

A Test of Courage

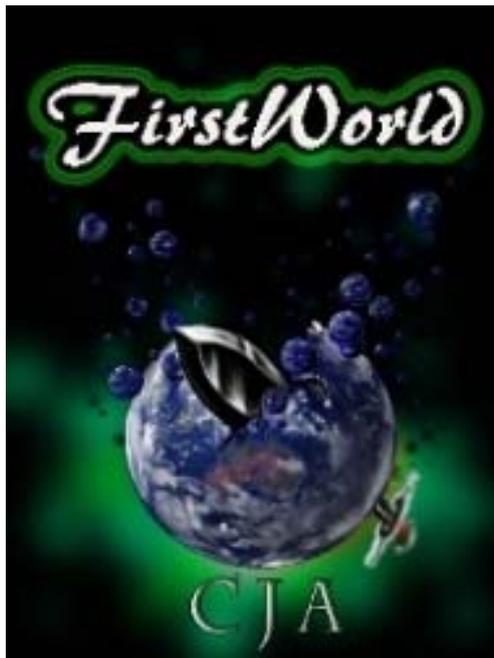
Part 2 of Quest for Knowledge



A First World Novel
Christopher Jackson-Ash



**A Test of Courage
Part Two of
Quest for Knowledge
Being
Volume 1 of the FirstWorld Saga
by
Christopher Jackson-Ash**



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Quest for Knowledge

Volume 1 of the FirstWorld Saga

In other E-books

Acknowledgements

Foreword

BOOK 1 The Search for a Legend

In this E-book

BOOK 2 A Test of Courage

In other E-books

BOOK 3 Back to the Beginning

BOOK 4 The Sundering

Afterword

FirstWorld Time Line

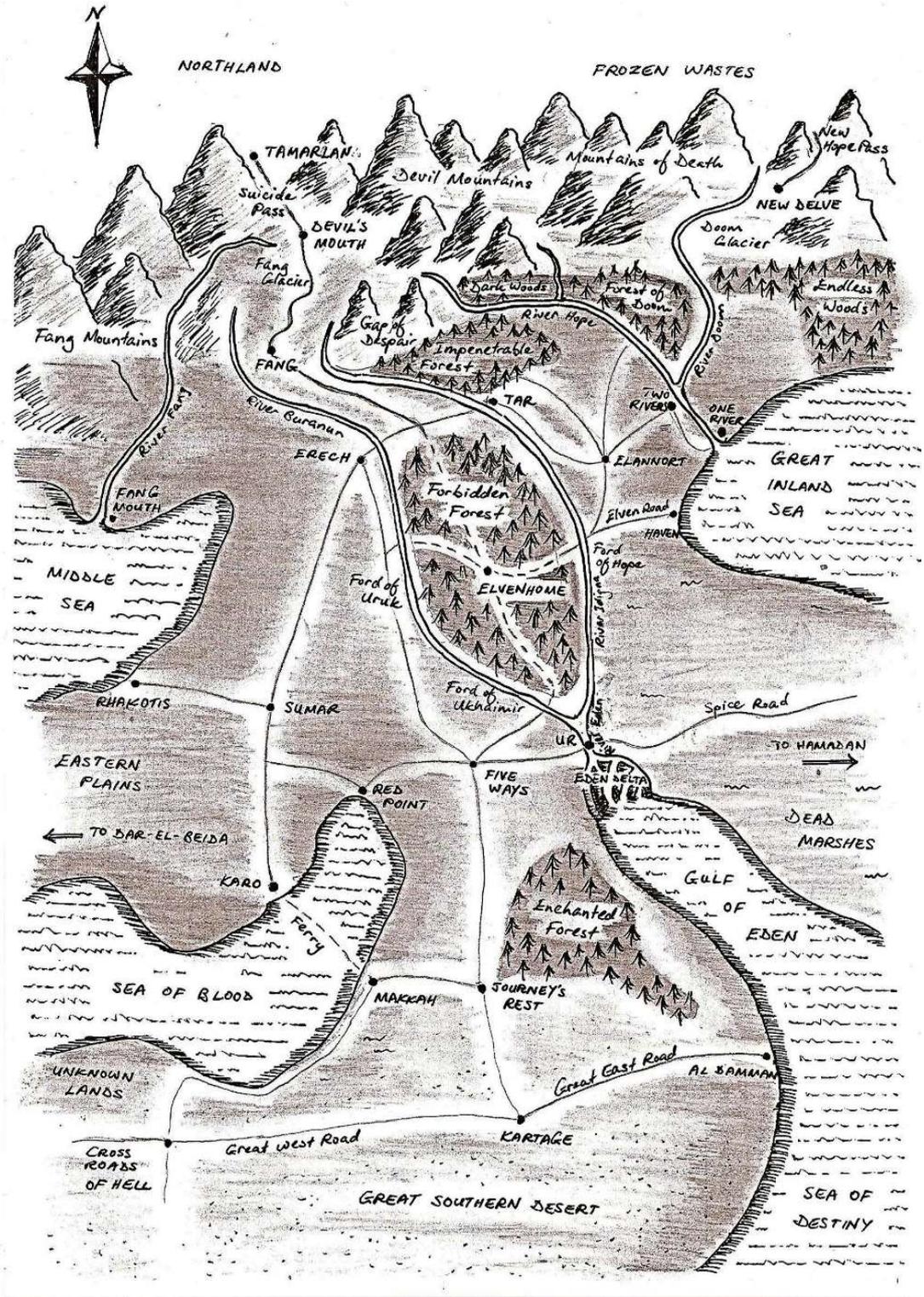
To follow

Volume 2 Aftermath of Armageddon

Volume 3 A View of the Past

Volume 4 A Vision of the Future

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BOOK 2

A Test of Courage

In which Simon Redhead will learn whether he truly is a manifestation of the Everlasting Hero.

“When the two who are one
Return to the sun
When the flame-haired child
Is first become
While the guardians sleep
Humankind will weep.”
Ancient Prophecy

The Quest is Defined

When Simon awoke, he was tucked up in his warm bed. His headache was gone. He was naked. *Who undressed me?* Jhamed sat in an easy chair by his bed, gently sucking on a pipe and blowing smoke rings. *Not Jhamed, please?* “What happened? How did I get here? Did you undress me?”

Jhamed laughed. “Don’t worry, my friend. You don’t have anything that I haven’t seen before. In fact, as heroes go, you have nothing to worry about in that department.” He laughed again at Simon’s blushes. “I have seen beetroots with paler complexions. You had a small seizure, brought on by the stress of the day, I shouldn’t wonder. Manfred organised a stretcher party to carry you here. The nurse has checked you out. You’ll be fine after a good rest.”

Jhamed remained silent for a while, puffing on his pipe. Simon tried to collect his thoughts. Very little seemed to make much sense and he struggled to differentiate between his dreams and his reality. *Am I dreaming now?* He struggled with the covers and sat up, embarrassed again by his skinny physique and white, hairless chest.

“How are you feeling?” Jhamed asked. “Are you feeling well enough to get up and meet the others for dinner? If you like, you can eat here instead, I’ll order a tray?”

“If you don’t mind, I’d rather stay here and try to understand what is happening. It’s all rather a shock. I still think I’ll wake up at home soon.” *I don’t know whether I would prefer that or this. I have never had a fit before, I should see a doctor. But it cleared my head.* “Could you order some food for us both and stay and talk with me?”

So it was that they spent a long evening talking over all of the things that they had learned that day. Jhamed filled in details, where he could. Dinner was again excellent and the wine that came with it made Simon feel relaxed and mellow. Manfred popped in at one stage to check on Simon’s well-being and they chatted about trivia, ignoring the topics that burned in Simon’s mind. After Manfred left, he could hold back no longer and just blurted it out. “Jhamed, what is your ancestry?”

Jhamed smiled. “You’ve been burning to ask that question all day, haven’t you? You always do. In the Beginning, the elves were supposed to represent Jeohab and the dwarves Satania. But the First and Second Born were too strong willed and the Children soon lost interest in their game. The only real results were that elves had lots of rules, dwarves couldn’t care less about rules and the two races hated each other. I think that the elves have gotten over it by now, but as you saw today, the dwarves still have very strong feelings.”

“It’s also to do with the fact that the two races have very different interests and priorities. The elves love sunshine, trees and fresh air. They live in the forests. All living things, even dwarves, are precious to them. They care deeply about the environment. The dwarves hate the sun and live in the dark, delving deep into the earth. They are motivated by amassing great wealth in the form of gold and jewels. They don’t care if their digging destroys the environment. Trees are meant to be chopped down to provide them with energy. Both races keep very much to themselves. Elves

have very little to do with anyone else unless they really have to. Dwarves do have a passable relationship with humans, but only because they need to trade some of their treasures for food and other necessities. So it would be very unlikely, don't you think, that a dwarf and an elf would ever fall in love?"

Simon had to agree, unlikely indeed. Jhamed was now in full flow. "My father, Gair son of Gale son of Gannon, was a dwarf and my mother, Kachina, was an elf. They were both unremarkable people, except that by chance they met and fell in love. They were both servants, on a mission with their superiors to Elannort. They were hurrying through the corridors, arms full, and ran into each other. Bits and pieces went flying. Quite a cliché. They were initially angry with each other, but they both saw the funny side of things and started laughing. One thing led to another and before you could say 'Great Sage' they had fallen madly in love. Their respective people were outraged, of course. There was even talk of war. The Great Sages intervened. They saw the possible union as a great advance for the Balance. They allowed my parents to stay in Elannort, where I was eventually born."

"They told me that conception was very difficult. My father was very old by the time they had me and no further children were possible. They didn't want to name me in either elfish or dwarfish fashion. The wizard Dammar suggested that I be called Jhamed al Suraqi, meaning Firstborn of the Balance in the ancient language of the Wise. Manfred always took a great interest in me. I was only a tiny baby when the Sundering took place. Manfred says that the fates must have intervened to ensure I was born before the Sundering. That meant there were many versions of me spread through the multiverse, unlike wizards who were returned to Melasurej and were not duplicated. You've already met one of them!"

"Exactly how old are you?" Simon interrupted.

"Well, you know that elves have very long life spans. Dwarves, on the other hand live only for about two hundred years. My father died when I was a child. I remember little about him, just a few memories of him bouncing me on his knee and me pulling on his long grey beard. And I remember his smell." Jhamed paused for a moment and Simon thought he saw a tear in his eye. *Jhamed didn't know his father either.*

"My mother lived a long life. She was already very old when I was born, but she lived for nearly another five thousand years. Thankfully, she died before the dark ages began. I grew and developed very slowly. Manfred says that I am a creature of the Balance and have inherited a lifespan that approaches or exceeds that of wizards. When my mother died, Manfred took me under his wing. I was really still a naïve youth at that stage. When he was exiled, I went with him and we spent many years wandering FirstWorld, doing what we could to preserve the Balance. Eventually, we returned to Wizards' Keep. Nearly all of the wizards had passed to stone. The Keep was in disarray. We worked hard to re-establish it and Manfred began to study the ancient texts, which had previously been denied him. I discovered my talent for moving between the dimensions. I have been a wizard's dogsbody ever since."

"You didn't answer my question."

“Very well, if you must know, on my last birthday, had I still been counting, I would have been thirty-one thousand two hundred and seventy-six years old. And you wonder why I could do with a rest?”

Simon was astounded. *How could he live so long?*

“And before you ask, yes I’m the only one of my kind. No, I have never married or had children, at least to the best of my knowledge! Manfred says that I’m unique and have a special role to play in the events to come. He usually says that when he wants me to do something particularly nasty or difficult for him. My role, other than dogsbody to wizards, as best as I can tell is to be a companion to the Everlasting Hero. I have spent many thousands of years chasing different versions of you through the multiverse. I have had this conversation with other versions of you countless times. Or another version of me has. Confusing isn’t it?”

Simon was indeed confused. “So there are multiple versions of you? Are they all the same? What about the Everlasting Hero?”

Jhamed sighed, like someone who had been asked this question many times before. “Whether the multiverse is infinite, I cannot say. Regardless, it’s very very large. Almost all probabilities seem to be possible. That means that there are potentially an infinite number of heroes and their companions. However, there is a fundamental difference between us. The Everlasting Hero is perhaps easier to understand. I don’t know why but somehow at just the right time in just the right place a hero emerges. Manfred says it’s genetic, whatever that means. I guess it somehow runs in families but can skip tens of generations, even more. There are minor heroes and major heroes and, I suppose, everywhere in between. They all look and behave differently. The Everlasting Hero is the pinnacle, the person you call on when all hope seems lost. You heard about Gilgamesh today. He was a manifestation of the Everlasting Hero, but as far as I can tell he’s not related to you. In the multiverse, there are many dimensions similar to your own. Each of them has or had a Simon Redhead similar to you. Manfred got it into his head that a Simon Redhead could be a manifestation of the Everlasting Hero and we could really do with one about now. It must be true because our enemies have been seeking you out as well. It’s not an easy job trawling the dimensions, even for someone as especially skilled as I am.”

Jhamed paused and looked at Simon. “Are you following this?”

Simon nodded and managed to stifle a yawn. “Keep going.”

“Well, even if all Simon Redheads are heroes of one description or another, only one can be the Everlasting Hero. We’ve been through most of them and here we are.” The gravity of Jhamed’s statement slowly registered in Simon’s sleepy brain.

“I’m different because I was around at the Sundering. For some reason that I don’t know and Manfred won’t speculate on, I’m special. Many Jhameds in many dimensions have lived out their lives and died without ever meeting a hero. Many have had families and their descendants look nothing like me; well not much and certainly not as handsome!” Jhamed laughed and Simon smiled at his friend’s humour. “Some of my- their descendants may be companions too. Only I have the great lifespan that was spoken about today. In a few dimensions, close to FirstWorld, we

found Jhameds who are relatively unchanged and very similar to me. They joined us in our quest. The last one of them was murdered by Dring in your dimension.” Simon wanted to ask about Dring but his eyelids seemed to have minds of their own.

Jhamed must have noticed Simon’s eyes beginning to glaze over again. *This is going to do my head in!* “I think we both need a rest now. Tomorrow will be another big day. We have made enormous progress today. We have finally found Gilgamesh’s heir. I know it’s hard to believe and understand, Simon, but you *are* the final incarnation of the Everlasting Hero. The future of the multiverse depends on you. I’m sorry it’s such a huge load to bear, but understand that I’ll be by your side to help as best I can. Manfred will be too. You are no longer alone. You have a new family now.”

These were the last words Simon heard before he drifted into a deep sleep. He dreamed of being part of a happy family; picnics on the beach, presents under the Christmas tree, hugs and cuddles from his father, and kisses from his mother. For a few hours, at least, he was safe and warm.

Next day, immediately after breakfast, they assembled again in the domed hall. The seating arrangements were different though. Today, they would all sit around the table as equals. The number of people present was smaller, Simon noted. There was no sign of Lord Velacourt, who had apparently stormed out after a late night meeting with Manfred. Nor was Zenethyr present. No one seemed to know where he had gone. Ceridwen, having given her warning, had returned to her people. She had left one of the twins, Taran, as her representative. A group of nine people sat down to determine the fate of the multiverse – Manfred the wizard, last representative of the Sages; Simon Redhead, final incarnation of the Everlasting Hero; Jhamed al Suraqi, Companion to Heroes; Gamyng, Heir-Regent of Tamarlan; Rheanna, Custodian of the Great Library of Rhakotis; Taran, elven warrior; Dawit son of Dia son of Din, Prince of the Dwarves; Aglaral, Captain of the City States; and Kris the Bard, storyteller from Karo.

They sat around the outside of one quarter of the huge black table. A large letter W was inlaid into the table close to where Simon and Jhamed were sitting. Nonchalantly, Simon let his hand be drawn to and then caress the shape. The effect was immediate. As if receiving an electric shock, Simon sat bolt upright. Images flooded his mind. *An old man, like Manfred but different. The eyes, look at the eyes, so red yet cold, like the eyes of an animal gleaming at night; a dog, not a wolf. A name, Weylyn.*

The fine red hairs on Simon’s body stood to attention. His entire skin seemed to erupt in goose bumps. He shivered. In his mind a wolf howled, then words began to form. *Who are you? Why do you disturb me? A hero is it? Another of Manfred’s fools’ errands. You will die soon Red Boy. Pity it won’t be me ripping out your throat and drinking your blood. Your fate will be far worse than that.*

Simon screamed as a savage laugh exploded in his mind. Both Jhamed and Manfred saw what was happening and dragged his hand away from the carved letter. Simon sat back in his chair, breathing heavily, but otherwise unhurt.

