



## Issue Five

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# The Fall Into Night

by Larry Myles

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The dark scaffolding crackled and hissed. Plumes of flame illuminated the night sky, casting an eerie glow on the makeshift barricades. City's people cowered in fear behind the rubble of their once impregnable wall, holding their collective breath. Could the city, the last bastion of technology, survive the night? Deep within the walled metropolis, nervous eyes looked toward the eastern sector. Between hastily erected barricades and the remnants of the old wall, a hundred fire towers blazed fiercely. If City's spies had it right, Nomad and his hordes would come at them through the soft underbelly of the Eastside Gate.

Along City's open coastline, a phalanx of flaming barges blocked the path from the sea, keeping at bay any savages lurking in the murky waters. Through most of the night, the skies had been clear of cloud and fog. Clear, that is, until Nomad began his mad chanting. Within minutes of the beginning of his eerie mantra, dark clouds came out of nowhere. Rain threatened; abetted by howling winds the threat soon turned into wet reality, turning from a light sprinkle to a horrendous deluge. The louder Nomad sang, the more intensely the storm lashed the besieged city. Soon the blazing bonfires surrounding the harbor and the east wall began to lose their fire. The battle for the last stronghold of the old ways would soon begin.

Hunkering down behind hastily erected barriers, their grim faces painted as dark as the night, City's soldiers were at battle-ready. Seasoned defenders, the men and women of the City Defense Force held not a single illusion about tonight's battle. For more than three centuries, the Force had done their

job; protect City from the savages on the other side of the wall. Doing their job with cold-blooded efficiency, never losing a battle, never allowing a single barbarian past their high walls. But tonight, with most of the eastern wall in rubble, the Force knew the very future of City lay in their hands.

Overhead, high in his observation tower, Commander Breach looked down and took stock of his soldiers. They were well trained and highly disciplined, armed with the best weapons City could supply. Breach felt proud and confident that his troops would win the night. Sneering into his gray beard, he thought about the savage called Nomad. Just one more barbarian with the audacity to try and take Earth's last city; to tear down what he himself could not build. Smirking, he dismissed all the rumors surrounding Nomad; that the filthy savage was possessed by the spirit of an ancient magician; that his magic could topple City's walls; that the wild-eyed lunatic could draw energy directly from natural elements. Spitting over the edge of his sand-bagged vantage point, Breach laughed aloud. That kind of superstitious babble might work on the opposite side of the wall, but here in City such talk shouldn't be able to frighten children. Stroking his beard, Breach felt the laughter die in his throat. No, such talk should not have been able to frighten anyone. But clearly that wasn't the case. His people were afraid, especially the status-Citizens.

Raising the night-vision binoculars to his eyes, Breach surveyed the hasty repairs done to the walls. The earthquake that had shaken City had come as a complete surprise. But nothing more than ironic coincidence, Breach thought fiercely. So what if Nomad had been quick to lay claim that it was his

borrowed magic that had sent the mighty walls tumbling. That was nothing more than opportunistic luck on Nomad's part; animal cunning, nothing else. Who cared if the raggedy-assed charlatan could fool his legions with such drivel. Luck, that's all it was; blind luck. Certainly he could not be accused of being an expert battle tactician, that was for sure. Because after the quake, for three tension filled days, the entire eastern sector had been exposed, lying wide-open and defenseless. The raving idiot hadn't attacked. Instead, as City's bulldozers and work crews worked feverishly to shore up the weakened wall, Nomad had huddled in his tree-hut praying to his magician-god. He had lost an incredible advantage, and tonight the madman would lose more. The Force would prevail. He would prevail, thought Breach angrily—and in so doing would show the weaklings under his care that he was more than a match for Nomad.



As Commander Breach unknowingly faced his final hours of life, City's towering citadels stood dark and silent in self-imposed blackout. Inside the Inner Sanction, the status-Citizens huddled in fear within their safe-rooms; while outside of the locked rooms, in the fortified antechambers, their mercenaries stood guard. Inside and out, all hoped they would live to see the first sunrise of the fall equinox.

>From a shadowed corner of one of the fortified courtyards, a boy opened the outer door and peered into the night. Something felt different in the air, and he found himself stricken by an almost supernatural fear as the darkness and all that could be hiding in it seemed to gain strength.

“Lant! Stop shaking lad, get yourself back inside; and bar the door.” Guardian Barlo stood in silence, studying the look of fear on the young lad's face. Finally, turning to his men, he knew the worry was mirrored in his own face. It was all they had to know. Barlo found his stool and sat down heavily, listening with poorly disguised contempt to the whimpering coming from within the safe-room. Mewling, weak cowards! Yet, they were status-Citizens and he held a responsibility toward them. Like his father, and his grandfather, and his father before him, it was his sworn duty as Guardian—sixth generation— to protect City's people.

For the next two hours, Barlo and his men sat in mute silence. Not a single word was exchanged. Instead, all eyes were fixed on the heavy wooden door. Suddenly, the lights in the courtyard began to flicker, becoming dimmer. Cursing under his breath, Barlo found his voice. “Another brown-out!” He felt the shadows on the wall becoming heavier, more sinister. “Lant! Get on the bike and pedal up some juice. Hansen! Turn off all the lights except the one by the door, and the big one overhead. We'll need those to see if anyone tries to force the door.”



“Anyone—or anything.” muttered Hansen, his callused hand resting nervously on his holster.

Moments later, as Lant’s strong legs pumped power back into the reserve batteries, the light in the room grew stronger. And as the shadows retreated, some of the men began to relax, cradling their rifles on their legs while patting their pockets for something to chew or smoke. Maybe everything would turn out all right after all. Perhaps Breach could hold Nomad at the East Gate. But it was not to be. Suddenly, Lant cried out, pointing a trembling finger toward the door.

A strange yellow mist billowed out from under the door. The smell of dead meat permeated the room as the putrid cloud boiled over and around the door-frame; circling as if looking for something.

“Weapons at ready!” Barlo barked.

No one dared breathe, and for a precious moment nothing happened. Then, from the other side of the door came

the sound of a great wind, carrying upon its shoulders, voices; loud inhuman shrieks of terror and mad laughter. Lant screamed, clapping his hands over his ears. Most of the others, paralyzed with fear, sat rooted in their chairs. The jarring sound of metal rang out as some of the weapons slipped out of shaking hands, clattered to the floor. The door shook violently, hinges squealing in protest. Lant was vaguely aware that Barlo was shouting at him, cuffing his ears; trying to get him to stop screaming. His eyes went as wide as pools when the door finally burst from its hinges and he found himself staring into a vast and empty darkness. It was as if he were looking into a bottomless chasm of blackness. He could feel the evil leaking into the room. From out of the dark pit, tentacles of yellow smoke slithered toward him. For a blessed moment, his screams died in his throat and a feeling of lassitude overtook his entire body; his eyes became as heavy as stone. But as the fingers of foul smoke wrapped themselves around his trembling body he felt himself being pulled into the darkness. The sound of insane laughter filled his ears and he began to scream again. And this time he knew he would never stop. •

# The Galaxy Trio: Episode 74

by Connaught Catlin

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*“Sacrificed to an angry god  
the sky blinds me and  
I melt into  
the cold blue air.”*

— *Me (oddly enough)*

## GUIDE TO SUCCESSFULLY ENJOYING THE GALAXY TRIO

1. Don't think too hard about it. Logic isn't always a good thing.
2. If there's a part you don't understand (or a phrase or a word), chances are I figured you wouldn't understand it and, therefore, it's got nothing to do with the plot.
3. I use quotes from movies, songs, books, pals, etc., and I like to put them in even if they don't quite make sense (see #2).
4. Don't take it personally.
5. I'm the queen of long sentences, so be prepared. It might be confusing, but it's all legal although I dare any of you to try and diagram them <insert maniacal laughter here>.
6. Any description having to do with Kimbo will be something like axe-wielding or barbarous or savage. For the Vampyre, it's pale or bloodsucking or angelic. And the girl is just the girl (Dacia).

Episode 74: *The Galaxy Trio on the Road Again or Just For the Hell of It*

It'd been months since The Galaxy Trio had sunk their collective teeth into something really juicy. The girl couldn't quite believe that she'd basically sat around for weeks doing nothing but watching old “Vega\$” repeats. True, there were a hell of a lot of episodes and Robert Urich did look oh-so-fabuloso in his Lee Press-on bellbottoms (being rivalled only by Gary Sandy of “WKRП” fame for stick-to-it-iveness), but there comes a time when you realize that there really should be more to life than getting to know a trashy TV theme song by heart. It was relief, therefore, that greeted the klaxon warning system

(AWOOGA, AWOOGA).

“What's your boggle, my hunka, hunka burning love?” questioned Dacia as she stretched out the kinks in her legs after having sprinted to the control room *much* faster than she should have considering the most exercise she'd had for the last week was going into the storage room to replenish the Snapple tap.

“Just a ship on a direct collision course,” responded the bellicose barbarian, switching off the auxiliary monitor before she could see he'd been watching “Vega\$,” too, cuz he'd *never* hear the end of that one.

“What, again?” sighed the bloodsucking boy wonder with a smile. “There really should be a law against all this blatant plot repetition.”



“What was that?” snorted the girl. “A little vampyre humor?”

“She’s in a bit of a snit, isn’t she?” commented the undead dear to his captivating cohort.

“Yeah, whatever,” spoke Kimbo in response after trying vainly to get a hook into the whole witty repartee thing. “But shouldn’t we be worrying about the ship streaking towards us at sub-light speed?”

“Well, why don’t we get a closer look at it before we go and get religion,” suggested the girl, crossing to the magnifying screen that looked just like that strange little doohickey with the blue light that Spock used. “Well,” she continued as she gazed out at the fast approaching vehicle, “there’s good news and there’s bad news. The bad news is that there are two other ships pursuing the first and they don’t look particularly friendly.”

“And the good news?” prompted Kimbo.

“You actually fell for that?” snorted the Vamp. “That’s quite possibly the oldest trick in the book.”

“It’s true,” smiled the girl as sheepishly as she could smile. “There is no good news. Just trying to cheer you up.”

Just at that moment, if only to save us all from any more of this truly awful conversation, a hail came in over the comm. Have I been watching too much “Star Trek” lately, or what?

“Mayday! Mayday!” spoke the voice, though I suppose *yelled* is a better way of putting it. These people fleeing for their lives — they’re just *so* excitable.

“What is it already?!” responded the Vampyre. “I mean, you don’t have to make such a racket.”

