the missing animals. "They must have taken them in the night, but I do not see how I missed them. Damn quiet nomads."

A voice called out from the small group that had approached. "Throw down your weapons and you will not be harmed. I am Kallah, leader of the Tormentor's Cult. We seek the one who calls himself Norbavon. The others will be free to pass on, but Norbavon must stay with us."

"For what to you want him?" the dwarf called back.

"The is the concern of the Tormentor, not ours. We only do the bidding of the true god. We do not question his motives."

"Jahvey is the true god Kallah. What has the Tormentor done that makes him a god." Norbavon stood up challenging the man's statement. "I am Norbavon."

"You two must go," he said turning to the others. "I will not have you harmed."

"Do not be a fool. They will not let any of us leave alive. They are afraid of you, why do you think they make this offer with so many at their aid? We must try and escape, though I have not the faintest idea how. This could be the end of your adventure." Cultin looked grim at the chances and called back. "You will have to fight me first Kallah. None of us will come and bow down for your false god."

"So be it." Kallah turned around and raised his hand. A band of five came down and approached the group. Norbavon, with only a glance knocked them from their horses to the ground. The Kallah looked back at him, frightened. Then turning to his army he raised both hands. The air was pierced by the thunder of four thousand horses racing across the plain to meet with the hero.

"Holy shit," Cultin screamed over the noise. "He is sending the entire damn army. You better think of something fast man, or we will all be dust before the end of the day." Norbavon looked back hopelessly as they stood to face their doom.

"Can you not stop them?" The Jackal turned towards Maczcksuxe.

"Not that many boy. My powers can attack only a few at a time."

"We shall fight to the death then."

"Why are you humans so quick to accept death?" the demon screamed at the Knight. "Orb release us, let us fight on our own ground! I will not be subject to the life-span of a mortal during battle!"

Maczcksuxe was becoming very frightened at the odds. All of them gazed at the approaching hoard. Dusk flew up from the ground, thousands of swords flashed in the air. Allanah bowed her head in prayer.

"This is no time for prayer!" The Jackal screamed at her above the sound of hoofs. He looked nervously around hoping that someone would have an answer soon, but none did.

"Orb! What would you have us do?" Maczcksuxe screamed bent over and talking to Norbavon's neck.

"We are in dire straits indeed. I have no solution, but I will not separate you." Even the voice of the Orb was tense, a shock for all whom were used to the calm, soothing sounds.

"Stand back," commanded Norbavon.

"No we shall fight by your side," Rhiannon answered not moving.

"Stand back I said!" Rhiannon jumped, she looked at Cultin and both of them moved behind Norbavon.

"Orb! Open your gates, allow me to escape," No difference in their situation was detected. "All of you turn away if you value your lives," the Demon's last words were choked as a change started overcoming him.

The Orb's voice screamed through their minds, "No Norbavon!" But it was obviously too late for the warning, the demon started to change shape. "All of you turn away, heed the demons words. Do not look, cover your eyes and do not open them again if you wish to live!"

"He is controlling me! I can not stop him!" the demon screamed in a new voice. His skin lost all form, melting down into a mass of puss and mucus. The internal organs could be seen, if one was looking, but all marked the Orb's warning. The embryo emerged, the true form of the demon was exposed once again and with that the lesser's were loosed into the world.

At first Rhiannon did not see anything except the jerking of Norbavon's body. The soldiers were getting closer, now climbing the rise which the trio stood on. Then little spheres started spurting forth from Norbavon's mouth. They landed on the ground in front of him. The enemy had not seen anything yet and still they rode. The spheres started growing, more coming out from the mouth, at first they attacked each other, but soon they detected a new scent in the air. The first to leave, bounded down the hill on ten legs, already it had reached the size of a man, and still it grew on. No force shield protected the flow from Maczcksuxe, every lesser that was born became whole and left in the form of a small embryo from Norbavon's mouth. Maczcksuxe withered not so much from the pain, but from having no control over his body. Rhiannon screamed. Hundreds of little lesser demons flew onto the ground from Norbavon's mouth. One sprouted wings and flew on into the battle. The first cultist was taken unaware. Then another. The fight was on.

The lessers ripped through the approaching army, most attacking before their target had any idea what was happening. Three eyes, one hundred eyes, lessers of every shape and form, Rhiannon found herself puking all that was left of breakfast onto the plains. Cultin turned away saying a quick prayer to Jahvey, hoping that the lessers would not turn back on them.

A cultist in the middle of the fray was first to realize what was happening. He turned his horse away, screaming the retreat signal as he rode against the tide. He searched for Kallah and found him at the base of the rise.

"Demons sir!" he panted.

"What?"

"Demons Sir, thousands of them. They spewed forth in a wave from the warrior. They come from his mouth. They destroy the men. We have no chance we must retreat!" He screamed as the one with wings softly landed on his helmet and release his head from the neck that was keeping it prisoner. Kallah looked on in horror as the body jerked, not quite sure yet of what had happened to its head. His hands reached up to find his neck empty, then the body jerked over, he was dead.

"Sound the horn!"

"But Kallah, the Tormentor said at all costs."

“Sound the horn damnit, I will not have my men eaten by demons!” But it was too late. Already the men had been over come and were now food for the spawn of Maczcksuxe.

Norbavon closed the gate and the demon was given control once again.

“What is happening?” Allanah asked doubting the sounds of death that rang in her ears.

“You may look now,” Maczcksuxe answered returning from his embryonic form. “Look and behold the power of the demon.”

Slowly the group gazed upon the field of battle. Where once four thousand nomads rode there was only waste. Pieces of human flesh scattered across the battle field. Half dismembered men gazed on with their last bit of life as hungry lesser demons consumed their entrails. The lessers fought over the new found food killing twice as many of their own as their were nomads.

“What will happen when they finish off with the cultists?” Rexord asked starring in disbelief.

“They will fight amongst themselves and kill until only one stands. He will not attack Norbavon, my presence is too great within him. It would be best for him to leave the last alone. I will search for him after all is finished.” Maczcksuxe looked at the waste before him, shaking his head. “Never before has this been done. I had not realized the power of the embryo before today. I fear for all the planet if the Tormentor were to release this power from those demons he controls.” All gazed onto the wasteland. There were only a few hundred demons left, fighting for every scrap of food, whether it be man or another lesser.

“Will they attack us?” Rhiannon turned to Norbavon.

“I do not think so.”

“How did you...” Cultin stared at the warrior with new awe in his voice.

“Please do not ask me how I released this horror. I have felt its presence in me for some time now. There is such evil in my soul and this is part of that.”

Two demons remained on the waste, searching for last scraps of food. Both had grown to twice the height of a man. They consumed everything, horse, man, other demon. One was the first lesser to escape the other was younger, but not much than his brother. By evening there was nothing left, the two looked towards each other and prepared for the fight to determine who would be the last to survive the litter.

The older one was the picture of Maczcksuxe himself, based on the human with rippling muscles and reddish brown skin. He lifted his head and howled in the air, an invitation to battle. The other was like a tiger, with the head of a dragon and six legs. Two arms protruded from its chest and beat the air in acceptance. They clashed.

They first attack was repelled by the older, gaining a good slice in the tiger's flank as he was thrown away. He turned around and continued his attack, stalking his brother in a circle. He feigned to the right, but rolled over to the left and caught the other thigh in his teeth. The older screeched in agony. He flexed his thigh muscle and it expanded to twice its normal size, the tiger could not open its mouth wide enough to release it. Then with two talons, the older pierced the tiger's skull with both. Then ripping through the bone he exposed the brain. The tiger increased his bite and almost cleaved through the thigh, but it only increased in size again, still holding the tiger effectively. The tiger's legs jerked back, causing both to topple, but the older was ready to finish the fight. He bent over with his snout and chewed upon the brain of the other, holding the head still with his hands. The fight was over and after the meal was complete and nothing left of the tiger the older stood up and looked straight at Norbavon.

“Begone if you value the life that you have earned today!” he commanded the disgrace of life. It howled back in victory, but had recognized its master and fled into the mountains.

“Should we not go after it,” Rhiannon asked mystified and disgusted by the sight.

“No, he has earned his life, maybe someday I will find it, but for now we have more important tasks and I am exhausted.”

“I think we should all rest after that,” Cultin confirmed. They made their way back to the camp. Each fell asleep, no guard was needed on this night. The horrors of the day haunted each, but in the middle of the nightmare, when the terrors became to much to handle with a sane mind, the Orb called. They looked towards the light in their mind and peace washed over them, allowing a peaceful sleep to come upon them finally.

Chapter Twelve

"How can he control us over our own will?" Allanah asked nobody particular and nobody had an answer.

"This is very wrong," the Knight was still pale from the horrors his eyes had brought to him. "This man can draw on our abilities and there is nothing we can do to stop him. I feel that this attempt has failed. We should enter as four, not one, where at least we can be masters of our own bodies."

"I can not agree with you Rexord," Maczcksuxe said awaking from his fit of exhaustion. "Norbavon used my powers in such a way that I had never thought of. If the four of us had entered that battlefield instead of the one, we would be as dead as my spawn's dinner. This man knows nothing, but everything as well. He acts on instincts created by our presence and uses what we have in ways that we could never dream up. We could never fight this well together. He is our leader and commands us at will. Do not think that I enjoyed that episode. There is no greater horror than not being to control one's own body, but look what he accomplished. He wiped out an army, an entire army without raising his sword. He won, four thousand to one and he won. I admire him as I have admired no other. I myself would rather be in him than have to face this man on the battlefield."