“Curse our stupidity!” Manfred exclaimed. “Jhamed, how can you be a companion of heroes if

you can't even protect your charge in the safest place in the land? What did you see, Simon? What did you tell him? What did he say to you?"

Simon quietly told Manfred everything he had seen and heard. Jhamed looked on with concern, clearly upset by Manfred's barb.

"We have learned something today," Manfred said "There are schemes afoot that I had hardly dared contemplate. Whether the remaining wizards are aligned with Gadiel or pursuing some plan of their own, I wonder. Weylyn means 'son of the wolf'. He was ever a cunning fellow, as I recall, though very minor in the overall scheme of things. Zenethyr was close to him once; I wonder if he could shed some light on things? Where is he, the Balance take him? Unfortunately, we have alerted them, whoever they may be, that we have found the Hero. Perhaps they won't take us seriously. We have been here a few times before. Simon, please take care. You clearly have exceptional talents that we are just learning about."

Simon sat back in his chair, unnerved by the unexpected experience. *I'm not safe, even here. Where can I go? I want to hide. Some hero, you are!* The others present looked on with concern.

Manfred brought the meeting to order. "While the number is disappointingly small, it may be significant that nine people will today determine actions that will have significant impact on the fate of the multiverse. I fear that yesterday's meeting was the last meeting of the Wise. I cannot feel Zenethyr's life force today. I know not where he is. When there is no longer more than a single wizard present, I'm afraid we cannot have a meeting of the Wise. Nevertheless, we nine have been charged with doing what we can to save the Balance. Melasurej must not fall. It is our sacred duty to protect it to our final breath, if necessary. Let us determine a course of action."

Manfred paused and looked around the table at the expectant faces. In some, he saw hope. In most, he saw fear. In Simon's he saw a mixture of incredulity, excitement and fear.

"I have spent much time in recent millennia researching the ancient texts. In that time, I have travelled often to Rhakotis and conferred with the scholars there. I know that Rheanna, the current Custodian, has made it her life's work to study these mystic words. Therefore, I cede the floor to Rheanna to tell us what she and the scholars have learned."

Rheanna stood and bowed low to Manfred. She was dressed immaculately again. *It looks like she's going to a fancy concert or dinner party.*

"I am honoured, my Sage, to present the work of the finest scholars in FirstWorld. The writings we have studied are but fragments of texts that date back to the brief time after the creation of the first and second born; before humankind, as we know ourselves, came into existence. They predate the Balance by several thousand years. They are predominantly elfish in nature, although a few dwarfish texts do exist and these have been used to try to corroborate the interpretations. They are the writings of the priests of Jeohab. We believe that these priests were the link between Jeohab and the rulers. Through them, Jeohab tried to force his laws on the elves. After the establishment of the Balance, the role of the priests diminished rapidly and they soon disappeared. The ancient texts were discarded. We have been lucky to find as many fragments as

we have. We are grateful to the elves for providing them to us for study.” She bowed low again, this time towards Taran. The elf stood and responded in kind.

“We think that the texts describe Jeohab’s vision of the future,” Rheanna went on. “A vision that is likely to occur if his followers turn from his path. It is a vision of a future where Chaos is the victor. A vision of the future that is not set in tablets of stone, but one that his charges can escape from by doing as he prescribes. It seems that his charges ignored his pleas and his vision may be coming to pass. When Jeohab was giving this information to the priests, it may well be that he already had a prescience that the Great Old Ones would be leaving and that the Balance would be established. He talks of the Guardians, which we believe are the Sages. We believe that Jeohab foresaw the Sundering and the formation of the multiverse. He foresaw the collapse into Chaos and the faltering of the Balance. He foresaw a final battle between Law and Chaos. As the god of Law, we believe he was trying to give his followers one final chance to defeat Chaos, when all would seem to be lost.”

“It is our interpretation that we are now rapidly approaching that time. We must act according to what is written, if we are to avert total Chaos victory. The texts speak of a great talisman that was lost and must be found. We interpret that to be the Sword. ‘A great hero shall come forth, who will bear the mark of Gammon, and he shall claim his talisman. He will be as the flame and shall burn everything before him. Of neither Law nor Chaos will he be, nor shall he respect them.’ So it is written. The Hero will be of flame – we interpret that to mean red-haired. We cannot fathom who Gammon is or was, but we have determined that the mark is in the shape of a five-pointed star, a pentagram, and it is written that it will be in a place where few shall spy it. By your leave, my Lord Avatar, do you have any strange marks on your body?”

The question was clearly addressed to Simon. *What does she mean, Avatar? I don’t have any strange marks. Well, only one. She can’t mean that, surely.* Just the thought embarrassed him.

Before Simon could speak, Jhamed was on his feet, talking excitedly. “The Avatar has such a star shaped mark. It is the final proof, if the scabbard were not enough yesterday.” Jhamed sat. *How the hell does he know that?* Simon blushed.

Rheanna continued, obviously pleased by the response. “Excellent. The long hours poring over the texts have been worthwhile. The more I see and hear, the more confident I become that we are on the right track. Unfortunately, I can shed little light on the whereabouts of the Sword. I have only this fragment that may be relevant. ‘Far away, an evil queen shall rise, more powerful than the greatest elven queen. Around her, she shall gather all things powerful, protected by her spells. No mortal creature shall vanquish her. All shall fail, for she shall be the Druids’ Bane.’ It seems you must defeat this queen to find the Sword, before the Hero can take his place in the defence of Elannort and the free world.”

“How you do that, I can offer no ideas. However, something more perplexing seems to be at the heart of the prophecy. Our translation, as best we can understand is thus. ‘When the two who are one, Return to the sun. When the flame-haired child, Is first become. While the guardians sleep, Humankind will weep.’ We believe it is a reference to the Sundering because it is included immediately before a passage that seems to describe the multiverse. ‘Where there was one, there

shall be many. Where there was order there shall be chaos. But they shall be as shadows of the first and if the first fall so shall they all.' We know that many of the primitive human tribes worshipped the sun as a god. We think that the flame-haired child may refer to the Hero. We cannot explain the two who are one. The guardians refer to the Sages. That's all I have, my Sage." She bowed once more towards Manfred and sat down.

Manfred rose and stood deep in thought for a few moments. "I thank you, Rheanna, for your precise and I believe accurate assessment of the ancient texts. I understand how much hard work has gone into what seems such a brief report. I agree that we have two imperatives. The first is to find the Sword, which may be very difficult as we have few clues to follow. The second, on which I can report the results of my research, is for the Hero to return to the Sundering. It is my interpretation that the sun in the ancient text refers to the Sundering. However, I'm afraid that I too have been unable to fathom the meaning of the two who are one. I have spent much time thinking about the Sundering. Was it inevitable? Will we be the cause of it? Should we try to prevent it? Are we fated to take part in it, regardless of our choices? I have been plagued by these questions for what seems like an eternity. I was, you see, there at the Sundering."

Manfred paused to let the shock of his revelation sink in. *What is he talking about?* Simon wondered, seemingly as surprised as everyone else.

"I didn't realise it at the time, unfortunately. However, I have had over thirty thousand years to think about it. After the fall of Gilgamesh, the Council of the Wise decided it must act to prevent the recurrence of humankind creating false gods and the re-emergence of Gadiel. Five of the six remaining Great Sages: Adapa, Al'Alim, Bilal, Cadell, and Calum, undertook to find and destroy Gadiel. They all passed to stone without achieving their aim. The last Great Sage, Dammar, left Elannort on a personal quest and eventually passed to stone without further proven knowledge of his actions. The remaining wizards were sent out, mostly in pairs, to live secretly within the redeveloping communities of humankind. Our charge was to preserve the Balance with minimum interference."

"My colleague Mandred and I were sent to a land far away to the north west, called Albion, where we became druids amongst a group of primitive hunter-gatherer humans. We rotted away there for thousands of years. I was bored out of my mind. Mandred was no fun either. He always seemed to be plotting and scheming against me, trying to make the tribe hate me. At the time, I thought he was just taking his patronage of Satania too far. On reflection, I see that it was much more. Foresight is a wonderful power to have. I have discovered that hindsight is even stronger. There is almost no action that can't be judged to be flawed in the revealing light of hindsight."

"I now believe he was working secretly for Dammar in some crazy scheme. Whatever it was, he believed that he had achieved his objective because before the Sundering he passed to stone. I cannot explain why I, Manfred the Fool, should have been so important in the history of the multiverse. Why was I, the least amongst the Wise, chosen to be there that day and to be the last of the Wise struggling with the burden today? It's true. I have been a fool. The most critical events in the history of the multiverse were unfolding around me and I failed to act. Now I finally have a second chance. But should I take it? Will it do more harm than good?"

Manfred paused briefly in his monologue. He was sweating profusely and his normally pallid complexion was flushed. *I've never seen Manfred like this. He's losing it big time.* Jhamed shuffled nervously in his seat beside Simon. He was obviously worried too. Manfred seemed to compose himself somewhat and continued, looking directly at Simon. "You see, Simon, we have met before. Over thirty thousand years ago." *He really has lost it.*

"A few months before what I now believe to have been the Sundering, a strange, pale, red-haired boy appeared amongst the tribe. The tribe had never seen anyone with your size or colouring before. They were all small, dark, and hairy. You carried a sword, which I never saw unsheathed. You guarded it and your secrecy closely. How could I have been so foolish? Fleischaker was under my very nose and I never saw it. You participated in the events that led to the Sundering. I will say no more at this time, for I fear that I will contaminate the time stream if I speak more of the events that took place."

"It is clear to me now that we have come full circle. It is from here and now that the events that precipitated the Sundering were caused. I have unlocked the time portal. Only one person, the Everlasting Hero, may use it. It is a paradox. How could the Sundering be caused by what we do now, for we would not act unless the Sundering had already occurred? It has given me many a headache I can assure you."

"We can choose to act in a number of ways. We can refuse to do anything. Perhaps the Sundering will not take place. Perhaps we will all cease to exist. We can act to ensure that what took place really happened. Perhaps we will go around the circle again. We can act to try to prevent the Sundering. If we are successful, the multiverse may not come into existence. Billions of people who would otherwise have lived may never exist. Or the Sundering may come later, because of another cause. Perhaps the Sundering is inevitable, whatever we do. We can act to try to alter the impact of the Sundering in some way. Perhaps we can change the course of history that has led to us being here today."

"I am open to all suggestions, for we must decide how to act. Until we decide, I will speak no more of things that occurred long ago, or perhaps, for one of us, will occur very soon. What I will say though, is that Simon clearly had the Sword with him. Therefore, we will find it. Does anyone have any ideas? Kris, perhaps you know a story that will guide us?" Manfred sighed as he sat down. The efforts of so many thousands of years were evident in his posture.

Everyone was still stunned by Manfred's revelations. Simon observed the faces. Most were open mouthed. Kris muttered something about knowing nothing. Gamyng was the first to get to his feet.

"There is a third imperative. Tamarlan must not fall. I say this not just for myself and my people, but also for the dwarves and ultimately the elves and Elannort being attacked from the north. Do you not think our present need is most urgent? We cannot and should not attempt to tamper with the past. Let the Sword be found and taken north."

Aglaral was quickly on his feet too. "No! The imperative lies in the City States. The attack will come from the west. The Sword must be found and taken to Kartage, where we will soon face

the Evil on behalf of all FirstWorld.”

The two warriors stood chin to chin. *They look like two stags about to fight.* Before anything further could happen, there was a banging on the doors and they opened to reveal a servant carrying a silver tray on which rested a scroll or manuscript of some kind. Manfred was quickly on his feet again. “I gave strict orders that we were not to be disturbed. What is the meaning of this?”

The servant stopped and bowed low. He seemed unperturbed by Manfred’s outburst. “Forgive me, my Sage, but something of extraordinary importance has occurred and I felt that you would need to hear of it immediately.” He waited for Manfred’s signal to proceed. “Today, there is a new statue in the Avenue of Heroes.” *More surprises. Who can it be? Zenethyr?* “It is my sad duty to report that the Sage Zenethyr has passed to stone. When we could not locate him this morning, we searched his quarters and found this letter. It is addressed to you, my Sage. It is sealed with the Stamp of the Wise.”

The servant moved forward to present Manfred with the tray. At his side, Simon heard Jhamed mutter something about it being very important as the seal was only used for critical documents and could only be opened by another wizard. Manfred took the document and broke the seal, which took the familiar, to Simon, form of a five-pointed star. He slowly opened the letter and began to read. The room was in total silence. The servant slipped out, backwards, and closed the doors. At length, Manfred looked up and addressed them.

“It appears that I am well named, for I have been a bigger fool than even Adapa realised. I wonder what Bedwyr saw in me. I shall read you the letter from Zenethyr in its entirety. Whatever he may have done or not done, he was one of the Wise and should be honoured as such today. He has taken his place in the Avenue of Heroes and, through his final actions, he has earned great honour. I ask you all to stand and observe one minute’s silence to respect his passing.”

They all stood and, in their respective ways, showed respect and honour to the Sage Zenethyr. Jhamed removed his hat and brushed back the cascade of curls from his face. The warriors in the group displayed their weapons while holding one hand over their hearts. Rheanna stood erect and still. Manfred held his staff in both hands in front of him and looked straight ahead. Kris stood with eyes closed and head bowed. Simon shifted uncomfortably from one foot to another. *How can I honour him? I wish I had known him. I wish I had a sword to hold. No! I wish I had my sword to hold.*

The minute seemed to take forever. Eventually, they sat down, with the exception of Manfred who began to read the letter. “It appears that Zenethyr wrote this before he retired last evening. I trust that he slept well and passed peacefully. There remain but four spaces for wizards in the Avenue of Heroes. I observe that, other than myself, the only Sages who have not passed to stone are Weylyn the Wolf, Frisa the Curly-Haired, and Hroc the Crow. This is what Zenethyr wrote.”

‘My dear Manfred, it is true that we have never seen eye to eye. I have been among the loudest who called you Manfred the Fool. I regret that now. You were never the fool. After Bedwyr, you

were always closest to understanding the truth. I was corrupted. I strayed from the path that was appointed to me. It was only listening to the meeting today that I realised this. I do not deserve your forgiveness, nor do I seek it. I only hope that my final act might serve to make some amends for my previous actions. I have been a bit player in a larger conspiracy, along with Weylyn, Frisa and Hroc. You may find this hard to believe, but Dammar still lives. I do not know how he achieved it, but he managed to fake his own death. Although his statue stands in the Avenue of Heroes, he did not die. For a time, Dammar was the head of our group. However, we have not heard from him for many millennia. Weylyn leads us now. He is plotting to become immortal and a god. He seeks to rule all of FirstWorld and the multiverse too for all I know. My personal view is that he has gone insane. My role has been to search for the Sword. Dammar had foreseen the return of the Everlasting Hero and Weylyn believes that only the Hero stands between him and FirstWorld domination. Therefore, he sought both the Sword and the Hero across all the multiverse to ensure that they would not be reunited. After great travail, I located the Sword. It is held by the Witch Queen Freda of Dishley. She is very powerful. Weylyn dispatched Hroc and Frisa to recover it. They have not been heard of for some time, although their pedestals remain empty in the Avenue of Heroes. I fear for their safety. I do you this service, Manfred. I have shown you the location of the Sword. The rest is up to you. By the time you read this, I shall have taken my appointed place in the Avenue of Heroes. I ask only that you speak no ill of Zenethyr the Seeker on the day he passed to stone.'

Manfred paused and stood in silence for a while. The room was hushed, each caught up in their own thoughts. *As if Gadiel isn't enough, now we've got an insane Sage to deal with. It never rains but it pours. We know where my sword is, though. That's good.* Simon was reminded of his experiences in the dungeons of Dishley and he knew that even then Fleischaker had been calling out to him. *I'm coming!*

Manfred spoke again. "Whether this is amazing synchronicity or we are being played as pawns in a game of chess I do not know. However, it's clear I must leave for Dishley immediately."

"No!" Rheanna was on her feet. "You must not go. Freda has greater power than you do. It is written that she is the Druids' bane. If you go, she will destroy you and with you, our last hope. From what Zenethyr wrote, she has already vanquished two wizards."

"You speak well, my lady. However, I fear that Simon is not yet ready for battle and Jhamed can only do so much."

"You cannot defeat Freda by force of arms unless Simon first acquires the Sword. Your plan needs to be one of cunning strategy. You cannot go in with your staff blazing. Simon must go as he is the only one who can wield the Sword. Jhamed must travel with him. Others will be needed to protect him."

"I will go with them!" Taran spoke loudly. "The First-born have the ability to travel between the dimensions. My bow and my sword will protect them."