“Please, help me!” continued the voice, at a more reasonable level now that someone was actually listening.

“We got that part,” snorted Kimbo. “Last time I looked, that was what ‘mayday’ meant.”

“Please let me board your ship,” elaborated the voice. I’m gonna haveta come up with a *real* good name to make up for all this “voice” stuff.

“What the hell,” shrugged the girl to her chums, just . . . well, for the hell of it. “It’s not like we can’t take care of ourselves.”

They allowed the pursued ship to dock in the aft bay, greeting it personally with many guns and whatnot after they’d made sure the two pursuing ships had beat a hasty retreat (you gotta love the English language). The owner of the voice stepped out of his damaged vessel, eyeing the three and their armada of weapons with a look that quickly replaced his previous one of relief — a look that said something like “oh, shit.” Just as he was about-facing to get back to the relatively secure confines he had been so eager to escape, he stopped short.

“Has anyone ever told you that you look startling like Rupert Graves?” questioned the girl.

The stranger laughed, realizing at once that anyone who could ask a thing like that simply *had* to be OK. “Once or twice,” he replied with a smile, once more coming to meet them. He was indeed the spitting image of Mr. Graves (what a

cutie. Angel says he's gay. Sigh. It's times like these I wish I were a guy. Ha-cha-cha) and was clad in a skin-tight flight suit of emerald green with two white stripes running its length from his shoulders down each of his legs, flowing smoothly into the boots which came up to his knees and continued the white stripe to his toes. OK. I'll admit it — that came dangerously close to a run-on sentence. Shiver. Anyways . . . On the left side of his chest was a name tag which read "Tethys." Good name, huh? While I've been doing all this description stuff, The Galaxy Trio had replaced all their weapons, seeing as Tethys was just too fashionable not to be a good guy. You may notice that all the good characters in this series are snappy dressers with taut bods. What can I say? I'm a slave to aesthetics. They escorted Tethys to the rec room, just for the hell of it. Oh — thank god — a paragraph break.

"So," began the Vamp as he squeezed in beside the girl on her fave recliner. "Let's get on with the improbable explanation thang." He flashed his canines, something he loved to do becuz it made him look so darned dangerous. "I can already tell this one's gonna be a doozy."

Tethys sat with unrestrained ease on a saggy orange velour ottoman, taking a sip of his shandy whilst running the fingers of his free hand along the length of his white stripes. Why? Hell, I don't know. Anyways . . . "I'm from a planet called Bok," he began with a toss of his tousled hair. "I s'pose it's a pretty normal world, except for the fact that there's no liquid water (something I won't get into cuz it doesn't matter, although it *does* cut down on the tourist trade). There's a faction, a cult really, that's been gaining support over the last few years, that insists that our world should remain passive in the coming system war that has been brewing between our neighboring planets for as long as I can remember, and are intent on taking over the government, turning it into a totalitarian state." Whew. Try saying *that* three times fast.

"Well," spoke Kimbo as Tethys paused. "Great. But what does this have to do with us?"

Tethys reached into his back pocket and pulled out a thin disk. "Maybe this will help you understand," he continued, placing it in the oh-so-handy-dandy disk reader at his elbow.

They all turned their attention to the vid screen, which showed a group of people dressed in flowing white garments moving around a bonfire of green flames.

"They're gonna take over the world with interpretive dance?" questioned the girl.

"Oh, is *that* what that is," put in the Vamp.

"Keep watching," spoke their newest acquisition, confident that what was to follow would shock them out of all this corny humour.

In an instant, a figure began to emerge from the fire, and it was huge. As it kept rising, they could discern not one, not two, but three dragon heads perched upon sleek curving necks that led to one gigantic body. It writhed and rumbled and made some truly hideous noises before returning to the flames.

"This was taken a month ago," explained Tethys as he removed the disk, finally having to stand to get the thing back into his pocket. "We had no idea they'd gained such power. When this meeting was filmed, they only had about a million converts — not enough to conjure and control the beast for any length of time. But since then their numbers have tripled. It was finally decided that things had gone too far, that we needed outside help."

“What is it?” asked Kimbo, impressed.

“We can only guess it’s one of the ancient gods, one that our ancestors worshipped as the creator/destroyer. We just chalked it up as a violent myth. Who woulda thunk it actually existed?”

“It didn’t look too . . . well . . . intelligent,” commented the girl as she sat squished next to the Vampyre thinking that this was, perhaps, taking closeness a bit too far.

“It’s not,” agreed Tethys. “It doesn’t seem to have any will of it’s own.”

“Well, then your problem is solved,” shrugged the fallen angel as he attempted to stand, finally freeing himself with a small popping noise, hurtling himself to the far wall.

“He’s right,” continued the girl as she stretched, watching the Vamp return as he straightened his mesh vest, and wondering how the hell they’d gotten to be so goofy. “All you gotta do is vaporize the brains behind the brawn and you’re as good as godless. Don’t tell me you didn’t think of that yourselves.”

“Of course we did,” snorted Tethys. “But when’s the last time you had to face three million fanatics who would as soon lobotomize you with the corkscrew attachment of a bottom of the line Swiss-army knife as look at you?”

“Not as long ago as you might think,” chuckled Kimbo.

Tethys looked a tad dubious. He had been sent to bring back an armada — how could he return with only three people, as fashion conscious as they might be?

“Listen, bud,” continued Dacia, also deciding to stand,

“I’m so bored I could recount every episode of *Vega\$* to you by heart. Just give us a chance to whack what’s-his-name. C’mon — trust us.” She flashed a wicked grin that quickly spread to her two compatriots.

Tethys had no choice but to accept their offer — what else could he do when surrounded by an intimidating trio who were grinning at him viciously with what seemed to be way too many very white teeth? “We’ll give it a go,” he sighed finally. Just for the hell of it.

\* \* \*

Besides the three million fanatics, it turns out there was another problem The Galaxy Trio would have to face when they got to Bok. Remember that no liquid water thing? Well, it had turned out to be quite more important than anyone, including me, had previously imagined. First off, the fact that their bodies *did* contain liquid water would render them almost instantly recognizable as outsiders which were, of course, feared even more than religious fanatics. Second, there was the fact that it wouldn’t be possible for them to remain in such a place for longer than seventy-two hours or they’d die a horrible, lingering death. The first of these two dilemmas was handled by the Vampyre who, because of his need for skin protection in general (you know — the sun thing), was a whiz at mixing up all sorts of magical make-up. He came up with a goop that would hide the fact that they were made mostly of liquid water, although it didn’t do anything for that seventy-two-hour deal (don’t worry — time limitations are your friend).

“Well,” spoke the girl, who was already squirming under her protective . . . protection and, at the same time, gaining a new respect for her pale pal who had to don this gunk on a much more frequent basis, “might as well head out to the ol’ corral and rustle us up a doggie or two.”



“Don’t mind her,” snorted Kimbo. “It’s that Clint Eastwood documentary she watched last night. But I do agree that there’s no time like the present.”

“C’mon, punk,” snarled the girl. “Make my day.”

Tethys, lost, turned to the Vamp, hoping one of this trio actually made sense.

“Lettuce leaf,” he shrugged.

OK — enough already. And let’s skip that shuttle thing, just for once.

\* \* \*

The good news is that there was no problem picking out the fanatics (those white robes’ll give you away every time). The bad news, and you knew it was coming, was that there were a hell of a lot of fanatics. Most of the people were robbed and the rest didn’t look very happy.

“Yipes,” commented the girl.

“My sentiments exactly,” agreed Tethys who, you must realize, had memories of a world completely different from this.

“Take me to your leader,” suggested Kimbo, already missing his axe, which he’d had to leave behind seeing as a four-foot weapon usually attracts some attention.

“Follow me,” Tethys nodded. Did I mention he looks just like Rupert Graves? Probably — but I just can’t stress enough how cute this guy is. “We’re heading for that building.” He

pointed to a distant spire. “Nobody’s allowed within 100 feet of the walls. There are guards every ten yards or so and they’re armed with disintegration rays with a range of 175 feet. There are hypersensitive mines throughout the 100 foot area. Every inch is floodlighted at night.”

“Anything else?” snorted the girl.

“No,” replied Tethys, realizing more and more each second that his world was perhaps a tad *too* literal. “Isn’t that enough?”

“*Somebody’s* gotta go in and out of that place,” commented Kimbo. “What about the servants?”

“They’re all permanently stationed there. They get replacements from the children. The servant of the Nephilim are totally cut off from the outside world. They’re a completely self-sufficient community.”

“This is getting better and better all the time,” spoke the Vamp under his breath. “How about specialists — doctors, electricians — you know.”

“They keep a fully manned staff trained for any sort of emergency,” replied Tethys.

“Of course,” said the fallen angel. “How stupid of me.”

Suddenly, the girl stopped fast and, slapping her hand to her forehead, exclaimed, “I could’ve had a V-8!” She continued in less than a second since she *knew* she’d have to explain, since she had finally begun to realize that other folks weren’t exactly on her wavelength. “We’ve all seen enough bad movies to know that these sorts always receive offerings.”

The trio looked to Tethys to confirm, which, surprisingly enough, he did. “They demand ten young men and women at each new moon,” he elaborated. “They’re sacrificed to the dragon.”

“And the people put up with this?!” snorted the Vamp.

“It only just started,” explained Tethys as he continued to lead them on through the milling throng (ha!). “And by the time it *did* start, there were so many converts that people were begging to die. It’s a great honour.”

“I have an idea,” began the girl (who always has a plan eventually), “but it means doing something terrible to innocent people.”

“Let’s do it,” laughed Kimbo without a moment’s hesitation.

Any idiot can see where I’m heading with this, so I won’t go into detail. Suffice it to say that four of the ten sacrifices (if it isn’t a word, it is now) found themselves painfully bound and gagged and stuffed in such a remote corner that they’d probably die of starvation before anyone found them (“Isn’t this a little cruel?” wondered Tethys. “Don’t look at me,” shrugged Kimbo. “Hey — they *wanted* to die,” added the girl.), while our quartet donned their red robes. It didn’t matter who the sacrifices were so long as they were young and attractive and silent. The first two of these were a cinch, but that silence thing is always a toughie. But the girl muddled through for a higher cause. Either that or because the Vamp kept elbowing her in the ribs. Take your pick. In no time at all, it being a new moon just to keep things rolling (rolling, rolling), they were swept up in a fury of purification and hair-removal ’til they were smooth as a stone and twice as clean. The procession into the citadel was strangely uneventful and quiet — probably

because deep down inside the people knew darned well they were sending the fruit of their loins to a horrible death (how could they *not* know). The white walls surrounding the fortress were one-hundred feet tall (forgot to mention that) and very impressive. They didn’t see the gates ’til they began to open, them being seamless and all, but when they *did* open they were awfully hard to miss. Beyond was a white hall lighted all over, though there weren’t any visible lights, and they were led into an antechamber (love that word) to wait.