"Maczcksuxe's words are wise," Allanah now said. "Norbavon is more than just four people, he is his own man and has his own mind. Never before has one been born a man, he is the first. I would never be able to show the courage in battle that he has. We fought while he remained calm and came up with an impossible solution while we talked of death. I feel sadness for him. He knows more than he lets on about his identity, but still he goes on. How many of us would be able to handle his tasks and remain sane? I agree with the demon, the path we are following is a good one. Jahvey once again displays his ultimate wisdom."

The Jackal had been growing tired of the past and joined in. "What now? So he can defeat and army, but what of the Dragon? What grand scheme will he come up with for the ancient one in the volcano. I never thought to reach this far alive. I admit it, but we are here and we are about to attempt what no man has tried since Beord, and could not even kill them. Beord could not even kill this one, he has survived for centuries. All right, I am scared, I will admit it. I do not like the idea of going one on one with a dragon. I like safe things, like attacking in the night, when my victims sleep or robbing empty houses. I do not want to die."

"Calm yourself Jackie," Allanah tried to hold him, but failed in her present form. "We shall overcome and we shall win. Jahvey would not have sent us if we could not have won."

"Fuck your god, all right! I am sick of hearing about him! Jahvey does this and Jahvey thinks that. Well Jahvey did not almost get his ass ground into the dusk by four thousands cultists and Jahvey home safe while we are going up against the most feared monster in the history of the planet. So do not give me any Jahvey shit, all right!" Tears of fright poured down his face, sometimes it was hard for the Jackal to remember that he was only a boy and had a boy's thoughts and fears. The others left him alone and remained silent themselves. Out in the distance from atop the volcano Zan Timo a dragon called, a challenge to them all.

Norbavon awoke with a start. Rhiannon hushed him with a finger on his lips. The sun had not come up yet and Culin's snores were the only sound heard across the plains. It was easy to forget that a battle of immense proportions just took place less than ten yards away.

He gazed up at her, a look of love spreading across his face. She looked scarred but smiled at him. She reached out her hand and took his. Norbavon lifted his blanket and let her come under its warmth with him. She pressed close to his body with hers, drawing in his heat, his scent and all about the strange man that had entered her life and stolen her heart. She was afraid of him, but her love overcame all emotions. Never had she fallen for one so fast. Such beauty in his face, a strong face but no bad thoughts ever passed across it. His eyes spoke to her and returned all of her love in a single glance. She lost herself in those eyes and felt her head leaning towards him. He took her head in his hands and guided their lips together. A strange sensation welled up inside his body, diminishing to center on one particular area of his lower body. She felt him press against her abdomen and rubbed her hips on his.

Their lips joined and tongues left the safety of the mouth, daring to enter another. They danced and their lips stayed together and time stopped for them as their kiss continued on. All of their love, hate, fear meshed together in that one kiss. All walls were down around their delicate human hearts and they joined as one along the floor of the plains.

Rhiannon parted from the kiss first, seeing disappointment flush his face. He gazed up into her eyes and then followed her hands as they removed what little clothing she had worn to his bed. Her breasts were released into the air. She took his head in her hands guiding his mouth to her nipples, now standing up and reaching out to his lips. She gasped as her first nipple was lost inside his mouth. He suckled, truly as the baby whom had never known the warmth of the tender breast at his mother's side. He moved away kissing the other, never going farther than his teacher guided. The growing sensation of his loins tried to take the moment and rush it towards a final conclusion, but he regained control and let his personal goddess lead the way.

She placed her hands on his chest and peeled his shirt back, covering his baby smooth chest with kisses and licking the salty coating that was covering it. Her kisses trailed down farther as she untied the rope holding up his pants with her hands. Her hands ventured inside and found his stiff manhood risen with desire. It was his turn to gasp as she took it in her lips and covered it with kisses. She could resist no more. Passion filled her veins as she bent down and removed the rest of his garments. She sat on top of him and guided him into her body. He looked up at her with the most wonderful curiosity, unable to wipe the smile of ecstasy from his face. They moved together as one feeling the others warmth and wetness. He felt so good inside her. She rubbed herself along the bank of hair on his genitals and her breathing got heavier. He felt a pulling inside of him and grabbed her hips, moving them more furiously than before.

They were both reaching the point of ultimate ecstasy quickly. Their breathing echoed across plains, what little life it had stopped and listened to the sounds of love that intruded upon their domain. Upon a rise in the middle was a man and a woman doing that which their minds told them was right and their hearts told them not to resist. He reached orgasm, feeling his seed, the seed of four, filling her insides and flowing over their union. She felt his eruption inside her and joined him with her own celebration. Her hands reached out to his shoulders, nails biting deep as her face contorted with passion.

When the moment was gone, she rolled off of Norbavon and lay down beside him, wrapping her arms around his chest and placing her head upon his shoulder she fell asleep in the arms of her lover.

"Such a feeling I have never experienced," the demon gasped. "I almost wish that I was a human."

"It is not always such," Allanah said gasping herself. "When the bond is not of the heart, but solely of the flesh, than the feeling is dulled, never reaching the height by those in love."

"I was with my wife again," Rexord said as if from a trance, his brow heavy with sweat. "That one will hurt very badly when he is gone. The feeling is love demon. The love of another and having it returned in equal. They have love, something a demon may never know or care for."

"If that is what you had with your wife Rexord, than I am truly sorry for the deeds that I committed against her." The demon looked straight at the knight and if one could speak of care on such a grotesque mask, then the demon reflected it.

Rexord looked back, surprised at the Demon's comment. "I forgive you, I swore that I never would, but I do. I too apologize for the life I took from you."

"The life you took was nothing. Many lessers have I had and still will have, but to take the one person away who can cause feelings such as this, that is the greater crime. Someday I will make it up to you, though it goes against everything that I believe in, I will make amends."

They gazed down on the sleeping couple and for just an instant everything was better. All of their cares and worries were nothing in the true eyes of love.

Book III
The Tormentor

Chapter I

The Tormentor sat in his lair, his new size much too small for the throne that had once housed his immense weight. Like a baby on a large chair he sat on the edge of the throne, legs crossed in a semblance of deep meditation. He had been transformed in more than size by Jahvey, most of his powers had diminished to that of the typical demon. But his evil had not disappeared, if anything it had grown, a cry for revenge adding fire to its heat. He had chosen the form of the minotaur to compliment his new size. The face of the bull hid the disfigurement that was contained in Jahvey's curse. He enjoyed this new change of image though, he was now free to travel to the surface, his size no longer a factor in breaching the passages that led up through the volcanoes.

When he had first been transformed, the demons that he had summoned here rose up against him. He had to go in hiding for a few days, seeking out demons one by one and killing them so that he could capture an army of demon spirits. He then used these to take back what was rightly his. Now they called him their god, no hand would raise against him. Beneath his throne every demon of the surface world, save one, knelt before him, stretching out below as far as the eye could see and into the darkness that clouded the far end of the immense lair. Their lessers building fortifications to the underground cavern. The work was enormous and the lessers worked throughout the day and night, mining the ore and melting it to coat the walls. Jahvey said that he would destroy the planet, well even if the planet was destroyed around them, they would survive in their metal shell. The lessers, usually uncontrollable, could not stand against the will of so many. His spirit army watched them, reporting any transgression immediately to the Tormentor. The demon ranks had diminished in the past weeks, any even thinking of rebellion were immediately destroyed and subjected to the Tormentor's will in their spiritual form.

The Tormentor felt someone approach and opened his eyes. A spirit demon, daemon, rose up off the ground and hovered in the air in front of the throne.

"The Kallah from the east is gone," he reported.

"What do you mean gone?"

"I have searched for him as you bid me, and he nor his army can be found."

"What of their mission?"

"Norbavon still lives," the spirit backed away from the throne.

"He lives!," the Tormentor stood and his worshippers raised their eyes in fear. "I send the Kallah to find him with four thousand of my human worshippers and he disappears off the world?! What is this man to be able to make my armies vanish in thin air? What of the Northern Armies?"

"They still search my lord, there has been no trace of the orb or of the four that you describe."

"Jahvey is playing tricks on me, he warns me of four while one makes it to my very gates!"

"He is not one my lord. He travels with a woman and a dwarf."

"Is the woman the cleric that I told you of?"

"No Tormentor, she is a petty fighter from the slums of New Peturan, as is the dwarf."

"Go, warn Skelter of their approach."

"He has been informed."

"Good, maybe this one is only a distraction to keep me occupied. Skelter will take care of him. As soon as my slaves have blocked off the other five passages we will have six of the dragons to meet my Orb when it arrives. Good Jahvey, you play very well, but not well enough. I have the Dragons to meet your small group," the Tormentor mused to himself. "Leave me, and find my army!" The daemon quickly disappeared and traveled back up to the surface world.

What is his game, thought the Tormentor pacing back and forth across the throne. Who is this Norbavon? He has alluded all of the attempts to capture him, but not for long. Obviously he went to enter the volcano and there was only one way down, guarded by Skelter, the father of all dragons. Whatever magic he used on the army of Nomads would not work against the dragon. Soon his slaves would finish the fortifications, then the comet would hit and they would be safely tucked away in their tomb. The challenge would not be easy though, he had been preparing the demons for the trials that lay ahead. With such a gathering they would fortify the walls with the magic created by all of his worshippers. Nothing would be able to break through the magic fortified metal.

The Tormentor took his post at the edge of the throne. No good in letting his followers see him nervous. Was it nervousness that flickered inside him, or fear of this unknown man that had foiled all attempts at capture? Something about the reports on him bothered the Tormentor. First he destroyed the

sacrifices in New Peturan, then recovered the sword from Drazcar, now he makes and army of four thousand vanish into thin air, leaving only their weapons to pollute the plains. From what source does he draw his power? Jahvey would not interfere, the calling of the four was the extent of his help to the world. Best to just forget the man for now, before long Skelter would have his way with him, then the man would never bother the Tormentor again.