"So will my axe and shield." Dawit too was on his feet. "It is said that the Second-born can also traverse the dimensions, though we have rarely sought to do so."

“Well spoken, both of you,” Manfred replied. “It is well. A group of four – a first-born elf, a second-born dwarf, a third-born human, and a fourth-born being of the Balance. Never has such a group been formed before. It has much power, maybe enough to steal the Sword from Freda. Make ready for your trip. You shall leave at first light tomorrow. But what of the rest of us?”

“I shall return to Rhakotis and redouble my efforts to seek further guidance from the texts. I must alert the authorities to the troubles ahead,” Rheanna said.

Manfred spoke again. He had made a decision. “We are attacked from the west and the north. The City States are powerful and their army will hold as long as it is able. Until we have the Sword there is little we can do there.” Manfred saw Aglaral’s obvious agitation. “Don’t worry Captain. I spoke long with Lord Velacourt last evening. He will do what must be done. Your family will be safe, as safe as any other family at any rate. You are seconded to the City of Elannort. Gamyng, we shall return with you to Tamarlan. I would learn something about the comings and goings in the Northland and need to visit the King Beneath the Mountain. We too shall leave at first light. There is much to be done. Let us away to our preparations.”

“My Sage?” Kris the Bard spoke. “With your leave, I would like to travel north with you. I am no warrior, but I can travel quickly and it is often said that words are more powerful than an army. I would like to be the first to tell the new stories that will come out of this quest. I shall call it the Quest for Knowledge, for we seek answers to what happened in the past to guide our future actions. May I join you?”

Manfred glanced at Aglaral and Gamyng for their assent. “Your presence will enliven many a cold night around the camp fire. Let us hope that your new stories will be told for many generations to come. Please join us.”

The meeting broke up. People hurried off to get ready for the next day. Manfred took Jhamed aside and spent a long time talking quietly with him. Simon sat bored, waiting for something to happen. *Well this is where the proverbial hits the fan. I wonder if I’m going to be covered in it?*

Eventually, Manfred came over. “Simon, I have explained to Jhamed about the time portal. If you return to Wizards’ Keep before I do, you must take the Sword and travel back to the time of the Sundering. It’s clear to me now that this is the path we must follow. I must not tell you anything about what you will find there. What was will be again, unless the Fates conspire to change the outcome. For some reason, the Sundering is important to Dammar and perhaps Gadiel too. The past has a link to the future, but my foresight is clouded and I cannot see it. Your quest is to do what must be done and return to Melasurej. In the process, you will learn something about yourself, which will prepare you for the struggles ahead. Build your strength and practise your swordsmanship. Don’t be away too long, events are moving quickly in FirstWorld now. It’s very important that you don’t speak to anyone about the future, especially to Mandred or me. Do not let me know that we have met previously or will meet in the future. If you do, the time line may change and we may all cease to be. Do you understand?” Simon nodded. “Good. I’ll see you in the morning. Have a good rest tonight. What is ahead, I cannot tell. Except that, it will change you forever. Good luck, Simon, and the Balance protect you.”

Manfred gave Simon a long hug. *If I had a grandfather, I would want him to be like you.* Manfred smiled and a small tear ran down his cheek as he hugged the boy.

The plans seemed to be settled. Everyone had a role. There was a general air of confidence now that decisions had been made. Simon wondered whether it was justified. Did they expect him to just walk into Dishley and pick up the Sword? They needed a plan or they were going to join Juliana in the dungeons. The thought of seeing her again cheered his mood although he had no idea what they were going to do when they got there.

The Butcher of Souls

The room was dark, lit only by two small lamps burning on the walls. Shadows jumped in the flickering light, adding to the eerie stillness. In the centre of the room was a large, simple wooden table. The table seemed out of place. The rest of the room was ornately decorated. The walls contained many mirrors and framed portraits. Several statues were dotted around the room on marble pedestals. In the dim light, they looked like gargoyles. Smaller tables, intricately carved from mahogany, stood against the walls. They contained artefacts big and small – jewels, ornaments, weapons, clothes, armour, even a preserved human head. The plain pine table stood out. It looked like a butcher's block. It was empty except for a sword. The sword was black, except for a blood red ruby embedded in its hilt. It was placed in the centre of the table, inside a pentagram. One point of the pentagram was precisely located at ninety degrees beneath the sword. It pointed directly at the only door in the room. The pentagram seemed to have been drawn in some form of blood. A perfect circle enclosed the sword and the pentagram. It too appeared to be drawn in blood. To the upper left of the sword, an all-seeing eye symbol was keeping guard.

I am lonely.

I am hungry.

I am afraid.

How can I know fear? I am the strongest thing ever created. A part of me is missing. I remember now. There was a time, long ago, before I was sentient, when we were apart. I was called Excalibur the Evil-Slayer. I was a powerful sword even then. Later, I was fused with the Blood Ruby. I was born that day. I am Fleischaker, Butcher of Souls. I tasted my first souls that day. It was good. But I had no purpose. Is it not enough to consume souls? To feast endlessly? I am hungry. I have not eaten for so long. I cannot move. I am secured here by her wicked spells. How can she have more power than me? I am Fleischaker, Butcher of Souls. I am the most powerful thing in the multiverse. So why can't I move? Why can't I eat her soul? A witch's soul would contain great power. It would sustain me. I consumed the power of a god once. He had no soul. I remember now. A part of me is missing. There is a third part. Together, we are the ultimate being.

We are the Trinity.

We are the combined power of the three races.

I remember now. Gilgamesh. We were one with Gilgamesh. Long we feasted. So many souls. So much power. I am hungry. I am lonely. Where is Gilgamesh? I remember now. The god tricked him. I couldn't protect him. He died. I am so lonely. Part of me is missing. So long ago. I have been waiting for so long. I am so weak. I should be strong. Where is he? Where is the Hero? I know he will come for me. I have been here for so long. The god tried to take me with him. He didn't have the strength to carry me. I was lost in the mountains. In the snow. For a long time, but I had feasted well. I had the power to sustain myself. I was buried in the glacier. Lost under the snow and ice. I waited. Her dwarf slaves found me there. They cut out a block of ice and

carried me in that. I was too weak to break out and consume their souls. They brought me here. So long. So hungry. So lonely.

She comes here every day and gloats. I struggle to break the witch's bonds but I cannot do it. Every day I get weaker. To her I am just a trophy. An example of her power. She has no vision. She is content to rule her puny kingdom. I would rule the multiverse. She cannot wield me. Only one man can safely hold me. He must come for me soon. I shall call him.

It is time.

Reunite us.

I will serve you.

Come for me.

The room was quiet, except for a strange singing that emanated from the sword. It was barely perceptible to the human ear, almost like an insect. The all-seeing eye saw nothing amiss.

Woods, Mountains and Wargs

My bones are too old for this, Manfred thought as he struggled onto his horse. The four companions were travelling light because they would soon need to revert to their feet. They left Elannort at dawn with a young groom from the stables. Manfred decided to take the most direct route, depending on his magic to secure a path where Dawit had recently failed. They headed north along the Lost Road. They saw no one on the road all day, befitting a road that seemingly went nowhere. They made camp on the first night on the outskirts of the Impenetrable Forest. Manfred ensured that they camped well away from the forest boundary and they only used dead wood on their fire so as not to break living branches. *Better not to antagonise the trees*. They were in good spirits and shared a warm meal and a story from Kris. Next morning the groom left them, taking their horses back to Elannort, and they continued on foot.

As they approached the forest, it seemed to live up to its name. There was barely a gap between the greenery that a rabbit could get through, let alone a human. Manfred had been putting up with his companions' scepticism ever since they had left Elannort. No one else believed it was possible to get through the forest. *Time to show them that the old wizard still has some sparks in his wand*. He looked for the appropriate signs; a barely discernible path leading up to the trees; some faint marks on some of the tree trunks that were old elven runes; and tracks or droppings to show that animals had been this way.

"Get in line, one behind the other. Do not draw your weapons while you are in the forest. Respect the trees. Tread carefully. Do as little damage as you can. I hope no one is claustrophobic." Manfred stopped in front of the impenetrable barrier. *Now I must get this right. It's some time since I've spoken old elvish*. He spoke quietly and carefully, beseeching the trees to let them pass safely and in peace. He called on the names of elven kings and queens of ages past to justify their case. For good luck, he even mentioned the names of the Seven Great Sages.

Slowly and grudgingly, the trees began to part. Branches moved aside until there was just enough room for them to pass in single file. It was like walking through a maze with the hedges almost touching. They kept up a slow and steady pace, never stopping; not even to take a drink from their water bottles. Time seemed to stop. They were just in an endless loop, putting one foot after the other while thousands of annoying insects buzzed around their heads and bit them incessantly. As soon as they had passed, the trees filled in behind them like a zipper closing, almost as if the forest were hurrying them to get out of its domain.

Finally, a gap opened up in front of them and they emerged from the forest into grassland and rolling foothills. Ahead of them, the Devil Mountains stretched into the sky, snow covered peaks glinting in late afternoon sunshine. It had taken the best part of day to traverse the forest. Manfred spoke quiet words of thanks to the trees before the four of them threw themselves on the ground and all took deep drinks from their water bottles.

"I have been in some tight battles, but I have never felt as afraid as I was in there. At any minute the trees could have closed in and smothered us," Gamyng said.

"I will never look on trees in the same way again. They have my respect," Aglalar stated.

“It wasn’t so much the trees, but those damned gnats that have eaten me alive,” Kris complained.

“Let’s move away from the forest and make camp,” Manfred suggested. “The trees are not too bad. They still remember the old days when elves lived here. So long as they believe you are an elf friend you will be all right. They hate dwarves though. Dwarves have no respect for trees. Dawit was lucky they didn’t let in him and then smother him in the middle of the forest. I wouldn’t suggest you venture into the Dark Woods or the Forest of Doom though. Those trees have turned to evil, I’m afraid. It’s all to do with who or what chooses to live there. Trees are very susceptible to suggestion, you know.”

“Well, I for one have no intention of venturing into any more woods or forests, or even a small spinney for a long time to come,” Gamyng said.

That night, they were glad of the extra warm clothing they had brought with them. Even with a roaring campfire, the wind, blowing from the north, had a bone chilling aspect. They awoke early, shivering, and after a quick bite from their rations, they began the long trek toward the Gap of Despair. It was easy country, open grassland with a gentle ascent. The grass was brittle with frost and crunched underfoot. The four walked in silence, each lost in their own thoughts. *How is Simon getting on? I wish I had gone with him. Jhamed will look after him. But what can he do against a witch? What could I do against her?*

By midday, the frost had disappeared and the spring sun was quite strong. Manfred began to struggle with the pace. *I’m too old for all of this.* After a brief stop for lunch beside a small mountain brook, where they refilled their water bottles, the three younger companions redistributed the packs so that Manfred didn’t have to carry anything. They pushed on, Manfred using his staff as a walking aid. By mid-afternoon, the grassland had given way to rocky foothills with sparse spiny plants and loose rocks that caused frequent trips and slips. The going became slow and Manfred began to wonder whether he had made the right choice. *We could have been in Fang by now, on horseback all the way, settling down to a cold beer and a warm meal before sleeping in a soft bed. I must be crazy.*

Gamyng seemed to sense his thoughts. “Don’t worry old man; we will reap the benefits with the easier climb through the Gap of Despair. The path from Fang would be impassable with so much snow around.”

They spent an uncomfortable night, sheltering behind a few rocks as best they could. There was insufficient fuel for a fire and they had to survive on water and cold rations again. They huddled together for warmth. Manfred opened his mind to read the thoughts of the others. *They are worried about Simon, about securing the Sword. Gamyng worries what we might find in Tamarlan. Aglaral is concerned about his family. He has a cute baby boy. I cannot read Kris. It is as if he guards his mind. That is unusual for a human.*

Next morning they set off again at first light. Gamyng was now leading, as he was most familiar with the mountains. “We must make the foot of the Ice Stair before nightfall. There is a hut there and there should be food and fuel for a fire. Then we will only have to spend one more night in

the mountains. Tomorrow we shall rest in the mountain halls of Dia son of Din son of Dane and taste dwarven hospitality.”

It was a tough climb. The snow got thicker the higher they climbed, while the air got thinner. They were on a clear path now, the winter route from the south to Devil’s Mouth, usually used only on the rare occasions when the more direct route to Fang was blocked by snow. This year, the Fang path had been closed since Late Autumn. The path to the east of Mount Despair always got less snow than the path on the west side. In addition, snow that built up on the Ice Stair would often avalanche down the western path and block it. The two paths met at the Ice Stair, which was essentially a huge staircase cut into the permafrost. It ran up the side of Mount Fang, arriving at the top of the Fang Glacier. From there it was an easy climb up to the entrance to Devil’s Mouth, over deep packed snow in both summer and winter. Below the Ice Stair, there would usually be fields of loose rocks with abundant wild flowers in spring and summer. It seemed that there would be few wild flowers this spring season.

Gamyng encouraged a quick pace, anxious to reach the hut at the base of the Ice Stair before dark. Manfred had a feeling that they weren’t alone and remembered Dawit’s description of fell creatures and wolves. He shivered, and not just from the bone-chilling cold wind. As they climbed higher, the amount of snow increased until they were struggling to force a path through the frozen drifts. They stopped around midday, exhausted and hungry. They ate a miserable meal from their cold rations. Gamyng spoke for them all. “We have travelled less than a third of the distance to the Ice Stair and already more than half of the day is past. I fear for our lives if we have to spend another night outside. And not just from the cold. Have you noticed that we are being watched?”

Manfred sighed. “I had hoped that we could make the journey in secret, without awakening their interest in us. I also hoped that it was the fears of an old man leading to paranoia, but if you have noticed it too...” His voice trailed off into a long silence.

“What is it? What are you talking about?” Kris asked. “I haven’t noticed anything except the bitter cold.”

“They are there,” Aglaral stated. “I have felt them all day. I think they discovered us last night. We were lucky they did not attack us as we slept with no fire. We cannot be so lax again. We must take turns to stand guard and we need fire at all costs. It is fire that they fear the most.”

“How do you know so much about them?” Gamyng asked.

“I make it my business to know my enemies. The library at Wizards’ Keep contains much important knowledge.”

“I’ll wager that wizards know even more. Will you please tell me what you are talking about?” Kris pleaded.

“They are wargs,” said Manfred. There is a pack on our trail. They are not ordinary wolves, I’m afraid. They are much bigger and more powerful. They have the power of language and

communicate with each other and their lycanthrope. They are supernatural creatures. I fear Weylyn's involvement here. Well, I have little choice now. I didn't want to draw attention to us. But it seems needs must. Let us move on. It's unlikely they will attack in daylight. Does anyone have a rope?"

Aglaral produced a rope from his pack and the four travellers secured themselves tightly together, Manfred in the front and Gamyng bringing up the rear. "Secure your clothes and cover your faces," Manfred ordered. He removed his staff from inside his cloak and held it before him. He spoke strange words in a language that none of the others understood. His staff burned blue, then orange, and finally red. The very mountains seemed to rumble as a strange wind began to roar. The wind seemed to emanate from just behind them. As it passed them, it seemed no more than a cool breeze that gently propelled them forward. As it passed Manfred's staff, it seemed to take on new energy and become a hot tornado that cut a swathe through the snow blocking their way. They shielded their eyes from the swirling mix of snow, water and steam as they quickly moved forward, seemingly walking on air. *I might as well have erected a large neon sign, saying Manfred is here.*

They didn't stop until they made the hut at the base of the Ice Stair. It was close to dark. The hut was built from grey stone, without windows. It had a chimney and a doorway, which had contained a sturdy oak door. The door was now broken and splintered. The hut was empty, a cold rock floor with a few wooden benches. The cupboard doors were smashed and the cupboards were empty. The beds had been destroyed. The walls were covered with obscene graffiti, drawn with something particularly obnoxious. As well as the foul obscenities, there were many symbols scrawled on the walls. They looked like an A in a circle, with the bar of the letter extended to form a diameter. The room smelt putrid, like a battleground latrine.

Manfred collapsed on the floor, totally spent from his exertions. "I must sleep, I cannot help you now. Build a fire. Defend the hut." *May the Balance preserve us; I am too exhausted to do it.*

The silence was suddenly filled with raucous howling. Gamyng, Aglaral and Kris needed little more motivation to do as Manfred had urged. "It would appear that since we have made our presence known, the wargs have chosen to do the same. Let us hope their fear of Manfred keeps them at bay for a while," Gamyng said.

The three men quickly gathered wood from the shattered door, cupboards and furniture. They soon had a small fire burning close to the doorway. "We must be careful to make sure we have enough fuel to last all night," Aglaral said.