“This could give me a headache really quick,” whispered the girl.

Four pairs of eyes stared at her — count ’em — *four*:

“Well, it’s about time we did something anyways,” spoke Kimbo as he stood and removed his robe to reveal an outfit just like Miles O’Keefe wore in those *awful* barbarian flicks, complete with furry boots.

His bestest buds followed suit and Tethys, too, once he’d been convinced that they’d be as easily spotted in those blood red rags as their normal clothes, anyways.

“I can’t help but think that we got into this place much too easily,” commented the Vamp as he smoothed the sea green fur of his jumper (not a real fur coat, that’s cruel), at the same time realizing how striking the color looked next to his pale, pale skin and shiny black hair. “I mean, considering all those colorful obstacles they invented to prevent this sort of thing.”

“I must agree,” agreed Tethys. “We’ll have to watch our step. Behind all these mindless drones are the people who put all this into motion. Hey,” he continued as the girl stared with glazed eyes. “Did you hear what I just said?”

“What?” she said with a jerk. “Something about being careful? You’re just too cute to really *listen* to.”

He sighed, shaking his head, not knowing whether he’d just been complimented or insulted.

“Oh, for Christ’s sake, people!” came a voice from under a red hood. The figure whipped off its covering to reveal a stark, lean frame, distinctly feminine. Picture if you will an *Aeon Flux*-esque woman with red, red hair and blue, blue eyes, wearing a pink skintight strapless evening gown with matching satin gloves.

“Nice, dress,” laughed Kimbo.

“I wouldn’t talk,” she retorted with a laugh of her own as she eyed him up and down. “What planet did *you* come from?”

“I’ll have you know that this is a designer original.” He smiled.

“Who are you?” interrupted Tethys. Good thing he’s around, eh? I mean, we need *someone* to get to the point.

She pulled out an ID badge from . . . *somewhere* and flashed it at them. “Cosmic Kitten, PI.”

“On an individual basis, or are you the tool of a large corporation?” put in the Vampire.

“Very funny,” she sneered. “Now, you all wanna tell me what you’re doing here?”

“Not so fast, little lady,” growled the girl, who wasn’t about to let any female in *pink* intimidate her. “I’d rather we discuss *your* presence here first.”

“I was hired by the high council of Alcor to discover why they’d lost contact with the ruling clan of Bok.” Luckily enough, she wasn’t one to hold back.

“Alcor is our chief ally and our nearest neighbor planet,” explained Tethys.

“The situation with planetoid 64 Cygni A has escalated. My employers had counted on Bok for support and were concerned when they lost contact,” continued Cosmic Kitten.

“Well,” sighed the girl, letting her bristles down since this femme fatale appeared to be on their side. “That’s a different matter.” She paused for a moment. “I don’t suppose you’d like to help us put an end to all this Nephilim nonsense.”

“I’m being paid to get to the bottom of this whole Bok affair,” responded CK, “and I won’t rest until I get the job done.” She paused dramatically. “I ride for the brand.”

“Of *course* you do,” smiled the Vamp.

And so we leave our heroes right smack dab in the middle of the lion’s den. Just for the hell of it.

TO BE CONTINUED •

# The Boulevard of Broken Dreams

by Dan Perry

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Jason Kolta drove away, his head pounding, the last of the shouts echoing in his head.

“Damn it,” he said, pounding the dashboard. This caused the CD player to skip, which only made him more mad. The car accelerated, and Jason began to calm a bit. He sped through stoplights, stop signs, and all other manner of street sign until he reached the Downtown. The car still careened wildly, but it seemed a bit more under control now.

“Somewhere around here there’s got to be a bar,” he said over the rising sound of the Rolling Stones pouring out of his substandard speakers.

He drove slowly now, his eyes searching the buildings along the road for the telltale neon glow of an open bar. He really, really needed a drink right now. It wasn’t supposed to happen like that, he told himself. Not like that at all. It all went so smooth, in his head; real life, however, was messy. Events spiraled out of control, things lost shape and meaning, and an innocent conversation can take on a malignant life of its own.

I hope you rot in Hell, were the words he heard last. Not a shout, not even a scream, just a whisper that came to him as if it was spoken in his ear.

What the hell did that mean?

More pressing concerns weighed on his mind, however, as he caught a faint flicker out of the corner of his eye. It was down a roadway he had just passed, so he would have to turn

around. He checked behind his car for lights, saw none, and whipped a quick illegal U-turn.

He found the road again, and made the left to get on it. He had never noticed it before, he realized, as unfamiliar shapes unfolded before him. Well, that happens, sometimes, you find a road you’ve never been on before and you drive down it. That’s how you find new stuff.

Jason decided to drive down it a while, to see where it lead.

\* \* \*

She opened the door, and he entered, smelling of cheap whiskey and stale cigarettes.

“Can I help you?” She asked, in her innocent little voice, and he turned round on her and started to speak.

\* \* \*

After a few blocks, the road began to widen, until it was full-blown four-lane boulevard. Each side was lined with people, out to do whatever it was they had to do. There were prostitutes of every imaginable age, weight, and color, and they plied their trade with fervor. Street hustlers, Three-Card-Monty dealers, pickpockets, thugs, and men who had the look of death about them strode everywhere. Men in business suits flocked to other men, younger men, who had eyes wide and full of fear.

There were cops at every conceivable point, but none of them were too interested in doing anything but laughing as others were taken down by the thugs, or went off with the prostitutes. The street seemed wet, as though it had rained recently, and Jason knew that it hadn't rained for days. Maybe a water main blew or something, he told himself, but it still struck him as odd.

He pulled up next to a man who was stopped at a stoplight, and slowed down. The man had his hazard lights on, and no cops were coming to help him. He stood in front of the car, peering into the depths of his raised hood, shaking his head frantically. Jason rolled down the window to offer help.

"Hey, buddy, you need anything?"

The man appeared not to notice. Jason beeped his horn. The man looked up, startled, and then stared right at Jason.

"What?"

Jason was puzzled. He could understand a little anger due to the man's car being broke down, but this was rude.

"I sad, can I get you some help?"

The man walked over. He reached Jason's car and offered his hand. Jason took it, and the apology that was offered with it.

"Sorry. The car just died, you know? One minute I'm driving along, the next, bam! Nothing," he said, shaking his head again.

"Has it been acting up lately?" Jason asked, thinking he might be able to help.

"Nope. In fact, I just installed a little part that should helped it run better. A carb that gets a thousand miles to the gallon," he said, smiling as he did so. The man had a round, honest face, and eyes that seemed to be smiling all the time. Jason found himself liking him instantly.

Jason laughed.

"No, I mean it. I was testing it for the last two weeks. It worked fine until I drove it. I saw this road, I'd never been down it, and then it died, here at the light." His eyes were all honesty, and Jason slowly found himself believing it.

"You mean that car has an engine-"

Just then one of the cops came strolling over. "Everything alright here?" He asked the man with the dead car.

"Yeah, Officer, everything's fine-" Jason began when the officer shot him a glare that said shut up, and now.

"I asked him. You keep your mouth shut, mister," the cop said. His voice had an edge to it.

Jason tried again. The man just stood there, frozen.

"It's nothing, really, he just needs his car towed, that's all," and when the last word escaped his lips the cop leaned down, looked in the car, and ordered Jason out.

"What?" He asked, incredulous.

"Get out of the car, asshole," he commanded. The man tried to intervene.

“Hey, he only tried to help, he didn’t do anything,” he said. The his lower lip exploded with pain, and he fell to the ground.

It seemed to Jason that the cop’s arm never moved, the man just fell in pain for no reason. When the cop delivered a boot to the man’s temple, however, Jason hopped out of his car. He had gotten one leg out and on the street when the cop kicked the door back in on Jason’s shin, sending a wave of agony up his leg right into his spine. Jason howled with pain.

“NOW GET OUT OF THE CAR, ASSHOLE!” The cop bellowed, and reached for the handle. Jason barely managed to get the lock on in time. A few of the other policemen were rushing over now, drawn by the first cop’s yells and shouts. Jason slid over to the passenger seat and rolled one window down halfway.

“Oh, god, he just attacked me, for no reason,” he was babbling, and one of the cops shoved an arm in the car and pulled his hair until Jason’s face was level with the opening.

“You heard him! Get out here!” The cop was screaming. On the other side of the street, the others were working over the man and his car, and laughing hysterically. Jason stomped on the gas pedal, reached for the gear shift, and shoved it in reverse, dragging the cop holding him back.



The cop let go and Jason straightened up in his seat. The officer was rolling in the street, still yelling at Jason to stop. Several others were now running after his car, chasing until Jason put the car in drive and headed for them. They broke off, and he flew down the road, checking the rear view for cops every few seconds until he was sure he wasn’t being followed. He turned down the first street he saw, and then mad another turn. He drove on and on, until he noticed the street he was on.

It was the same damn street, no matter how he turned.

\* \* \*

“Oh, yes, you can help me...” He said, his breath worse than the stench of his body.

“You cane help me just fine,” he went on, and advanced on her. The sound of the slap he then delivered could, and was, heard outside.

She screamed, then, and fell to the floor. The man unzipped his pants, and let them drop around his ankles.

“Get ready.”

\* \* \*

Jason was a little freaked after two hours of solid driving. He could not get off the street. There was no way.

He did the only thing he thought of doing.

He parked the car.



Down the street, at The Diner, the Regulars were just starting to come in. Alice looked at them all warmly, and smiled to a few as they meandered in.

One angry young man came in and sat by himself at the bar. Alice came over to him and took out her order book.

“Hiya, Jimmy,” she said pleasantly, “ what’ll it be tonight?”

He looked at her, eyes sullen and withdrawn, and ordered.

\* \* \*

Jason stepped up to the first person he saw and stopped him by grabbing the man’s shoulders.

It turned out to be a kid, probably no more than seventeen, with hollow eyes and a pale complexion. He looked at Jason and smiled a dark little smile with no hint of humor in it. Moonlight glinted off of perfect teeth, giving the impression that they were tinted blue in some way.