His thoughts caused anger to well up inside the Tormentor. He called to a servant below to prepare for the games. That would make him feel better.

The demons cleared a circle in the middle of the floor. They stood with stone faces, gazing at their leader who had jumped from his throne and now appeared in the middle of the circle.

"Who have you chosen?"

"The largest of the lessers my lord," the daemon answered.

"Is he needed?"

"No lord, he was working in the mine, but enough metal has been extracted. He has grown restless and consumed four of the other lessers. We meant to kill him tonight, but I see that you can make better use of him. His is larger than you lord, we have let him grow to such size to aid in the digging of the shafts. He will be a good challenge for you lord, but none can stand to your mighty will."

"Bring him in!" A path was opened in the circle as an enormous lesser was driven in by a score of demon hosts. He rose two times above the height of the minotaur. His mind had not yet taken shape, he was still driven by the hunger of a new born. This would be a good fight, thought the minotaur. They eyes raced around to make sure that none would attack. "Yes, you are allowed to fight lesser. If you destroy me your life is your own." The crowd laughed at the offer. None of the games were even close. The lessers were driven by hunger alone, never was their enough thought to for a proper battle strategy.

The Tormentor took a good look at his opponent. Some of the forms taken by the lessers disgusted even him. There was no head, the shoulder were spiked with course hair, but no neck rose from them. Three eyes looked out from deep groves in the thing's chest, gazing first with fear then malice. Below each eye was a score of small spikes that could be brought up to protect the eyes. The only weapon that a massive arm that ended in a single sharpened talon. The arm was more like a third leg from its location. The lesser squatted down in a battle stance and waved its protrusion in the air as in forming a challenge. The new god touched his forehead in acceptance. This gesture was a surprise to all. The Tormentor was happy with the results of his acceptance, he had recognized the lesser as a formidable opponent by this, something that he had not done with any of the others.

The Tormentor carried no weapons, save those given to him by his present form. His nostrils flared, sniffing and thriving on the smell of fear emanating from his opponent. His hoofs clashed on the ground, the bull was ready to charge.

They circled each other looking for a breach in the other's defense, none was found. The minotaur taunted him, feigning attack to drive the lesser off guard. He was driving the mindless insane with hunger. The meal was there, the lesser attacked. The arm swung out, the talon coming close, but not striking out. The minotaur grabbed the end, cutting his hand on the sharpness. Blood welled up in the wound and the Tormentor looked down at this new event. Never before as a demigod had he bled. He gazed at the dripping and unconsciously released the talon. He brought his hand to his mouth and tasted. The salt filled his mouth, he enjoyed this new flavor. An interesting sign Jahvey, he thought. A little display of mortality.

A gasp brought him back to his senses. He looked up just in time to avoid a second attack. The talon struck out between his legs and rose. He straddled the talon, cutting in the strong muscle in his thigh. Pain made the Tormentor howl out. The crowd was tense, never before had the Tormentor shown any pain. He slid down the talon, ignoring the pain of the cut deepening in his thigh. The lesser brought him high in the air, he meant to throw the Tormentor to the ground. Right before the arm tensed to throw, the Tormentor dropped upon his opponents shoulder. The lesser howled in rage and brought his talon back to attack the new growth. The lesser did more damage to himself as the minotaur climbed down the hair to the monster's chest. He grabbed onto the protruding spikes and ripped one out. The talon came near the chest, but did not attack for fear of hitting an eye. He tried to push the minotaur away, but the Tormentor hung on fast. He took his new weapon and pierced the eye staring out in fear. A small explosion erupted in front of the minotaur as the fluid from the eye coated him from head to toe. The lesser ran around causing the crowd to run for safety. Try as he might the lesser could not shake his god loose. The minotaur plunged into the eye, totally disappearing from sight. The lesser stood still, not fully realizing that he had an intruder inside of him. The other two eyes looked around for the minotaur, but soon stopped. An ear shattering

scream came from the monster's mouth as he grew a head. The minotaur had penetrated the skin from inside and brought out the lesser's heart to show the crowd. The lesser plummeted to the ground, causing the minotaur to once again immerse himself inside the body.

The lesser lay on the ground, very dead. The crowd came closer to see the fate of their god. From the hole in the lesser's top the minotaur crawled, still pulling the heart with him. He climbed atop the body and the crowd erupted in cheers for their god. He rose the heart above his head and fulfilled his new found love for blood.

Chapter II

The companions walked slowly towards the ever growing volcano. The closer they came, the more ash they had to walk through. The going was very slow, but by nightfall of the next day, they had made it to the foot of the mountains. They rose above their heads into the clouds. Never before had any of them been so close to the volcano. Its top gone centuries before, the volcano was the only mountain of which the top could be seen. Snow capped the other mountains, or at least the parts that the group could see. Eagles flew from their mountain nests to discover if the new arrivals were a threat. Sensing no danger they flew off into the plains to search for the food that would feed their families. No other animal life was detectable in the gloom of Zan Timo. The ominous silence only added to their ever decreasing spirits.

Cultin found a small cave in the side of the volcano and here they took shelter. No one had talked all day, Jackal's excitement had weighed heavily upon Norbavon and now he felt the fright of the boy inside of him. A few stolen glances passed between Rhiannon and Norbavon, but they were contrasted by a knowing look from the dwarf. He only smiled at the two.

The cave was warm, due to the heat of the volcano. Norbavon and Rhiannon slept together, not caring about Cultin's scrutiny. They made love again that night and pledged themselves to each other for ever.

"Oh, but there is one near," Allanah answered the silent call. "Jahvey look down on these two, for their time together is short. They pledge themselves to each other and to you in their silent prayers." She bent her head and heard her prayer answered, then before the eyes of god and man, Norbavon and Rhiannon became husband and wife.

The next morning was bleak, no sun was in the sky, or could be seen due to the ash being spewed from Zan Timo. Tying a rope to one another, they started the long climb to the summit. Sparse growth could be seen on the lower portions of the mountain, but soon even these ended as the rocky slopes took charge. They found a precarious trail twisting around the base, and appearing to continue to the top, this they followed for lack of another option. The air thinned as they climbed, but the cold could not affect those within the volcano's range. Small rocks, dislodged by their climbing feet, plummeted hundreds of feet to the valley's below. None of them dared to look down. As the sun reached its height, Cultin called a halt. They had walked far enough for now and he wanted them to have their strength should some emergency require it. They ate a good meal consisting of bread and cheese, with some water. After their meal they gazed out into where their feet had brought them. The drop off the side of the trail was horrifying, nothing to stop a fall save for the ground at the base. Needless to say they stayed close to the volcano's side. After a short while Cultin called for them to continue. Grudgingly they stood up and continued the climb. They had just circled around to the other side of Zan Timo when a tug on the rope made Rhiannon and Cultin turn around towards Norbavon. He put a finger to his lips and pointed. Far above them, at the top of the volcano, came Skelter. He was searching the sides of the mountain. None of them had to wonder, for even an instant, what he was looking for. Cultin motioned ahead. They found a small crevice which they could all fit into to. When Skelter had circled around to the other side, they dashed into the crevice. Norbavon squeezed in just in time, for Skelter came in a fury an second later. Dragon fear gripped their hearts as the beast flew by their hiding place. They could only see a small portion of him at a time through the thin opening. His head past, then his wings filled the opening, it seemed as if the beast went on forever. None of them able to more, the fear was such. Norbavon's sword glowed, responding to the dragon's closeness, some of the fear was washed away as it sensed Skelter. Norbavon tried to hush it, but there was no danger, the dragon's end had finally come.

The danger, for the moment, had past.

The dragon was scoping the sides of the mountain. He had been warned of intruders, and no one came to his volcano without invitation. He saw traces of a climb but could find no one. His dragon nose could smell nothing, that was strange. There were traces, but no scent, his magic turned up nothing either. Well, Skelter thought, if their were intruders upon the volcano then they were protected with a powerful magic. Powerful enough to thwart the attempt of the dragon, but soon enough they would have to meet Skelter, for there was only one way down in the ground and that entrance was in Skelter's lair. "Humans, hide now, but we shall meet soon enough. I look forward to it." With that Skelter flew back up to his lair, nestled inside of the volcano.

"That was close," Norbavon said leaving the safety of the crevice.

“What is it matter? He will get us soon enough, that sword can not protect all of us.” Cultin said with a shrug and headed up the trail.

“Do you have any idea about what your going to do about the dragon?” Rhiannon asked with trusting eyes.

“No, but I have not planned any of the other escapes either. Something will come up.”

“Great, something will come. Well, just in case something does not come up, I will stay close to you and the sword if that is all right with you?”

Norbavon laughed, “that would be a pleasure my love.” But she moved away before he could kiss her, running tauntingly up the trail.

The trail steepened and soon they were traveling on all fours. The top was close, even if they could not see it, the heat informed them of the close proximity of the summit. The sun had started to disappear. There was no safety of a cave this close to the summit, so Cultin posted watch while the other's lay down on the trail. He tied all of their ropes to a protruding rock.

The night went slowly for the dwarf. He hated the suspense. What would become of them? Here they were walking into their own deaths, but still they continued. Tomorrow they would arrive at the top. He still could not believe this turn that his life had taken. Never would he had believed that he would be climbing the face Zan Timo about to challenge Skelter himself. And only three of them, but who would count Rhiannon and himself. Norbavon had done everything so far. What a traveling companion, fought all of your fights for you, never caused an argument, and joined up with your family. Not too many would realize the close bond between himself and the girl, but as far as Cultin was concerned, Rhiannon was his daughter, now Norbavon was his son. Too bad there was not a Shrine or Temple nearby so that they could get married before their deaths. Cultin thought about the day ahead. He really felt no fear, just fate. If they were going to die than they would and if not, all the better. How could on feel fear after what he had seen on the battleground below, now out of sight below the volcano. They had walked through the carnage and their was nothing left except for armor and weapons, most of the saddles were even eaten and the armor was licked clean. That nightmare would never leave him. He thought about the families of those men. Four thousand wives without their husbands, four thousand children without fathers. Even the nomads had loved ones, but they had to defend themselves. Too much death lately, he hoped that it would all end soon. Death was not fun, he wanted to get back to New Peturan with some of the gold he was carrying. But their would be no more New Peturan if his task was not completed. He would make sure that Norbavon had all of the help he needed, if any, in reaching the Tormentor.