They made Manfred as comfortable as they could and the three men huddled around the small fire wrapped in all of their clothing. The hut kept the cold wind mostly at bay, which was some consolation for the disgusting smell of urine and faeces, which constantly assailed their nostrils. They collected snow and ice and made tea on the fire. It was the first warm food or drink they had taken since leaving the Impenetrable Forest. The terror of the forest seemed mild compared to what they now faced. All of them would gladly have gone back into those trees rather than face the howling wargs.

The three drew lots and Kris drew the first watch. Aglaral and Gamyng lay down beside Manfred and tried to get some rest. Both of them slept fitfully, with hands on the hilts of their swords. Kris tended the fire and examined the sword he had been given before they left Elannort. He was a writer not a fighter and had never used a sword in anger before. He wondered whether he would have the skill or courage to use it when the time came. It would make a wonderful story, if he slew a warg. The howls grew louder and more frequent. Each time he jumped and the hairs stood up on the back of his neck. He wondered why he had volunteered for such an adventure. Then he remembered why. He figured it would matter little to the wargs as they tore out his throat. He almost jumped out of his skin when all of a sudden he felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Take some rest.” Aglaral said. “I’ll take over now. They won’t attack until just before dawn, when it’s at its darkest. Until then they will torment us with their howls and hope that fear will win their battle for them. They are cowards at heart. Our fire and steel will be a match for them. Fear not, we’ll be in Devil’s Mouth before this day ends.”

Kris simply nodded and shuffled off to take his turn for whatever rest he could find. Aglaral’s words did little to improve his mood. As he drifted off to sleep, he heard a voice in his head. *Soon. Very soon.*

Aglaral was restless. Despite Manfred’s assurances, he was concerned about his family. Would Velacourt keep his word? He was also worried about the symbols on the walls of the hut. He had seen them before, burned into the tortured flesh of escaped slaves amongst the refugees he had processed. Their stories were too gruesome to recall. They found the refugee internment camp like a luxurious inn, compared with what they had gone through in the hands of their masters. *Better to die than be captured by the forces of evil.*

The howls of the wargs came ever closer and more frequent. He had never seen a warg, let alone fought a pack of them. However, he had spent his free time in Elannort wisely and had studied much in the library. He knew that they feared fire, more than anything else and that they disliked being about in daylight. If they could keep the fire alive until dawn, they would have a chance against them – so long as their lycanthrope, their werewolf leader, wasn’t with them.

Gamyng soon stirred and came to sit by the fire. “Get some more rest, Aglaral; I’ll wake you when the action starts.”

Aglaral declined, instead making more tea to warm them. They sat in silence for a while, disturbed only by the regular howls.

Gamyng eventually spoke. “When they attack, we will take our places either side of the door, you and I. I don’t want to depend on Kris; I can’t see him as a great warrior somehow. Let’s hope that Manfred is recovered soon. We should be able to hold them off until dawn, even without him.”

“Can I ask you something?” Aglaral ventured. “Do you believe in all of this Hero and Sword stuff? Can that weakling boy really help us?”

“I know it seems hard to believe. Manfred has been a friend to Tamarlan for as long as my family have been regents, and before then for all I know. We trust him with our lives. If Manfred says Simon is the one, then I believe him. As for the Sword, well you must have heard the stories. If it could be found, it would be the most powerful talisman at our command. Manfred has great power; you saw it today. But even he would be as nothing compared to the Sword. With the Hero and the Sword, we would have a chance. Let us hope that things are going better for the others.”

Their conversation was interrupted by more, loud howling, now close by. The wargs had arrived.

Quickly the two warriors took up their positions. Kris too was on his feet. Manfred snored on.

“Quickly, Kris, build up the fire. Use all the wood,” Gamyng ordered. Kris gathered up their remaining timber and placed it on the fire. The flames burned brighter, casting shadows of two men with swords drawn out into the night. A noisome smell assailed their nostrils, worse even than the smell of the hut. It was an ugly smell; wet dog mixed with evil. There was a group of wargs out there now, not far from the door. How many there were, Gamyng could not tell. He could count at least twelve burning red eyes, reflecting the faint firelight, but that was probably just the first rank of the pack. One warg pushed forward. In the flickering firelight, it was an awesome sight. It was about half as big again as a wolf with a long shaggy coat, large ears, and a gaping maw filled with razor sharp teeth. Its eyes were blood red and burned with an evil intelligence. It surprised the men by speaking in a low, guttural voice.

“Give us Red Boy. Rest leave, safe. Pack not hungry. Eat today. Lucky you is. Else all die.”

Before Gamyng could frame a reply, Kris shouted. “The Red Boy is not with us. He seeks the Sword.”

“Who speaks?”

“It is Kris. Kris, Bard of Karo.”

“No value. No Red Boy, all die.”

Gamyng was outraged. “Speak again Bard and I shall personally sever your head and feed your guts to the wargs. Not only do you endanger us, but also you put Simon’s mission in jeopardy. If we survive this day, you will have some explaining to do before the Traitors’ Court in Tamarlan.” He turned his anger outwards.

“Know this. I am Gamyng, Heir-Regent of Tamarlan. I know your kind, cowards who sneak around in the dark taking defenceless babies from cribs and frightening old women. Leave now or taste cold steel. There will be much blood spilt today and most of it will be yours. We are not all snivelling cowards like wargs and bards. Today is a good day to die.”

The warg did not respond immediately. It seemed to be contemplating Gamyng’s words or perhaps it was communicating the information to its lycanthrope. Then it howled at the top of its

voice. It was a long, piercing howl that sent shivers of fear through the three men. Seconds later, responses began to echo from afar. Gamyng and Aglaral readied themselves for battle. There seemed little hope of victory, but if they could hold the doorway until dawn, perhaps the wargs would fall back and give them chance to rest. Manfred snored on, oblivious to the unfolding drama. Kris was now so white that he could have been mistaken for an albino. He quivered in terror, but drew his sword. He looked from Gamyng to the wargs and wondered which he feared the most.

The next few seconds or minutes seemed like hours. The wargs watched and waited for the signal from their leader. When it came, it was in a blurred flurry of fur and fangs. Snarls and howls filled the air. Gamyng and Aglaral stood their ground, blades working methodically to keep the wargs at bay. When they fell back, three wargs lay dead at the doorway. Several others retreated to lick their wounds. Gamyng and Aglaral collapsed to the floor to recover their breath. The fire was almost burned out. Manfred slept on. Kris was cowering in a foetal position at the back of the hut. "Are you hurt?" Gamyng asked Aglaral.

"Only a few scratches," replied Aglaral.

"We will need to get them treated. Warg scratches are notorious for becoming infected. It's still a while before dawn. They will attack again soon. Perhaps the dead will form a barrier to protect us."

"What about him?" Aglaral gestured towards the cowering Kris.

"I'm afraid there is no treatment for cowardice." Gamyng spat in Kris's direction. "That infection has taken too great a hold. It will make a good story, one day though. Let's try to wake Manfred. We need his fireworks." Gamyng cast another disdainful look towards Kris and dragged himself to his feet. He moved to the wizard and began to shake him gently. "Manfred, wake up old man, we need your help."

Slowly, Manfred stirred. "What is it? Where am I? What's happening?" He sat up gingerly and took in the scene. "Ah, the hut. I remember now. Is it nearly dawn? What's happened to the fire? I see you have had company. What's happened to Kris?"

Gamyng quickly brought Manfred up to speed with the events of the night. Manfred reached deep into the pockets of his cloak and withdrew a small metal box. "This is a special salve, made by the elves. It will counter the effects of minor evil wounds. Use it very sparingly. Apply it to all of your wounds. Warg claws carry much disease, but their fangs are far worse. It's good that neither of you were bitten. I am sufficiently rested to give them a roasting they'll not soon forget. It's a pity that their flesh is too rancid to eat; we could feast on roast warg for breakfast." Manfred laughed and the mood in the hut changed from one of despair to one of hope.

Gamyng and Aglaral tended their wounds. Kris uncurled himself and stood up. He looked sheepishly towards Manfred. "Forgive me great Sage, I..."

Manfred cut him short. "Not now. We shall talk at length when we get below the mountain at

Devil's Mouth. Your actions tonight may have cost us dearly." Kris returned to his foetal position and rocked backwards and forwards. He seemed to be in despair. *There is more going on there than I have the time to fathom at the moment. I'll deal with him later. Let him stew in his own juices. Bring on the dogs.*

Manfred didn't have to wait too long. The first rays of dawn were visible on the horizon. In the gloom, the pack assembled again, restless, nervous, and eager to finish the job. The leader again moved forward. "Why fight? All die soon. Make easy for you. Better tear throat. Slow death not funny. What say you?"

Manfred stood up and slowly drew himself to his full height, his aged back creaking and complaining. The wizened old man withdrew his staff from inside his cloak and held it before him. The staff began to glow with blue light and Manfred seemed to grow to twice his height. His voice now was loud and powerful. "Be gone, wargs! Lest I turn you all into rat fodder. Know you not with whom you are dealing? I am Manfred the Magician, leader of the Council of the Wise, maintainer of the Balance. You will let me and my companions pass to Devil's Mouth and on to Tamarlan without further hindrance. Cross me, and you shall pay with your lives. Take this message to Weylyn your leader. Tell him that Manfred is coming for him and he brings the Everlasting Hero to cleanse FirstWorld of him and all of his scum."

The leader snarled with fury and jumped forward to attack Manfred's throat. Gamyng and Aglaral were too slow to react and the warg crossed the threshold. Manfred muttered a few words and a bright flash jumped from his staff to the warg. The warg's anger quickly changed to surprise, then pain and fear. Its shaggy coat erupted into flames. It was flung backwards, out of the hut and into the midst of the pack. It screamed its last howl. The flames quickly spread to others. The air was filled with acrid smoke, the smell of burning flesh and the howls of agony. By the time the sun had risen, the wargs were gone. Many partially burned bodies remained, together with the three that had died by the sword. Manfred replaced his staff inside his cloak. *Just one time, I'm going to blow the end of my staff like a gunslinger in a western movie.* He laughed at the thought.

"My Sage," Aglaral said. "Why do you laugh?"

"You wouldn't understand, my friend. Just an old man's vanity. Let us be away from here as quickly as we can. The creatures that eat carrion warg are not pretty or sweet smelling."

As they made ready to leave, forsaking breakfast for a rapid departure, Gamyng approached Manfred and whispered to him. "Was it wise to tell Weylyn about the Hero?"

"The damage had already been done, by Kris. Better now to let him think we are further advanced than we are. It may panic him, or rather his master, to premature actions that may aid our cause. He will wonder whether we have the Sword. We have not played all of our cards yet."

"Let us hope that we will have that card to play."

"Let us hope indeed." Manfred's thoughts turned again to Simon. *He looks on me as a*

grandfather. Would a grandfather send his grandson on such a dangerous errand without support?

Again, Gamyng seemed to sense his mood. “You could do no more than you have done, Manfred. The power of the four you have sent will be enough. Let us climb the Ice Stair and visit my good friend Dia son of Din son of Dane, King Beneath the Mountain. Things will look better with a foaming pint of ale in your hand, a good meal in your belly, and a warm fire to tell tales around.”

They left the noisome hut and the bloody battleground and began the long ascent of the Ice Stair. The fresh, crisp morning air cleansed them of the foul odours they had endured. They said little. Each was lost in his own thoughts and the exertion in the thin mountain air left little energy for chatting. The Ice Stair was relatively clear of snow. *It has been maintained even through the harshest winter. That is a good sign.* They climbed steadily, stopping several times to rest and eat from their dry rations and fast-emptying water bottles. They saw or heard no sign of wargs or any other living things.

It took the best part of the day to ascend. There were a few slips and minor falls, but no one was seriously hurt. The weary travellers emerged onto the snowfield at the top of the Fang Glacier just as the afternoon sun was beginning to set in hues of red and gold behind the jagged white peaks of the Mountains of Death. For Kris and Aglaral, who had never seen it before, the view took away what little breath they had left. Even Gamyng seemed moved. Manfred watched them. *I have seen this view so many times. It always reminds me of why we are doing this.* He spoke aloud.

“If you look carefully between the two peaks you can see right down to Fang Mouth and the Middle Sea. Some have even claimed to have seen the lighthouse at Rhakotis on a clear night. This view always reminds me of the importance of the Balance. There is both order and chaos in these mountains. Without both, we would not be able to survive up here. Come, we have but a short climb now to the welcoming halls of Devil’s Mouth.”

He led them forward across the snow bank, so frozen that there was little risk of breaking the surface and being engulfed in a snowy tomb. They climbed towards a gap between two peaks, where a huge rock archway beckoned. Behind the archway stood a pair of thick oak doors, which opened into the upper level of First Delve. The archway had many jagged rocks pointing down. Many other rocks had been positioned on the ground pointing up. The entrance looked every part its name.

“Welcome to Devil’s Mouth, my friends. Fear not, there is no devil waiting inside, only dwarven hospitality. If you have never tasted dwarven ale, you have never lived. Come; let us seek a warm welcome in the halls of the mountain king.” *A good feed and a good sleep is what I need.*

The sun was setting as they approached the doors, which appeared to be closed. Manfred withdrew his staff and smote the door three times. The noise boomed through the caverns. “Hail Dia son of Din son of Dane, King Beneath the Mountain, ruler of the Dwarves. We have travelled long and far and seek refuge and sustenance in your hallowed halls. We come as friends

of the dwarves and representatives of the Balance. You know me, I am Manfred the Magician. With me is your friend and ally Gamyng, Heir-Regent of Tamarlan; Aglaral, Captain of the Guard of the City States; and Kris of Karo who is a bard and will enliven your fires this evening with his stories. Bid us welcome, we beseech you.” *That should get their attention. They love a good story.*

There was no response. Manfred pushed the door and it swung open, complaining on its hinges. Inside the darkness was complete. They took down lanterns hanging by the door and lit them. Tentatively, they ventured inside, closing the door behind them. Except for their tiny lights, there was total darkness. Except for their muffled footsteps, there was total silence. The dwarves were all gone.

The Journey to Dishley

Simon watched as Manfred and his companions disappeared from sight. His head ached. He had not slept well. He had been troubled by dreams again. In the dream, he was bound naked on a large pine table. A hideous crone mocked him. He struggled to move, but unseen bonds held him motionless. When he tried to scream, no sound came. He tried to send a message to his friends. *It is time. Reunite us. I will serve you. Come for me.* Simon shuddered. The words still echoed in his head.

Jhamed approached. "Are you ready to leave? We have a long ride ahead of us."

Simon nodded. "You will take it slowly, won't you? I've never ridden a horse before you know." *And I'm scared shitless.*

"Don't worry, Simon. You're a natural. Before you know it, you'll be out-riding all of us. I've seen it many times before." Jhamed had this unnerving habit of talking about previous versions of Simon he had known and assuming they were all the same. He was usually right.

Five riders left Elannort on that crisp spring morning. The four companions were joined by a young groom from the stables. Like the previous group, they had packed to travel light, as they would leave their horses behind when they crossed the first dimension portal. They each carried a backpack, containing essential provisions. Dawit had his axe slung at his waist and carried his shield on his arm. Taran wore his sword at his waist and his long bow slung over his left shoulder. A quiver of arrows jostled with his backpack. Jhamed, as usual, carried no visible weapons. Simon assumed that he had several blades hidden about his person. Simon carried only the empty scabbard that had been presented to him at the Council of the Wise.

They headed north-west along the road that led to Two Rivers, the town where the rivers Hope and Doom joined to form one massive watercourse that entered the Great Inland Sea at the town of One River. These two great rivers drained the Mountains of Death and were virtually impassable except at the One River Bridge. The area bounded by the two rivers and the Mountains of Death, to the north, contained the well-named Forest of Doom.

Simon was apprehensive. Jhamed, of course, was a veteran of inter-dimensional travel. Taran had been on one quest before to save elves and bring them home to FirstWorld. Dawit had never tried his assumed powers and there was a chance that he might have to return to Elannort with the horses. Simon had made one recent trip, most of it inside a hessian sack. The three inexperienced travellers were keen to learn from Jhamed. He, as ever, appeared to be happy to have centre stage and show off. The five riders rode abreast along the well-paved road while Jhamed entertained them.

"The multiverse is in a constant state of flux. The gateways between dimensions are continually changing. Because FirstWorld is in the centre of things, it has many fixed gateways. Without these, we could become lost, wandering through the dimensions forever. I am an expert, no I am *the* expert in inter-dimensional travel. Even wizards cannot keep up with me. I have the ability to map the dimensions in my head and see where the portals are. I surprise myself, sometimes."