“What’s your pleasure?” He asked, and Jason immediately let go. The kid knew what he was asking, and so did Jason. This was wrong. Jason could feel that.

“Who are you? Where are we?” He asked the kid.

In response, he got the same little smile, and a harsh sound that could have been laughter if it wasn’t matched with the smile.

“You’ll find out,” he said, and walked away.

“We all do, sooner or later.”

Jason shook his head and walked on, looking for someone else to talk to. He came across a little girl, who sat on a stoop playing with a ball. She bounced it up and down, never looking up to see where it went. She just believed that it would land in her hands each time, and it did.

Jason crouched down in front of her.

“Hello?” He ventured. Still she did not look up.

“Little girl? Can you tell me where we are?”

She shook her head. She threw the ball again, and this time Jason caught it. She looked up then, and her eyes were old, so very old. It shook Jason a little to look into them.

“I am my parent’s hope for the future. Daddy’s idea of the future is to tie me to the bed. Mommy’s is to take pictures,” she said. She spoke calmly, without emotion. Jason handed back the ball, his mouth suddenly dry.

“No, don’t,” he croaked.

“And then Daddy climbs on top,” she continued, and Jason ran away. The little girl with the empty voice continued on, oblivious to the loss of her audience.

\* \* \*

The woman screamed for what seemed like hours, as the man had his way. He hurt her, in little ways and big ones, as he entered and thrust. He bit her lip, he scratched her arms, he slapped her again when she fought back.

She grabbed for something, anything, to use against him, and found a glass on the coffee table. She picked it up, almost dropping it in her fear, and smashed it against his head. Blood burst from split skin, glass rained on the floor, and the man clutched his head, hair puffing out between his fingers.

“Oh, fuck!” He said, rolling off of her.

\* \* \*

A man in a suit was busy talking to another man when Jason approached. The man in the suit was patiently explaining something to the other, who was in bandages. The man in bandages had only one arm.

“Yes, I’m sure you think that, sir,” said the Suit, and Jason crept up slowly, so as not to disturb them.

“But they cut off my fucking arm!” Said Bandages, and waved his stump for good measure.

“They were perfectly within their rights, I assure you,” said the Suit. He was busy digging in his satchel for something. Bandages was getting visibly upset, and creeping ever closer to the Suit.

The Suit finally found what he was looking for, and produced it. It was a silver whistle, and he blew on it quickly. Suddenly, out of nowhere, three cops appeared and beat the shit out of the one-armed man. He screamed quite loudly when they grabbed his stump. Jason walked past quickly, not looking anyone in the eye.

Still, the Suit shot him a quick wink as he went past. Jason shuddered. He hated lawyers.

A few blocks later, Jason saw a man strolling along, one hand being held by a man who resembled Richard Nixon. The other hand was busy holding the back of his head. Blood trickled down the hand and stained the cuff of the man’s suit.

He introduced himself as Jack.

Jason walked on, and saw more than he ever bargained for. A house, blue paint, white trim, an old, unhappy dog in the yard. The picket fence could have been white once, but it had fallen into disrepair, like the rest of the house. The whole thing was slightly rotten, and sinking on the left side. The dog barked and snarled at Jason as he passed. Newspapers swirled around his feet, and the headlines were all the same: LIES! GET YOUR PREPAID LIES HERE! A man stood on a soapbox, shouting out ideals, while another man stuffed money in his pockets. The door to a church opened, and a young boy ran out, zipping up his pants. A priest followed seconds later, smiling a devilish little smile, and winked.

“Oh, Christ,” he asked, “where am I?”

\* \* \*

The man crept toward her as she leaned against the windowsill, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Why?” She asked, over and over. The man got closer, and struck her full force in the face. She fell, but got a glance out the window as she did so.

“Help!” She screamed as the man attacked her again.

Jason saw the lights of the Diner before he saw the actual place. He was emerging from an alley (he had long ago given up all hope of getting away from this street) and he stepped around to the front of the building. It was a plain, gray-brick squat affair, no ornamentation beyond a faded green awning. The windows were large and open, light poured out into the street from them, sending strange shadows dancing on the pavement. The windows were filthy, and needed a severe cleaning.

He looked up at it, and saw that the only sign read "Diner". He sighed, and went inside. A bell jangled behind him, several people inside looked up at this. They all stared at him, mouths open.

"We got a new one," someone said, and there was general chorus of laughter. Jason walked stiffly up to the bar. He sat down, opened a menu, and looked for the address. He was not surprised that there wasn't one. The waitress walked over and took a pen from behind her ear.

"What'll it be?" She asked.

Jason looked around. He sat there, stunned, as he recognized some of the faces. The blond in the corner, for example. A face that could launch a thousand ships, something spoke in the back of his mind. A body that united a generation of men in lust.

"That's Mari-"

"Yeah, that's Mary."

The angry young man seated at the counter looked at Jason once, grunted, and looked away.

"And James D-"

"Leave them alone, they've suffered enough," said the waitress. "Especially Jimmy."

"But, they're all dead!" Jason said. He was standing now, and several people were looking at him. He looked back at the waitress, who pulled on his shirt and made him sit back down.

"No, they're not. Not here."

"Where is here? Where the Hell am I?"

She smiled at him. "You're on the Boulevard of Broken Dreams."

He shook his head. She nodded back slowly.

"No way, I'm not important like them... I've never mattered to anyone..."

"Sure you did, or you wouldn't be here. There must have been someone who needed you, or believed in you enough that when you disappointed them you came here."

Jason slowly shook his head. "Oh, no..." He repeated to himself, over and over. "Oh, God, no."

"So," the waitress said, "whose broken dream are you?"

The woman fell to the floor, crying anew, as she remembered the face of the man outside her window. The grunting above her continued, until, when she failed to

respond properly, the man crushed her throat with his huge hands.

“I hope you rot in Hell,” the woman whispered, as the last of her breath escaped her lips. •

Outside, Jason Kolta watched it all, and then ran.



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# Conqueror, Chronicles of the Realm

by Joe T. McCormack

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Book 1, serialization 2

## CHAPTER SIX

Sergeant Quentin whipped out his compass and shot another azimuth due north, according to Lord Arackas. But his mind wandered. It just didn't seem real. Angela. Elves. The Realm. It didn't seem real at all. The more he thought about it, the more he thought they were in a fantasy world. Not surprisingly, the only thing he could relate to his experience in the Realm was the D&D games he'd played. It was tough for him to accept that a game created by a few people was actually a real, breathing world. Sergeant Quentin smirked to himself and wondered if the D&D creators had ever been to the Realm.

"Where do you think we are?" Sergeant Quentin asked as they traveled north.

"I don't know." Gladstad said thoughtfully. "Maybe we were drawn here by someone who needs us - summoned."

"No shit." Sergeant Quentin grunted as he stuffed the compass away in a pocket. "But why? We don't have any weapons. No magic. I don't know about you, but I'm no wizard."

Gladstad sighed deeply. "Maybe because we're outsiders."

"Outsiders." Sergeant Quentin mumbled in reply.

Crash!

The sudden sound of trees splintering and breaking sent Sergeant Quentin whirling.

Crash!

"What was that?" Gladstad asked weakly. He was not ready to confront whatever made all that noise.

"Ha, ha, ha! Food!" A deep, thunderous voice roared out from the forest. Two muscular giants burst through the trees, each over twelve feet tall. A third form was behind them, somewhat shorter and younger in appearance. The younger giant was learning to hunt from its elders.

These strong, fearless giants roamed the hills and forests surrounding their close knit tribe of a hundred, searching for food and game. The giants rarely attacked other tribes unless provoked or motivated by hunger. But when they could not find food, they would overrun other tribes with their sheer numbers. The giants were a primitive and ignorant race when it came to herding and feeding animals to provide a constant food supply. Most of the Realm believed that the giants were no better than wild animals.

The humans and other races did not view the giants as a threat until ten years ago. Some fluke of nature doubled the giant's reproductive capacity and the tribe experienced a massive population spurt. To support this growth, the giants ravaged farms and villages that for livestock. They rarely

killed humans or elves. But because of those few fatal incidents, the humans felt invaded by the intimidating giants. Fearing for their children's safety, the humans banded together into an army of over one thousand soldiers. In small, costly skirmishes, the soldiers cut the giant population in half. But without reinforcements, the year long war whittled the small army down to just over one hundred soldiers. The soldiers' survival was due to one barbarian's finely honed skills as a soldier and mercenary. His name was Baracuss.

The giants disappeared. And with time, Baracuss disappeared as well.

That is, until now.

"What are those? Cavemen?!" Gladstad shot out fearfully. He retreated a few steps at the sight of the hulking forms.

\* \* \*

"Shit! I don't know!" Sergeant Quentin returned as the giant forms, clad in black furs and wielding clubs, approached slowly. One of them effortlessly pushed over a small tree almost equal in height to himself. The tree fell to the ground with a dull thud, exposed roots sending dirt flying through the air.

"Little man. Good food!" The giant roared and smiled, displaying a large mouth of rotted and missing teeth.

"Come on! Let's get out of here!" Sergeant Quentin shouted as he ran north. Gladstad wasn't far behind him.

"Hey!" One of the giants bellowed.

Boom! Boom!



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“They’re throwing things!” Sergeant Quentin exclaimed between breaths. He felt the earth shake under his feet. The giants heaved small boulders through the air, smashing into trees around Sergeant Quentin and Gladstad as they fled.

Sharp pain shot through Sergeant Quentin’s left shoulder and he was sent reeling to the ground, off balance from a small boulder that just nicked him. Muttering under his breath and thankful the boulder hadn’t smashed his head like a melon, he scrambled to his feet and chased after Gladstad.

“Wait for me!” Sergeant Quentin called. Gladstad was not slowing down.

They reached a well traveled road in the forest that stretched away to the left and right. An old man rode down the road in a mule drawn cart, staring at the strangely clad humans as he passed. Sergeant Quentin ran east along the road and hoped the giants would find the old man and give up the hunt. The old man would die sooner or later anyway.

Two muscular forms on horseback approached from the east. “Hey you!” Sergeant Quentin shouted. “Hey! Can you give us a ride?”

“If there’s gold in it.” A barbarian with long, dark hair under a steel helmet pulled back on the reins with one of his large, sinewy arms. He wore leather jerkins and boots that had seen the edge of many swords. His black, deep set eyes portrayed a battle hardness, a wild fury that could surge to the surface with no warning. His companion had a similar look, but wore no helmet.