The story of the demigod had come to all of them in a dream. That was something to stew over, Jahvey himself sending Norbavon to destroy his own creation. There was nothing in the dream about the strange necklace Norbavon wore, nor was there any information about his strange powers. At least now they knew who there real enemy was and why everyone wanted to kill them. Now if he died, he knew that it was for a good cause. But damnit, he did not want to die yet, there was so much to do, a new son in law and maybe kids someday. He wondered what Rhiannon's children would think about having a dwarf for a grandfather. Norbavon kept saying something about not coming back from the volcano, but Cultin shrugged the notion away. If any of them came back it would be Norbavon, he was the one with the super sword. Cultin would take extra precautions to stand behind him tomorrow when they faced the dragon. They were all crazy, absolutely insane, but the dwarf admitted to himself, he had not had so much fun in a very long time if ever.

He gazed at the young lovers, clinging onto each other in their sleep. He did not want to wake them and the chances of being attacked up here were next to nothing. The dragon had long since cleared this area of any inhabitants. He checked the ropes, finding them secure, he lay down and slept himself.

The morning came, waking a dreamless sleep. The gloom was gone from their hearts. They walked up to the gates of fate and excepted whatever lie beyond them. There was never any thought given to the idea of turning back, it just was not an option. They circled the volcano one last time as the trail brought them to the lip of a giant lava filled pool.

The molten rock bubbled and boiled within the volcano's giant cooking pot. The heat was tremendous, but not unbearable. They quickly looked around, there was nothing, just the giant pool. Then Norbavon noticed a trail to the west, a trail that continued down inside the inner edge of the volcano. They tried to follow it with their eyes, but the trail was lost under the rock beneath them. Without hesitation they followed.

Norbavon was getting sick and tired of not having any options. He felt like a giant puppet with others pulling the strings. He was a tool, like the farmer used the plow for the field, Jahvey was using him to plow down the Tormentor. What did he care about the fate of the world? Every instinct that he had told him that he would not be around to witness his own success. Why should he even try? Then he looked to his wife, she would be here. If he continued for no other reason than to her a world to live on, that was enough reason for him. He started down the trail to enter the volcano.

There was a sharp branching through some rocks, but still the path continued down towards the lava and came to an abrupt halt right above the surface. They stood on a small shelf of rock, breathing harshly in the heat. They would have to find the way soon or they would pass out. It was Rhiannon who noticed the cave above them in the side of the wall. A cave big enough for a dragon. The climb was treacherous, but it was the only way into the cavern, to fall was to be melted in with the molten rock. None of them looked down. Sweat poured on their skin, making their grip slick on the hot rock.

Norbavon went first, it was he who had to enter the cavern before the others. He peered over the edge and the sword glowed. Lying on its side looking straight at the warrior was Skelter.

“Come in Norbavon, I have been expecting you.” Norbavon had no choice, so he turned to help the others and soon the three stood before the most ancient of dragons. Two of them staying very close behind the humming sword.

Chapter III

"May I test something," the dragon asked coating the three with flames from its throat. They stood but the flames did not reach them. When the ordeal was over they looked straight ahead, afraid to look down on their skin for fear of what they might find. "I thought so," Skelter said looking them over. "You carry the Sword of Jahvey, its power still flows strong. My flames can not harm you nor those who stand close. Do not think that you can escape me now, there are more ways than one to kill humans." Skelter lifted his head and looked towards the lava pit behind the cave entrance.

The dragon was ancient, as old as the world, as old as the Tormentor, the father of all dragons. Age could be told in its eyes and there were a few faults in his armor that could be attributed to his age, but before age brought shortcomings, age brought wisdom, its presence burning brightly within the dragon's eyes.

In front of those eyes there was a mouth that took one's breath away. Two teeth, larger than all the rest, hung over the lower jaw. They seemed to be made of pearl the way they glittered off of the gold piled in the cave. The companions could not move, although the sword did its best to dispel the fear of the dragon, they could not move. They saw before them the most awesome of Jahvey's creations, the oldest. It was not fear that held them still as much as not believing what their eyes told them to be true.

"Speak, you wish to flatter me, then do so with your tongues, not eyes."

"I am Norbavon," he stammered.

"I know who you are. I know who your companions are. I know from whence you come and I know to where you head. Tell me something new. I have allowed you to live this far the least the you could do is beg me for your lives. I am ashamed myself. Every hundred years or so I allow one to live long enough to reach my lair, one of great deeds. You are such Norbavon, so I allow you to live. I grow tired of this, I am very old and have no patience for you mortals. Talk, for when our conversation ends, you will die."

"Please, Sir," Rhiannon approached the creature, knowing full well the safety of the sword she left behind.

"Skelter, please creature."

"Skelter, we must reach the Tormentor. The comet is going to hit and the world is going to blow up and everything is going to die." She blurted out the words, amazed at her chance to plead with the dragon. She had thought dragons mindless beasts intent on the hunt. But they were beautiful and so powerful. Although her fear screamed against it, she found herself admiring the beast.

"What do you mean the comet is going to hit?" But Rhiannon was so amazed at her own courage that her words were too fast for the dragon to understand.

"Beg your pardon Mr. Skelter," Culin now approached the dragon, ashamed at his own fear while Rhiannon had shown courage. "Do you not know of the Tormentor's and Jahvey's battle?"

"I have heard nothing," his voice growing angry. "Tell me what you know."

"Well I only know what I have been shown in a dream. The Tormentor wants to become a god and Jahvey is not pleased. He sent the comet, to destroy our planet. We are supposed to go down into the passage that you guard and kill this beast before he destroys the whole world."

"Do you speak the truth dwarf, for if I find you to lie my terror will be merciless."

"I swear by Jahvey himself that the story I told you is the one I was shown."

"Stand still, I will see if you are lying. And Norbavon, why do you stand back when your defenseless companions dare to approach me. Come forward so that I may check the dwarfs story in the souls of all of you. The saying that the dragon can see into the souls of men is not entirely false." The dragon closed his eyes in concentration, he seemed to be exerting an awful amount of energy and soon opened eyes panting with exhaustion. "Norbavon, your soul cannot be found," Skelter was shocked at his own statement, "come closer." Norbavon walked towards the dragon, more fear of what would be soon discovered than of the dragon itself.

Skelter brought his head close to the warrior, the enormous eye right in front of him. Norbavon could have struck in that instant, taken his blade from his back and pierced the mighty eye. Maybe they could have escaped, but the thought of destroying or even marring this great beast was repulsive to the warrior.

"The Orb," Skelter whispered in awe. "You wear the Orb of the Tormentor. How did you shrink it? Where did you get it?"

"It has always been with me since my first recollections. I have done nought to the orb. It has always been as you see it now, hanging from my neck. If I got it from anywhere it was the ruined temple from which I awakened."

"Where is this temple?"

"The swamps, far to the north."

"I thought as much. The Temple built to guard and house the Orb. I have seen its destruction on my flights."

"What is the Orb?" Norbavon asked trying to gain some knowledge of his own mystery.

"The Tormentor secretly forged it in the fires of this volcano at the dawn of the new planet. He imbedded such power in its sphere, using it to amplify his own magic here on the surface world. Now you tell me what you know about the temple, I wish to further delve into your mystery Norbavon, for I sense Jahvey strong in you and I would not want to bring his wrath upon myself by killing you."

Norbavon related the facts, as he knew them, from his strange awakening all the way up to the meeting with the dragon. Rhiannon and Cultin added in points at times and soon the whole story was told, including that which Captain Kraken had told them.

The dragon sat still for quite some time, pondering over the amazing relation of facts. He broke the silence, "I have heard your story Norbavon, and I believe that I may be of some insight as to your own personal story. I believe that the facts may horrify you, but I will tell it if that is what you wish."

"Please," Norbavon pleaded, drawing closer to the eye.

"Stand still and I will tell what I see." The dragon closed his eyes once again and searched for Norbavon's soul.

This time the dragon did not overly exert himself, but seemed to nod as if some theory had proven true. "You have no soul Norbavon." Skelter let that fact sink in the hearts of his audience, "you have four."

"What lie are you trying to weave dragon?" Cultin came forward a look of intense anger on his eyes. "Every man has a soul, do not lie to us if you do not know what you seek."

"I tell no lie dwarf. The Orb breaths with a life of its own, and a spell surrounds it. Norbavon is not one man, but four." The dragon closed his eyes again. "How ingenious my god. The four that the Tormentor warned me about." He looked down at the group in front of him. "You are truly sent by Jahvey himself. I will not hinder your journey, you may proceed and I send my own luck with you."

"What do you mean the four? Do not quiet up now dragon, tell me what you see. Who am I?"

"You must figure that out for yourself Norbavon. I have said too much already that many wish to hide from you. I leave you. I allow you to escape me so that you may truly fulfil your destiny. For too many years I have done the Tormentor's bidding, I see now that I have been a slave to one of evil. There may be evil in this world, but I will not be subject to the whim of one who wishes to destroy my home. No longer will I follow the Tormentor." The dragon lifted its immense bulk and strode out to the entrance. "Come and see the wraith of Jahvey." The others followed and horror fill their eyes.