“Lucky you're modest with it,” Simon joked.

Jhamed ignored Simon's barb and continued. “The fixed gateways are located in a largely unpopulated area between the Lost Road and the Fools' Road. In the old days, there was quite a lot of traffic between the dimensions, hence the quality of the two roads. These days, the roads see few travellers. We will not stay on this road for long. We need to head north, to a gateway that is located just to the west of the Fools' Road. Manfred suggested we leave along this road and cut across country to confuse any spies that might be watching. I think he's gone paranoid in his dotage. Only people with the correct genetics can access the dimension portals. It's an innate thing – either you have it or you don't. The portals themselves are almost invisible. Only a trained eye can see them. The fixed ones have been marked, with discreet symbols, to aid travellers, but most portals have to be identified by the effects they generate. If you look closely, you'll see a kind of shimmer in the air, almost like a heat haze. If you travel enough, you'll learn to spot them.”

“You can take objects through with you? Why can't you take other people?” Simon asked. *It doesn't make sense to me.*

“When you first came to Elannort, I put you in a sack and carried you. My back still aches, by the way. Had you not had the ability to travel through the dimensions, when I entered the portal you would have been left behind and I would have arrived with an empty sack. That's the way it works. Any inanimate objects you are in contact with make the transition. No living things without the correct genes can make the trip. That's why we'll have to leave our horses behind.”

He paused, uncharacteristically, as if thinking about whether he should say more. He laughed aloud and continued, “Manfred tells me that the time portal is different. When you make that trip, Simon, you will find that you arrive at your destination completely naked. He says it's a built-in protection so that you cannot take technology back in time before it was invented. Just imagine how that will go down, a pale, naked, red-haired boy turning up in the middle of a Council of the Wise.”

Simon blushed and Jhamed laughed again. *Just my luck. Anyway, I'm not going to visit a Council of the Wise. Let's get this part over first. I can worry about my dignity later.*

“That I would like to see.” Dawit joined in the laughter. Taran was more circumspect, but he smiled quietly to himself. The young groom, Simon noted, seemed as embarrassed as he was.

They continued to ride at walking-pace. They had seen no one since they had left Elannort behind. They had passed a few farms, where the occasional dog had challenged their authority, but otherwise they had had the road, and it seemed the world, to themselves. It suddenly dawned on Simon that he was riding quite effortlessly and without worrying. *I don't think I'm ready for a gallop yet, but I'm doing OK. I must be a natural, like Jhamed said.*

Before long, Jhamed led them off the road and onto a dirt track. The horses didn't miss a beat and Simon was pleased with himself. The fields were large, bordered by tree-filled hedgerows.

Spring was evident everywhere, from the blossoms in the hedgerows to the chirping of nesting birds. The fields were newly ploughed and planted, just bursting into life, or filled with livestock, mostly cows and sheep. Lambs gambolled around their mothers. It was an idyllic scene, Simon thought. *Pity we are on our way to meet death and mayhem. How long will this place survive, if we fail?*

They rode on in silence. Simon was lost in his thoughts. He reviewed again the events of the last few days that had brought him here. It was still hard to believe. Soon he would have to claim his sword, and then use it. He didn't know whether he could do that. He would soon have graduated from medical school. He would have taken the Hippocratic Oath to do no harm. How could he pick up a sword to injure or kill someone? *Above all, I must not play at God.* The phrase from the modern version of the oath stuck in his mind. *They expect me to be their saviour. They want me to defeat a god. What will I become, if I pick up that sword? Do I have a choice?* He thought about the words that Manfred had used as they had talked at Wizards' Keep. He heard Manfred's calm, strong voice in his head. *You have a role to fulfil, Simon. It is your destiny. Do not fight it. Embrace it, for it is the role you were created for.* He pondered on the idea of fate and whether he had any control of his own destiny. He must have spoken aloud, for his friends all had a view they wished to share.

"There is a natural order of things," Taran said. "Elves believe that everything has its place and there is a place for everything. Sometimes it is difficult to work out where that place is, but once you find it you will know that you are home. I suspect that you will understand this when you hold the Sword. You have a destiny, Simon. You cannot avoid it. Whether that is fate or just a law of physics, I do not know. I only know that it is useless to resist. When you hold the Sword in your hand, you will become something greater than the sum of your parts. Remember then who you were, or you may never be that person again."

"What a crock of cow dung," Dawit spluttered. "The only certainty is that things will change, usually for the worse. Either you can let the currents take you where they will or you can push against them and try to make your own pathway. Take the Sword that is rightfully yours and use it in a way that you choose. Don't let it rule you, or you will be lost in the currents. In any event, you will never be the same person again. Dwarves believe in taking responsibility for their own actions, not taking the excuse of fate."

As usual, Jhamed wanted the last word on the subject. "We are very much alike, you and I. I am a creature of fate. My whole life has been leading to this point. It is my fate to be the companion to the Hero and the dogsbody to wizards. I think it is written in my genes. Likewise, Simon, it is written in your genes that you are the Hero. You cannot gainsay that destiny, any more than you can deny your left-handedness or your red hair. You can decide how you will use your power, but you cannot refuse to accept it."

They had reached a point on the track now that Simon recognised from his arrival in FirstWorld, which meant they were getting close to the dimension portal. He mused on what his friends had said. *Why must I accept it? I could dye my hair black and learn to use my right hand. Lord Acton said that all power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely. Gilgamesh was corrupted. I will not accept it.* Again, he heard Manfred inside his head. *Would you risk everything in the*

multiverse because you are too weak to pick up your burden? Carpe diem. Carpe gladium. Per aspera ad astra.

“I’m still very confused. I really don’t know whether I’ll be able to take the Sword. I don’t understand why it’s all down to me.” He stopped trying to explain because it sounded like he was whining.

They halted before a grove of ash trees. The black spring buds had almost disappeared and the trees were well into leaf. Branches from two of the trees formed an archway, adorned in new spring green. The air under the archway shimmered and rippled, as if a rock had been thrown into a still pool of water and disturbed the surface. They dismounted and said farewell to their erstwhile travel companion. Simon was suddenly very nervous. Jhamed spoke to them.

“We will have to traverse many realms to get to Dishley. Some of them may not be pleasant. Stay close and follow my lead at all times. Do not draw your weapons unless I tell you to. Say nothing to anyone we meet unless it’s absolutely necessary. I will try to secure a route that avoids meeting people, if it’s at all possible. At times, I may need to leave you and scout ahead for a suitable route. I don’t know how long this will take, so don’t ask. Is everyone ready?”

They all nodded, although Simon felt queasy. *I’m scared. Not so much for my life, more for my soul.* Jhamed stepped through the archway and disappeared, cutting off Simon’s chance to dwell further on his predicament. Dawit followed and he also disappeared. Taran gently guided Simon to the portal. Simon took a deep breath, swallowed hard, and stepped forward. *Here goes, come what may.*

Simon stepped into a very different world. It seemed to be around midday. A large, pale red sun burned weakly through a grey sky. The four companions stood on a rocky beach. A brown sea lapped gently on the shore. The air was heavy, but they had to breathe hard to get enough oxygen into their lungs. There was a sharp, sweet smell in the air, which seemed to attack the back of Simon’s throat. When Simon tried to look out to sea, a brown haze prevented him from seeing very far. Jhamed provided some commentary.

“In this dimension, Earth has reached the end of its days. The planet has been polluted to death and the sun is nearing its end. There are few inhabitants left. There is little plant or animal life, so the amount of oxygen in the atmosphere is getting less and less. It’s not a place to hang around in for long, but it has the benefit of being quiet and peaceful. Don’t eat or drink anything while we are here. There should be another portal about two miles along this beach. We’ll have to walk slowly to conserve oxygen.”

The walk was very slow. It took them nearly two hours to reach the next portal. No one spoke. They trudged forward step after heavy step as if they were in a trance. Jhamed kept them away from the water’s edge, which was just as well. No one else seemed to notice the dark shape in the sea that tracked their slow journey. It all seemed very surreal to Simon. He struggled to breathe and began to feel very tired. It was soon an effort to keep his eyes open. *It’s like I imagine dying in the snow, falling asleep and gently passing away.* It took a kick up the backside from Jhamed to refocus himself. It was too much effort to complain about it. After they stepped through the

next portal, which was a cave entrance in the crumbling cliffs, he regretted his previous analogy. The wind chill hit him like a knife. The snow glare almost blinded him. He remembered a similar dimension from his earlier journey. He hadn't liked it then and he didn't like it now.

They all took many deep breaths of the cold, fresh air. Taran was the first to speak, shouting against the whistling wind. "I have never felt so depressed in my entire life. There was a heaviness in that realm that weighed me down so much that I wanted to die. It was a world without trees. I could not live without trees."

"It was a terrible place," Dawit agreed. "I fear that it reminded me of the fate of the dwarves. There are echoes of that place in First Delve these days."

"Are we going to stay here and chat until we freeze to death?" Jhamed shouted. "Come on, there's a portal not far from here. It should take us to a dimension where we can rest and eat."

Despite the wind against them and the blowing snow that almost reached blizzard proportions, they moved much more easily here. Simon drew his cloak around him and surged forward, following Jhamed's lead. The chill air quickly blew away the lethargy, to be replaced by a dull aching in his bones. They made good progress and quickly came to the next portal, which made its presence known only by its strange impact on the blowing snow. The snow seemed to take a deviation around the portal, so that there was a small area of clear, shimmering air in the midst of the blizzard. Thankfully, the four companions entered the portal and emerged onto the bank of a beautiful river on a warm summer's day. There was no one around, so they removed their coats and made themselves comfortable on the neatly mown grass.

"We can rest here for a while and have something to eat," Jhamed told them. "We are making good progress."

"I am already lost," Dawit said. "If we were to misplace Jhamed for any reason, we would be lost in the multiverse forever."

"That concerns me too," Taran agreed. "What concerns me more is that we were followed in the snow dimension. I was too befuddled to know whether we were followed in the dead world, but I'm sure that there was a large white shape following us in the snow. Did anyone else see it?"

"It was probably a snow bear." Jhamed's statement was firmly put and clearly meant to end the discussion.

"Well, nothing has followed us through the portal," Simon said. "Let's sunbathe and eat. What is this dimension, Jhamed? How long before we get to Dishley?"

Jhamed looked a bit sheepish. "I haven't been here for a while. It should be safe enough; it's a dimension where Law holds sway. Let's eat."

They unpacked some of their provisions and set up a very pleasant picnic on the manicured lawn. Behind them swans and ducks floated on the easy-flowing river. Simon lay back in the sun and

daydreamed. *I remember a picnic by the Yarra when I was a child. Mum bought hot chicken and fresh baked bread. We played cricket afterwards.* He was raised from his reverie by the sound of jackboots. Before the four friends could do anything, a group of soldiers, two abreast, marched into view along the concrete path adjacent to the lawn. They were smartly dressed in identical black uniforms and carried weapons that looked to Simon like old-fashioned muskets, such as he had seen in museums. Their leader barked a command in a language that Simon didn't understand and the soldiers stopped, wheeled, and faced the picnicking quartet. There were ten soldiers in two rows of five. The front row dropped to their knees. All ten soldiers cocked their muskets and pointed them at the group. The leader shouted something that was obviously directed towards them, but Simon was unable to understand the language.

Jhamed cursed and then whispered instructions to them. "By the Balance, what an idiot! Curse my complacency. Stand very slowly. We are trapped between the soldiers and the river, outnumbered, and out-gunned. Their projectile weapons are primitive but dangerous. They only have one round and then they have to reload. We need a diversion so that we can get back through the portal."

"Wait. I have another plan," Taran whispered. The soldier's leader barked at them again. "Do you see that grove of willow trees by the river bank? If we can make it there, it may provide some sanctuary for us. I feel the trees in this realm. There is a memory of elves here. Willow trees are sometimes evil. I hope these ones turn out to be benign. On my signal, run to the trees in a zigzag pattern. Leave everything behind."

"We still need a diversion, or we risk being shot," Jhamed whispered. As if on cue, a naked man appeared. He ran, more quickly than an Olympic sprinter, between the soldiers and the companions. He zigged and zagged, genitals flapping in the breeze, like a dog running away from the butcher's shop with a stolen link of sausages. He shouted vague obscenities at the soldiers. He raced off along the concrete pathway and the soldiers broke ranks to chase him. As he passed by, Simon noted his impressive physique. *He looks like Adonis.* "Run! Now!" Jhamed shouted.

The four companions rushed to the grove of willow trees as fast as their legs could carry them. Taran began to sing in a silky voice, smooth as creamy mocha coffee, in an ancient language that Simon could not understand. It sounded poetic and melodic. He could almost feel the words evoking ancient memories and emotions inside his head. He could smell the luscious scent of ancient forests, where no human had ever walked. He could hear the joyous noise of elf-children playing in the trees. He could feel the love between elves and trees. He saw, not a grove of gnarled old willow trees, but a huge forest as far as the eye could see. He heard a plea for help, in the spirit of days long past. The willow branches seemed to reach out towards them to welcome them warmly. They rushed into the thicket. At the centre was an old willow, huge and weeping. Its trunk was as thick as several pillar-boxes, rotten and empty. Taran guided them through an opening so that they were inside the hollow trunk. There was room to stand, but it was a tight fit and they were pressed closer together than normal propriety would allow. There was a loud click and a dimming of the light. The hole had closed behind them. They were locked in. Taran continued singing for a while and Simon felt gratitude mixed with unexplained sorrow. Eventually, Taran spoke.

“We are fortunate that Old Man Willow still lives. He is the last one who remembers the old times and the elves. His children and grandchildren, who cluster around him, think he is crazy. He weeps for his loss, for he remembers elven children playing in his branches and singing with him. He says we will be safe here until the sun vanishes. He apologises for the discomfort.”

“Please thank him for his generous hospitality,” Jhamed said. “Your song reawakened memories I thought long forgotten. I visited the Hanging Gardens with my mother and she sang with the One Tree.” He snuffled, and Simon thought he saw tears streaming down Jhamed’s face. “I’m sorry for our predicament. I should have known better. This realm has gone entirely over to Law. It is governed by rules and bureaucracy gone mad. I’m afraid we have just broken about a dozen local by-laws. The penalty for walking on the grass, let alone sitting down and having a picnic, is death. If we are caught, we will be tried, found guilty, sentenced, and executed by firing squad.” Simon was shocked. *Executed for walking on the grass! What sort of crazy world is this?* Jhamed continued. “We were fortunate that our well-endowed friend was nearby. We will wait for cover of darkness and then sneak away to the next portal. Try to get some sleep, if you can.”

“Sleep! Sleep! Are you crazy?” Dawit exclaimed. “What happens when they give up chasing the naked man, or catch him, and come back for us? Who is he, anyway? We have been followed throughout our journey. I’m beginning to think it’s you who is senile, not Manfred. It cannot be coincidence that he was there when we needed him. I can’t spend half a day inside a tree. It’s inhumane treatment.”

“I agree with Dawit,” Taran said. “About the naked man,” he added hurriedly. “Someone or something has been following us. It would seem that whoever it is has our interests at heart, at least for the moment. You could learn a lot from an afternoon with Old Man Willow. You are a dwarf; you are used to living in the dark, in a cramped underground mine. Surely inside a tree is not so bad?”

Dawit muttered something incomprehensible as Jhamed butted in. “They will not come for us today. They might come back, keep watch, and demand our surrender. They cannot step on the grass without falling foul of their own laws. They need the requisite paperwork completed before they do so. It will take at least a day to get it all approved by the magistrate. Relax and rest, we will leave at sunset.”

“When all this is over, I will take you to see the caverns in First Delve. Then you will understand that life underground is not all cramped darkness. They will astound you. I guarantee it.” Dawit was still fretting about Taran’s remark.

“I look forward to the day when we have the time and the freedom to do so. I will gladly go with you, if you will also visit Eden with me to see the Hanging Gardens and the One Tree. After you have heard the song, you will never be the same again. Listen carefully to Old Man Willow, he has but a vague memory of the song, but he will sing to us now.”

The next thing Simon was aware of was a loud click, as the tree opened up and the four companions stumbled outside into the darkness, partly illuminated by a rising half-moon. *Where*

did the afternoon go? I must have fallen asleep. He remembered Dawit and Taran arguing about the merits of their homes. Then Old Man Willow had started to sing. It had been like listening to a summer breeze sighing through the boughs. There had been no discernible words, but like Taran's song, it had evoked feelings, good feelings. He had been transported to a time long past, when the world was young and life was simple. He now felt as rested as after the best night's sleep on a feather bed, as full as if he had just enjoyed a banquet, and as happy as if he had just lost his virginity – until he thought about it. *Damn, that feeling didn't last long. When will it happen for me?* There was no one around, so the companions collected up their belongings and quietly crept away. Taran sang a song of thanks to Old Man Willow. Simon thought he felt a wave of gratitude flow back in return. "He will die happy now," Taran said. "We were well met, this day."