“I don’t have gold.” Sergeant Quentin confessed.

“Well then, I guess your legs will carry you.” The barbarian spurred his horse forward.

“Wait! There are cavemen after us!” Gladstad yelled.

The barbarian darted his dark eyes over Gladstad with a frown.

“I think he means there’s a small pack of giants after us.” Sergeant Quentin corrected.

The barbarian stopped his horse and looked at them suspiciously. “That’s impossible. The hill giants haven’t roamed these forests for years.”

“But they’re ... “ Gladstad began, but he was cut off by a man’s shriek and the sound of splintering wood. A mule bellowed in fright and pain as deep laughter drifted past them.

“Come on! Get on!” The barbarian patted the back of his horse. Sergeant Quentin and Gladstad quickly mounted the two horses. The riders urged their horses in the direction of the screams.

“Where are you going?!” Sergeant Quentin demanded. But he already knew.

“To kill a few giants! Aye, even giants have gold pieces!”

“Oh shit. We’re going to die.” Gladstad mumbled weakly.

The barbarian wielded a large, double-edged battleaxe effortlessly as his other hand held the reins. He grasped the leather wrapped shaft with pleasure, enjoying the deadly severing power of the weapon. Bloodlust filled the barbarian’s

soul and mighty sinews as he urged his horse into a full gallop. His eyes were ablaze with the desire to kill, to spill the blood of whatever foe met his battleaxe.

“Kill ‘em!” Sergeant Quentin shouted, firmly gripping his machete. There was only one thing that mattered now. Kill or be killed.

\* \* \*

Gladstad clumsily held his single-edged axe in one hand. He kept thinking about dying in a strange land. Now he wasn't sure that he'd live. He never wanted to die.

The giants were ripping the mule apart with their hands and were taken by surprise as the barbarians.

“Aahrg!” The helmed barbarian cried, burying his heavy battleaxe into the skull of a giant. The second giant lurched forward and clamped onto the horse's head, snapping its neck. The horse's legs gave out from under it and the giant reached for the barbarian.

But the barbarian was quicker. He swung himself from the saddle, rolled to the ground, and gained his feet. Sergeant Quentin tumbled off the back of the dead horse, falling flat on his back with the wind knocked out of him.

The other barbarian galloped directly at the giant, who was throwing the dead horse violently to the ground. As the barbarian raised his battleaxe, Gladstad closed his eyes and clenched his teeth. The barbarian swung his battleaxe and the giant raised his bulky arm. The battleaxe wedged itself into his forearm instead of his skull. Sharp pain nagged forcefully at the giant's simple mind but he grasped the barbarian by the neck and threw him fifty meters into the bushes.

Gladstad peeled his eyes open and shrieked as the horse galloped past the giant without the barbarian to control it. Tossing his axe to the ground, Gladstad pulled himself onto the worn leather saddle and grabbed the reins. He pulled back and slowed the horse to a walk.

The helmed barbarian sprang at the towering giant and ripped the battleaxe from his forearm. With a fluid motion, he swung the battleaxe and buried it in the giant's meaty chest. The giant sank to his knees, eyes wide with surprise and pain. He weakly grabbed the battleaxe's shaft with both hands as blood flowed from the fresh wound. The barbarian tried to force the battleaxe deeper into his chest. More blood flowed as the giant forced the battleaxe out and angled its edge toward the barbarian. Straining against the strength of the giant, the barbarian held the battleaxe away from him as sweat rolled off his face. Moment by moment, inch by inch, the cold, razor sharp head of the battleaxe edged towards the struggling barbarian.

Scrambling to his feet, Sergeant Quentin rushed the giant and forced his machete up to its hilt into the giant's side. The hill giant exhaled loudly, sending a mist of blood into the air as he toppled over and lost his grip on the battleaxe. The helmed barbarian eagerly yanked the battleaxe from the giant, then watched Gladstad riding towards them.

“Is it over?” Gladstad asked, fervently trying not to look at the dead bodies.

The other barbarian stumbled out of the bushes, and Sergeant Quentin muttered, “Yeah.”

“Play?” A childish voice called out from behind the remains of the cart.

Cautiously creeping around the cart, the helmed barbarian investigated the source of the voice. “What do we have here? A baby giant!”

“Really?” Gladstad asked as he awkwardly dismounted and strode up to the helmed barbarian.

Wiping his bloodied machete on the black fur of the giant, Sergeant Quentin asked, “So what do you do with a baby giant?”

“It could be sold for gold. Aye, much gold! Enough for a horse, wenches and ale!” The barbarian said. The other barbarian smiled in agreement.

“Will it harm us?” Gladstad asked wearily.

“No. Baby giants are really quite dumb. It should be no trouble. If it is, we just kill it.” The barbarian replied, thumbing the end of his battleaxe.

\* \* \*

“Play?” The baby giant asked again as it stood up, towering over everyone. Its seven foot tall frame wandered over to Gladstad, long brown hair flowing behind it.

“No play.” Gladstad blurted out nervously, feeling extremely small next to the baby giant.

“No play?” The baby giant asked then smiled. “But play is fun!”

Gladstad looked to Sergeant Quentin for help, but he just said, “I guess he wants to play with you.”

“No play. Play later.” Gladstad said to the baby giant, hoping it would understand.

“Oh.” The baby giant whispered, lowering its head.

The helmed barbarian smiled as he wiped his battleaxe clean. “Well, we must be going if we want to safely reach the castle before nightfall. Who knows what will come out of the forest then.”

“Mind if we come along?” Sergeant Quentin asked, realizing that traveling with these seasoned barbarians could be the only way to survive in the forest.

The helmed barbarian slipped the battleaxe through a loop on his leather belt and said, “I guess not. Besides, the giant seems to like your friend.”

“Yeah, well Gladstad seems to have that kind of luck. Oh, I’m Sergeant Quentin.”



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“A soldier, eh?” The barbarian groped for his battleaxe. He didn’t like soldiers, especially in combat. He’d come to hate them during the war against the hill giants. He hadn’t minded soldiers before that. Then ten of them tried to murder him in his sleep. That swiftly changed his attitude towards them.

“Yes. But I’m not from this land.” Sergeant Quentin replied quickly as he noticed the barbarian reaching for his battleaxe.

Staring at Sergeant Quentin, the barbarian lowered his hand and said, “I suppose not. Your clothing is unfamiliar. What brings you here?”

“Visiting a friend.” Sergeant Quentin said. He wanted to say he was brought there by Metsys, but he decided not to. He didn’t know how the barbarian would react to such a name, and didn’t want to find out.

The barbarian didn’t probe further as he respected other people’s privacy, unless it affected him. And in this situation, it didn’t seem to affect him.

Walking along the road east, the helmed barbarian said, “You can call me Baracuss. And that is my friend, Loce. But I think, for your safety, you should use a different name...I’ve done it many times before.”

“Like what?” Sergeant Quentin asked.

“I don’t know. Think of something. That way you won’t forget.” Baracuss replied.

“How about Mohawk?” Sergeant Quentin suggested, referring to his haircut.

“Good. Mohawk.”

## CHAPTER SEVEN

They arrived at the wooden castle gates just as the sun set over the western mountains. Both Gladstad and Mohawk viewed it in awe, staring at the towering sixty foot stone layered walls and the mighty wood and iron reinforced gates. The four soldiers that stood watch outside the gates held long spears and small shields, and were well clad in full link chain mail and steel helms. They stared at the small band’s approach with curiosity and growing suspicion. Defensively, they jumped in front of the barbarians, blocking their entrance to the castle. Peasants inside the castle turned and stared with curiosity.

“What is your business here with that giant?” One of the soldiers demanded, pointing his spear.

Baracuss was not in the mood to answer questions from a soldier, especially one so young and obviously without combat experience. The sale of the giant for the many gold coins within the castle was the only reason he didn’t reach out and punch the soldier.

Smiling wry, Baracuss replied, “To sell him on the slave block.”

“Aye, he should bring a good price to work the mines.” Another soldier muttered.

The mines were deep within the Northern Mountains. The keep and mines themselves were dangerous to be around. Many of the merchants who claimed the land began to dig up the rich mineral deposits such as gold and diamonds with human laborers, but soon met with disaster. The vast areas of

land the merchants bought were not previously explored. Thus they didn't know about the ice giants that dwelled in the mountains. When the ice giants swept down from the high mountains and attacked the merchants, few survived the bloody, ruthless slaughter. Those that did never went back. The merchants began to purchase barbarian slaves and captured hill giants. Some they trained for combat, others worked the mines. But the ice giants were still a formidable threat. Unless hundreds of slaves and a dozen hill giants were sent to the mines every year, the merchants would lose the mines to them.

Such a young hill giant could be trained as an excellent combatant against the ice giants.

The soldier looked at the party closely. He didn't recognize the clothes that Mohawk or Gladstad wore as any he'd seen in the Realm. But they didn't appear threatening, which eased his mind somewhat. Reluctantly, he lowered his spear and said, "Pass, but keep your beast under control."

Nodding impatiently, Baracuss led them through the gates.

The cobblestone streets were filled with peasants buying, selling and hauling various goods and livestock. The smell of burning torches lingered in the air as the band walked down the narrow street. A few people argued over the price of chickens, then paused to gaze fearfully at the baby giant.

As they passed a tavern, the two barbarians eagerly eyed the scantily clad wenches who stood outside. Yes, they would be fine company later.

"Is the slave block open now?" Mohawk inquired, gazing at smooth legs that the wenches bared for him openly.

"No, but the giant must sleep somewhere." Baracuss replied.

"No better place than the stables." Loce added.

They approached the horse stables. A bald headed man with a large, round belly came out, adjusting his pants beneath his overlapping waist.

"Hey friends, what can I do for 'ya?" He asked with a smile.

"Like to buy a horse. A good horse, mind you." Baracuss said.

"Of course. Yes, I have one just for you." The man said. "Come. Follow me."

Loce dismounted and they followed the man into the stables.

"Play?" The baby giant asked, seeing the horses. They would be much fun to play with.

"No!" Gladstad shot out before he toned himself down, "Play later."

Baracuss looked over a muscular horse with a shiny black coat. "How much?"

The man paused for a moment, then said, "Fifty gold."

Baracuss, openly offended by such an offer, glared at the man. "What?! That is outrageous! I'll pay you thirty five gold for the horse. And I'll give you another four gold to lodge my friend's giant for the night."