"The comet!" Rhiannon spoke the terror for them all.

"Already it starts it plunge to our planet. Jahvey has prepared for your failure. If you do not succeed than know that you leave nothing behind. There will be no more world to live on. You are the hope to us all. I must go and warn my brothers. We must escape, for if you do fail, I will not be on this planet, but do not take my escape as a lack of courage in your abilities Norbavon. I only wish to preserve my race." With a fury of wind, the dragon was off and flew out of the volcano leaving the companions behind to ponder all that he had told them.

Chapter IV

They left the entrance of the cave, no one spoke. After a cursory search of the dragon's lair the passage was found. Norbavon hefted a large steel plate off of the ground. He gripped the ring and pulled, revealing a spiral staircase plunging straight down to the planet's core. The Orb, its true identity now realized, expended a little energy creating light for the group. Norbavon descended first, followed by Rhiannon then Cultin, the planet swallowed them as Norbavon gazed out the entrance of the cavern to see the light of day for the last time.

There was no place for an enemy to hide, so they descended as quickly as possible, not caring for the sounds that they made. The Tormentor would know soon enough of their arrival, probably before they even reached the bottom.

Who am I, Norbavon thought.

A shining voice filled his head as the Orb answered his question. "You are the flesh created by Jahvey himself."

"Who are you?"

"I am the Orb."

"What of the others?"

"They can not hear your thoughts, nor you their's. You affect each other by your moods, but that is the extent. I would say, to make it as easy to understand as possible, that you influence each other."

"Who are they?"

"The knight Rexord, the cleric Allanah, the boy Jackie, and the demon Maczcksuxe."

"A demon! I am part demon!"

"Yes, you should have known that by now. Where do you think those monsters that slaughtered the nomads came from?"

"I have been pondering that, but did not like the answers. Tell me more of my birth."

"You were born at the temple in the form you are now."

"What of my parents?"

"The four are your only parents."

"What of my childhood?" Norbavon could not hide the fear in his voice as he waited the response.

"There is no use in hiding the truth from you, you had no childhood. The first moments that you remember, awaking in the temple, that was your childhood."

Norbavon's sadness filled his heart. "Than I am truly your puppet."

"No, you have your own free will. Did you think the demon enjoyed you controlling him to unleash his lessers? You are more in control of them than they you. You are your own person Norbavon, more than I ever dreamed of."

Norbavon thought before asking this last question, he was scared at the answer he might receive, but went ahead anyway. "What of my soul? The dragon said I had none."

"You have four souls."

"But they belong to others!"

"Yes, you have no soul of your own."

"What happens when I die?" Small sobs entered the man's voice. There was only one answer, but he had to hear it from the Orb.

"Then you will cease to exist."

"No!" Norbavon screamed in his mind. "I have a wife now, or would if circumstances allowed. What of her? Have you no mercy? I have done so much for this world, will you not grant me that which I have earned?"

"It is not in my power to grant such things Norbavon. You were made so that the others and myself could be brought to the Tormentor without detection. You have done so much for us and I wish that I could help you, but the soul you live on is not your own and must be returned. I feel your pain, I was just given a life of my own, for years I was an inanimate slave to the Tormentor, now I live as you do. Be thankful that you have had this small glimpse of life. You have had a chance to love, to be human, if only for a short span."

"But Rhiannon, she will be alone, without a husband."

"You are her husband, Norbavon. The cleric whose soul you share said the prayers to Jahvey and he has joined you with her."

"But how can he bond our souls when I have none to give?"

"Her soul is now yours. Even when you depart from this world, your memory will live on in her soul."

"What is your part in all of this? You did not say that I shared your soul?"

"I hold the spell that keeps you complete."

"And if you were removed from my neck?"

"Then the spell would be broken."

This was all too much for Norbavon. He must ignore his own sadness, there was a world to save, even if he could not enjoy the fruits of his labor, at least Rhiannon would. "What of the Tormentor? How do we defeat him?"

"You will not fight him. We will."

"I understand," Norbavon halted the disturbing conversation and immersed himself in his own thoughts.

Although Rhiannon could not hear what had taken place in front of her, she saw that Norbavon conversed silently with someone. She caught glimpses of the pain spreading across his face and felt her own pain. He would be gone soon, he knew this also, and yet he continued. He went on to be champion for a race that he could never belong to. Her love for him filled her heart with his sadness as they descended to their final doom.

"What have you told him?" Allanah demanded. "I feel such sadness from him."

"I have told him everything," the Orb answered sorrowfully.

"Why tell him more than he needs to know?" Maczcksuxe asked.

"Because he is a man!" Allanah was furious with the question. "He is not a pawn nor a puppet! Even if his soul is ours, he has a heart and mind of his own and he deserves to know his fate. He has displayed more courage in this short time than any man in their entire lives."

"Where does this lead?" the Jackal asked uncomfortable with the present topic.

"To the gates of the Tormentor," Rexord responded. "I have read of this staircase in our oldest of texts. There are five other entrances such as this, all ending up at the demigod's footstep. I am surprised that we have not been stopped, nothing descends the stairs without his knowledge."

"Maybe Jahvey took that power away when he cursed him," the Jackal suggested.

"No, he has other means besides his own power. The Tormentor obviously wishes to meet with Norbavon. His great pride shall be his downfall. He will allow us to pass these stairs so that he may slaughter the warrior in front of his demons." Maczcksuxe spat at the thought of his brethren worshipping the false god. "Make yourselves ready, for when we reach the bottom a battle of untold proportions will take hold."

The staircase went on forever. The only light in the dark shaft was that of the Orb. Around and around they had traveled, descending farther and farther into the planet. Neither the top nor the bottom could be seen, only murky darkness.

Their footfalls echoed loudly in the shaft, creating the only sound to be heard.

"Norbavon," Rhiannon called reaching out for him. "Why is it that you look so sad?"

"We are soon to be parted my love, my wife."

"I thought so also, are you sure?"

"Yes, but let us not think about it, we still have far to go. Let me be simply comforted by your presence for now." He turned and continued their descent.

They rested for the night, or what they guessed by their tiredness, on the stairs, which were quite large enough to hold a body. They stood no watch. If the Tormentor meant to attack them it would have come by now.

Norbavon dreamed of life, he saw a family, his own. Rhiannon and him lived happily on the outskirts of New Peturan. A small boy ran through the room in the house. A feeling of content washed over him, then the Tormentor came.

"I am waiting for you Norbavon. Come to me and accept your new god."

"No!" Norbavon tossed in his sleep, almost falling off of his precarious resting place.

"Yes my son, you are mine. I will give you life. I can give you that family, that son. Only accept me, bow before me and I will reward you with untold dreams. I created the race of men on this world. I created the dragons and all of the animals. What is one more life to me? I can give you all, a soul. A soul Norbavon, a place to live with your family and so little I ask. Be my prophet, I will hold the Orb and you

will not be parted. The four souls will be yours, your powers will not leave you. I can do this. I am your god." Norbavon denied the Tormentor's temptations. So inviting they were, but there was fear in the voice. The Tormentor feared him.

"Be mine." the voice drifted off only to be replaced by the Orb.

"Sleep Norbavon, do not be tempted by your dreams. Only a dream," and a dreamless sleep was finally upon him.

Cultin woke them. They mindlessly took to the stairs following the path before them. Far below they could now see torches. The bottom stairs were lit. There was no telling how far they had come.

"Looks like we are about to hit bottom," Cultin observed. "Hate to think of walking back up these," but a look to Norbavon quieted him. They continued in silence.

The last two hundred feet of stairs were lit intermittently with torches, newly placed in the walls. The shaft in the center of the stairs continued, but the stairs soon stopped. They gazed down into the mine shaft of the Tormentor. A fire far below them, sent a hot wind flowing upwards.

One passage led away from the staircase and this path they took. Not long now, Norbavon thought.

Chapter V

The Tormentor had heard of Skelter's betrayal from the daemon, Norbavon was coming. Why did that bother him? The Orb was nowhere near, nor were the four that Jahvey had warned him about. He paced ruthlessly upon his throne. What was this man who had defeated every trap sent against him? He was not even in the plan, a lone warrior coming to him. How had this threat escaped him? His powers were extraordinary, but he was only a man and men die.

The daemon flickered in front of him, the warrior had arrived, soon there would be no more Norbavon to worry about. The Tormentor had let him through the outer defenses of his lair, he wished to meet this man. He could have had him captured, but it was easier this way. Norbavon was coming to him and would bow down and recognize the new god or die. The matter was simple. He tried to put it out of his mind, but there was something he had missed. Why had Skelter let him through? The dragon had sworn allegiance to the Tormentor. They had been friends since the world's beginning, now he betrayed him. He would pay, when the comet hit the planet the dragon would be no more than smoldering ash. The dragon had even left his post and flown off to the others. Were they plotting against him? There was no way for a dragon to reach the inner sanctum, but the facts could not remove the sense of destroyed plans from the Tormentor's heart.

His army of demons now stood along the edges of the cave, Norbavon would not have a chance of escape. The lessers gazed along hungrily, they had been promised the last meal, a last fight to see who would survive. He had no need of them anymore, the fortifications were almost completed and the rest of the work could be done by the demons. He gazed across the vast emptiness of the cave before him. His kingdom was small in comparison to the world he once owned, but soon, so very soon he would be a god and challenge Jahvey himself. For too long he had acted at the whim of the true one, being locked in this prison and refused access to the light. The comet would not hit for many months yet, there was still much work to do on the surface before all was ready for its arrival. But what if Jahvey decided to destroy them instantly upon the death of his warriors, the four had not been seen since the initial warning. What was it that Skelter had warned him of? The dragon had said something about the orb being closer than he knew. But how does one hide the orb? It was too large for a man to carry. There was no way that he could have missed it. He was getting too worried over small details, they would be found and dealt with as Norbavon was about to be. Of course the Orb could not enter the cavern, he would not allow that. No telling what tricks Jahvey had implanted in the sphere. His own sphere, how ironic that the one god should send his own creation against him. The orb had served its purpose though, its time of need was over. It would be destroyed with the rest.