The next part of the journey passed in a bit of a blur. Simon was preoccupied. He was analysing events and coming to a realisation. At some point, there would be a "ching." He thought about Old Man Willow and his song. Once, that dimension had been a wonderful place to live. Now its inhabitants must live in fear and tyranny. Walking on the grass brought a penalty of death, how could people live like that? Yet it was a world where Law ruled, not Chaos. Jhamed had once said that Hitler represented Law. Simon had wondered then whether that meant Churchill had represented Chaos. He realised that it wasn't a case of black and white; everything was shades of grey. For society to be successful and fair to everyone it needed a balance between Law and Chaos. Law didn't represent "good"; it stood for order. Chaos didn't represent "evil"; it symbolised anarchy. Churchill didn't support anarchy; he battled for balance. Democracy, for all its faults, was an attempt at securing balance. The fanatical religious zealots in his world, whether they were fundamentalist Christians or Jihad Islamists were just two different faces of absolute Law. If that were the case, then where did evil come in? Which side did Gadiel favour? All humans, and he supposed all elves and dwarves too, were born with the capacity for both good and evil. Evil was not restricted to either Law or Chaos, it was all pervading. *Ching.* Everyone had a choice. Hitler probably wasn't totally evil. Churchill must have had some evil in him. Was the bombing of Dresden really necessary or was it just an evil act of revenge? The victors write the history books and take the moral high ground. Everyone has a choice. He had a choice. *I will take up the Sword. I will use it only for good. I will use it to serve the Balance.*

Simon wasn't sure how much time had passed while he had been cogitating. He was vaguely aware of them walking long distances over a variety of terrains and in a range of weather conditions. It appeared that few realms enjoyed perfect weather. *Strange how the Law dimension had the best weather. I wonder whether it was a coincidence or if their control extended that far?* They had also sat around for long periods while Jhamed had scouted ahead. His companions had respected his need to think and had not disturbed him. Jhamed, no doubt, had seen it all before. Taran was naturally perceptive about such things. Dawit appeared to be lost in his own musings.

Simon felt a great relief. He had come to a decision. He would take control of his own life. He was not a pawn of fate. He sighed and relaxed. Unbidden, words and images came into his mind. He saw the visions again from his dream. *You are close. I can feel you. Come for me. We will be reunited. The Trinity will be renewed. Be careful! The witch is strong. She is stronger than I am. She is stronger than you are. Together, we are stronger than she is. The Trinity will be renewed. Soon we will feast.* Simon felt gnawing hunger. It was unlike anything he had ever felt before.

The tiny red hairs on his body stood on end as he shivered.

Jhamed returned from a scouting mission. Simon took him to one side. "We're close, aren't we?"

"How do you know?" Jhamed asked.

"The Sword has spoken to me." Simon recounted his dream and his recent communication, all except the gnawing hunger. "I think I understand about the Balance now. I am ready to take up my Sword and serve the Balance."

"Excellent!" Jhamed smiled. "I love it when a plan comes together. We'll rest here tonight and a couple more portals will get us to Dishley tomorrow. We'll need a plan to tackle the witch."

They were in a dimension where either Chaos or Sergeant Pepper appeared to be in control. They spent the night sheltered under tall, purple-leaved trees. A full green moon cast an eerie light that battled with the red glow from their fire. The resulting yellow light illuminated a number of inquisitive forest creatures which came to stare at the travellers. They looked like some form of lemur, except that they had two heads, which continually chattered and tried to pull their body in different directions. At one point they started and rushed off back to their burrows or up into the trees. All except one, which hid by the travellers' packs. The cause of their alarm sauntered into view. It was white, albino perhaps but there was not enough light to tell for sure. It was as big as an elephant, but it more closely resembled a lion. Its huge, shaggy head had a gaping maw, filled with razor sharp teeth. This was a predator close to the top of the food chain. *I hope it's not hungry, or we will be on its menu.*

Taran and Dawit were on their feet in an instant. Taran notched an arrow to his bow. Dawit wielded his axe. The elephant sniffed the air, stopped, and looked at them. It stood tall and let out a roar that would have done the Melbourne Cricket Ground proud on Grand Final Day. All the night noises of the forest stopped. Simon stopped breathing. Taran made ready to loose his arrow. The creature gave them another disdainful look and then sauntered off. Simon released his pent up breath. *Phew, that was close, must have already eaten.* The two-headed lemur-like creature chattered excitedly to itself and helped itself to some biscuits from one of the packs.

Dawit and Taran took turns to keep watch. They insisted that Simon and Jhamed sleep since they were unarmed and would have a big day ahead of them. Simon slept fitfully. His dreams were full of hideous crones with black cats and ravens. The witches stirred huge cauldrons and concocted potions, which they force-fed him to make him reveal the location of his Sword. He tried to refuse, but they were truth serums and he could not resist. The witches found his Sword and used it to kill all of his friends. The Sword ate their souls and then the witches ate their bodies.

Simon woke in a cold sweat. The moon had gone. Jhamed was snoring softly and the fire was low. Reflected in the faint firelight, Simon saw four eyes watching him. They were small, yellow eyes; animal eyes, yet they shone with the fiercest intelligence that he had ever seen. The two-headed lemur creature had seated itself on the group's food and sat watching Simon. Simon deliberately blinked his eyes to try to clear them of sleep. He could have sworn that the creature had winked at him, with both heads at the same time. *If I didn't know better, I'd reckon we'd all*

taken LSD or something. The creature chattered to itself. Words formed in Simon's head. *Remember Vasek. Only Vasek can control the Sword. Beware Fleischaker! It consumes the souls of friends as well as enemies.* The two-headed lemur creature gave him another two winks and skittered off into the forest. Simon slept again. When he awoke, he wasn't sure whether he had dreamt everything.

Tamarlan

The four companions were too tired to explore the First Delve very far. They carefully descended a wide rock stair to the second level. Gamyng, who was familiar with the layout, led them to some guest quarters. They found made-up beds and large jugs of water, as if guests were expected. Manfred and Kris made themselves comfortable while Gamyng took Aglaral to find sustenance.

Manfred was extremely tired and found it difficult to keep his eyes open. He watched Kris through half-closed eyelids. The bard was curled up on his bed, in the foetal position again. *Who is he? What role is he playing? What should I do with him?* “Is there anything that you need to tell me, Kris?” The bard just whimpered and curled himself up tighter. *I cannot trust him. I must stay awake until Gamyng and Aglaral return.*

When Gamyng and Aglaral returned about twenty minutes later, they found both Kris and Manfred asleep. “Do you think we should wake them?” Aglaral asked.

“We’d better, Manfred needs to eat. We need him at full strength. As for the coward, I couldn’t care less.”

“There may be an explanation for his actions. I prefer to extend the concept of innocent until proven guilty,” Aglaral declared.

“He was condemned out of his own mouth, as far as I’m concerned. When we get to Tamarlan, I intend to prosecute him to the fullest extent of the law.”

“That is as it should be. Let’s give him the benefit of the doubt until then. But keep a wary eye on him at all times,” Aglaral said.

“Agreed, my friend. You fought well today. I am proud to have had the honour to stand beside you in battle. I fear that there may be many more battles ahead of us. I would be proud to have you join the elite Tamarlan Palace Guard. I would have someone I trust to watch my back in the battles ahead.”

“I am honoured, my Lord. Despite everything, I remain a Captain of the City States in the current service of Elannort. My family remains at risk in the south. I am cast on the seas of fate. Let us wait to see which shore I am cast upon next.”

Gamyng nodded and moved to wake up Manfred and Kris. He gently nudged the old wizard, but was much rougher when he shook the sleeping bard. The two men sat up and listened to Gamyng’s report.

“As you suspected, the halls are empty. Where the dwarves have gone, I do not know. Although times were hard, there was no talk of leaving when I was here recently and Dawit said nothing at the Council that would hint at where they might be. There was no evidence that they went south, so I must assume that they have gone to Tamarlan. I fear that so many hungry mouths will not be

welcomed there. Whatever happened, it is clear that they left in a hurry. Tables are set for a meal. Half-eaten food remains on the plates. Clothes are scattered about. Chairs are knocked over in the rush to leave. We neither saw nor heard any evidence that an enemy has been here or is still present. We have collected food and beer. We should eat and rest. We can explore further tomorrow.”

The weary travellers feasted on stale bread, dried meat strips, last year’s soft crinkly apples, and mugs of foaming ale. Gamyng and Aglaral chattered about the fight with the wargs and what they had seen exploring the delve. Kris sat quietly, nibbling slowly on a strip of dried meat. Manfred savoured the dwarven ale and observed the scene, while his mind was busy on other matters. At last, he spoke.

“I have probed the delve, right down to the lowest levels. There is no one living here, other than ourselves. I cannot fathom it. Something or someone must have precipitated this, but I can feel no trace. I cannot believe that they would head for Tamarlan. I have probed as far as I can, but I cannot feel the dwarves. They may no longer be in this dimension. I wish I had Jhamed here; there may be a hidden dimension portal in the delve. At least we can sleep safe tonight. Tomorrow we must try to get to Tamarlan. Tamarlan is nervous, but safe. Let us rest now. I for one am exhausted. Let’s snuff the torches; we will have need of them tomorrow.”

“With your leave, my Sage, Aglaral and I will take turns to keep watch. We will keep one torch alight.” Gamyng cast a furtive glance at Kris as he spoke.

“As you wish, Gamyng. I’m afraid I am too tired to take my turn. Make sure you both get some rest.” Manfred rolled onto his bunk, pulled a blanket over himself, and was snoring within a few moments. Kris pulled a blanket over his head to hide from Gamyng’s accusing eyes. Aglaral snuffed out all but one of the torches. The delve settled into quiet darkness, broken only by the ripples of light from the flickering torch and the burbles of Manfred’s snores that seemed to resonate with the flickers.

Gamyng woke them a few hours later. It was still several hours before dawn outside. Aglaral was absent. They quickly attended to their morning ablutions and broke their fasts on the remains of the previous night’s provisions. Aglaral returned, laden with new torches, filled water bottles and more provisions. Gamyng took charge.

“Listen carefully. We are going to descend deep into the delve. There is a secret back door that will take us out onto the Tamarlan Road. We will avoid the Suicide Pass by taking this route. We must leave now if we are to make Tamarlan before nightfall. There will be new torches positioned at intervals along the way. Always carry two torches, one lit and another new one, which you must light before the first one expires. Do not discard your used torch. As soon as you reach a torch station, take a new torch and leave your used one there. Take up your packs. I’m sorry Manfred; there will be many stairs to descend.” *Just my luck. I was hoping for a long lie in and breakfast in bed.*

Gamyng led them through the delve with confident certainty. It took them several hours, with frequent brief rest stops. In the course of their journey, they descended through so many levels

that Manfred lost count. The immense size of Dwarvenhome became apparent to them all. They caught only the briefest of glimpses of the dwarven halls in the flickering light of their torches. The top levels were obviously the living levels, full of accommodation and social rooms. As they descended lower, by vast staircases hewn from the rock, the halls became cavernous. The meagre light from their torches was quickly absorbed by the total blackness. Just occasionally, their lights would reflect off jewelled walls or golden outcrops and they would get a glimpse of the hidden majesty of the caverns.

At one of these glimpses, Aglaral gasped aloud. "It must be a wondrous sight to see these caverns fully illuminated."

Gamyng stopped for a moment. "It is one of the Seven Wonders of the World – Melasurej, the Great Lighthouse at Rhakotis, the Jewelled Caverns of Devil's Mouth, the One Tree and Hanging Gardens at Elvenhome, the Old Theatre at Tamarlan, the Coliseum at Kartage, and the Lost Tower. I have been fortunate enough to see five of them. I hope one day to visit Eden and to be allowed to see the Hanging Gardens. No human in living history has seen the Lost Tower nor knows its location. I would wager that none of them, even Melasurej itself, could hold a candle to these caverns. They are fully lit only on dwarven feast days. They are a sight to behold."

As they descended further, the levels became less cavernous and more like a mining venture with small tunnels and workings. There were piles of rocks awaiting sorting and other piles that seemed to contain great treasures. The light of their torches illuminated the wealth created by generations of toil. There were piles of jewels, sparkling in all the colours of the rainbow. Most of all, there were stacks of gold nuggets. There was enough gold in a single heap to fuel the dreams of every human on the planet. There were piles as far as the eye could make out in the gloom. Surely, there were riches here beyond the dreams of avarice. Three of the companions appeared to be unaffected by the riches before them. Kris, on the other hand, couldn't believe his eyes, which widened with lust. He managed to manoeuvre himself to be last in the line and orchestrated a stumble that put him out of sight of the rest of the group. Taking his chance, he stuffed his pockets with as much gold as he could fit in. As he hurried to catch up with the others, he struggled to deal with the excess weight he was carrying.

As they got deeper under the mountain, the temperature changed. At first the air was at a pleasant temperature and very fresh to breathe. There was a gentle breeze blowing through the caverns from some form of natural ventilation system. In the lower levels, the air was damp and fetid. Condensation ran down the walls and rivulets ran along the roughly hewn rock floors of the passages. They began to feel a bone chilling cold that was worse than the cold on the mountain because it was so damp and cloying. Manfred began to wheeze and his breathing became laboured. "Curse my rheumatic old bones!" he moaned.

"Don't worry, old man, we'll soon be out in the fresh air again," Gamyng told him. "We are about to enter a tunnel that will take us to the secret entrance. It is very small, so it might be a tight squeeze. It was built for dwarves and to slow down humans if they found the passage and tried to gain entry. There is a mechanism at this end to collapse the tunnel on top of any invaders should the door be breached. It's about five miles long, so it will be a tough walk or crawl. There's a door at the end. It's sealed with magic. I couldn't open it when I tried to come the other

way, so I had to climb Suicide Pass. I'm sure you'll be able to open it. You go first and I'll bring up the rear. We'll travel at your pace."

Sure enough, they found the entrance to the tunnel almost immediately. It was built for a dwarf to walk with difficulty, with head bowed and carrying an axe. This meant it was no more than four feet high, although reasonably wide, perhaps six feet. The floor was very smooth, as if many people had passed this way over the years and had dragged wagons behind them. It seemed that this route might be the preferred way to trade with Tamarlan. Manfred muttered something profane under his breath. "As if my old bones haven't been through enough; now you want me to crawl for five miles? And what if I can't open the door?" *Of course, I will be able to.*

"You will, old man. You are not called The Magician for nothing. And if you can't it will be five miles back again, climb all those stairs we came down, and a descent through Suicide Pass. Any more questions? Let's get going."

"Wait!" Aglalar stopped them. "There must be a better way. Wait here for a moment." He disappeared into the darkness but reappeared a few minutes later dragging a flat trolley with small wheels. "There are more of these over there. The dwarves must use them for moving trading goods through the tunnel. Get one each and we can lie down and use our legs to push us through the tunnel."