“Well, lodging might be four gold for a night...if he don’t cause any problems.” The man said, adding up the numbers in his head. “Okay, forty three gold and I’ll hold your friend’s horse here as well.”

Baracuss had forgotten Loce’s horse. Baracuss left the man in the stables with a heaping handful of gold.

“Stay here.” Gladstad told the baby giant as they left.

“Hungry.” The baby giant beckoned.

“Don’t worry. I’ll be back.” Gladstad said. He followed Mohawk into the tavern.

But the tankards of ale that passed between his lips made him forget and he passed out for the night.

\* \* \*

Gladstad rubbed his throbbing temples as he sat at the table with Mohawk and the barbarians. After all that drinking, he didn’t remember anything about last night. Perhaps it was for the best that he didn’t remember climbing on wooden tables and dancing as he yelled and scared the wenches with his wild looks. But he did have an exciting time that many in the tavern would remember for some time to come.

Mohawk smiled inwardly at Gladstad. He didn’t know Gladstad was such a partier. But then, many people were like that.

“Man, what a good night!” Baracuss declared, raising a tankard full of ale. He vividly remembered the three wenches that had to dedicate most of their evening to his satisfaction. Loce and Mohawk also raised their tankards in remembrance

of the wenches and drank deeply. Gladstad merely rubbed his head.

“Come on now! Haven’t you ever had a hangover before?” Mohawk laughed.

“Yeah.” Gladstad lied quietly. He’d had a few beers before, but never so much.

“We’re going to be needing more gold soon.” Baracuss said, patting his purse on the table. Only ten gold coins remained.

“Well, how about selling the giant today?” Mohawk asked.

“Aye, that would bring some gold. But the giant can wait.” Baracuss confessed.

“See that merchant over there?” Baracuss pointed to a silk robed man with large, jeweled rings on fingers.

“Yeah.” Mohawk said, turning around in his chair to see the man.

“He’s a very powerful trader. I heard he has a vast amount of gold for anyone who can stop the killings at the eastern port.” Baracuss said plainly.

What he didn’t say was that the trader owned the port. And any ships that docked to load or unload cargo had to pay him a fee. The trader’s port was the only way to access the Realm without a trek over mountains and through marshes. His fee was the most inexpensive way to get goods to and from the Realm. And that fee, which added up to one hundred and fifty gold coins per vessel, made it possible to build three sea



bearing ships every year, with enough left to take over other merchant trades beyond the great seas.

“Killings?” Gladstad shuddered.

“Yes. From what I’ve heard, someone is killing sailors. But the strange thing about it is that the sailors’ wives have never been attacked.”

“Sounds like a female Jack the Ripper or something.” Mohawk commented.

“A what?” Loce asked.

“Oh, a crazy person.” Mohawk said simply, not caring to explain himself.

“How much gold will we get if we kill this person?” Gladstad asked. He wanted some clothing that would protect him from the night’s cold better than his shorts and T-shirt.

“That’s what I’m going to find out.” Baracuss mumbled as he pushed his chair away and strode towards the trader.

Baracuss didn’t wait for an invitation to sit down in front of the trader. “Heard you have a reward out for the killings at the eastern port.”

“That’s right. Three hundred gold coins to whoever can kill that savage murderer. And, of course, bring me proof. You want to try for the reward?” the merchant said, twisting a ring around his finger.

The thought of potting three hundred gold coins made Baracuss smile. “That’s right. And I’ll bring you proof when I

return.” He said coolly, trying not to look too impressed with the reward.

The trader’s hazel eyes looked over the barbarian. “You seem confident. That is good. But I must tell you, others such as yourself have gone to the eastern port and never returned. Tell me barbarian, what makes you different?”

“Eleven years ago I led an army, and I alone killed eighteen hill giants. Besides that, as you said, I am a barbarian.”

The trader glanced at the table where Baracuss’ friends sat. “I’ve heard of that war. It was bloody to say the least. But it’s hard to split the gold four ways...isn’t it?”

“We’re not cut-throats!” Baracuss roared out, slamming his balled fist on the table.

Jumping slightly, the trader said, “Fine! You’ve got a deal, my friend. Ask for Quitities when you return...if you return.”

“Good.” Baracuss grinned He stood up and walked away.

“So what’s the deal?” Mohawk asked eagerly.

“We leave now. I don’t know who we’re looking for, but all we have to do is sit and watch. Then we kill.”

“It’s that simple?” Gladstad asked, somewhat taken aback by the barbarian’s cold strategy.

“Yes. We’ll be the first to collect the reward.” Baracuss declared confidently.

“What makes you so sure?” Mohawk prodded.

Barcuss walked to the tavern door. "Because nobody has lived to come back and collect the reward."



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## CHAPTER EIGHT

Mohawk and Gladstad went, somewhat reluctantly, with the barbarians, though Mohawk was eager to meet with Metsys and find out why they were summoned to the Realm. Mohawk decided that by going to the eastern port, there was a chance he could uncover the reason for his summoning. And perhaps find some type of magical oracle that he could use. Any weapon was better than his machete.

The journey to the eastern port was relatively easy, even doubled up on horseback. But the horses were looking a little ragged towards the end of the week long journey after supporting two bodies instead of one with little food or water. Baracuss had to ration his remaining gold. That, unfortunately, didn't allow for much feed. Incredibly though, the horses made it to the eastern port as if they were kept alive by some unseen force.

"This is it?" Mohawk asked as he looked around.

Not many ships were docked at port, which could hold eight ships at any given time. Only two were in port. Armor clad soldiers with long swords guarded each sailing ship cautiously. Five sailors were visible top side, unloading huge wooden crates with the help of slaves. Mohawk could tell the slaves were muscular, and obviously strong. They were probably barbarians.

They had to be strong to live beyond their teenage years. These slaves were well disciplined, having been taught well by the master's whip. Many of them showed the scars of such disciplining. They would stop working only when the master said, for fear of the whip. They would eat and sleep only when the master said, for fear of the whip. And they would defend their master's life with their own, or suffer a death far worse than they could imagine.

As they came closer, Mohawk could see that all the slaves wore a neck shackle of wrought iron and had just enough ragged cloth to cover their loins. It was a privilege for slaves to wear the ragged cloth, as the slaves who were not obedient had none. Rebellious slaves were usually sent to work and sleep in the pig stables.

"This man killer must be a serious problem around here, huh? I mean, there aren't many men around here. Well, there isn't really anybody here." Gladstad pointed out.

Nearing a tavern, they dismounted as Baracuss waltzed up to a sailor.

"Hey there!" Baracuss called out.

"Yeah?" The old sailor replied while scratching his white haired head. The years of sea life were obvious in his hard, wrinkled face.

"Do you know about the man killings?" Baracuss asked as he followed the old sailor into the tavern, followed closely by Mohawk and the others.

"Do I? Oh yes, quite well." He responded roughly, sitting down at a worn table that had seen the edge of many daggers.

A ravishing woman in a tight fitting black and white long sleeved shirt that parted generously in the front walked over to the table. Her black pants were tucked into long black leather boots that openly displayed her somewhat muscular legs.

"What can I get you?" She asked, tugging at her blond hair with a tantalizing smile.

Baracuss thought, "She is beautiful. But why would someone so beautiful work in a tavern with as little business as this one?"

"An ale." The old sailor said as he gazed upon her soft breasts. In a flash, he remembered all the beautiful wenches he'd been with. Oh, if only he was a little younger.

Baracuss looked at her shapely body and ordered an ale.

Tearing his eyes from her, the old sailor said, "Oh yes, the man killings. From what I've heard, many men, not only sailors, have come to this tavern and they're never seen again. But no bodies have ever been found...I mean, if they were killed. I have come to this tavern on many occasions and no one has killed me. Aye, I can swear to that. I just come here now to look at the pretty women and drink. Years ago, I'd have done more, but I'm not as young as I used to be." The old sailor smiled at Baracuss, thinking of the old days.

The woman placed the tankards on the table and winked at Baracuss as she turned and moved slowly back to the bar. Baracuss' wanton eyes followed her. Pulling over a few wooden chairs from the other tables, Loce, Mohawk, and Gladstad seated themselves.

"Round of ale!" Loce burst out, longing for the taste of ale after the week long trek. Gladstad didn't want to drink himself into oblivion again. His stomach lurched at the thought.

As the night wore on and more ale was consumed, wild stories of conquest and wenching circled the table. Only Gladstad had no stories, and he felt awkward. After a few more tankards he left with a wench, determined to remember this experience.

The old sailor consumed three more tankards, served by a somewhat less attractive woman and clumsily retired to his ship, laughing to himself as he left.

"I don't think the killer is coming tonight." Loce said, realizing that night had fallen outside.

The tavern was filled with other sailors, most with wenches. Baracuss didn't see anyone that looked suspicious, but he really didn't know what to look for. Still, something didn't sit right with him ... something he could not pinpoint.

"Ah, perhaps not." Baracuss sighed uneasily.

Getting up, Loce waved at the blond haired woman who served them before. "Well, I'm going to have a little fun!" Smiling at them, he accompanied the woman into a room. As the door shut behind them, Mohawk noticed the handle of Gladstad's axe propped up against the wall beside the door.

The woman embraced Loce in the torch light and began caressing his muscular neck with her soft, wet lips. He would not have to be aggressive with this wench, unlike some others he'd been with. He embraced her, kissing her smooth neck. But as he continued, it became patchy with hair that he hadn't noticed was there before. And it tasted strange. Before he could pull away to look, she bit into his neck with long, sharp teeth. He vainly struggled to get away, but he was held tightly in place by her six long, hairy arms.

As she drained the warm blood from his body, her eyes turned red with wild hunger. Soon she would have enough blood to lay her eggs. And when her eight legged young hatched, they would in turn feed upon others. Dimly she imagined one day ruling the entire land from the spread of her young.

Loce's eyes widened with terror as he tried to scream for help. But he couldn't. He couldn't even breathe.

"Why is Gladstad's axe over there?" Mohawk asked, once again amazed at Gladstad's forgetfulness. Baracuss glanced

over to the axe, then suddenly jumped up as if he'd seen a ghost.

Wielding his battleaxe and cursing to himself, he said "By the gods! I should have figured it out! Damn her!" Swiftly, he sprang over the table, rushed to the door and forced it open with his bulky shoulder. The door popped and splintered as it was flung inward on its iron hinges. Mohawk sprinted over to the door and drew his machete cautiously. Baracuss exploded into the dark room that was lit by a single torch. Drawn to the left by the faint sounds of sucking, he saw the pale form of his friend Loce. A black spider equal in size to a man stood upright on two legs, its other legs locked around Loce's body.