A drum sounded in the distance followed by others picking up the steady beat. A low booming filled the cave with a feeling of impending destruction. All was ready for his coming. Torches placed in the walls lit the cavern, but hid his minions. Come Norbavon, come and meet the Tormentor.

"It is time." Norbavon turned to his companions. "I do not wish you to meet this fate, but you have volunteered so far and I do not think that I could turn you back." The looks he received proved him correct. "Inside is the Tormentor and he knows of our arrival." They had also heard the sounding of the drums. "Through this last passage hangs the fate of the world." A look of final destiny filled his eyes. He looked to Rhiannon who was trying to hide her tears. This was the end, they both knew that Norbavon would not leave the cavern. The secrets that Skelter had given them had drawn to one conclusion about the strange fate of Norbavon, a conclusion that they all came to, but none discussed. He reached toward her and kissed her lips. "I love you. I have loved you since I first met you. Do not forget me."

"Never Norbavon," tears now flowing freely. "Never could I ever forget you." She held onto to him tight, never wanting to let go. The pain of parting was so terrible, more painful than any punishment the Tormentor could grant. Norbavon pushed her gently away and faced Cultin.

Norbavon reached to the dwarf who was failing to hide his own pain running freely down his face. He clamped his hand on the gnarled man's shoulder. Cultin reached towards Norbavon and embraced him. The warrior was taken aback at first, but soon returned the gesture. "You have been a son to me Norbavon. Never will I let the memory of you die. I only wish there was something of yours we could take with us, something to look at when the pain of your parting is too strong to handle."

"We have something," Rhiannon surprised both of them and patted her stomach. "You grow inside me husband." The shocked stares from the men brought a smile beneath her tears.

"How do you know?" Norbavon asked aghast. "How long have you..."

"We women know these things, my love. Inside of me you grow and I nourish your blood. Your memory will never die. I will tell your child about his father and he will know you in my memory." The Orb around Norbavon's neck flickered. "It is time," Rhiannon finished trying to control her emotions.

"A child," Norbavon said touching Rhiannon's stomach, amazed at his own creation. "I have one more thing to say and it is not to you. There has been something we have all been avoiding and that is my possessors."

"Norbavon, no," Rhiannon pleaded.

"No, I must." He turned away addressing the air. "I do not know you, but this woman is my wife by all but ceremony and she carries my child, our child. I charge you to see her safely back and take care of her." The sadness in his voice broke the other's hearts. "I know what I must do and I will do it so that my child and my love will have a world to live in. Please, grant me this wish."

"I will," Allanah said quietly. "Forever Norbavon your child will be protected as no other."

"Any person so bold as to touch him will have my curse and feel my wrath as I rip his heart from his chest!" The demon had no way to deal with the flowing human emotions, but his pledge was made in the only way that he knew how.

"I will watch her always," Jackal added his own pledge to the others.

"I have lost my first son, but Jahvey has given me another chance, I will live by your wish Norbavon."

Norbavon turned towards Rhiannon. "It is done. The ones inside of me will watch you and our son forever my wife. You have nought to fear about your future."

"Do not forget about me," Cultin added. "Anyone touches that kid will feel my steel. We will get her back alive, count on it."

"Let us go then and meet this demigod that has been the cause of all our sorrow." Norbavon tried to fill his heart with destiny so that he could try and remove the pain of his emotions. The thought of a child gave him new hope, something to feed on. A reason to destroy this beast. His child must survive, and to survive there must be a world to live on.

He turned away from his companions, the orb flared up again, signifying that it was ready for the final battle. He turned down the passage and entered the dark chasm at the end. The others followed and when they had all entered the cavern the exit was closed. Dark forms filled the gap, there was no exit from the cave, but this was a surprise to no one.

Far at the end of the chamber a minotaur sat in a throne that was much too large for him. He stared at the group with eyes of death. There was no doubt that this was the Tormentor. The two enemies faced, each sizing up the other.

"Tormentor," Norbavon called approaching the throne.

"Norbavon," he answered and dropped down to the ground, meeting Norbavon in the center of the vast cave. "Finally I get to meet him that has thwarted all attempts at capture. Who are you? No do not answer, I will find out soon enough. I see that you bring your companions, very foolish if you wished them to live." He eyed Rhiannon closely. "You love this man? I see it in your heart, and you carry his child. You can hide nothing from me, I am your new god. Do you accept me as such Norbavon? Do you realize who I am? I am the master of this planet. I am the Tormentor. Did you really come down here to destroy me? There are four others that will try, why are you here? Why send a lone man? You confuse me Norbavon. Now tell me, do you recognize your new god!?" The Tormentor brought the bull snout to face with Norbavon, gazing into his eyes. Norbavon did not answer, his own hate gazing back at the demigod. "Choose wisely fool, for if you do not join, I will bring your son into this world and I am sure he would be glad to worship me." Norbavon reached for his sword, but with a glance from the Tormentor it was gone. He reached for the demigod, but found his hands did not move, nor the rest of his body. The Tormentor laughed at his efforts. "Do not waste your strength man. You cannot break my hold. I am your new god and you will be my first human sacrifice, committed by the god himself." His hand came up with Norbavon's sword in it. He looked over the man with new eyes and noticed the orb around his neck.

"What is this Norbavon? What have you brought into my lair?" His voice rising in pitch as his anger grew. "My Orb, you have brought the orb, but where are its true bearers. Whom did you steal this from and how did you shrink its size? No matter, I will rid you of your burden."

The Tormentor took Norbavon's sword and placed it against his neck, but the sword would not go near the orb. "Remove this thing at once! I will destroy it and you with it." The Tormentor brought the sword back as if to swing.

“Wait,” Norbavon muttered through his frozen state. “Free my hand and I will give it to you.”

The Tormentor scrutinized Norbavon's resolve. “What trick do you try now.”

“None, simply free my hand and I will remove the orb.”

“Norbavon no!” Rhiannon cried.

“Quiet bitch!” the Tormentor yelled. “Why these tears Norbavon? What are you hiding from me? Go, remove the orb.”

Norbavon felt his hand again. He flexed it bringing blood into his veins. His last act as a man. He placed his hand on the orb, feeling its smooth texture around his neck. He knew that its removal was his end. “Rhiannon forgive me,” and he ripped the orb from his neck.

Chapter VI

As the Orb fell to the ground a great brilliance spilled from its center. The light grew, and the companions had to turn away. The Tormentor just stood and watched, the final realization of what was happening, shocked him in to momentary submission.

When the light faded to a dull glow, Norbavon was no where to be seen. Before the Tormentor stood a demon, knight, cleric, and thief. Upon the floor lay the Orb, restored to its full size, light emanating from it as it flourished in the release of the weight of the spell.

"You," the Tormentor gasped. "How did I not see?"

"You are not a god, there is only one god and his wrath is before you," answered Allanah.

"Attack," he screamed as his body vanished only to reappear upon the throne. Completely surrounding them the demons advanced. More demons than had ever been gathered at one place, at one time. They walked slowly, glad to rid their god of the last opposition. The companions turned around finally realizing the new threat.

"Grab the Orb!" Rexord screamed at Maczcksuxe. "You're the only one strong enough to hold it. We can not let them get at it!"

"But what is going to stop them from getting at us," he answered.

"They are your friends, can you not talk with them?" Allanah suggested.

"They are warped by the Tormentor, but I shall try," Maczcksuxe turned facing the shrinking circle. "Brothers," he called out, "the thing is not your god. He is only a pawn of the true creator. The comet has turned toward the planet and is on a path to this very core. Do you think that these walls will stop it? See his lying and the way that he has used you. There will be no escape from the true creator's wrath. These walls will not sustain. The comet shortens its distance as we speak and the only thing that will stop its arrival is the Tormentor's defeat."

One of the host called out, "you lie Maczcksuxe. You are demon like ourselves. Join us against the betraying Orb. Join us and we will not destroy you. The Tormentor has sworn to protect his followers. Believe, I have seen the power of the new God. We will rise up against Jahvey and we will become gods ourselves."

"Fool, can you be so blinded by your pride to believe his lies. There will be no future, only death for us all. He already has his army of daemons. Do you think that he needs you? When the comet hits all will be gone and you will be just dust floating in the debris that remains of this planet."

The demons faltered for a minute, doubts ringing through the crowd.

"Does he lie?" one called out.

"Will the comet completely destroy the planet?"

"I say the Tormentor is the only god!"

"Jahvey's wrath is inescapable!" The companions were being backed up against the throne were the Tormentor looked on with glee. "Do not listen to these four! Destroy them!" The Tormentor ranted on his throne feeling his hold on the demons loosen. Two armies were soon formed, one sided with the companions and one with the Tormentor.

"We must choose life!" one called to the others. "I have no love for Jahvey, but I have even less love for death. We must join Maczcksuxe and his companions and destroy him that has lied to us!" The Tormentor turned to this demon and struck him down where he stood. His smoldering ashes caused by a flame shot from the Tormentor's hand.

"Do you wish to join your brother? Kill them now or face my wrath which will be ten fold more terrible than that of the false creator. Where is your god Orb? Why is he not here to fight for you? You have lied. Now destroy them!" He screamed this last command. Fire flew from his fingertips, striking out at those formed against him. The two sides clashed and a battle of untold proportions was started.