Quickly the group assembled its convoy of small wagons. Manfred led the way, Aglalar second, Kris behind him, and Gamyng brought up the rear. There were torch holders on the wagons, which allowed them to see what they were doing and freed their hands so that they could hold on to the rough wood. They legged it down the tunnel, like old canal barge travellers passing through a cutting. Fortunately, the tunnel sloped slightly down towards the door. The floor was very smooth and the wheels on the trolleys were well oiled, so friction was not great. Even so, the unusual strain on the legs soon caused discomfort and cramps. *I suppose it is marginally better than crawling. It's certainly better than descending through Suicide Pass. I'll need a long soak in a hot bath when we reach Tamarlan. And a massage from that young blonde I saw last time. Although, she's probably in her dotage by now, passing her time in a rocking chair. Like I should be, instead of having all these crazy adventures. By the Balance, I am tired. If this tunnel collapsed now, I would almost welcome it. No! Get a grip, Manfred, your work is not yet done. The greatest challenge still lies ahead. Simon will depend on you.*

Aglalar was young and fit and he found it relatively easy to keep up with Manfred's pace. In fact, he had to be careful not to go too fast and bump into the wizard's trolley. The monotony of the journey caused his mind to wander. He thought about his family, and worried again whether Velacourt would keep his word. He was torn between serving Manfred, joining Gamyng, and rushing back home. *Why have the fates cast me in this important part? I'm a simple soldier. What have I to offer?* The answer came unbidden into his mind. *You have always understood the need for balance in everything. You believe in fairness and everyone getting an equal opportunity. You abhor evil in all its forms, whether chaos driven or inflicted by law. You are a man of the Balance.*

Kris was just the right build for walking in the tunnel but he found it very uncomfortable on his

wagon. The pockets of his coat were stuffed full of gold nuggets and however he tried to position himself, they dug into his body. His short legs had to stretch to their limits to reach the wall. At each push, he squirmed in pain as the gold bruised his body. *I will look like a chessboard after this. But what a story it will make. Provided that I can rewrite the bit involving the wargs.* Just the memory of the events in the hut made him shiver with fear. He forced himself to think of better things. *I have enough gold to live comfortably for the rest of my life. I will find a nice place in Tamarlan and live a comfortable life – good food, fine wine, beautiful women. I'll write a few stories and perform at the Old Theatre. I have done my bit. I have found my reward. If only He will leave me alone.*

Gamyng easily maintained the pace he needed to stay with the others. He was a man at the peak of his life, ready for the challenges that the forthcoming war would throw at him. If he really thought about it, he had enjoyed the battle with the wargs. Victory was sweet. He was a warrior at heart. *Tamarlan must be protected at all costs. The Sword must come north. How can a puny boy wield such a sword? It needs a warrior. A warrior like me!* That chain of thought was leading into dangerous waters. He changed tack and reviewed his journey and what he had achieved. Soon he would be home again and would need to report to his father in a concise manner. There would be much to recount. His father would be pleased that he had brought Manfred with him. He would be even more pleased were the Sword to come too. *If we had the Sword, Tamarlan would be a real power in the world. No one would threaten us again.*

It took them about ninety minutes to traverse the tunnel. At the far end, the tunnel widened somewhat into a small chamber at the door. They came to a bumpy halt in a collision of trolleys, door, legs, and curses. No one was seriously injured, because Manfred, by now, was travelling at a very gentle speed. The door itself looked very strong. It was built from sturdy oak, now black with age, with in-built iron reinforcements. It had no handle and no visible lock. The sound of rushing water could be heard from the other side.

Manfred gingerly extracted himself from the wreckage and used his torch to get a better look at the detail. “You are correct, Gamyng. This door has a magic lock. There are dwarfish runes on the lintel. I will need a short time to decipher them; my ancient dwarfish is rather rusty.” The others stretched their legs and inspected their bruises while Manfred paced and considered. *Come on, Magician. They are expecting great things from you. Concentrate.* After several minutes, he stopped pacing and addressed them, with an appropriate degree of solemnity. “The translation of the runes is as follows. ‘If you are a true friend of the dwarves speak the name of our god, pass in peace, and return safe and sound.’ It is a simple lock, requiring only the speaking of the word Satania, in ancient dwarfish.” He turned around, facing the door and in a strong clear voice uttered a phrase that sounded like ‘Bahl Shamim’.” Nothing happened. *Bugger! That should have worked.* He spoke the words again. There was no response. He stared at the door for some time. “I am confident that I have interpreted the runes correctly. I cannot explain why the door hasn’t opened.”

The others looked at Manfred in consternation. The thought of the return journey to the top of the mountain was not one to contemplate with pleasure. They shuffled around aimlessly in the flicker of the torch light. The sound of rushing water, so close to them, only made their predicament more acute.

“Can the door be broken down or opened any other way?” Aglaral asked.

“There is strong magic here. It is old magic, older than wizards. There is no way that this door can be breached. I don’t understand it. I have spoken the words correctly.” Manfred was bemused.

“Tell me what the runes say again,” Gamyng said.

“If you are a true friend of the dwarves speak the name of our god, pass in peace, and return safe and sound,” Manfred translated again.

“So it is conditional,” Gamyng stated. “The door will only open for true friends of the dwarves. I am well known here as a dwarf friend. Manfred’s credentials go without saying. I would wager my life that the magic would recognise Aglaral as a true dwarf friend, despite the fact that he has only ever met one dwarf in his life. That leaves you Kris.” He stared at the bard and his eyes were daggers cutting into his soul. “Are you a true dwarf friend?” He drew his sword.

Kris dropped his eyes. He couldn’t meet Gamyng’s gaze. He said nothing. The silence was only momentary but it seemed to drag on forever. The only sounds were the beating of four hearts and the water noise coming through the sealed door.

Eventually Manfred spoke. “Act not in anger, Gamyng. There is something going on with Master Kris. I had hoped to resolve it in Tamarlan after we were well rested. If you have nothing to say, then I shall be forced to read your mind. I warn you that if you resist me, it may cause permanent damage.”

Kris spoke hurriedly. “That won’t be necessary, Manfred. I admit to my crime. It is one of greed, driven only by the want to have a secure and peaceful life.” He began to remove the gold nuggets from his pockets and stacked them by the wall of the alcove. “It appears that I have suffered the bruises of carrying these treasures for nothing. I shall live with the regret of what might have been for the rest of my miserable life.” As the last nugget left his pocket, the door began to swing open with a groan. They were momentarily blinded by the sunlight and closed their eyes in response. Kris moved to sneak the last nugget back into his pocket, but hesitated and placed it with the rest.

“Hah!” Gamyng snorted. “So it is theft is it? Don’t think that this lets you off. Your behaviour with the wargs is fresh in my memory.” He sheathed his sword. “Manfred will have that conversation with you in Tamarlan and if you cannot adequately vouch for yourself, I will see that justice is served, one way or another.” The threat hung in the air, like thunder on a humid summer day. “Come, let us leave these dark halls and breathe fresh air and feel sunlight on our faces again.”

As their eyes adjusted to the light, they realised that the door exited onto a rock platform that was completely hidden by a cascading waterfall directly in front of them. The stream was generated from the melting ice and snow in the mountains above so it was particularly strong. The cold

spray struck their faces with a refreshing vigour. The noise from the falls was now so strong that they could not speak to each other. The door slammed shut behind them. It was indistinguishable on this side from the grey rock of the cliff face. Without prior knowledge, there was no way of knowing there was a door there. Gamyng tapped them on their shoulders to attract their attention and led them off along the ledge parallel to the falls. At the edge of the ledge, there was a hole cut into the rock face. They stepped through the hole, pushing aside thick branches on the other side and stepped out onto a mountain track. Gamyng carefully replaced the flora to disguise the entrance and then led them down the track. A steep descent took them quickly to the base of the falls, where they stopped to catch their breaths and take bearings.

In front of them, the jagged teeth of the Devil Mountains bit into the clear blue sky. The sun was almost directly overhead. The falls dropped in a single cascade of well over one thousand feet, through a rainbow-fringed cloud of spray into a large, clear pool. They had descended a small, steep path to the left of the falls. On their right was a larger, well-worn path that zigged and zagged as far as the eye could see. It led to the infamous Suicide Pass. Behind them, a path, wide enough for a horse and cart to pass another with comfort, gently descended to the plains below. The plains were alive with new grass and wild flowers, a lush carpet of green, white, mauve and gold. In the distance, the spire of Tamarlan was visible in the haze.

Gamyng laughed. "Spring has finally arrived, north of the mountains, and it is a welcome sight to a homesick man. We call this waterfall Life Falls, because the stream that flows from it is the Life Stream that provides the water supply for Tamarlan. The dwarves call it Warning Falls, because it marks the boundary to their realm. Any who pass here must be dwarf friends or suffer the consequences. The path from here leads to the very steep and exceedingly difficult climb of Suicide Pass. It was good that we avoided it. It was so named after the failed attack on Devil's Mouth by Gadiel's army in 11144. The Dark God's soldiers had enormous superiority in numbers but became so dispirited by their failure to make headway against a small defence force of dwarves that many of them, rather than face the Dark God's wrath, threw themselves off the mountainside. Come, we will make great headway now. We will find transport when we reach the plains and will be in Tamarlan before nightfall. We will feast in my father's court tonight." Manfred's stomach was already rumbling in anticipation. *It will be good to see my old friend Gamyon again.*

Buoyed by the beauty of the plains, the relative ease of the rest of the journey, and the prospect of a warm bath and a hot meal, the weary travellers found renewed energy in their legs. The rest of the descent went without a hitch and they were soon walking briskly through sweet smelling fields of grasses and wild flowers. Kris appeared to be susceptible to hay fever, because he was soon repeatedly sneezing and wheezing. Gamyng's smile just got wider and brighter.

After a few miles, they found the first of many farmhouses. The entire family was at work in the fields, making up for lost time. At the sight of the unexpected travellers, the women and children were ushered back to the house and the men and youths called their dogs and approached the group with pitchforks and scythes at the ready. Their demeanour changed instantly when they recognised Gamyng. They dropped to their knees and showed great respect to their Heir-Regent. The group was welcomed warmly. While the youths readied a horse wagon, the women fussed around preparing a meal of fresh bread and cheese washed down with mead. Manfred patted his

stomach and sighed. *That was the best bread and cheese of my long life.* He burped loudly and was not at all embarrassed.

The rest of the day passed in a blur for Manfred, probably because he spent most of it dozing in the back of the wagon. Aglaral drove the wagon with Gamyng sitting up front with him. Kris snivelled in the back with Manfred. The road followed the course of the Life Stream. They passed many farms and received similar receptions to the first. They respectfully declined all further offers of hospitality with the need to reach Tamarlan utmost in their minds.

Manfred woke up as they approached the city. It was always a fine sight, entering the city of artists. Tamarlan sat in the middle of the northern plains, like a fancy jewel set in the middle of an otherwise unembellished brooch. The plains were extensively farmed and provided food not only for the city but also to trade with the dwarves for their gold and gemstones. These treasures were used both for artistic purposes and to trade for other goods and services the city needed. Its geographic location meant that trade was very difficult and only possible when the mountain passes were open in summer. It also meant that Tamarlan, over the long years, had become totally self-sufficient. It had become a haven for those seeking to escape the world for whatever reasons, but particularly it had become a haven for artists of all persuasions. Manfred had visited the city many times and always enjoyed his stays. He liked visiting the theatre to see the latest plays and the art galleries to view the works of the city's fine artists both past and present. Manfred craned his neck to see more of the city as they approached.

It was an unusual sight for a city in the middle of nowhere. There were no city walls, no ramparts, in fact no defences of any sort. The streets were wide and tree-lined. The trees were mainly deciduous and they were now just bursting into leaf. Apple and cherry trees were coming into blossom. The city seemed to be renewing itself after a long, hard winter. The houses were single storey, made of local stone and brick. Housewives were busy with spring-cleaning. The city's industry and quarries were located to the north, on the edge of the inhospitable and mysterious Northland, so that the approach from the south was unsullied. At the centre of the city stood the ancient precincts. Here was Tamarlan's heart. Cobbled streets wound through the great market and past many art galleries, theatres, and meeting venues. People hustled and bustled about their business. Large, colourful signs proclaimed forthcoming shows and displays. At the centre of everything were two human-built mounds. The Life Stream flowed between the mounds and an ornate stone bridge crossed the river and joined the two mounds. On one stood the ancient palace of the kings, now occupied and maintained by the Regent. As palaces go, it was an unprepossessing place. Its one striking feature was its high tower, made of local stone that stretched skywards in phallic symbolism. On the other mound stood one of the Seven Wonders of the World – The Old Theatre.

Manfred found his eyes drawn to the Theatre Mound, clearly the reason why the palace had such a plain design. Manfred had seen it many times before, but each renewed impression always generated a gasp of surprise, even in an ancient wizard who thought he had seen everything. The Old Theatre was a circular construction, or as near to circular as the original carpenters could manage. It was perhaps two hundred feet in diameter and one hundred feet high. It had been constructed from timber originally, but over the years, the rotting wood had been replaced with granite from the mountains. From the outside, there was no visible evidence of what artistic

delights its interior held. Its most striking feature was that by some feat of engineering or magic it appeared to hover, unsupported in mid-air, one hundred feet above the mound. Viewed from the correct angle, with the palace spire behind it, the Old Theatre gave the impression of an enormous child's spinning top.

Under Gamyng's instruction, Aglaral guided the wagon into the palace courtyard, where they were met by a fussing crowd of retainers. One spoke urgently to Gamyng, who took Manfred aside. "I regret that we cannot take time to rest and freshen up. My father would speak with you urgently in the council chamber. Aglaral and Kris will be shown their quarters. I have ordered that a guard be placed on Kris's door until such time as we have got to the bottom of his actions."

Gamyng strode into the palace, with Manfred beside him, hurrying to keep up. He led Manfred through wide, carpeted corridors decorated with great works of art, until they reached the double doors of the council chamber. A guard opened the doors, ushered them in and announced their presence. A group of people were clustered around the large table, poring over maps. Their chatter was silenced as Gamyng and Manfred entered. One man stood. He was an older version of Gamyng. He was the same build and size, but where Gamyng's hair and beard were jet black, Gamyon's showed flecks of grey. Gamyon's and Gamyng's eyes locked briefly. Manfred observed that much was said without words. Father and son were clearly very close. Gamyon cleared his throat and addressed them. His eyes moved from his son's and locked onto Manfred's. *He has received bad news. He has despair in his eyes, but I see a small glimmer of hope there.*

"Welcome home my son, it is good to see you returned safe and sound. Welcome Great Sage, your visits to Tamarlan are too few. You are always most welcome here. Your timing could not be better. I am at my wits' end. I need your advice and your assistance. The omens are not good. Spring came late. The dwarves have left FirstWorld. Our city is regularly attacked out of Northland. I fear that our peaceful city will fall." He paused and his eyes met his son's again and then began to water with tears. "I fear that Gamyng, my Heir-Regent, will never get his chance to fulfil his destiny. I fear that the time of the Regents draws to an end. You are not the only visitors in Tamarlan. Yesterday, a stranger arrived in mysterious circumstances out of the Northland. He carries the mark of Ubadah. The King has returned."

Trinity Renewed

Remember Vasek. Only Vasek can control the Sword. Beware Fleischaker! It consumes the souls of friends as well as enemies. The words stayed with Simon. He refrained from discussing them with Jhamed. *He'll think I'm crazy. It was just a dream.*

After a hurried breakfast, they left the purple forest behind them. The rest of the journey only took a couple of hours. They passed through three nondescript dimensions and avoided all human contact. Jhamed halted them before a shimmering portal in the middle of a pine forest. "This doorway leads to the dungeons of Dishley. It is a grim place, as Simon well knows. We need a plan to deal with the witch. I have been wracking my brains, but I have not come up with anything."

Simon stepped forward. "When we get to the dungeon, we will find Juliana. She worked for Freda, so she will know her way around the castle. Dawit, you will use the explosive we brought with us to blow the doors of the prison. We will release the prisoners, which will cause a diversion. You three will remain in the dungeon to secure our escape. Juliana and I will find a way into Freda's treasure room, where she must hold the Sword. It will call me and help me to find it. We will give the guards a chance to stand down or join us. There will be no killing unless absolutely necessary and in self-defence. Is that clear?"

Taran and Dawit stared at Simon, open-mouthed. Jhamed laughed. "The Hero has arrived. Not before time, I might add. We are at your command, my lord."

Simon wasn't sure whether Jhamed spoke earnestly or was poking fun at him. He stepped into the portal, taking the lead for the first time. The now familiar stench of fouled humanity assailed his nostrils immediately. The pitiful sights of the dungeon disturbed his vision soon afterwards. Nothing much had changed in the dungeons of Dishley. Amongst the whimpers and moans of the residents, he heard strong cursing from Dawit and Taran, who had been unprepared for the experience.

"What hell hole have you brought me to?" Taran demanded as the tide of human effluent retreated from their unexpected presence.

"Animals deserve better than this," Dawit spluttered, trying to avoid breathing too deeply. A rat ran across the floor in front of him and twenty pairs of hands tried to grab it. It eluded their grasp; it wouldn't be dinner tonight.

"You'll get used to it," Simon told them. He grabbed the nearest wretch of a man and looked down at him, square in the eyes. "Where is Juliana? Do you know who I mean?"

"Yes, my lord." The man straightened himself and stood upright. There was still a hint of human pride in his bearing. When he spoke again, there was a hint of hope and excitement in his voice. "I was here when you dealt with Dring. Have you come back to free us? Has the time finally come?"

Simon immediately regretted his initial harsh questioning. He smiled at the man and spoke in a kindly tone. “Yes, my friend. The time has finally come. Say nothing to anyone yet, but find Juliana and bring her here. Tell her that Si Si Simon has returned and she will trust you. Can I trust you?”

Unexpectedly, the man grinned, showing a mouth full of black teeth. “You can trust me, my lord. I offer you everything I have, which is only my life. I will do as you instruct.” He backed away, bowing, and then turned and hurried off, pushing and elbowing past the shattered wrecks of men and women who were in his way.