For a fraction of a second, Baracuss reflected on the many battles he'd been in. He remembered seeing his foes heads drop from their bodies as his heavy battleaxe severed them. He remembered Loce taking a savage blow from a hill giant that had come up behind Baracuss while he battled another. The blow Loce took had rendered him unconscious for over seven days, but it gave Baracuss another chance at life. A chance he wouldn't have had if Loce hadn't been there.

A tremendous surge of rage flowed through his mighty form as he smacked the back of the spider with the flat edge of his battleaxe, making it to stumble forward and lose its grasp of Loce. He friend fell limply to the floor, unmoving. Lifting the battleaxe over his head Baracuss sent it whistling with blinding speed at the spider, eager to cleave it in two. But the black spider had keen reflexes and jumped to the other end of the small room while sending a thick, white cord spinning at Baracuss. Lurching forward and rolling his shoulder, Baracuss dodged the substance as it hit the wall behind him and instantly crystallized into a thick, circular

white film. He swung his battleaxe again at the black spider as he got to his feet, cleaving the lower half of its body and two legs.

Then the spider jumped at Baracuss, its mouth groping for his throat as it latched onto him with its remaining legs. Unable to use his battleaxe, Baracuss dropped it and grasped the spider's jaws, straining to hold it away from his throat. Something slick shot out of the spider's mouth and wrapped tightly around Baracuss' neck. He grabbed the red corded tongue with one hand to rip it from his neck so he could breathe. When the spider's jaws came within an inch of his reddening face, Baracuss grasped the spider's head with both hands again, barely able to keep it away. Within moments his lungs began to burn and the dark room started to spin.

Seeing that the spider had Baracuss firmly in its grasp, Mohawk buried his machete into the black spider's back. It reacted by releasing Baracuss. Mohawk threw the spider to the floor with considerable effort and pushed the machete deeper into its back as Baracuss grabbed his battleaxe and swung it at the struggling spider. He cleanly severed its head with a dull crunching sound and fragments of the spider's exoskeleton flew through the air.

Once the spider stopped moving, Mohawk withdrew his machete, thinking it was dead. Baracuss, not so easily convinced, ripped the torch from the wall and threw it on the body, catching it afire. Mohawk took a few steps back as the fire consumed the sizzling body, his eyes wide with relief. He never knew such a thing existed. Then he looked at Baracuss, who was fingering his throat.

"Is it dead?" Mohawk asked, breathing heavily.

"It's dead now." Baracuss said roughly as he put his battleaxe on his leather belt and went to check on Loce. He found that his friend still breathed, although shallowly. As Baracuss carried Loce out of the dark room, Mohawk noticed a grey mound in the corner. He got a bad feeling in his gut as he approached the mound. But he had to see for himself if his feelings were right.

The mound consisted of a corpse of shriveled flesh that hung loosely around the exposed leg and arm bones. It looked as if everything had been sucked out of it. Reaching over, Mohawk pulled a pair of dog tags from the mound of flesh and bone. Gladstad, 221-04-4431, A Neg, No religious pref. Gripping the dog tags in his hand, Mohawk almost retched. He cursed himself for not being more aware of Gladstad's whereabouts. Leaning against the wall, Mohawk sighed in disbelief as he looked upon the mound that had once been Gladstad.

Indeed, Gladstad had found his dreaded end.

\* \* \*

With Baracuss' help the following day, Mohawk buried Gladstad's remains deep within the forest as they waited for Loce to recover from his wounds. Mohawk started at the fresh grave and clenched the dog tags as he had done with many others that had died on other missions. He couldn't help but feel some hollowness, an emptiness in his consciousness that came from knowing Gladstad had died so horribly ... so grotesquely. He hadn't cared for Gladstad much personally, but he entered this world with him, and now he was gone. Mohawk always tried to keep friendships at a distance. He found it was much easier to cope with death from a distance

after having seen it take many of his friends in combat. That was why he didn't shed any tears. Death was common to him. It almost seemed to be a part of him.

Mohawk stood alone by the grave for the greater portion of the day, realizing that the only contact with his world was gone. He was a stranger in a strange land. Alone.

When Baracuss returned just before sunset with the horses and Loce, Mohawk hoped that no such fate would befall him in this land, where no one would remember him. Mohawk took the reins from Baracuss and swung himself onto the saddle.

"Looks like it's time to leave this place." Baracuss said.

Mohawk smiled as best he could and urged his horse forward, followed by Baracuss and Loce.

## CHAPTER NINE

Quintities was not difficult to find. The trader was well known among the common folk, even if they never dealt with him.

"So where might we find him?" Mohawk inquired as Baracuss joined them.

"At the tavern." Baracuss replied dryly. He should know Quintities would be at the tavern, drinking and wenching anytime he pleased.

"Sounds like a man of my tastes." Loce grinned as they entered the tavern.

"Aye!" Baracuss agreed, winking at one of the wenches that stood by the doorway.

"Quintities," Baracuss announced as he threw the ass end of the black spider on the table, "This was your killer."

Looking at it with apprehension, Quintities replied, "Ah, yes. I should have thought as much. A woman spider. Were their others?"

"No." Baracuss lied, unsure.

"Good, then." Quintities smiled, throwing three leather purses onto the table, "Here's your reward. Spend it well, eh?"

Taking the heavy purses, Baracuss smiled. "Aye, you can bet on that!" He left the tavern, and gave a purse to Mohawk and Loce.

"Hey, I don't know about you, but I'd like to get my hands on some armor and a real sword." Mohawk was feeling incredibly powerless with only the machete.

"Good idea." Loce agreed. The machete Mohawk had was not a weapon he would take into battle.

"Well then, let's go." Baracuss said, patting Mohawk on the shoulder as they strode down the cobblestone street. They proceeded to an armor and weapons shop, where Baracuss demanded to speak with the owner. He didn't like to bargain with young apprentices.

"Yes?" A stocky, muscular man with greying hair walked up to the counter. He was nearly six foot four inches in



height, which forced everyone else to look up to him. Mohawk was amazed by the man's hairy arms, dark with oil and dust. It looked like the man was wearing a fur.

"I'd like to price some armor, chain, and a worthy sword for combat." Baracuss said sternly, not intimidated by the man's towering height.

"Hmm, for whom?" The man asked, looking among them. He inspected Mohawk's clothing curiously.

"My friend, Mohawk." Baracuss said, pointing to Mohawk with his left hand.

"Ah, good. I have just what you need." The blacksmith grinned, showing his yellowish teeth as he turned and pulled some items from behind the counter. With one hand, he lifted up a chest plate and placed it on the counter, then put chain mail on top of it. Baracuss began inspecting it for flaws and the man disappeared through an opening in the wall. He soon re-appeared bearing a long sword, complete with leather sheath. The sheath was plain looking, but Mohawk wasn't interested in fancy.

"This will do fine." Baracuss said evenly, not wanting to sound impressed with the quality of the forged material. That could make the goods more expensive. But he was impressed with the clean strokes applied to each link of the chain mail and the delicate care that was taken to create the smooth, one piece chest plate. He'd seen chest plates made from several pieces of metal. He wore one in battle during his early days as a mercenary, and the plate's joints were severed, caused him some nearly deadly wounds.

Handing the double edged long sword to Mohawk, the blacksmith asked, "What are those clothes you wear? I have never seen such."

Taking the sword, Mohawk thought for a moment and said, "Oh, they are from my land..."

"What are those patterns?" the blacksmith inquired abruptly.

"Camouflage. It's supposed to conceal a person better in a wooded area." Mohawk replied.

"Ah. I see." The man said, wondering if he could place such a pattern in his armor. He could make a substantial amount of gold with such an improvement.

"Well, how much do we owe?" Baracuss asked, ready to bargain if the price was not reasonable.

"Huh?" The man said, snapping out of his thoughts, "Oh, ahh, about forty gold."

Loce raised an eyebrow in surprise. The armor, chain mail and sword would have never been that cheap anywhere else he had traveled. But it didn't look like the blacksmith was really concentrating on the sale. He was preoccupied with some other matter and just wanted to complete it.

The blacksmith was thinking of ways to put patterns on one piece chest plates and other armor. He had, on several occasions, beaten patterns such as eagles into plates for high ranking soldiers. Then he carefully poured gold or pewter into the etch marks to fill the pattern and form a locking bond with the plate. He had to be careful because too much molten gold could heat the plate and cause small holes to form. That resulted in a weaker plate that would not be effective protection in battle. The blacksmith was detailed and patient with his work, never letting any of his creations possess

blemishes. He wondered how he could make the pattern in different colors.

Taking the gold coins from Baracuss, the blacksmith disappeared behind the wall without a word.

“Well, that was good dealing.” Baracuss said as he turned around. Loce helped Mohawk don the chain mail suit which covered his arms and body to just below the loins.

“I would say so!” Loce grunted. He buckled the leather straps behind Mohawk’s back in a criss-cross fashion to hold the dull colored chest plate firmly to his chest.

Baracuss handed the sheathed long sword to Mohawk. “We had better be gone from here before the old man changes his mind.”

Mohawk buckled the leather belt around his waist as they left the shop and trekked down the cobblestone street. He now felt like a warrior, instead of some ill-equipped imposter in a strange land. Mohawk felt confident he had all the tools necessary for an even fight without being mortally wounded in his previously unprotected torso.

“This feels great!” Mohawk said, gripping the leather wrapped hilt of his sword.

“Good. It’s important that one feels truly comfortable with whatever he may wear and wield.” Baracuss commented from experience.

Mohawk decided it was good time to ask about his original quest. “Do you know where I can find a person by the name of Metsys?”

Baracuss stopped and glared at Mohawk. “Yeah, I know. Why do you need to see a blasted wizard?”

Perhaps it was not such a good time after all.

“To help me piece a few things together.” Mohawk said simply.

“Such as?” Baracuss asked irritably. His skin crawled when he thought about wizards or anything magical.

“Never mind.” Mohawk replied, sensing Baracuss’ obvious dislike of Metsys. He was thankful he was able to get armor and a sword before he asked. He might have to put them to use against the barbarian.

“Are you a wizard?” Baracuss whispered, his eyes brewing with silent, deadly rage.

“No!” Mohawk shot out defensively, “But I must see him! He summoned me to this world and got my friend killed! I must know why!”