The Jackal had quietly left the group and now scaled the sides of the throne, unknown to the Tormentor. Maczcksuxe was attacked from behind and overwhelmed. "We shall rip your heart out for your betrayal of your race." He was surrounded by demons who attacked, ripping bits of flesh from his skin. "It is you who will be dust floating in space," they screamed as they surged on the helpless demon.

The others tried to make their way to the demons aid, but it was only Allanah who could make any progress. None of the demons would approach her, she fought with the hand of Jahvey striking down the opposing faction as she slowly made her way through the crowd surrounding Maczcksuxe. Rexord could

do little without a sword, so he stood rear guard to Allanah's slow progress. Maczcksuxe clung tightly to the Orb, hoping to gain some protection by its presence.

"He is gone Allanah, retrieve the Orb!" Rexord called to her from behind.

"No, he is one of us. He heard the call and came, we must help him. Besides he is the only one strong enough to bring the Orb to the Tormentor."

"What then," he answered furiously. "What do you plan to do with the Orb if we ever get it to the Tormentor?"

"That is for the Orb, I only know that we must bring it to him." Around them, demons clashed. The sides were divided evenly, those who fought for life cared little about the four companions and only sought the death and destruction of the others. The battle was mindless, but did form a distraction to keep the whole of the demon army from concentrating on the Orb and its bearers.

The Jackal had now reached the top of the thrown. The Tormentor was too content on watching the battle to notice him. Using the skill learned from the streets of New Peturan he made his way slowly to the side of the Tormentor where his goal was firmly gripped in the clawed hand. The Tormentor spun around as he approached.

"So thief, you think you can defeat me alone. You will be the first to die." He swung out, but the Jackal sidestepped nimbly. They paced around in a circle, looking for an opening. The Jackal swung in low with his foot, but the Tormentor was too quick. He swung the blade down low, striking him at the calf. The Jackal yelled out in pain, but the noise below kept it from being distinguished from any other. There was no help here. He was about to be skewered and all of his companions were below fighting for their own lives.

Allanah had almost made it to the center of the ring. Maczcksuxe blocked attacks with the Orb. A striking light now surged from the center of the sphere burning any demon that came in contact with it. They tried to break through the glass with weapons, but no weapon existed that would even scratch its surface. Maczcksuxe lie on his back, but could not protect every front. Flesh was ripped from his legs and the arms that clung to the globe. Soon he would lose his strength and the globe would fall, him with it.

Rexord kept the demons from Allanah's back, fighting with his hands and feet, cursing Norbavon for leaving his sword on the island. He too was slowly being overcome, there was just too many of them and the faction that had sided with them was too preoccupied with destruction to be of any assistance.

The Jackal lay, waiting for the final blow. The Tormentor had sizzled some fire on his fingertips as a threat, but decided on the sword in the end. His foot hung loosely from his leg, blood flowing from the wound that had sank through the bone. "You will die now boy. Know this, that you are a sacrifice to the new god, the first human sacrifice and be proud of the fact." He brought the sword down, but Jackal rolled. The sword struck the ground and with immense pain, the Jackal brought up the useless shaft of leg and knocked the sword from the Tormentor's grasp. The sword slid across the seat of the throne and fell off the edge.

"Rexord," the Jackal screamed.

The knight looked up just in time to see the sword fall from the throne into a crowd of brawling demons. "Allanah, I will be back," he yelled as he made his way through the crowd. The other demons were too preoccupied with each other to take any notice of the knight. He was knocked down by a swinging arm and crawled the rest of the way. Claws came down on his hands, but he took no notice of these. He only saw the sword now partially covered by a fallen monster.

"You think I need the sword to kill you. You are wrong, deadly wrong." The Tormentor took the boy in one hand and lifted him off the ground. The other hand went to the damaged foot. "Learn what pain is, and what a lack of faith can cause." He wrenched the foot from the boy's body and lifted it to his mouth. Blood flowed from his cheeks as he, to the Jackal's horror consumed the entire foot, bone, shoe, and all. The Jackal squirmed in his hand, trying to look away from the sight before him, but the demon kept bringing his around forcing him to watch.

Rexord had reached the sword and used all of his strength to pull it free from the body on top of it. The sword called out to him at his touch. It sang songs of glory to Jahvey and preached of victory. "Shut up," Rexord answered, "we have to survive before we can win. Now lend me your strength." The sword filled him with new power and the knight was taken aback at first. He turned towards Allanah, she was now as completely surrounded as Maczcksuxe. The demons waiting to see who the brave one would be to attack her first.

“True cleric of Jahvey,” they taunted her. “Where is your god now? Ours is here fighting by our side, where is yours?” She ignored their taunts refusing to lose her faith. “Why does one who claims to love you, send a ball of fire to consume your planet?” they continued.

Rexord made his way through the fighting demons. The Sword of Jahvey scored flesh and bone as he arced the sword for attack. None could stand to the might of the sword bearer. He reached the group surrounding Allanah, they stood back, amazed at the power of the blade. They attacked with magic, but the sword protected him and his new charge. “Here is my god,” Allanah finally answered. “Here is this weapon.”

“If our god is so weak, then come and challenge his blade.” Rexord joined in taking two demons down in one swing. Their enemies ran at the might of their new attacker. Rexord and Allanah worked together, wielding the might of the one god in sword and in magic. They surged towards Maczcksuxe, destroying all in their path.

Maczcksuxe could not hold on much longer. Already one of his legs was a pulverized mass of flesh. One arm hung limply to his side. He was now fighting with his teeth, trying to bite down on any careless enough to come close to the mouth. He squirmed on his back, trying not to stay still enough for an aimed attack, but his strength was weakening. He felt the attacks stop and looked up for a final blow that was sure to come and mercifully end all, but it did not. Above him stood the Knight and the Cleric, battling the crowd they had surrounded him.

“Help him up,” Rexord called to Allanah, “I can keep them off.” She put down her hand to the demon. He looked at her beautiful sight, filled with the power of the one god. His heart became soft as he was rescued by those that he had destroyed for so many years. She gripped his clawed hand and helped him to his one good leg. He leaned on her with the weight of his full body.

“Rexord,” she called to the knight. “Hold his weight for a second.” He took hold of the demon, looking up at his new friend. They looked cautiously at each other, surprised at their trust in their past enemies. The demons that had surrounded Maczcksuxe saw only hopelessness in the attack of such powerful adversaries. Fear of the blade and the magic of the cleric, they had left the group alone to find game elsewhere.

Allanah bent over to the destroyed leg. “Jahvey, he is your child also, and he has fought for you against his own people. Lend me your power to heal this wound.” She placed one hand on the Orb and the other on the crushed bone. The light from the Orb seemed to use her as a circuit to the leg, and it was healed by the power and mercy of Jahvey. They looked on amazed, never had the power of a cleric been used to heal one such as he. There was no time to ponder the situation, the Tormentor had to be dealt with. They made their way to the throne and were horrified by the sight.

The Tormentor held the Jackal's limp body over the edge of the throne. “He is the first, you shall follow. All who defy the might of the new god will be sacrificed to him.” The look on his face did not follow his words. He was losing his grip on the demons and he knew it. They no longer fought for him, they fought now because that is what they were born to do. To destroy and whether it be demon against human or demon against demon, they would destroy. Around them bodies lay on the ground, slowly rejuvenating back to a fighting condition. Demons consumed, burned, fought hand to hand against each other to add to the blood bath that was ensuing. Already the army was half its size and there was no end in sight. They had gone into a frenzy, taking out their anger in the deception against brothers. There would be no halt until the last one fell. The Tormentor was disgusted. His demon race was destroying itself before their god's very eyes. His dreams were disappearing, but he would make those responsible pay. They attacked as lesser attacks upon conception. They were mindless, only wanting to consume and kill.

The Tormentor turned away, refusing to accept the fact of defeat. He reached his claw in the Jackal's leg and pulled the remaining bone out. Already the Jackal had passed out, the loss of blood too great to sustain conscious thought. He tossed the ruined corpse down into the small group gathering at the foot of his throne. The Jackal hit the ground and bounced limply off the cavern floor. Only a small breath of life caustically passed through his lungs, signaling the others that he was still alive, but not for long.

The Tormentor brought his hands in front of him. Fire fizzled on his fingertips. “Prepare to die for the true god!” he screamed as he loosed the power granted him by Jahvey.

Rexord stepped forward, the blade brandished proudly in front of him. The fire hit it and the two powers of Jahvey battled. The sword, being born true in spirit and still with the faith of its creator, won and the fire was deflected.

The Tormentor screamed in rage and jumped from his throne. "You may deflect my powers, but not my fists." He rushed at the group, but stopped. He looked down at his body, the body of the minotaur. Not in this form, he thought to himself. He looked to his opposition, the cleric and the knight still held weapons of Jahvey, they could harm him. He started to change, reverting himself to the embryonic form that would drive these two humans insane.

"Do not look!" Maczcksuxe screamed, blocking their view with his body. "Turn around and look away." They reluctantly followed his command. "I am not affected Tormentor." The embryonic form stared back through its sightless eyes. Maczcksuxe raised the Orb before him. "Now die false prophet!" He brought the Orb back and threw it in the midst of the mass of entrails and brain.

No sound was uttered at first, the lifeless eyes just watched the Orb's approach as in slow motion. The sphere flew through the air into its midst. A tremendous cry came out as the light enveloped all that was the Tormentor. The light flashed and Maczcksuxe had to hide his eyes from the sight.

When the light had faded, they all gazed at the scene before them. The Orb lay on the ground, its light once again faded to a faint pulsing. They came closer. The light was somewhat blocked, a dark form in the middle. The Tormentor, pounding and raving, was trapped inside his own creation.

"It is finished," the Orb's voice filled them all with shouts of victory. "Look now above you." At first nothing could be seen, but soon a blurred image began to take shape above their heads.