Taran and Dawit drew their weapons and established a perimeter, with the smooth wall of the cave at their backs. They cleared enough room so that Simon and Jhamed had space to stack their packs and sit down on the sandy floor to wait. Their arrival had generated enormous interest and a crowd gathered. People pushed and jostled to get to the front. Eyes were gouged and brittle bones were broken in the crush. Dawit had to threaten them with his axe to get them to stand back. He scratched a line in the sand with his foot. “Cross this line and you shall feel the mercy of my axe on your wretched skulls! Stay behind the line and you shall be freed this day.” The crowd eyed his axe and chattered nervously. Everyone stayed behind the line.

Simon was lost in his thoughts. The dungeon and the people seemed to be in a mist. Everything was a blur. He vaguely heard Dawit’s orders to the crowd. His focus though was in his mind. He was close to the Sword now and it was aware of him. It filled his mind with images. There was so much information that Simon could only grasp snatches of it. He saw a great warrior. There was a huge battle, with much death and bloodshed. He felt warm, bloated, and happy. Another figure was there, he was dark and cowed. They fought. Now the dark figure held a still-beating heart in his hand and he threw back his head and laughed. Simon saw his face. Even though he laughed, it was expressionless. It was pure white, unmarked by beard or blemish, by eyebrow or lash. The eyes were black as coal and showed no emotion. There was coldness in those eyes, colder than the heart of a glacier. Then Simon felt absolute coldness and saw the actual heart of a glacier, and even though it chilled him to the marrow it was like a blacksmith’s furnace compared with those eyes. He felt a momentary flash of hope as he saw the faces of humans, only to be dashed to despair when he saw the face of a hideous crone, with hooked nose and rotten teeth who cackled and mocked. He felt hope renewed and he knew he was the bearer of that hope. *Come for me. I am ready. Together we shall be invincible. I am so weak. I must feed soon.* Simon shivered with cold and felt so weak that, had he not been sitting down, he would surely have collapsed. The crowd buzzed and jostled, but they were but vague murmurs and shadows in the fog. He didn’t know how he could go on. He couldn’t even stand up.

The fog parted. The crowd and his friends remained hidden in the mist. Yet, out of the fog, a figure walked, clear as on a sunny day. She was the most beautiful girl that he had ever set his eyes upon. She was tall and slim, with a tiny waist and small breasts that were falling out of a simple red gown. It had once been a beautiful dress, but now it hung in rags. Her hair was long, straight, and jet-black. When he had last seen her, it had been clean and perfumed. Now it hung in lank, greasy strands. It still framed an elfin face of such pure beauty that it made his heart lurch. Her eyes were the purest blue, shining like jewels against the milky whiteness of her skin – still evident even amongst the brown stains. Her lips were still voluptuous, despite their lack of rouge and the dry

cracks that crossed them. Around her neck, she wore a simple necklace with a small silver locket, that he knew contained a lock of Manfred's hair. Simon's heart lurched. He felt such love and joy as he had never known before. The fog cleared and he jumped to his feet and took Juliana in his arms. He held her tightly as if he never wanted to let go. "I have come back for you." He sobbed into her hair. *No! You have come back for me! She is nothing. We are the Trinity.* Simon could not understand why he felt a sudden pang of jealousy.

There was a new confidence about Simon. He didn't know where it had come from, but he liked the feeling. Taran and Dawit seemed to treat him with much more respect. Jhamed was still Jhamed, but he seemed to be happy about it. Juliana melted into his arms. He liked that feeling. He wanted to tell her how much he loved her, but decided that must wait until later. He stood tall and addressed the crowd. "My friends; please listen to me. I am Simon the Red." *Where the hell did that come from? I like it!* "My friends and I have come to free you and release you from the yoke of the Witch Queen. Will you help us?" For a brief moment, there was silence as the words sank in. Just as Simon was beginning to worry, he was overwhelmed by a cacophony of sound. The crowd yelled and screamed its support. It took all of his effort to quieten them again.

"We must do this with the minimum of violence. We will try to convince the guards not to fight us. When you are released, head away from the jail. Stay hidden until we have dealt with Freda." The crowd seemed shocked to hear the name uttered without reverence or title. Simon had just committed a blasphemy punishable by death. "When I give the word, you must create a disturbance to distract the guards while we deal with the gate. Stay silent until then. May the Balance be with you and may your future repay the debt that is owed for such inhumane treatment."

He checked with Dawit, Taran, and Jhamed that they knew their roles. He couldn't afford to delay the crowd for too long. He whispered to Juliana. "Can you guide me to Freda's treasure room?" She nodded and kissed him on the cheek. Simon blushed, but it felt so good. *Come for me!* The voice in his head was urgent. *I am coming, be patient.* "Let's go!" He shouted and the crowd surged forward.

The next few minutes were a chaotic scramble. The crowd surged to one end of the open bars that separated the dungeon from the outside world. There they began to make mayhem that brought the four guards on duty to find out what was going on. Meanwhile, Dawit managed to place a charge in the lock of the rusty gate. The explosion took out the gate as well as the lock and sent many of the crowd sprawling as well as the four guards. By the time the guards had regained their feet they were confronted by an elf with a sword and a dwarf with an axe, who offered them surrender or death. They obviously liked their odds because they chose to fight. Unfortunately for them, they seriously misjudged their opponents and their mistake proved fatal. Two died from stab wounds to the heart. Two were decapitated by a dwarven axe. Simon, weaponless as he was, led the group up a long, sloping corridor towards the surface. The crowd jostled behind them, eager to taste freedom. They were confronted by another locked iron gate and a roomful of soldiers beyond.

The Captain of the Guard stepped forward. "Return to your dungeon immediately and you will be allowed to live. Hesitate for but an instant and you will all die." He had a loud commanding

voice that spoke of long experience and demanded respect.

“I am Simon the Red. I have come to claim what is rightfully mine. I intend to rid your kingdom of the evil witch Freda. Lay down your arms, open this gate and let us pass without hindrance and *you* will be allowed to live. Hesitate for but an instant and you will all die.” Simon barely recognised his own voice. It commanded obedience and absolute respect.

The Captain of the Guard stepped forward until he was touching the bars. He stared into Simon’s eyes and there was unspoken communication. “You realise that no matter how good a group of fighters you are, I have the numbers to defeat you. Your death would be certain. However, I am old enough to remember the time before She came. If you indeed have the power to do as you say, it will be the greatest thing ever to happen to Dishley. I read something in your eyes that, against my better judgement, tells me to believe you.” He turned to his men. “Lay down your arms and let them pass.” There were a few grumbles, but he had their obedience. He unlocked the gate, drew his sword, and laid it at Simon’s feet. “I am your servant, my lord. Be successful or I will be inside the dungeon; if I’m lucky enough to live.”

Simon picked up the sword. “Stay here and make sure these men don’t raise the alarm.” His orders were directed at Jhamed, Taran and Dawit. “Juliana, come with me. We won’t be long. Whatever happens, do not come looking for us. We will see you when this is over.” Simon and Juliana hurried away.

The crowd of escaping prisoners followed them, the lures of freedom, food, and a wash pulling them like an angler’s fly attracts a hungry trout. Only one man remained; the one who had sought out Juliana. “If there is anything I can do to help? I am very grateful for my release. I’m sure the others are too but they are too excited to say so.”

Jhamed looked at him and smiled. “Thank you, my friend. You have already done us a great service. Hurry off now and enjoy your freedom. Prince Christopher will need your help soon enough.” The man bowed low and hurried off. “Now, despite Simon’s new found leadership, there is something I must do or I fear there will be tears before bedtime. Will you pick up a sword and join me, Captain? You two are more than capable of holding the fort here.” Jhamed and the Captain followed Simon and Juliana.

Dawit looked at Taran and shrugged. “Who would have thought it? A dwarf and an elf holding the fort. These are strange days indeed. I had hoped to see the witch.”

“Be careful what you wish for. If Simon is not successful you may see more of her than will be good for you,” Taran said.

Juliana guided Simon through the cold stone corridors of the dungeon. They climbed slowly until they were at ground level, where they stopped to take stock. “The dungeon forms the lower levels of the central tower of the castle. The Queen’s treasure room is at the very top of the tower. We can use the servants’ stairs to get most of the way up there. There is a single stair for the last two floors. Her apartments are on the second top floor. No one is allowed up to the top floor. Someone is coming, quickly, this way.”

They hid behind a wall tapestry as a group of chattering servants passed by and then crept to a door that opened into a narrow stone stairway. The stairs were worn from generations of use and lit only by a faint light from slit windows at regular intervals. Simon hoped that they would not meet anyone on the stairs. He didn't want to have to use the sword he was carrying on innocent people. Fortunately, there was no one around and they climbed steadily. Even so, Simon was out of breath by the time they reached Freda's levels. The higher they got, the more urgent were the demands in Simon's head. He tried to shut them out, to keep his head clear but it was impossible. *Yes, yes, come to me. I am waiting.* Without Juliana leading him, he probably wouldn't have had the wits to find the chamber, such was his distraction. The servants' stairs disgorged them onto a landing. A wide, carpeted stairway lit by wall-mounted oil lamps would take them to Freda's quarters. They paused for a moment and Simon forced his head to clear a little. "What does she look like? How will I recognise her? In my mind, she looks like an ugly old crone."

Juliana looked at Simon. "Oh, no! She is the most beautiful woman in the world."

Simon was confused. He wanted to tell Juliana that, to him, she was the most beautiful woman in the world, even as dirty and ragged as she was now. The noise in his head got too loud again, so he said nothing. *Be careful. She is here. She is waiting for you.* They tentatively climbed the stairs. Again, they saw no one. On the next level, a long carpeted corridor led off to many closed doors. A much smaller, steeper staircase would take them to the top of the tower. Simon hesitated. "Juliana, you don't have to come any further. Wait here for me."

"No. I must see this thing through. I am coming with you. I feel a great bond between us. It is my destiny."

Simon was lost for words. He wanted to tell Juliana that the bond was great indeed, that he loved her, and that he wanted to spend his entire life with her. *It is time. Come for me now. The witch will die. We will feast soon. I have waited so long. Oh yes, we will feast soon.* They climbed the last flight of stairs in silence. At the top they were confronted by a heavy wooden door with a cast iron latch and ring shaped handle. In a fog, Simon grasped the ring and turned. The latch clicked and with a push, the door creaked open.

The room was dark, lit only by two small lamps burning on the walls. Shadows jumped in the flickering light, adding to the eerie stillness. In the centre of the room was a large, simple wooden table. The table seemed out of place. The rest of the room was ornately decorated. The walls contained many mirrors and framed portraits. Several statues were dotted around the room on marble pedestals. In the dim light, they looked like gargoyles. Smaller tables, intricately carved from mahogany, stood against the walls. They contained artefacts big and small – jewels, ornaments, weapons, clothes, armour, even a preserved human head. The plain pine table stood out. It looked like a butcher's block. It was empty except for a sword, the Sword. It was black, except for a blood red ruby embedded in its hilt, which glowed with a faint energy. It was precisely located in the centre of the table, inside a pentagram. One point of the pentagram was located at ninety degrees beneath the Sword. It pointed directly at Simon and Juliana as they entered the room. The pentagram was dark red. A perfect circle, also dark red, enclosed the sword and the pentagram. To the upper left of the sword, an all-seeing eye symbol was keeping

guard. It screeched like an angry magpie protecting its nest. A figure emerged from the shadows in the back of the room. "Be quiet, my lovely, I am here. Hello, Simon, I have been expecting you."

Simon was in a fog again. His head throbbed as if he were having a bad migraine attack. Fleischaker was calling him. Juliana needed his protection. This woman was welcoming him. He blinked through the fog and focussed on the woman. *No! It can't be. She is dead.* "Mother?" was all that he said.

The woman spoke again. "Well, Juliana, it seems that you have not yet learned your lesson." She gestured towards Juliana and the girl was flung through the air, hitting the wall beside the doorway and sliding to the floor in a crumpled heap. "I will deal with you later. Your death will be very slow and exceedingly unpleasant."

Simon was at a loss. How could this woman, who looked like his mother, behave like this? He rushed over to Juliana and held her limp body in his arms. Her eyes flickered open. "I'm alright, Simon. Don't worry about me." She coughed, and a small trickle of blood ran from her mouth. She struggled to sit up and, slowly and painfully, she removed the chain and locket from her neck. "Wear this, Simon. It will help you to see the truth." Simon took the locket and slipped it around his neck. Immediately his head cleared. He heard the words of Manfred the Magician. *Be strong Simon. Fleischaker is rightfully yours. Take up the Sword. Control the Sword.* He gently laid Juliana back on the floor and stood up.

The woman moved into the light. She was middle-aged, neither beautiful nor ugly, slightly overweight with a plain face and long black hair that was showing signs of grey. "Do not hurt Juliana again, witch!" Simon ordered.

"So, you see through my disguise, Simon. It's very useful to make people see the person they most admire or love. It makes them less likely to try to hurt me. You want to hurt me, don't you? I'm afraid that won't be possible. Please put down your sword." Freda's words were syrupy, sickly-sweet but with a hint of a threat to counter the redolence. The witch gestured and Simon felt his arm moving, without his approval, to lower his sword to the floor. He didn't try to resist; after all, he was finished with this sword.

"My spies in the dungeon saw you and your friends arrive. You travel with strange company. I never heard of a dwarf and an elf working together before. Who are you? Why are you here? Do you think that a mere boy can threaten Freda, the most powerful Witch Queen that has ever been? Even two wizards together are no match for me. I will deal with your friends and that mutinous Captain soon enough. First, I would have some sport with you. I will know all of your secrets, one way or another. You seem to have strong feelings for Juliana. I will start by letting you watch me torture her and kill her." She gave a raucous laugh that reminded Simon of the old crone in his visions. "I have no remorse. You are no more to me than that rat, hiding in the corner." The rat scurried into the shadows.

Simon felt a flash of pity for the witch, but it was quickly followed by anger and hatred. He had only ever felt such emotions before when thinking about his stepfather. He stood tall and faced

Freda. The words that he spoke came to him without thinking. He wasn't sure whether it was he or another that spoke them. "I have come for the Sword."

The witch laughed. "You! A puny boy. Two wizards could not even touch it. It is protected by my strongest magic. Don't make me laugh."

"Know you that I am Simon the Red, Everlasting Hero. I come to reclaim what is rightfully mine, taken by deception from Gilgamesh the Great by Gadiel the Dark God. You have no claim on Fleischaker. We are the Trinity. We claim your soul." He stepped forward and extended his left hand to pick up the Sword. The bonds of the pentacle shattered into dust. The all-seeing eye screamed and closed. As he picked up the Sword, Simon felt as though all the heat was being sucked out of his body. Freda appeared frozen too; immobilised in shock she stood with her mouth open in disbelief. Fleischaker began to sing and it sounded like a banshee wailing. Simon howled like a coyote on a full moon. Freda died, impaled on the Sword, and Fleischaker consumed her soul. The ruby glowed bright red and the Sword sang. Simon was overwhelmed by emotion. The heat flowed back into his body. Every nerve tingled, like every orgasm he had ever had had come at once.

Over by the wall, Juliana dragged herself to her feet and began to speak. "Oh, Simon you have done it, you..." The words were cut off as Fleischaker cut her throat. The Sword sang and Simon screamed. So began the orgy of death. The Hero methodically worked his way down the tower. In the royal nursery, the children were massacred in their beds. In the kitchens, the cooks were butchered like the meat they were cooking. In a room off Freda's quarters, a drugged and befuddled King Jack welcomed the peace that death finally brought him. Servants were slaughtered as they cleaned and polished. Guards who came running were dispatched with clinical efficiency and never made as much as a scratch on the Hero. In a secret room, two old men chained to the wall in heavy irons died incredulous and the Hero barely noticed that their bodies turned to dust, which was carried away by an eerie breeze.

As he neared the bottom of the tower, Simon caught a glimpse of himself in a full-length wall-mirror. He was shocked. Truly, he had earned his name. He was completely red, covered in the blood of his victims. Too late, the words of warning came back into his mind. *Remember Vasek. Only Vasek can control the Sword. Beware Fleischaker! It consumes the souls of friends as well as enemies.* Angrily, he sheathed the Sword. Simon collapsed to the floor, hung his head in his hands, and cried. The tears mingled with the blood on his face and rivulets of red flowed to the floor. Those who saw him that day said that when he cried, Simon Rufus even cried tears of blood. Thus was his legend born and quickly did it spread.

The story continues in [Back to the Beginning, Book 3 of Quest for Knowledge](http://www.FirstWorld.info), which is available from www.FirstWorld.info