Frowning, Baracuss pieced the puzzle together, “Is Metsys the ‘friend’ you told me you were coming to see?”

“Yes he is.” Mohawk admitted, trying to remain calm.

Baracuss thought he knew Mohawk well enough to trust him. He didn’t believe he was lying about the matter. And his instincts told him Mohawk was not a wizard. If he was a wizard, Mohawk would have been able to find Metsys without help.

“Very well. Come with me.” Baracuss grunted.

Weaving their way through the streets, they came upon a large, well guarded keep. Mohawk thought it strange to find a keep in the middle of such a populated area, but it made perfect sense to Baracuss. It was typical for wizards to have a strong, highly defensive area in which to practice magic. Wizards often feared those who felt magic was an unnatural practice ... an evil that must be destroyed. They feared barbarians such as Baracuss for that reason. There was also the possibility that hordes of creatures, human or otherwise, would band together to destroy a wizard. No wizard, short of a god, would be able to repel such an attack single handed. Hence, the keep's primary purpose was to weaken such an attack and give the wizard time to escape. This keep had been occupied by eight generations of one family line. Metsys' entire lineage could be tied to this single keep in. He spent most of his life learning magic that his forefathers passed down. He even learned the difficult work of masonry so the keep could be maintained by each generation.

During the great tribulation some two hundred years ago, a creature was brought into the Realm by an evil wizard, Drakas, from another plane of existence. The creature soon became known as the Death Raiden. It ravaged the Realm, killing thousands of elves, giants, barbarians, humans and anything else that came before it. The remnants of the races that survived rallied around this keep and together with Leok, one of Metsys' forefathers, finally destroyed it. The great wall was erected around the keep afterwards to protect them from other evil scourges. But fifty years later, having forgotten about the lurking presence of dark magic beyond the walls, the elves, giants, and barbarians went out again into the forests and re-established their tribes.

A moat surrounded the keep, and soldiers were gathered around the mouth of the drawbridge. Archers lined the top of the keep's stone walls, pacing back and forth. Baracuss

wondered how good a shot they were with a bolt and a moving target.

Crossing the drawbridge, Mohawk said, "This looks like something out of a history book."

"Huh?" Loce grunted, looking for anything living in the depths of the moat that surrounded the keep.

"What is your business here?" A brawny soldier asked as the other soldiers put their leather gloved hands on the hilts of their sheathed long swords.

"My friend here," Baracuss said as he pointed at Mohawk, "Was summoned by Metsys."

The soldiers looked at one another. One said, "He didn't tell us."

"Let them pass." An old, smooth voice rose from behind the soldiers. They parted with no hesitation, revealing a six foot tall man clothed in long purple flowing robes tied at the waist with a leather belt. His shoulder length greyish brown hair moved slightly with a gust of wind that swept over the keep's wall. His black, deep set eyes probed Mohawk.

"Please come." Metsys said as he turned and walked through the small courtyard to a series of wooden steps.

Metsys felt at home here at the keep. He was raised in it and knew every one of its hidden corridors and traps. He could see the magic the very stones radiated. After so many generations of conjured spells, the elemental fabrics of white magic filled the entire keep ... even the earth below it possessed a magical aurora.

For the past fourteen years Metsys had labored to alter the magic into a complex web of protection spells. The keep walls contained the magical ability of immunity to earthquakes, heavy winds, and minor dark magic bombardment. The surrounding moat had the ability to change into a blazing wall of fire to protect the keep from mortal assailants. The ground radiated a powerful global protection spell that would repulse all evil creatures from entering the keep grounds if they managed to pass the first two protections. Anything that assaulted the keep would be weakened magically, giving Metsys an even chance in magical combat ... if not an advantage.

Following Metsys as he ascended the stairs, Baracuss whispered, "I hope he doesn't try anything stupid. It would be too good an excuse to sever his head."

"Why do you hate this guy so much?" Mohawk asked.

Glancing at Mohawk, he said, "Mainly because I believe the nature of magic should not be twisted to some man's purpose. I believe that a man, if he is meant to live, should fight with his sword, where his wits and talent will defeat his enemies."

Loce nodded his head in agreement.

Passing through a pair of large, heavy wooden doors they found themselves in a vast room. Metsys seated himself behind a large wooden desk. Four empty chairs faced him. Mohawk guessed that the fourth chair was for Gladstad, had he lived. Large, finely woven tapestries hung on the walls. Some portrayed the sun and clouds of different patterns and colors. Another showed a dark blue doorway surrounded by red flames. Yet another displayed the threatening image of the

large, muscular black beast known as the Death Raiden. It was an image that attracted Mohawk's curiosity.

"Please, sit down." Metsys motioned with his hands.

"So," Mohawk began, "Why did you summon me here?"

"So you could destroy the dark magic which plagues this land."

"I am not a magician. Surely you would fare better at such a task." Mohawk replied.

"That may be true. But if I were to do so, this land would be powerless to defend itself in the event that I left. The dark magic would simply grow and take over what I am trying to protect." Metsys explained. "If I try to defeat the dark magic, I will have to redirect the magic that protects this land to even stand a chance. If I fail, the Realm would be lost." Metsys folded his arms on the desk. "It's too much of a risk. The Baron knows this, and the only reason he has not come forth is because the same could happen to him."

"A deadlock." Baracuss mumbled.

"Yes."

"Who is this Baron?" Mohawk asked.

Leaning back in his chair, Metsys replied, "A powerful dark magic sorcerer. He goes by the name of Lord Doefloct. He's been able to master the dark magic and slowly take the land around the Realm because he perverted the use of the Staff of Majii. It is a source of raw, untapped magical power that is neither white or dark magic. It was brought here

through the same door as you by a man who called himself a pharaoh ... whatever that means. Nevertheless, the staff's power is derived from your world. Only someone from your world may destroy it with magic. Physically."

Mohawk was amazed that Egyptians had come to the Realm.

"But I am not a magician." Mohawk stressed.

"No, not in one sense of the word. But you possess the magic from your world. Simply by breaking the staff with force, you would render the staff useless." Metsys explained patiently.

"If this Baron is so powerful, how am I supposed to conquer him, much less get close enough to destroy that staff?" Mohawk quickly pointed out.

"In the southern Realm there is a mountain ... Mt. Reach. It is a powerful source of white magic from the world's heart. It contains a sword, a Sword of Dragon Slaying. But it is surrounded by dark magic ... evil dragons. I would try to retrieve the sword, but the land would again be in imminent danger in my absence." Meysts stated.

"What was the purpose of my friend, Gladstad, who you let die?" Mohawk rumbled.

"He was to be your partner. I could not interfere to save his life." Metsys said, half lying. Actually, he only wanted the stronger willed soldier to confront the Baron - not someone who could easily be twisted to the Baron's will.

"So I'm supposed to take out this Baron by myself?" Mohawk raised his arms in disbelief.

Metsys stood and walked to the tapestry of the doorway. "No. Behold, I summon another."

\* \* \*

It was dark as the muscular figure made his way to the satellite van. Sergeant Quentin and Gladstad missed the accountability formation that Colonel Ratcliff ordered and he was sent to investigate. Lightning crossed the clouds above him, illuminating the ground beneath in flashes. But there was no thunder.

"Interesting." He thought as he glanced at the clouds above. He had never seen lightning without the always present thunder, sometimes delayed by distance. The further away the lightning, the longer it took the sound to travel.

But clearly, there was no thunder.

Opening the heavy hatch door, he peered inside. The equipment was operating, apparently on auto, but nobody was inside. Sergeant Quentin's 9mm pistol sat on the desk. He glanced at his watch. It was 2215 hours, not time for a shift change, the only reason a person could be absent from the van and get away with it.

"This is odd." He grunted as he stepped down from the van.

Suddenly, the hair on his entire body stood out as he saw a blinding flash of light. He dimly felt a tugging like many ropes wrapped around him, pulling downward. Passing through an unseen wave of heat, he felt his body collide helplessly against a cold hardness.

Voices echoed in his head, and he strained to open his eyes.

“Blasted magic!” Baracuss spat in disgust, barely holding himself back. He fiercely wanted to smash Metsys’ body with his heavy fists.

“Is he going to live?” Mohawk asked, looking at Mac’s sprawled form on the wooden floor a few feet from the tapestry.

“Yes.” Metsys replied dully.

“What happened?” Mac asked hoarsely as he slowly got to his feet.

“You were summoned.” Mohawk replied.

“Sergeant Quentin? What are you doing here? What am I doing here?” Mac said, confused.

Mohawk pointed at Metsys. “That is the man who brought you here.”

Mac looked upon the wizard with amazement and disbelief.

“Metsys?” Mac whispered.

“Yes. It is I.” The wizard replied.

“Incredible.” Mac said as he looked at the barbarians. “Baracuss, Loce?”

Baracuss nodded his head, wondering how this stranger knew his name.

“You guys have met before?” Mohawk asked, amazed that Mac knew the names of these people he hardly knew himself.

“Uh, not exactly. How did this happen?” Mac said.

“You were summoned.” Metsys said.

“Yes, yes I know. But...” Mac began.

“What do you mean ‘not exactly’?!” Mohawk demanded, getting up. He hated being left in the dark.

“They were part of my campaign. Metsys. Baracuss, Loce. The Baron, dragons...it was all part of my campaign.”

Shaking his head in frustration, Mohawk said, “So you’re saying that I’m playing your fucking campaign in the flesh?!”

“I ... I don’t know! The campaign just popped into y head. It’s not like I had really planned the game out. don’t u

derstand.” Mac confessed. A long silence filled the roo. “Oh fuck. So what now?” Mohawk grumbled. “Well,” Metsys aid as he sat down, “You need to conquer the Baron.”

“Just like that?” Mohawk spat.

“It appears that your friend already knows a great deal about the land. Even about me. He might know more about the Baron’s domain than I do.” Metsys said openly.

Metsys didn’t mention that he was the one that placed all the information about the Realm into Mac’s head. And when he had summoned two people to the Realm, Gladstad turned out to be an unexpected visitor. Mac was the one he planned to summon, along with another.



“True. I know about the Sword of Dragon Slaying, and the evil dragons that guard the entrance to the white magic on Mount Reach. And a death knight.” Mac cited.

“Death knight?” Mohawk asked as he headed for the door.

“Basically an undead knight of reversed honor.” Mac explained briefly.

“Great.” Mohawk stated as he left. “I guess we’ll take the Baron out for doughnuts and coffee, huh?” •