Two demons were all that remained of the mystical battle, they had created armies of lessers and now acted as generals from opposite sides of the great hall. All stopped their fighting and gazed above at the image creating itself on the roof of the hall.

The ceiling was transformed into the sky, and a comet plummeted towards the planet. As they gazed, its fire went out. The comet no longer held the fury of the one god, but still it came. The ball of rock disappeared from sight.

"We have won!" but the oppression was too great for any victory party. Maczcksuxe looked around at the carnage. Too many of his brothers had died. On the surface thousands of men were killed, all because of the Tormentor. Such a price to pay so that life may continue on the planet.

A huge impact shook the hall. "The comet has hit the volcano," the Orb's voice entered their heads. "You must escape, gather around me.

Out from the darkness one short form raced towards them. "Wait!" he called. Then they could make out the new intrusion. "Rhiannon," he cried, laying the woman at the foot of the Orb. "She was struck, I had to carry her to safety," he looked up at the Orb with tear filled eyes. "You must save her, she carries his son." The anguish on his face brought tears to the others. The roof was falling down on top of them, already the two remaining fighters had flown for safety.

"Come around me everyone, bring the girl, Cultin." They stood in a circle surrounding the Orb, warming their wounds in its emanating glow. It flashed once, and they were no longer in the cavern. The voice of the Orb filled their thoughts for one final good-bye. "You have all done well, the world has you to thank for your courage and its salvation."

Chapter VII

They stood in the mouth of the dragon's lair. The Orb had done all it could to get them from the disintegrating cavern, but they were not out of danger. The comet, now reduced to a great ball of rock, had landed in the volcano. A small island shown above the sea of lava. What they could not see was that far below, the comet had blocked off the opening and now far beneath in the planet, pressure was gathering up to remove the intruder. The lava boiled, newly heat by the hurled rock. The level was rising and soon the lava would flow into the lair.

Jackie and Rhiannon lay next to each other. Their breathing was better and the Orb had healed all of their physical wounds. The Orb itself was gone, not having the power to transfer the others along with itself. It sat in a tomb far below the surface, making its prison all the more inescapable for the Tormentor.

"So you are the ones." Cultin looked at the group trying to fully comprehend who it was that stood in front of him. He regained his composure and rushed over to Rhiannon, Allanah was already bending over her.

"She will live, they shall both live, as long as they survive the wounds of the mind, those that no healing power can effect."

"What now? Are we to be tempted with survival only to be drowned in a pool of lava?" Rexord's usual strength had gone from his voice. Still he carried the Sword of Jahvey, but it hung loosely in his grip.

"There is a path to the top." Cultin eyes alighted with new purpose. He ran to the edge, but his downtrodden look diminished any hope in the other's hearts. The lava had already reached the small outcropping that led to the trail. There was no way out.

"The sword, she sings." Rexord looked down at his possession. The sword's glow had returned.

"What does it mean?" Cultin asked.

"I know not, but do not give up faith. Wait, look to the sky."

The group had gathered on the edge of the lair, below them the lava rose up in anticipation of new food just inches above it.

Down from the clouds they came, the six remaining dragons, Skelter at their head. They swooped down and entered the cavern as the group made a path. The cavern was filled with their mighty presence.

"Quickly now," he bent over his neck, the others following suit. Soon the dragons all had passengers and when all were secure the dragons flew out of the cavern. They rose high above the mountains just as the great volcano coughed out the intruding comet. The volcano erupted in a fury, half of the mountain was flung in the air. From miles away the dragons hovered, taking this as the last sign of the Tormentor's threat. The lava covered the slopes of the volcano and all adjacent mountains.

From above the plains, the dragons turned and flew. Once again the adventurers were returned to their previous lives. Scores of experiences left to ponder over time.

Epilogue

Twelve moons after the narrow escape a man, who had once been the boy Jackie, stood waiting. His leg was still healing from the attack, the Orb's spell had worked fairly well though. A speck in the sky grew larger as the dragon Skelter approached. Dust rose off the ground as the dragon landed. No words were spoken, the dragon bent down his head and the Jackal mounted the ancient beast. Behind him sat a knight and together they flew off too the east. For the better part of the day they flew on. A group of mountains rose out of the vast forest spread below them, their destination. The dragon flew to the middle of the mountains, to the central point. A lone mountain was surrounded by the others. An expanse of grass and trees grew upon this mountain and a gathering was taking place.

The dragon landed and its riders dismounted and joined the ceremony. They stood in the dragon's private temple to the one god, all in silence. All of the participants were gathered in that clearing, surrounding a great statue that they all recognized, for around that statue's neck was a marble representation of the Orb.

A cleric stood closest to the statue, the markings of the head of her order were now donned by her cloak. A new light of knowledge and wisdom had bestilled itself upon her face. Once again the cleric Allanah was beautiful in the eyes of her god.

The knight approached her. He had donned the armor that had been shut away for year once again for this ceremony. The Sword of Jahvey shining brilliantly in the evening sun. He was an outcast to all that he had believed in, but the look in his eyes was not one of a man who regretted his actions.

The man they had once called the Jackal approached a woman and child. She lifted the boy to the man's eyes. So much like his father, he thought to himself. The child smiled at his parent, knowing in his own child like manner that the man before, like so many in the clearing this day, was of his own flesh and blood.

Next to the woman stood a dwarf, beaming with pride at his grandson. He stood with an air of power, gained by the great charge of protecting the mother and child.

The last dragon landed and from its back came the demon. No longer cursed by the evil look in his eye, he too rushed to see the child. Never before had a demon gazed upon a boy with such pride, his boy. He looked around protectively, newly accepted into the band of fathers.

The dragons stood along the outside, paying homage in their own way to the man that they honored at this ceremony. Their wings beat softly in the thin air atop the mountain. On the outskirts of the clearing was a small wall, protecting this sacred ground dedicated to the most high.

Allanah spoke as the master of ceremonies, "I see that we have all come as promised," she said formerly. Small whispers of greeting passing through the crowd were hushed at the sound of her voice. She went over to Rhiannon and took the child from its mother's arms. She willingly gave the child to the cleric and all followed her as she approached the statue. "Here is your son Norbavon." She placed the child at the foot of the statue. The noble eyes of rock peered down at the boy, finding pleasure in such a fine offspring.

"We all contributed to the conception of this boy, but you are his true father. Know that we have kept our oath and the child will be protected from all that may wish him harm." The demon Maczcksuxe grunted his acknowledgment of the oath. Allanah smiled at him. "Know that your mission was accomplished and that a world stands for your son to live in. You have made the greatest sacrifice in the short time that you were part of the world which you saved. You will always be remembered in our hearts and we will tell of your deeds to your son. He will know you." Her voice started breaking and there were small sobs from the surrounding group. "For such a short time you touched our hearts with your great courage. No man has done as much as you have with their life. We who live on this planet for years, can never match even a part of the bravery you displayed in your short life. Less than a month," she said shaking her head. She tried to compose herself, but the tears came unmercifully. Rexord took her in his arms and held her close. She placed her head on his shoulder where her tears of life mixed with his own.

"I pray that someday we may meet my friend," Rexord continued on Allanah's behalf. "You have the truest heart of any knight that I have known. Knowing your own fate you strove forward to the larger goal. You are a fine example for any son to follow." He bowed his head in silent prayer.

"The Orb lies deep within the heart of the planet friend," Jackie went on. "No longer do we have the power to grant you life, but know that I pray every day for your soul, that you may some day enjoy the life that you saved."

Maczcksuxe stepped forward, for he had his own words for the hero. "I was born evil to the core Norbavon. I am a demon and I am not ashamed of the fact. For years I have looked down on the human race with scorn, now I strive to emulate them. You have shared your heart and feelings with me, for that I granted one part of your soul. I have touched the heart of human compassion. I can not change my history, but I will make amends by protecting your son, our son. I have given birth, and for some reason that fills me with a warmth that I never knew existed. You have done much for me man, more than you can ever know. You will be with me always. The soul that I gave you was not returned to me unchanged, you have given me a heart and for that I am forever in your dept."

Skelter spoke from the outskirts of the gathering. "I only knew you for a short span, mortal, but I have been touched by your courage. I will thank you, from all life that dwells on this planet, for our continuance." The ancient beast bowed his head in homage to so noble a cause.

Cultin spoke next. "The Orb said that you did not have parents. It was wrong. As odd that it may be that I consider Rhiannon my daughter, than you are my son. Farewell true friend."

A path was made as Rhiannon approached and retrieved her child. "Husband, my love for you grows stronger by the day, but you are not here. I pray for your return, for I can not accept your death. You have not died in my eyes or those of our son, you live on and I wait for the day of your return. So I will not say good-bye forever, but instead good-bye until you return to my arms." She fell onto the ground at the foot of the statue. "Jahvey, if you have any mercy return my husband to me!" Her pain racked voice called up to the heavens. A burst of light came down from the clouds, but did not return her husband. Instead it inscribed these words upon the stone plate at the base of the statue.

HERE LIES NORBAVON
HERO OF JAHVEY
HUSBAND OF RHIANNON
FRIEND OF US ALL

With the final word from the most high himself the ceremony ended. Each approached the statue to say good-bye in their own silent words and prayers.

Only Rhiannon remained on the clearing, the rest had flown back to their own lives. Cultin would wait for her at home, she had asked him to depart without her. Skelter stood on the edge of the clearing staring out into the world and waiting with the patience bestowed by living since the dawning of the world.

She knelt at the statue, grateful that this place was prepared where her husband's memory was honored. The son of Norbavon lay on the grass in front of her. He crawled over to the statue and reached out his hand. His palm started to glow and new words were written below those of the god.

I WILL RETURN MY LOVE

Here ends the tale of Norbavon, the souless one.